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**Young Adult Literature in the Classroom:
A Tool to Inspire Students and Encourage Reading
Both Inside and Outside of the Classroom**

Naomi Nagy

The University of Akron Honors Research Project

Sponsor: Dr. Harold Foster

Spring 2021

Abstract

This paper examines the potential of incorporating more young adult literature into high school English and language arts classrooms. Drawing on past research of others and the thoughts and opinions of a handful of current high school students, this paper will focus on what young adult literature is, why more teens and young adults should read it, and how it can be incorporated and taught in the average high school English classroom. These studies, along with the thoughts and experiences provided by high school students surveyed for this paper, may not reflect the thoughts and opinions of every high school student taking part in their English classes, but they do provide valuable insight that current and future educators should take into consideration when entering their own classroom.

Introduction

When most people think of a high school English or language arts classroom, they often picture a classroom full of students with a teacher standing in the front of the room “teaching” one of Shakespeare’s plays, assigning the next three chapters of *Great Expectations* by Dickens, or reviewing theme in *Moby Dick* by Melville for the next reading quiz. If one were to ask the same people what they thought of reading these very same pieces of literature themselves in high school, more often than not answers will yield more negative responses and quips than positive ones. Being forced to read the difficult language and ideas often found in what we label as the “classics” has resulted in generations of high school students leaving school with negative impressions of what literature is and reading in general. As most consider reading, especially reading in your free time, to be a valuable trait and habit to keep up during one’s lifetime, hearing that many of our young people do not enjoy reading can be quite disheartening, especially for current English and language arts teachers. Multiple attempts at encouraging

students to read more in the classroom have, for the most part, ended in frustration and little to no positive long-term impact. There is still hope, however, as the introduction of young adult literature in our student's lives may make a difference.

Young adult literature, often shortened and referred to as YA literature, is characterized as books or novels that are aimed towards adolescents from the ages of 12 to 18. They tell stories where the main character is also a young adult and goes through experiences and problems that young adult readers relate to and experience themselves, traits that have left more and more teenagers reaching for these books (Rybakova & Roccanti, 2016, p. 32), and has resulted in these books often being simply characterized as "books for teens." Some famous YA books include *The Giver* by Lois Lowry, *The Fault in Our Stars* by John Green, Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief*, *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas, *The Hunger Games* trilogy by Suzanna Collins, and many, many more. People of various ages have enjoyed reading these novels, but they all fall under the YA literature title because of their teenage protagonists who experience difficulties that other teen readers relate to or can at least picture themselves in. The reason why this is so important is because many of the books that are still assigned in high schools today, especially the ones that students have difficulty reading through, do not meet these same requirements that make a novel a young adult novel. Most of the "classics" students read in high school "portray adult characters in situations far removed from most teens' experiences," and are creating "aliterate adults who resist reading even when they are capable readers" (Ostenson & Wadham, 2012, p. 5).

In an attempt to create adults who continue to read, the desire to read needs to be introduced earlier. One may argue that the best way to do that with high school students, who need to read for their classes anyway, is to allow them to read books that were written for them

with characters and plots that spark their interest and relate to their own lives. And even more importantly, written at a reading level that they can understand. Before continuing any further, it is important to note that this paper does not advocate for the classics, or canonical literature, traditionally read in schools to be completely scrapped from every single high school curriculum. There is much value to be found in those pieces of literature and much that students can learn from as well. What this paper hopes to accomplish is to show that there is also a great deal of value to be found in teens reading YA literature, and that it deserves a place in our English and language arts classrooms as well.

YA Literature vs. The Literary Canon

Young adult literature, stated by Beumer in her article, “Multiple Selves and Multiple Sites of Influence: Perceptions of Young Adult Literature in the Classroom,” is simply, “works written by authors specifically for a young adult audience” (2011, p. 216). Going into a little more detail, Avoli-Miller, in her article, “Young Adult Literature in the 21st Century Classroom,” mentions that topics and themes often found in YA Literature are more relatable to present day teenagers and the issues they see and face every day. She argues that students are more likely to choose YA Literature over older, classic novels, “because they are able to relate to the contemporary themes in modern YA literature. Topics that were once considered taboo are now available to teens. Sexuality, abuse, relationships, and dysfunctional families are common” (Avoli-Miller, 2013, p. 16). While some of these topics may bring discomfort to some, they are very real topics that many high school students struggle with themselves on a daily basis. When they read these books with main characters struggling with modern-day problems, they see themselves as well.

In contrast, as Santoli and Wagner argue in their article, “Promoting Young Adult Literature: The Other ‘Real’ Literature,” students tend to dislike or struggle reading classic literature is because, “they [classic literature] do not address adolescent concerns: they are about adult issues and are written for well-educated adults who have the leisure time to read or who are university literature students” (2004, p. 67). Most classic literature, or books that belong to the literary canon, are about adults and adult issues. Even when the main characters are teenagers, they are facing life circumstances or events that most high school students are not yet thinking about and cannot relate to their own personal life and experiences. While certain life experiences a teenager may face in the 1800s may be true and accurate to the time, they are vastly different from the lived experiences of teenagers today in the 21st century. Today’s students living in the United States are not worried as much about being married off at a young age, picking up a sword to fight in war, or hiding an affair from their married partner. While these stories are great and capture the attention and interest of many well-read readers, high school students often gravitate towards something else.

The canons, unlike many contemporary YA novels, also lack the diversity that so many readers are, and have been, seeking. As briefly mentioned earlier, YA literature often addresses controversial topics and introduces characters of diverse backgrounds and abilities that the canons often lack. Christenbury argues that because the classics often taught in the classroom, both then and now, mainly come from the 18th and 19th century British and American authors, these novels bring forth, “nothing more than a curriculum that is an uncritical rehash of the traditional power culture: white, male, Christian, Anglophilic,” (2000, p.15, as cited in Santoli & Wagner, 2004, p. 67). While there is nothing wrong with being white, male, a Christian, or someone who admires England, these are not characteristics that describe everyone on earth. A

quick look around today's classroom, of course depending on the school, proves that not every student can be described as white, male, Christian, and Anglophilic as well. In fact, many people, especially young adults, make it a point to immerse themselves in areas of life that offer more diversity than what was traditionally represented in all forms of media, including literature. Lo, in their article, "How Social Media, Movies, and TV Shows Interacts with Young Adult Literature from 2015 to 2019," reminds readers that, "Books that are chosen to be published reflect the zeitgeist, including the social, cultural, and technological progresses in popular culture that dominates our cultural dialogue," and that one area of book publishing that clearly reflects, "these progresses is the young adult sector," (2020, p. 611).

Diversity in young adult literature can come in the form of gender, the color of one's skin, cultural backgrounds, and even in recognizing those with disabilities. Hughes and Wheeler take the time to note in their article, "Introduction: Mainstreaming Literature for Young People," that, "Literature for young readers lends itself to the exploration of disability because it documents the transformations of personal and social identity most young people experience," not failing to point out that even for young people without disabilities themselves, "the works they encounter provide long-lasting frames of reference for understanding bodymind diversity," (2018, p. 262). As with any other form of diversity, seeing it represented in the media, in this case contemporary young adult literature, is important to help build and shape the identities of not only those who can personally relate to or look like the people being portrayed for others to see, but also for those who do not possess those characteristics as well. When presented accurately, as many YA novels aim to do, diversity, in any sense of the word, helps create readers who are not only well-read, but are also more understanding and knowledgeable of the world and people around them.

To add to that point, as mentioned before, students tend to be more inclined to pick up a book where the main characters, their own age, are simply more like them. As Hughes and Wheeler continue to point out, there is importance in shedding, “light on the need for all young readers to see themselves in texts, explore known and foreign worlds—be these real or fantastic—and cross the threshold of imagination” (2018, p. 262). Adding to this point, Garrison, in the article, “Growing Up Graphically Coming-of-Age Issues in Graphic Novel,” states, “earlier writings patronized young readers and ignored the confusion of this time, while also missing the opportunity to help support them through it,” going on to say, “Thankfully, today’s young adult novels offer a more realistic portrayal of adolescence, illustrating the harsh social realities and complexities of the journey into adulthood and giving developing readers some solace and commiseration in the experience” (2020, p. 10). Shedding light on the current day, realistic ideas of adolescence is what is needed for young readers if teachers, and the rest of society, wish for them to read more. The ability to relate to what has been written down on the page, and to the characters or narrator telling the story, is key to encouraging people, especially young people, to read more throughout their lifetime and is what will be discussed next.

Importance of Choosing the Books One Reads

As previously mentioned, many high school students are now able, through the creation and continued writing of young adult literature, to read stories that they can “find” or “see” themselves in. Being able to closely relate to the events and actions taking place within a book or piece of literature is one of the most important factors in liking and reading through a text. Louise Rosenblatt, a well-known, highly influential educator known for her research in teaching literature, argues that students must find something familiar to connect to within a text or piece of literature, and also be able to read the text without too much struggle, if the student is to not

become alienated from the text's meaning (1995, as cited in Ostenson & Wadham, 2012). Students express distaste towards reading and difficulty in comprehending the meaning of certain pieces of literature, not only because the texts often presented to them are hard to read, but also because there is a separation, or alienation, between the meaning of the text and the student and their own lived experiences. It is challenging to understand a text that presents events and ideas that do not already exist within one's own life or thoughts on a daily basis.

One teacher who recognized this, and worked to meet the needs of her students, is Nancie Atwell. Well-known for her creation and use of reading and writing workshops, Atwell controversially gave control to her middle school students in the classroom to write about what they wanted and read about what they were interested in for most of their class time together. At first a little cautious about this idea herself, Atwell notes that she learned, "it's not a luxury for students to select their own books, that choice is the wellspring of literacy and literacy appreciation," later adding, "My students become avid, skilled readers because they decide what they will read," (2015, p. 21). For Atwell, giving up control over everything her students did in her classroom was necessary for her students to learn, and more importantly, become good, well-read readers.

No book was off limits for her students to read in her classroom. If students wanted to read a book Atwell didn't like or thought wasn't written well, she still let them. Arguing to this point, Atwell highlights a student of hers who absolutely loved the incredibly popular young adult *Twilight* series by Stephenie Meyer. Although Atwell did not believe these books were well-written by any means, she allowed the student to read them through, claiming that, "stories like these can help an inexperienced reader learn how to manage the experience of a big, fat book. They're a means to an end, not an end in themselves," (2015, p. 21-22). Reading books

that some may deem not “difficult enough” or valuable to learn from still provide important lessons and provide practice for students and young people to read more, even pieces of literature at levels far higher than what they may originally think is possible or interesting to them. This same student went on to read 40, yes 40, books of increasing difficulty that school year and, what some may claim, of better literary content. This student, however, was not alone in her progress that school year. That same year, Atwell’s students finished an average of 53 books (Atwell, 2015, p. 22), an amount many adults themselves cannot imagine reading in their entire lives. To top it all off, many of the books read were those that fall under the literary canon, books that many adults struggle to get through and understand. Reading young adult literature, or any book of their choice, classical or not, did not hinder these students. If anything, it prepared them for more difficult texts and helped them excel and grow in their reading skills to become better readers.

Personal Survey Results

Survey Questions:

If the push for an increase of use of young adult literature in schools is based on student experiences, choices, and mindsets within their English and Language Arts classrooms, it is of utmost importance to also hear student’s thoughts and ideas when it comes to this argument and decision to change a teaching style. After all, with all of the information already presented, it is necessary to remember that the whole push for the increase of young adult literature in schools is for the benefit of all students. Therefore, a small sampling of seven current high school students were asked to complete a short survey that asked them their thoughts and experiences relating to reading in the classroom and what they thought about reading young adult literature. It is important to note that the answers, thoughts, and opinions of these seven teenagers are not

enough to reflect the thoughts and opinions of all present-day high school students. The answers they provided, however, do align with similar results and ideas presented in other published articles, research papers, and surveys regarding this topic that are already quoted in this paper, while also adding insightful thoughts and ideas not already mentioned.

After asking for each student's name, age (parental permission and signatures were required if under the age of 18), grade (all are current seniors), and the high school they attend (all within Cuyahoga County in Northeast Ohio, USA), the survey asked the following questions:

1. Do you currently read for fun?
2. If you do read for fun, what books do you usually read?
3. Do you like the books or pieces of literature (plays, poems, short stories, etc.) you read for your English and L.A. classes in school?
4. If you have a favorite, what was your favorite book or piece of literature you read for an English or L.A. class in high school?
5. Do you have trouble reading through the books or pieces of literature assigned to you for class?
6. Do you ever choose not to read the book or piece of literature and instead read a summary of it online?
7. A "select all that apply" section was used to better understand why some students chose to read summaries of the book online.
8. If you choose not to read a book or piece of literature for class, what is your reasoning behind it?
9. If you were assigned to read a young adult book for class, instead of another Shakespeare play (or older novel), do you think you would be more likely to read it?

10. If you were able TO CHOOSE the book you read for class, would you be more likely to read it?
11. What is one book, YA Lit. or not, that you would like to read for your English or L.A. class? If you don't have one, google one. If you really don't have one, leave this one blank.
12. FINAL QUESTION!: What are your thoughts on incorporating YA Lit. into the classroom? Good idea? Bad idea? Do you think it will help students be more excited to read? Any thought or idea is helpful!

Survey Answers:

Each question asked students to answer in a different way, some asked for a short text answer, one required a “select all that apply” response, a few questions gave the students a choice between “yes,” “no,” and “maybe” answers, and the final asked for a long text answer. Overall, each student answered the majority of the questions and many expressed strong opinions that were encouraging to see, very insightful, and well-thought-out.

Of all of the questions, some provided more valuable and interesting information than others, while some simply confirmed what is already known and held to be true by many. Question number one, for example, asking “Do you currently read for fun?”, yielded expected results with most students answering, “Not really, only once in a while,” with only one answering, “Never,” and another answering “All the time!” When asked what they usually read in their free time, answers varied, but young adult literature, or young adult fiction as one student called it, and young adult dystopian novels were among the books some of these high school seniors were interested in. Following questions revealed that only one of the seven students enjoyed the books their English or language arts teacher assigned to them while the rest simply

said they didn't like them or only sometimes liked them. Students' favorite books, out of the ones assigned for them to read, included *The Great Gatsby*, *The Lords of Discipline*, *Fahrenheit 451*, the play *The Crucible*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, and *First They Killed My Father*. These pieces of literature are all great and well-known works of fiction, nonfiction, and even plays, but only one, *The Handmaid's Tale*, can be classified under the young adult genre.

Moving on, every student surveyed said they either always or sometimes struggle reading through the books assigned to them, with most students admitting to reading summaries online of the books for a variety of reasons that include:

- 1.) Lacking an interest to read.
- 2.) Not enough time to read the book.
- 3.) In their own words, they are too lazy to read the full book.

When asked if they would be more likely to read a book for class if it fell under the young adult literature category, every single student, except one, said yes. The same results, with the same student saying no to the previous question, occurred yet again when they were asked if they would be more likely to read a book for school if they had the ability to choose the book themselves. The student who answered no to both of these questions claims that they, no matter what, simply do not like to read. Additionally, while it is crucial to note that the students claiming they would read more for class if they were allowed to choose the books, or at least fall under the YA literature category, could end up not coming to fruition in reality, it is still encouraging to see an increase of interest in reading more books when these options are offered. In fact, when asked what books they would choose to read for class if they had the option to do so, all of the books suggested, besides *Pride and Prejudice* that one student suggested, were young adult books such as *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, *Ender's Game*, and *The Ballad of*

Songbirds, a new, fourth book to the incredibly famous *Hunger Games* trilogy by Suzanne Collins. Whether these students will actually read more or not when given the freedom to choose what they read, it is obvious that there is an interest in YA literature.

At the very end of the survey, students were asked for any final thoughts on the idea of incorporating more young adult literature into high school English and language arts classrooms, and they did not disappoint. Although their names will not be shared for their own safety and privacy, the following quotes all come from current high school seniors, presented in the order they responded to the survey, in their own words:

Student #1: “I think it would be a really good idea to have highschools [sic] and college kids reading books made specifically for their age group so that they are reading relatable content.”

Student #2: “It [reading YA literature] might make the students feel like less of a little kid. It also might make them feel like they’re [sic] brain is being put to approximate work instead of being out [sic] to sleep.”

Student #3: “Good idea. YA lit. could still be balanced with Shakespearean type books, but should have more of a presence in English classes since they are often more relevant to young adults and teens. At the moment I don’t feel as if they had a presence at all in the books I read throughout all four years of my high school English courses.”

Student #4: “I think that reading Shakespeare is definitely a great experience. I get that it’s not always the absolute most entertaining thing one can read, but I think it teaches a lot about literature and how the nuances of a piece really give it such profound meanings. I do, however; believe that there are other forms of literature that are both engaging and educational that can be

more included in LIT classrooms. I think that engaging students and teaching them to love reading could potentially have a massive impact with their overall performance in said classes. Incorporating young adult pieces that speak more to the kids reading them allows for a pleasant and effective learning experience for the kids.”

Student #5: “YA Lit is, most of the time, more fun to read. I think that having exciting books in the classroom is a great idea for getting students to actually engage with the material instead of spitting up themes they read online or heard from others. It would likely allow students to share unique thoughts instead of overworked ones.”

Student #6: “I think it’s a good idea because students will actually want to read these books.”

Student #7: “I think it is a great idea to incorporate more YA lit in English classes. It will probably promote more students actually wanting to read rather than being forced to and will lead to a better future in their lives.”

Overall, none of the students were against the use of young adult literature in the classroom. While some stated reasons that have already been talked about, others offered new takes on this argument, such as Student #5 who brought up the point that the incorporation of YA literature into the classroom has the ability to get, “students to actually engage with the material instead of spitting up themes they read online or heard from others,” adding that, “It would likely allow students to share unique thoughts instead of overworked ones.” Student #4 also pointed out that many classical texts, such as many of Shakespeare’s work, “teaches a lot about literature and how the nuances of a piece really give it such profound meanings.” Before moving on, however, Student #4 added that incorporating other forms of literature in the classroom can have many

positive impacts on the lives of students and, “that engaging students and teaching them to love reading could potentially have a massive impact with their overall performance in said classes.”

These high school students provide valuable points and insights to this conversation. Their voices, as seen in their responses to the survey sent to them, are strong and worthwhile listening to, not only because they provided some great points to think about, but because it is their education and future that is being impacted here. As Student #7 pointed out, incorporating more YA literature into English classes has the potential to, “lead to a better future in their lives.” Maybe it is time for more educators to listen to these students and take into consideration what they want to learn and read about.

Teaching YA Literature Alongside the Literary Canon

How:

Of course, not every teacher has the freedom to host reading workshops, where students can read whatever they want as Atwell does. Many also do not have the ability to stray far away from the curriculum and reading lists their school district requires them to follow. It is also important to recognize that other teachers simply may not agree with Atwell’s classroom setup and that this is how their classrooms should be run as well. Even so, it is hard to argue that Atwell’s techniques and ideas for her classroom do not yield impressive results and that the thoughts and teaching of well-accomplished educators do not make sense and hold true in many classroom settings. If hosting a reading workshop every day of the week is not an option for one’s classroom, there are a host of other ways to incorporate YA Literature into the lives of one’s own students.

Rybakova and Roccanti not only claim that, “Our goal as teachers is to cultivate a love for books and learning, and we believe that reading and analyzing a text can be both engaging

AND a significant contribution to a child's intellectual stimulation," but they also add that, "By combining the aesthetic pleasure of reading YAL with the more analytical reading of canonical texts, teachers can instruct students on both how to enjoy a novel and how to get more out of it" (2016, p. 34). The key word is "combination." As mentioned before, the goal is not to teach students who will never read a classic piece of literature or a book that is a canon. The goal is to create students who actually read, and read well. In order to do this, debating the pros and cons of classic and contemporary pieces of literature needs to come to an end when choosing which texts are to be read for a high school class as, "these two categories of texts are most powerful when they are connected rather when pitted against one another," (Rybakova & Roccanti, 2016, p. 31). Instead of only reading one canonical text or YA novel by itself during the school year or for summer reading, students can read both a canonical and young adult text right after another. The two texts can be compared to one another, allowing certain state standards to be met for many, and help strengthen the themes, ideas, and arguments presented in each separate text while also strengthening reading comprehension and analysis skills in students. Finding similarities, or even differences, between the two texts can also function as a tool to help students better understand what is taking place or being said within the often more difficult language of the classical, or more traditional, text.

There are many canonical texts that can be easily paired with contemporary YA novels. As Santoli and Wagner claim, "Good-quality novels written for teenagers contain the elements of literature found in the classics: character and characterization, setting, conflict, theme, point of view, plot, style, crisis, climax, foreshadowing, flashback, figurative language, and so forth," (2004, p. 69) while also introducing stories that deal with young love, satire and irony, and other literary elements often found in classic literature (2004, p. 72). The same stories and themes that

many fear will be lost if students stop reading the classics are still alive, and presented well, in YA literature. For example, Markus Zusak's young adult novel, *The Book Thief*, can easily be used to connect and prepare younger high school students for *The Diary of a Young Girl* by Anne Frank or Elie Wiesel's *Night*. All three of these texts share a common, and very important event: the Holocaust.

The young adult graphic novel *Smile* by Raina Telgemeier introduces the famous "coming-of-age" theme presented in *Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott, *The Catcher in the Rye* by J. D. Salinger, and even in *Roll of Thunder Hear My Cry* by Mildred D. Taylor. Star-crossed lovers are found within the young adult novel *Eleanor & Park* by Rainbow Rowell and Shakespeare's famous play, *Romeo and Juliet*. Even events involving suicide and themes with gender and societal expectations can be connected between John Green's young adult novel *Looking for Alaska* and the play *The Death of a Salesman* by Arthur Miller, *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald, and many more well-known classic pieces of literature (Rybakova & Roccanti, 2016, p. 35-36). A full table put together by Rybakova and Roccanti, that connects young adult novels to canonical texts for classroom use, will be provided in Figure 1 at the end of this paper, before the reference list.

Why:

As one can easily see, although the way books are written, and those reading them, have changed throughout the years, the same themes and ideas that hold true through time and continue to be well-loved by many have not changed. They are simply presented differently and written down in a way that more people, especially teenagers preparing for life after high school, can understand and continue to enjoy them. Heading back to points made earlier, in an ideal classroom setting for many, not only will YA books be a present in lessons throughout the school

year alongside the canon, but student choice will also be present in choosing what books they read. Different levels of student freedom in the classroom will vary by teacher, but as Donovan advocates in their work, “Three Immigration Novels: One Teen Reader’s Critical Comparison of Intersectional Identities,” they write that educators at a minimum,

Should suggest that students should have a say in what literature they study. Clearly, their [the students] interests vary by genre, gender, culture, place, and time. At best, students’ choices would be at the center of their literary education, and intersections of interest would drive their inquiry. (2020, p. 47)

What Donovan argues is true. Because students are the reason why schools exist and why teachers are needed, at best, student choice and what they need to succeed should be at the center of their education. This does not mean that students can choose not to do work or decide what they deserve to learn or not, but as brought up earlier, students learn, grow, and excel more when they are interested in what is presented to them and if they are given choices in what they are to read and learn about. This is not always possible in every area of education, but when it is, it should be used to its fullest potential.

Adding on to this point, Donovan continues by saying, “the teacher’s role would be within, across, and around the intersections of inquiry. Intersectionality offers a framework that identifies how different forms of social stratification such as class, race, sexual orientation, age, religion, ability, and gender converge and create obstacles” (2020, p. 47). Teachers are not placed in front of classrooms to only present new information. They are also there to answer questions and build on top of what students already know, question, and wish to seek. While there is more than one way to try and accomplish all of these learning objectives, YA literature may be one of the best tools to use to do so. As mentioned near the beginning of this paper, YA

literature presents readers with situations, events, and ideas that are incredibly diverse and great for discussions. Today's students not only keep an eye out and want to talk and learn about these diverse topics, but they are also incredibly diverse in who they are as individuals as well. They each have different needs and wants and often need to be taught and heard from in a variety of ways. Teachers are obligated to recognize this and find ways to teach and provide content to give to their students that reflects this idea and will help their students learn and grow. As Atwell so aptly puts it,

English teachers can engage in magical thinking and assign a strict diet of classics or other whole-class novels, and then watch as students read *maybe* six books a year ... Or English teachers can decide to teach the student's we've got. (2015, p. 23)

Using YA Literature as a Tool to Inspire

Finally, as mentioned in the title of this paper, YA literature also has the power to inspire students. The incorporation of YA literature in the classroom not only has the ability to get students reading both inside and outside of school, but the lessons and ideas they learn from these books and pieces of literature have the power to impact them positively for years to come. Kent and Simpson, in the article, "The Power of Literature: Establishing and Enhancing the Young Adolescent Classroom Community," point out, "It is the responsibility of the teacher to cultivate the classroom community in such a manner that students grow ethically, socially, and academically," (2020, p. 145). Some of the best ways to help students grow ethically and socially alongside their academic careers is to provide them with books whose characters and heroes grow ethically and socially as well. Many of the same issues surrounding world change and social issues in today's culture are the same controversial topics tackled in today's YA novels.

In the article, “Young Adult Literature Has a Lot to Say About Social Justice,” Winters writes, “young adult literature offers an earnestness and hopefulness I rarely find elsewhere. It makes me want to care,” and states that this is perfect for a younger generation, currently known as Generation Z, who have proven, “themselves to be resilient and thoughtful activists,” (2019, p. 44). In a generation and age where activism is on the forefront of many young people’s lives, it is important to find ways to encourage and also educate them through these movements many of them are taking part in. Popular YA novels like *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas, *Dear Martin* by Nic Stone, and *The Poet X* by Elizabeth Acevedo, collide headfirst with social issues that are still being fought for and debated over to this day. These stories not only highlight and educate young readers about these issues, but they also educate readers on different ways to handle these situations, how activism could look like surrounding these issues, and the good and the bad that accompanies standing up for what you believe to be right.

Now, not every teenager is looking to become the leader of a social movement and not every YA novel calls readers to attend a protest or sign a petition. However, YA novels usually do call readers to do what is right, good, and necessary in life. Even if it doesn’t have a happy ending, most YA novels end with a lesson that was learned, a lesson to be learned, or a lesson that encourages readers to go out into the world and make it a better place. However that may look like, “Young adult literature will often tell you directly the lesson you should walk away with,” and while this may come off as a little cheesy to some, Winters argues that, “Our culture needs young adult novels because they are sincere when the world is quippy. These books say what they mean and in doing so invite us to empathy,” (2019, p. 45).

There is, always has been, and always will be a need for empathy. It is a trait that keeps societies sane and moving forward and is a trait that students should walk out of the classroom

with. The need and desire to do good for oneself and for others may be one of the most important lessons students can learn while still in school. Any tool to help accomplish this should not be overlooked and should instead be taken full advantage of. As Atwell clearly states,

Instructional fads come, and they go. Human needs and desires remain constant. Our students-- *all* of them --want the same sense, satisfaction, and meaning that adult readers of stories seek. Worthwhile, interesting, appropriate books have the power to sustain every student's interest. (2015, p. 23)

Books that have the ability to meet the needs and wants of young people are not only desired in today's changing world, but are needed if teachers wish to help transform the lives of readers.

Conclusion

There is nothing new about the struggles of English and language arts teachers who try their best to encourage students to read. There are, however, new tools and ideas that can be used to aid teachers along in this process. YA literature is a genre of books made specifically for teenagers who often come face to face with other books they have no interest in reading or understanding. In fact, many of these YA novels become large parts of pop culture in which teenagers are immersed and seek out every day, that is, when they aren't in school. The lack of YA novels read within school often means that there is then also a lack of books with characters, ideas, and issues that today's young people can directly relate to, understand, and enjoy reading about. Many of the traditional books, or canons, assigned to them leave students confused, uninterested, and with a negative sense of what literature is and what it can do for them. The addition of YA novels to high school English and language arts classrooms has the potential to encourage students to read more and develop positive reading habits that they will continue even after leaving high school.

Through the use of reading workshops and/or other classroom setups and strategies that allow for more student choice in the books they read, students can, and will, become better and more experienced readers than many other students who have no choice but to read more difficult to understand books their teacher assigned for them. Student choice and freedom in the books they read and in what they wish to learn and talk about may seem too controversial to some, but in the end, dramatically leads to more academic growth and achievement for students within the English and language arts classroom. In addition, many YA novels can be taught alongside the novels and pieces of literature already commonly used in the classroom. The options and possibilities for incorporating YA literature into high school classrooms are limitless, practical, and easily attainable for those who wish to better the reading lives and skills of their students both in and out of the classroom.

Incorporating the use of young adult literature in the classroom may call for some adjustment in the teaching styles and habits of teachers who have become accustomed to many of the traditional ways of teaching literature to students. While the traditional books and methods commonly used hold value and are worthwhile to read for many, the students of today's world simply need something else if they are to fall in love with reading and keep it up throughout their lives. Young adult literature has the ability to create strong, well-read readers who will grow to read all types of literature, even the ones they used to struggle through in school. Until then, books with stories that meet students where they are in their lives is what is needed, desired, and necessary if teachers wish to raise a generation of self-motivated young people who continue to read.

Figure 1:

YAL Novel	Canonical Connection(s)	Connecting Element(s)
<i>The Book Thief</i> by Markus Zusak Goodreads rating 4.35/5 out of 821,132 ratings	<i>The Diary of a Young Girl</i> by Anne Frank <i>Night</i> by Elie Wiesel	Event- The Holocaust
<i>Smile</i> by Raina Telgemeier Goodreads rating 4.12 out of 60,891 ratings	<i>Little Women</i> by Alcott <i>The Catcher in the Rye</i> by Salinger <i>Roll of Thunder Hear My Cry</i> by Taylor	Theme- Coming of age
<i>Mockingbird</i> by Erskine Goodreads rating 4.16 out of 17,512 ratings	<i>To Kill A Mockingbird</i> by Harper Lee	Characters- Similar plot lines, characters, differing themes <i>Mockingbird</i> references <i>To Kill A Mockingbird</i> several times
<i>Unwind</i> by Shusterman Goodreads rating 4.19 out of 110,977 ratings	<i>Fahrenheit 451</i> by Ray Bradbury <i>1984</i> by Orwell	Theme- Dystopian society and totalitarian government
<i>Eleanor & Park</i> by Rowell Goodreads rating 4.16 out of 294,805	<i>Romeo & Juliet</i> by Shakespeare <i>Pride and Prejudice</i> by Jane Austen	Theme- Star-crossed lovers <i>Eleanor & Park</i> references <i>Romeo & Juliet</i> several times
<i>Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children</i> by Ransom Riggs Goodreads rating 3.79 out of 302,611	<i>The Metamorphosis</i> by Kafka <i>Lord of the Flies</i> by Golding	Theme/genre- Peculiarity, magical realism
<i>If You're Reading This</i> by Reedy Goodreads rating 4.02 out of 432 ratings	<i>Death of a Salesman</i> by Arthur Miller <i>The Kite Runner</i> by Hosseini	Theme- Father/son relationship, Muslim stereotypes
<i>Drums, Girls, and Dangerous Pie</i> by Jordan Sonneblich Goodreads rating 4.25 out of 15,243 ratings	<i>The Adventures of Tom Sawyer</i> by Twain <i>Catcher in the Rye</i> by Salinger	Theme- Coming of age, grief
<i>Looking for Alaska</i> by John Green Goodreads rating 4.16 out of 552,044 ratings	<i>Death of a Salesman</i> by Miller <i>The Awakening</i> by Chopin <i>The Great Gatsby</i> by Fitzgerald <i>Breakfast at Tiffany's</i> by Truman Capote	Event- suicide Theme- gender roles/ societal expectations

(Rybakova, K., & Roccanti, R. (2016). Chart. Connecting The Canon To Current Young Adult Literature.

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