

Summer 2010

Engaging the religious dimension in significant adolescent literature

Rickey Cotton

Southeastern University - Lakeland

Follow this and additional works at: https://firescholars.seu.edu/seu_papers

 Part of the [Children's and Young Adult Literature Commons](#), [Literature in English, North America Commons](#), [Modern Literature Commons](#), and the [Religion Commons](#)

Copyright Statement

Southeastern University works are protected by copyright. They may be viewed or downloaded from this site for the purposes of research and scholarship. Reproduction or distribution for commercial purposes is prohibited without written permission of the author.

Recommended Citation

Cotton, R. (2010). Engaging the religious dimension in significant adolescent literature. *Literature and Belief*, 30(2), 81-93.



William James (1842–1910)

Engaging the Religious Dimension in Significant Adolescent Literature

Rickey A. Cotton
Southeastern University

“I am Archie Costello. . . . You’ll have me wherever you go and whatever you do. . . . Because I’m you. I’m all the things you hide inside you.” (Cormier *Beyond* 269)

Oogrukk told the boy that every person once had a song that was just for that person. “Could I get a song?” Russel asks. Oogruk replies, “You don’t get songs, you are a song.” (Paulsen 28)

Mattie shrieked to the heavens and pounded the floor with rage. “Nonono! Don’t take him! Nonono!” (Anderson 147)

Religion is frequently a vital dimension of significant contemporary adolescent literature, and the quotations above indicate some of the wide variety of ways in which it may be depicted. While for decades some intellectuals in the West have declared that religion is either dead or dying, that assertion is not borne out in the reality of American lives, for either adults or their children. No social institution but the family has existed as long as religion, and religion in some form has existed in all known societies and at every period of all known societies’ histories. In modern times

religion is playing a greater role than at any time in recent decades, not only in the lives of adults but also in the lives of adolescents.

Too often, readers do not consider whether significant contemporary adolescent literature released by secular publishers has a religious dimension. In particular, little attention is given to how the portrayal of profound issues in adolescent novels may impact religious concerns of adolescent readers. One tendency is to assume that adolescent literature does not deal with issues touching the religious dimension. Another is mentally to compartmentalize the portrayal of such issues as moral conflict or supernatural activity into separate, unrelated categories and fail to consider their frequent interrelationships with religion or how these interrelationships may affect the religious values and beliefs of adolescent readers.

For, as a few statistics convincingly demonstrate, adolescents in contemporary American society, like adult Americans in general, are very engaged with religious issues and activities. Ninety-two percent of Americans believe in God or a universal spirit, while fewer than ten percent are firm in their belief that there is no God (Salmon 1). Similarly, fully eighty percent of American teenagers pray, and more than half of American teens who in 1995 were in seventh through twelfth grades attended church at least monthly, with thirty-eight percent attending every week. Eighty-seven percent of thirteen- to eighteen-year-olds responding to a survey on adolescent health claimed to be affiliated with a religious sect, while only thirteen percent of teens responding to the survey reported they had no religious affiliation (Smith et al.).

I. RELIGION AND TRADITIONAL LITERATURE

Religion has long been recognized as playing a significant role in traditional literature. Serious writers deal with the whole of life, including its depth dimensions. For example, George Panichas asserts that "D. H. Lawrence's well-known observation that 'one has to be so terribly religious to be an artist,' would indicate certainly that there are levels of meanings and relationships existing between art and religion which can be neither escaped nor ignored" (12).

Giles Gunn observes that while much contemporary literature and criticism maintain a distance from orthodox religion, religious concerns and issues remain at the center of much contemporary dialogue. Not only does this discussion reflect concerns from mainstream religious traditions, but a significant minority of scholars has studied forms of belief that are heterodox, and some have been chiefly interested in “those unspeakable experiences behind creed or conviction” (49). Gunn further observes that religion deals with “ideas that ‘we are’ rather than ideas that ‘we have,’ ideas so central to our existence that, while we can think in and with and through them, we can rarely think about them” (50). The function of works of art, he asserts, is to help people discover what they feel about these kinds of ideas. Literary art enables them not only to address these ideas with the intellect but also with the senses, to feel as well as to think about them.

II. DEFINING RELIGION

How religion is defined is of critical importance in engaging religion and literature. An area of human experience so pervasive and so complex is difficult to define. Many major thinkers have sought to define religion in a way true to its complex and far-reaching roles.

For instance, William James, one of the well-known founders of the philosophy of pragmatism and an eminent pioneer psychologist, emphasizes the function of religion in the lives of individuals in his definition of it: “[Religion is] the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine” (31–32). In his landmark work on the psychology of religion, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, published in 1902, James focuses on religious experience itself, not on particular theologies or religious systems. He concludes that the results of religious experience include giving meaning and zest to the common features of life, and he asserts that the total absence of faith of some kind in an individual leads to psychological collapse.

Paul Tillich, a major modern theologian, defines religion as that which is of “ultimate concern” (*Protestant* 59). For him the religious

dimension represents the depth dimensions of life. When individuals deal with the intimate and profound aspects of existence, they are being religious. He asserts that religion “gives meaning, seriousness, and depth to all culture” (59). He also remarks that “[f]aith as ultimate concern is an act of the total personality. It happens in the center of personal life and includes all its elements” (*Dynamics* 4). Thus, questions such as Why live? What does life mean? Why be moral? are religious questions.

In his highly regarded work *The Religious Factor* (1961), sociologist Gerhard Lenski defines religion as “a system of beliefs about the nature of the force(s) intimately shaping man’s destiny, and the practices there with, shared by the members of a group” (298–99). He intends that his definition include traditional religions such as Christianity as well as even contemporary humanism. While Lenski’s definition includes an emphasis on the group, he asserts that every normal adult of any normal society is religious, for all intelligent human activity is based on assumptions about forces which shape the nature and destiny of human life, whether these assumptions can be articulated or even clearly remembered.

Winston L. King describes religion as the organization of life around the depth dimensions of experience, experience characterized by some sort of ultimacy and transcendence that provides norms and power for the rest of life. He maintains that religion in this sense has been involved in almost every known culture, however varied in form and completeness.

Grappling with the dynamics identified by these major thinkers, C. Daniel Batson and W. Larry Ventis seek to provide a functional definition of religion that addresses its practical complexity and enables effective discussion, research, and reflection. They define religion as “whatever we do to come to grips with existential questions—the questions that confront us because we are aware that we and others like us are alive and that we will die” (22). Focusing on individual rather than group aspects of religion, their definition is intended to include all the ways of dealing with existential concerns traditionally associated with the word “religion,” such as belief in the supernatural and an afterlife, mystical

and conversion experiences, various forms of worship, prayer, meditation, asceticism, and rules for behavior. But they also aver that religion includes other, nontraditional forms of religious experience involved in coming to grips with the meaning and purpose of existence, such as belief in an impersonal cosmic force, focus on self-actualization, social-action rituals, and even the experience of being converted away from the religion of one's youth (9). Batson and Ventis further recognize that in some cases the same issues can be approached both philosophically and religiously. A philosophical approach, they say, examines issues abstractly and impersonally. In contrast, a religious approach involves confronting issues on an intensely personal level, and religious answers have dramatic effects on individuals' lives (10). A functional approach like theirs is very helpful and necessary in engaging the religious dimension of contemporary writers for adolescents. An examination of works by three writers of recognized stature utilizing their definition reveals how varied, complex, and profound a role religion frequently plays in the best literature written for adolescents.

III. THREE MAJOR WRITERS FOR ADOLESCENTS

Robert Cormier, Gary Paulsen, and Laurie Halse Anderson have each received the Margaret A. Edwards Award for Outstanding Literature for Young Adults, given by the Young Adult Library Services Association, in recognition of a writer's "lifetime achievement" in writing works that assist young people in "understand[ing] themselves and their world" ("Margaret"). Cormier, the 1991 winner, writes "powerful and outstanding novels" which present "teenage protagonists faced with difficult, uncompromising situations" ("Margaret"), while Paulsen, who received the award in 1997, often explores the "spiritual" dimension young people can discover in themselves in the wilderness. The most recent winner, Laurie Halse Anderson, in 2009 was praised for her realistic, insightful depictions of teens undergoing transformations "through various settings, time periods, and circumstances, poignantly reflect[ing] the growing and changing realities they face ("2009").

Cormier's *The Chocolate War* (1974) is recognized as one of the major milestones in adolescent literature's development in seriously and profoundly depicting adolescent experience in genuinely artistic ways. *The Chocolate War* involves profound depictions of religious dynamics, while its sequel, *Beyond the Chocolate War* (1985), depicts the religious dimension in even more thorough and explicit ways.

Archie Costello, the ruthless antagonist of both novels, by *Beyond the Chocolate War* has completely embraced his identity as an evil person. His strong sense of identity delights him and gives him power over others. Emerging from a meeting with the evil Brother Leon,

Archie sought the surge of satisfaction that usually filled him when he contemplated assignments. . . . Archie was suddenly elated, knew he was apart from other people. It was a dark and beautiful secret he shared with no one. . . . [H]e whispered: "I am Archie." (45)

In his climactic confrontation with Obie, Archie displays what might be termed a transcendent sense of identity, which gives him a strength and power that the uncertain Obie lacks. Identifying himself as the evil within people, he says, "I am Archie Costello. . . . You'll have me wherever you go and whatever you do. . . . Because I'm you. I'm all the things you hide inside you" (264).

In this novel, Obie, once Archie's right hand, unsuccessfully tries to establish a new identity in response to his discovery of love in his relationship with his new girlfriend. He becomes Archie's adversary and finally even tries to arrange his murder but fails. In their final meeting, Obie tries to blame the evil person he became on Archie's domination, but Archie will have none of it. Archie explains, "Obie, it's not me. . . . It's you, Obie. . . . Just like Brother Andrew always says in Religion. Free choice, Obie, and you did the choosing" (263-64). Obie realizes that Archie is right and moans with the realization. His moan "had death in it. And truth. The terrible truth that Archie was right" (264). Archie responds to Obie's discomfort by saying, "Don't feel bad, Obie. . . . You've just joined the human race" (264). The lesson, apparently, is that by failing actively to resist evil,

one becomes part of the problem of evil. Obie counters with “‘Okay, maybe I’m not the good guy anymore. I admit that, I accept it. Maybe I’ll confess it at church’” (264).

Jerry Renault also confronts the issue of identity at a religious level. At one point he considers a religious vocation, questioning whether he should “[b]ecome a priest? Or a brother? A good and kind brother like Brother Eugene? And take his place in the world, someone to fight the Archie Costellos and even the Brother Leons?” (160). Later, he comes to a decision about what he must do, a sense of what is ultimately necessary for him: “He knew somehow he would make his way back to Canada. And especially to the Talking Church. And beyond that to something else. Something he could not even consider now. But first he had to return to Trinity” (225), his purpose being to continue his resistance to the evil of the Vigils. This sense of purpose gives Jerry both peace and courage.

The depictions of two characters’ attitudes toward death are notable in this novel. The portrayal of Archie’s relentless, unrepentant dark nature extends to his attitude toward death. One character thinks to himself that he “knew that Archie recognized no eternity, neither heaven nor hell” (249). Archie’s actions bear this out. During the funeral mass for gentle Brother Eugene, the unmoved Archie takes the opportunity to meet with a Vigil member and calm him about skipping the mass by saying, “‘They’re all too busy praying. . . . You’re always safe when someone’s praying for the dead’” (65). David Caroni, a secondary character who is driven to suicide by the cruel Brother Leon, carries out this act under the domination of an inner voice. When he is unable to pray, David yields to the voice’s command to commit suicide. Preparing for his death, he pictures it as “beautiful blessed oblivion. All of it over” (257). In the midst of his jump to death, however, he realizes suicide is a mistake: “*Mama, I don’t want to . . . I didn’t mean to . . . this terrible flash of clarity like lightning striking . . . What am I doing here? . . . wrong, a mistake, I didn’t mean to do this*” (258).

Two aspects of the portrayal of traditional religion are significant in this novel, which is set in a Catholic secondary school permeated with evil. One is its negative portrayal of traditional religious leaders.

If there are any positive religious role models at the school, they are not delineated in the novel. The school is run by the remorselessly evil headmaster, Brother Leon, who keeps control by maintaining a secret alliance with the heartless manipulator Archie. While gentle Brother Eugene of *The Chocolate War* is mentioned positively, in the sequel he is an absent character who has been driven to a nervous breakdown and eventual death by the Vigils.

One character, however, does have positive religious experiences of a traditional nature. While recuperating in Canada, Jerry spends a great deal of time in an ancient local church, where he experiences peace and learns to pray. Consequently, "he found comfort there. . . . He had read somewhere of contemplatives, priests or brothers or monks, who spent their days and nights in solitude, praying, musing, contemplating, and Jerry could understand the peace these men must attain" (108). As Jerry begins his reentry into life at Trinity, he successfully reestablishes a relationship with his former friend Goober; in gratitude he utters a kind of prayer: "'Tomorrow,' Jerry said, hanging up, weak with relief, breathing his thanks. His thanks to whom? God, maybe, thinking of the Talking Church in Canada" (152). When Jerry first returns to live with his father in Monument, he does not plan to return to Trinity but then realizes he must, feeling a compulsion, even though he longs "for the peace of the Canadian countryside and his uncle and aunt and the Talking Church" (225). Jerry's strategy for resistance has changed, however. Instead of confronting the evil, he plans to outlast it.

Paulsen uses religion of another sort in his novel *Dogsong* (1985). Often writing about the outdoors and adventure, Paulsen nevertheless explores profound inner and spiritual dynamics in *Dogsong*, which depicts religion playing a role in a search for identity, family relationships, a mentoring relationship, and dealing with death. Russel Suskitt's search for his true spiritual identity and the way he is supposed to live means giving up modern Western ways and rejecting his father's Christianity to find his identity, purpose, "song" in the simple but spiritual lifestyle of primitive Eskimos.

In its depiction of religion, this novel includes a negative portrayal of traditional Christianity and the conversion of the protagonist to

an alternate form of spirituality, the mystical “old ways” of the Eskimos. Although Russel’s father told him about Jesus, the ministry of Christian missionaries is portrayed negatively. Their teaching promotes an unhealthy guilt and causes the Eskimo people to turn from their own spirituality—a mystical, positive pantheism—to a Christianity based on guilt and fear:

We had those songs until the first missionary came. He said they were wrong . . . like dancing was wrong . . . said we would go to hell if we did not give them up. . . . [He told us] about fire and pain and these demons . . . who would tear the strips of meat off us. . . . People were afraid to sing and dance and we lost our songs. (27–28)

The missionaries have also been responsible for introducing modern culture and technology—snowmobiles, diesel machines—which have alienated the Eskimos from their environment. But Russel’s personal odyssey takes him back to the old ways, both spiritually and culturally.

Russel’s father plays a key role in directing Russel in his spiritual quest for identity. Russel lives with his father in an Alaskan village on the edge of frozen wilderness. In their small government house “[a]ll along the walls were pictures of Jesus. His father loved Jesus” (5). Russel’s father also tells him about Jesus: “‘he is the Son of God and is meant to suffer for your sins,’ his father said, [but it] made no sense at all to Russel” (6). However, Russel does not say anything against his father’s faith because “Jesus kept his father from drinking. . . . And if Jesus kept that out of his life, that was all right” (6). Instead, Russel is himself influenced by modern ways. He owns a snowmobile and a motor sled, but he does not like them. He views them as necessary for transportation since dogsleds are no longer used to get about. He also does not like cooking his meat, instead preferring to eat it the old way, raw.

One day, Russel, restless and deeply unsatisfied, says to his father, “Father, something is bothering me” (10). His father, sensing the depth of genuine unhappiness behind Russel’s words but unable to

help the boy find comfort and meaning in his own Christianity, sends him to the aged Oogruk. Russel is shocked. “‘Oogruk? For help?’” he asks (10). His father explains that “‘there are Oogruk’s words and there is Oogruk’s song. Songs and words are not always the same. . . . Sometimes words lie—but the song is always true. . . . There is much to learn from Oogruk’” (11).

Following his father’s suggestion, Russel turns to the ancient, blind Oogruk for his mentor. Notably, this depiction of a successful mentoring relationship is set in the frozen north of the Alaskan wilderness, not in a contemporary urban setting. A close bond develops between Russel and Oogruk as the mystical old man trains the teenager in the ways of properly relating to the frozen northland, the old ways of the primitive Eskimos. Also, “Oogruk tells the boy that every person once had a song that was just for that person. ‘Could I get a song?’ Russel asks. Oogruk replies, ‘You don’t get songs, you are a song’” (28). Russel asks the old man to teach him how to become a song, and Oogruk agrees to do so. During the training, which involves giving up modern ways and returning to primitive Eskimo ways, Oogruk proves to be a wise and effective teacher, and Russel succeeds in achieving a new and fulfilling spiritual identity.

But a great challenge comes when Russel must deal with the death of Oogruk. There is no formal ceremony. Instead, Oogruk, knowing he is dying, has Russel take him out into the frozen wild and leave him, explaining, “‘An old man knows when death is coming and he should be left to his own on it. You will leave me here on the ice’” (72). Russel is reluctant, but Oogruk insists. Turning from the old man, Russel drives the dogteam for miles and miles, but, unable to bear simply deserting his old teacher, he goes back. Oogruk, however, dies before Russel returns, and Russel finds him sitting still: “His hands were folded in his lap and his legs were stretched out in front of him and the eyes were open and not blinking with life” (73–74). After staring at the old man for a time, Russel places a harpoon in Oogruk’s lap and says, “‘You will want to hunt seals. Use it well and make much sweet meat’” (74). Before driving the dogteam, “which smelled the death and didn’t like it,” Russel turns “back to Oogruk one more time. ‘I will remember you,’ he said, then let the dogs go” (74).

Religion is also a strong presence in Anderson's *Fever 1793* (2000), both in the inner and personal life of the main character, sixteen-year-old Mattie Cook, and in the larger society in which she lives. The book is a powerful historical novel, well-researched and vividly written. It fictionally portrays an actual yellow fever epidemic in Philadelphia that killed five thousand people, ten percent of the city's population. Mattie's father died when she was a young girl, the family's only child. Her mother and grandfather own a popular coffee house on High Street, where Mattie's best friend, Eliza, a freed black woman, works. Separated from her mother during the epidemic, Mattie must struggle to maturity, taking care of both her grandfather and the family's coffee house.

After discovering that their coffee house and the family home above it have been vandalized and almost all their food taken, Mattie prays deeply:

Thank you, Father, for keeping me alive. Please punish the terrible people who wrecked our home and stole our food. No, that's not quite right, they were probably hungry. Punish them a little bit for taking so much. They should have left something behind, and they had no reason to break things. Deal with them as you see fit. Please take care of Mother and Eliza and Grandfather. (129)

But God does not "take care" of Grandfather, and he dies, leaving Mattie furious with God. She "shrieked to the heavens and pounded the floor with rage. 'Nonono! Don't take him! Nonono!'" (147). Then she spends the night kneeling "beside the finest man [she] had ever known, praying that the morning would not come" (149). Since death continues to be a constant and pervasive presence in the city, some kind of faith becomes vital to persevering. At one point, Mattie nearly gives way to despair. "'Are we going to die, Eliza?'" Mattie asks. Eliza responds, "'That's foolish talk. I'm not going to die. I have too much work to do. Mother Smith there, she won't go until she's ready and the Lord Himself asks for the pleasure of her company. Don't listen to the words of despair, Mattie. You must be strong and have faith'" (177).

They do survive, and when it becomes clear they have outlasted the fever, Eliza suggests they have a thanksgiving feast at the coffee house. Mattie fully agrees. When they sit down to a table filled with food, the old holy woman Mother Smith blesses the meal:

“Dear Lord, we give you thanks for your blessings. For bringing us through these days of pestilence, we thank you. For saving our children, we thank you. For restoring us, for watching over us, for giving us bounty, we thank you. Watch over those who have passed, Lord. . . . Keep them close until we are ready to join them. . . . Blessed be Thy name. Amen.” (221–22)

Then they were all “solemn and quiet for a moment” (222).

As is evident in these three works, religion is a vital dimension of adolescent life, and contemporary adolescent literature of quality clearly reflects this reality. It is imperative that both adult and adolescent readers develop insights and skills needed to interpret and engage religious issues in ways that are appropriate and productive. Religion lies at the center of both individual and cultural identity, often playing a role in cultural conflicts and international struggles. Skillfully recognizing and engaging the religious dimension of quality adolescent literature by such authors as Cormier, Paulsen, and Anderson is essential to honest, thoroughgoing, and valid interpretation and will contribute to the wisdom, depth, and strength of those who seek to live lives marked by integrity and harmony.

WORKS CITED

- “2009 Winner: Laurie Halse Anderson.” YALSA. American Library Association, n.d. Web. 1 Mar. 2010.
- Anderson, Laurie Halse. *Fever 1793*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000. Print.
- Batson, C. Daniel, and W. Larry Ventis. *The Religious Experience: A Social-psychological Perspective*. New York: Oxford UP, 1982. Print.
- Cormier, Robert. *Beyond the Chocolate War*. New York: Dell, 1985. Print.

- . *The Chocolate War*. New York: Dell, 1974. Print.
- Gunn, Giles. "Literature and Religion." *Interrelations of Literature*. Ed. Jean Pierre Baricelli and Joseph Gibaldi. New York: Modern Language Association, 1982. 47–66. Print.
- James, William. *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*. New York: Modern Library, 1902. Print.
- King, Winston L. "Religion." *The Encyclopedia of Religion*. Ed. Mircea Eliade. 16 vols. New York: Macmillan, 1987. Vol. 12. 284–93. Print.
- Lenski, Gerhard. *The Religious Factor: A Sociological Study of Religion's Impact on Politics, Economics, and Family Life*. New York: Doubleday, 1961. Print.
- "Margaret A. Edwards Award for Outstanding Literature for Young Adults." *Teenthing*. Springfield-Green County Library District, n.d. Web. 1 Mar. 2010.
- Panichas, George A., ed. Preface. *Mansions of the Spirit: Essays in Literature and Religion*. New York: Hawthorn, 1967. 11–15. Print.
- Paulsen, Gary. *Dogsong*. New York: Puffin, 1985. Print.
- Salmon, Jacqueline L. "Most Americans Believe in Higher Power, Poll Finds." *The Washington Post*. 15 June 2008. Web. 1 Mar. 2010.
- Smith, Christian, et al. *National Study of Youth and Religion*. Lilly Endowment, Inc. Web. 1 Mar. 2010.
- Tillich, Paul. *Dynamics of Faith*. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1957. Print.
- . *The Protestant Era*. Trans. James Luthor Adams. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1948. Print.