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Adolescence

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ADOLESCENCE: A LITERARY PASSAGE

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[ABSTRACT](#)

Using Erikson's and Gilligan's theories of adolescent development, this paper presents *a* content analysis of the depiction of adolescent development in *a* sample of Newbery Medal winners and honor books. Some diversity was found among the major characters, but white males were overrepresented. Many of the characters underwent an identity crisis. Some passed through the identity versus role confusion stage; others, especially in the almost prototypical maleinitiation-rite stories, discovered ways to deal with nature (industry) which engendered *a* far clearer sense of self (identity). The major female characters experienced the two phases more or less simultaneously, but *a* similar fusion existed for *a* number of the male characters. The themes of "separation" and "connection" were paramount in the stories, and what Gilligan has called "the ethic of care" was presented positively. Some main characters matured only when they recognized their responsibility to others.

[INTRODUCTION](#)

Children on the cusp of *adolescence* face an arduous journey to adulthood. As they approach one of life's major turning points, marked by physical, intellectual, and socioemotional changes, adolescents struggle with such questions as: Who am I? How can I lead *a* moral life? How should I act toward others? Families and peers may help them find answers, but another potential source of guidance is in the school setting, with literature as *a* constant.

The goal of this study was to analyze the depiction of adolescent development in *a* sample of recently published, widely available, and highly regarded books for young adolescents, and to indicate how questions of self-understanding are addressed in these books. Our particular focus is on books aimed at adolescents aged ten to thirteen, since these years are often seen as particularly crucial for later cognitive and emotional development (Schoeppe & Havinghurst, 1960). To this end, the focus has been on books directed primarily at young adolescents: Newbery Medal winners and honor books from 1984 to 1989. Presented annually by the Children's Service Division of

the American Library Association, the Newbery Medal acknowledges the author whose book is judged to make the most distinguished contribution to American literature for children. Most Newbery Medal winners and honor books are appropriate for young adolescents (Schlager, 1978). Once *a* book is *a* winner or *a* runner-up, it is ordered nationally by almost every children's library (Nilsen, 1970). Therefore, the seventeen books so honored over the past five years are widely available. The analysis here is of the ten books in the sample whose main characters are between the ages of ten and eighteen. (The books are listed in Appendix 1.)

Given their acknowledged *literary* value, the books are apt to be recommended by teachers and librarians regardless of their implicit messages about *adolescence*. Analysis, however, suggests *a* common theme regarding adolescent development, the recognition of which will enable teachers, librarians, and counselors to help readers deal with questions of self-understanding. We hope to assist such adults offer *a* gentle version of bibliotherapy, as well as offering *a* source of entertainment to young adolescents.

Bibliotherapy, of course, is not *a* universally acclaimed usage of serious literature. Some *literary* critics, for example, believe it may be *a* justification for publication of many shallow tales of morality (Hunt, 1974), and that the use of "books for the practice of psychic medicine" (Walsh, 1981) can be frustrated by the large range of interpretations that may be accorded any story. Used well, however, and in conjunction with literature of merit, bibliotherapy, and perhaps even reading itself, should at least occasionally provide *a* common basis of understanding for adolescents and adults. As one of its advocates suggests, "Bibliotherapy is *a* family of techniques for structuring an interaction between *a* facilitator and *a* participant, an interaction which is in some way based on their mutual sharing of the literature in the broadest sense possible" (Berry, 1978, p. 185). The technique of bibliotherapy may be *a* socializing influence, and can provide the reader with an opportunity to know him/herself better, to understand human behavior, and to find interest outside of self through *a* structured discussion of shared literature. It is through facilitated discussion that readers recognize that they are not the first to meet and solve problems, become aware of previously unrecognized problems, and find solutions without experiencing feelings of inferiority, guilt, fear or shame (Spache, 1978). Most applicable to *a* wide range of adolescents is what has been called educational/humanistic bibliotherapy (Berry, 1978) or developmental bibliotherapy (Hynes & Hynes-Berry, 1986). This is *a* method for helping people to grow by allowing them to confront personal feelings, increase self-awareness, and enhance self-esteem and self-actualization (Hynes & Hynes-Berry, 1986; Berry, 1978). In the process the facilitator is not *a* therapist, but rather *a* general leader or discussant, while the participants are students or volunteers (Berry, 1978).

CONCEPTUAL MODELS

Using literature for bibliotherapeutic purposes, however, requires *a* conceptual model of the crucial dimensions of adolescent development. There is *a* wide range of theories of *adolescence* and the list of genuine concerns among adolescents is extremely long (see Compton & Skelton, 1982). Thus, any focus will necessarily be suggestive and

illustrative rather than comprehensive and definitive. The educator might present one or more theories of *adolescence* early on so that the readers may bring an analytic frame of reference to the reading of the novels. We have found two sets of theories of adolescent development to be particularly helpful in our analysis of recent Newbery recipients: those of Erik Erikson and Carol Gilligan. Erikson's conceptualization of *adolescence* and personal identity is among the most widely used in psychoanalytic ego psychology (Kimmel & Weiner, 1985), and the Gilligan model is increasingly influential (Kimmel & Weiner, 1985; Muuss, 1988).

In Erikson's view, the stages of life are not independent events in which the accrued learning and maturation of each stage is added to the developmental accomplishments of earlier stages, but rather interactive events in which developments at one stage become building blocks on which later events depend (Kimmel & Weiner, 1985). In each stage the dialectic dynamics result in *a* struggle between two opposing tendencies without which *a* final quality could not emerge (Erikson, 1976). Erikson's eight stages are: (1) trust versus mistrust (infancy), (2) autonomy versus doubt and shame (early childhood), (3) initiative versus guilt (preschool age), (4) industry versus inferiority (school age), (5) identity versus diffusion (*adolescence*), (6) intimacy versus isolation (young adulthood), (7) generativity versus stagnation (middle adulthood), and (8) integrity versus despair (maturity). We'd like to elaborate briefly on the three stages most relevant to *adolescence*: Stages 4, 5, and 6. In Stage 4, children begin to deal with the issues of industry versus inferiority. These must be resolved for *a* sense of competence to emerge (Erikson, 1976). The fifth stage typically begins at puberty with *a* period of open questioning and reworking of childhood identification and values. The stage typically involves *a* period of moratorium in which adult commitment is delayed (Erikson, 1968). In *a* successful transition, certain roles and values are established as essential, and the youth feels *a* sense of obligation and commitment to them (Newman & Newman, 1988). Some of the challenges are the balancing of commitments which often make competing demands (Newman & Newman, 1988). The positive side of the struggle is *a* sense of identity (*a* sense of continuity and consistency of the self over time). The negative side is *a* sense of confusion about one's identity or role. *A* positive resolution is also likely to entail the emergence of fidelity--"the ability to sustain loyalties freely pledged in spite of the inevitable contradictions and confusions of value systems" (Erikson, 1976, p. 25).

Erikson's suggestion that fidelity is an emerging value of his fifth stage leads to what, from our perspective, is his major point of contention with Gilligan. In Erikson's scheme, it is this sense of fidelity which makes possible *a* meaningful entry into his sixth stage (intimacy versus isolation), in which one attempts to fuse his or her identity with that of another person while recognizing that other's uniqueness. According to Gilligan (1982) the order of the fifth and sixth stages might actually be reversed for women: "While for men, identity precedes intimacy and generativity in the optimal cycle of human separation and attachment, for women these tasks seem instead to be fused. Intimacy goes along with identity, as the female comes to know herself as she is known, through her relationship with others" (p. 11).

The female-developmental model proposed by Gilligan (1982,1988,1989) has received widespread attention in the past decade (Kimmel & Weiner, 1985; Muuss, 1988; Kazemek, 1986). It includes *a* developmental view of morality, and focuses on the problems of separation and connection. While other theorists of *adolescence* have emphasized the need to develop independence, Gilligan and her associates have described the importance of relationships in the female life cycle (Stern, 1989). In the pathbreaking book *In a Different Voice*, and subsequently in coauthored texts like *Making Connections*, Gilligan distinguishes between these two kinds of morality. The "justice orientation" is best explicated in the work of Kohlberg (1981) and is based on "separation," the capacity to distance oneself from concrete situations in order to establish just rules for mediating relationships. Gilligan (1982) argues that the images of hierarchy and conflicts of rights, obeying rules, and upholding principles may be most relevant to men's lives, while the images of responsibility and webs coupled with injunctions to care are more typical of the moral imperatives that women hear.

Autonomy and individuation are not paramount in the morality of caring, the other orientation. Instead, responsibility toward others rather than abstract principles is emphasized, and the moral concern is rooted in the specific connections among people and the reality of hurting others. Gilligan argues that it is the struggle over connection that poses problems for girls. In their work, Gilligan and her associates argue that girls coming of age in Western culture are tempted to exclude themselves or exclude others--"that is, by being good women or by being selfish" (Gilligan, 1989, p. 10). It is the form of the connection to others that changes as the adolescent strives to be responsive to herself without losing connection to others, and respond to others without abandoning herself (Bernstein & Gilligan, 1989).

But how are stages of adolescent development depicted in recent Newberys? Is it practical to employ Erikson's stages to this depiction? Do the authors of these books seem to take *a* stand with regard to the issues that separate Gilligan from Erikson? And if they do, do they present female and male developmental priorities as different? Kazemek (1986), for one, argues that there are fictional characters that embody *a* morality of care and reject *a* morality based on rights, rules, and separation, but her analysis is only of books with female characters, while our sample has both male and female characters. The analysis of *a* more representative sample allows *a* fuller understanding of the presentation of adolescent development.

ANALYSIS

One question is whether young adolescents will find books that are of interest, and characters with whom identification is possible. Studies have found that young children prefer to read about same-sex characters (Kropp & Halverson, 1983), although Bettelheim (1976) has suggested that this preference is not apt to extend beyond *a* first reading. This sort of evidence raises the question of whether readers prefer characters whose ethnic or racial backgrounds are similar to their own. In the current sample, there is some gender and racial diversity among the

major characters, but the familiar pattern of white male overrepresentation, Nicolle's (1989) charge that "there is nothing for boys to read" notwithstanding, persists: only two of the ten books have an adolescent female main character; among the adolescent male main characters, two are black, one is Eskimo, one is Puerto Rican, and nine are white. Still the "token" major characters that do exist (Rachel in *After the Rain*, Aerin in *The Hero and the Crown*, Jamal and Tito in *Scorpions*, Jerome in *The Mouses Make the Man*, and Russell in *Dogsong*) are certainly among the most memorably drawn in the sample and provide considerable opportunity to stimulate interest through either same-sex or same-race identification. Unfortunately, with the exception of Rachel in *After the Rain*, whose Jewishness is barely discernible, there are no female minority-group main characters, although four books have women of color as minor characters.

Assuming that reader-character identification is possible, there are several developmental patterns in the recent crop of Newbery books. All ten of the novels present major characters who can be seen as undergoing what Erikson might see as an identity crisis, the stage most frequently associated with his thesis. Some characters are most clearly passing through the identity versus role confusion stage, with undertones of the earlier, industry versus inferiority stage. Jamal's struggle in *Scorpions*, against a role confusion that seems to propel him into the Scorpion gang, has left him hardened to inner-city violence by the end of the novel. It is presented against what Erikson might call a losing battle against an overwhelming sense of inferiority, associated both with himself and his family. Jamal's own sense of inferiority has been occasioned by, among other things, a school principal who labels him unredeemable and looks for the evidence that could justify expulsion, his sense of family inferiority (an absent father), a brother who has been imprisoned as an accessory to murder, and a mother who is overwhelmed by her efforts to support the family. So, when Jamal learns that his older brother has been stabbed while in prison, we find that "He didn't want to think about everything happening to the family. It seemed that they never made things happen to anybody else, or even for themselves. Things happened to his family, the same way things happened to him" (p. 146).

Jamal's is the only story among the ten in which the interactive rather than the independent nature of sequential stages is presented in this negative way. Thus, although his story perhaps most importantly engenders empathy for a certain kind of inner-city youth, it may also serve as a cautionary tale, indicating, in Erikson's terms, how important a sense of industry can be for the happy resolution of the later identity crisis. In the other stories, earlier successes are the bases for later ones. In both *Hatchet* and *Dogsong*, Gary Paulsen's almost prototypical male-initiation-rite stories, a main character's gradual discovery of how to deal with nature (industry) engenders a far clearer sense of self (identity). And *Prince Brat* (actually named Horace) of *The Whipping Boy*, undoubtedly the simplest of the recent crop of Newberys, develops a sense of regal responsibility and identity only after his adventure with Jemmy, his whipping boy, forces him to face the consequences of his previously delinquent attitudes toward his studies and his horribly selfish attitude toward others. In the end, Prince Brat finds he must prevent Jemmy from suffering more blows on his behalf, because even though Jemmy claims, and means, "I wouldn't yowl and bellow," the Prince must finally and honestly admit, "But I would, Jemmy!" (p. 88).

The relationship between Prince Brat's increasing sensitivity to Jemmy and his achievement of *a* more coherent sense of self raises the question of the real epigenetic sequencing of the identity and the intimacy stages of Erikson's scheme. This is the question that Gilligan raised, and one that recurs in almost all of these Newbery winners, regardless of the main character's gender.

To be sure, both of the major female characters, Rachel in *After the Rain* and Aerin in *The Hero and the Crown*, seem to experience the two phases more or less simultaneously. Rachel's identity as writer, friend, girlfriend, and family member is strengthened through her growing intimacy with Izzy, her grandfather, and also with Lewis, her first real boyfriend, and Helena, her girlfriend. Her initial uncertainty about how to stand up to her parents on "trivial" matters, such as their unwelcome use of "Mouse," their pet name for her, is transmuted eventually into such *a* keen sense of the appropriate that, by story's end, she compels her parents first to permit her to miss school in order to stay with Izzy in the hospital during his last few weeks and, finally, to let her stay with him on what she senses, correctly, will be his last night alive. She is enriched and her early deep desire for wisdom is fulfilled, almost as if she were embodying what Belenky et al. (1986) call "women's way of knowing," through her knowledge of and love for Izzy--*a* knowledge and love which are hard-won and come only after she has learned to enjoy their "verbal boxing matches" (p. 190) and Izzy's gruff exterior that previously had made him inaccessible.

One can almost read *a* conventional Eriksonian sequencing of an identity stage followed by an intimacy stage into Aerin's story in the mythic fantasy *The Hero and the Crown*, perhaps befitting her status as *a* dragon-slaying superhero, *a* role almost exclusively played by males. Only after she discovers the truth about her mother and, consequently, about herself, does Aerin achieve *a* truly intimate (and in this case, sexual) relationship with either the immortal Luthe or the human Tor. Even after the discovery, and perhaps due to her eventual straddling of the mortal and immortal worlds, Aerin's sense of self at any given moment becomes particularly dependent upon her relationship with others. Without such defining relationships, she might have remained in the limbo into which she had fallen after her fearful battle with the dragon Maur, *a* limbo in which "She slept, . . . drifting back and forth across the boundary of selfhood . . ." (p. 122). She is eventually "cured" into *a* state of not-quite-mortality by the "not-quite-mortal" Luthe and the information about her mother's past. But she is then drawn back into mortal society by her sense of responsibility to the beleaguered Damarians, whom she saves from disaster. Once returned, however, her sources of meaningful identity become her relationship to Tor and her status as Queen of Damar, the combination of which permit her to forget Luthe and her immortal destiny, as "the not quite mortal part of her did sleep, that she might love her country and her husband" (p. 246).

Given Gilligan's theses, it may be no great surprise that intimacy and identity are so closely fused for the female characters. It is somewhat more surprising that *a* similar fusion exists for major male characters as well. This is clearly true for the three "cross-gendered" novels, whose authors are female but whose major characters are male. Thus Cynthia Rylant's zealously religious Pete in *A Fine White Dust* needs to come to terms with his responsibility and

debt to his close friend Rufus and to his parents before he can come to an appreciation and acceptance of himself and the social world in which he finds himself. Early in the book, he enviously compares himself to Rufus, who he says "was solid like **a** rock. And I was the Jello man" (p. 12), and feels that his parents were "people I hardly knew" (p. 24). By the end of the book he reflects, with what passes for contentment, that "the world is **a** place that isn't anything like the inside of **a** church on **a** hot summer night. It's **a** world where good guys like Rufus are happy atheists, and nice folks like my parents don't care much about church, and spiritual people like me wander around wishing it was heaven" (p. 104). Pete's increasingly sure identity even permits **a** genuine concern for the Preacher Man who, though his desertion and hypocrisy hurt Pete greatly, still merits the reflection, "I've got to admit, I still worried about him. I worried he might be lonely. I figured he never wanted to hurt me or anybody else. I figured he just didn't know what to do about being lonely" (p. 100).

Then there's Paula Fox's Ned in *One-Eyed Cat*, who requires the solace of confessing his "sin," the possible maiming of the one-eyed cat with the air gun his father had forbidden him to use, first to the dying, and therefore "safe," Mr. Scully and then to his mother. And Marion Dane Bauer's Joel in *On My Honor*, who similarly needs to confess to his father his "sins," the series of reckless choices he made that may have contributed to his friend Tony's death. Careful readers will observe that both Ned and Joel seem no less caught up in Eriksonian Stage 3, in which **a** sense of initiative vies with **a** sense of guilt, than in Stage 5, where identity vies with role confusion. But none are likely to deny the Gilliganian insight that, whatever "separation" crisis (whether it be autonomy, initiative, industry, or identity) is central, the successful resolution of the crisis is convincingly portrayed as dependent upon **a** successful, and nearly simultaneous, resolution of an "attachment" or "intimacy" crisis. Both Ned and Joel must allow themselves honest, human contact before they can get on with their lives.

One would be tempted to infer that the simultaneous resolution of "separation" and "attachment" crises is **a** distinctive device of female authors if it did not occur in novels about male characters written by men as well. In *The Moues Make the Man*, Bruce Brooks carefully draws **a** portrait of the narrator, Jerome Foxworthy, **a** black adolescent growing up in rural North Carolina, and his white friend, Bix. Jerome's sense of "industry" is clear from the start; he loves basketball, **a** game which he prefers to practice alone, developing his ability to "fake" or "move" in the absence of others; and he's such an accomplished student that in response to mandated integration, he's chosen to be the first black student to attend **a** previously all-white school, where he finds his classes in French (**a** subject he loves) and communications (which he finds hateful) particularly useful mirrors on white psychology. Jerome befriends Bix, an excellent baseball player, and teaches him the fundamentals of basketball, only to find that Bix's exaggerated sense of honesty prevents him from putting the final touches, the fakes, on his game. At one point, Jerome and Bix angrily part company over the "faking" issue, and Jerome realizes that "Before Bix, when I was alone it was the way it should be, and nothing was missing. Now, after Bix, I was alone and something WAS missing, no doubt about it" (p. 184). The remainder of the story involves Jerome's observation of Bix awkwardly coming to terms with "faking," first in sports and then in his relationships with others. In the end, however, it is Jerome's sense of self, and his

ability to fool that self, that is most clearly changed through his relationship with Bix. As he says in the book's last *passage*: "... if you are faking, somebody is taking.... If nobody else is there to take the fake, then for good or bad **a** part of your own self will follow it. There are no moves you truly make alone" (p. 280).

A similar sense for life's interconnectedness informs Russel's successful acquisition of **a** traditional Eskimo identity in Gary Paulsen's *Dogsong*. Born in **a** time when Christianity and snowmobiles are but two symbols of Western incursion into Eskimo culture, Russel attempts to reclaim his heritage under the tutelage of an eccentric village elder, Oogruk. His eventual success depends in large part upon his learned capacity to care deeply, not only for Nancy, the woman quite literally of his dreams, but also for all forms of life, even those he kills for food. He ends his "dreamrun" and returns to civilization only because of his loving concern for Nancy's health and his recognition that Western medicine may be her only chance for survival.

One might question why male authors of adolescent fiction, as well as their female counterparts, should be attuned to what has been called female issues and approaches. Could it be that when writing in **a** genre commonly associated with females, or when writing of "others," in this case generational others, or of marginalized groups such as blacks and Eskimos, they simply project what they associate with others, in this case the aforesaid issues and approaches most commonly associated with females? Or is it possible that when writing in **a** more marginalized genre than adult fiction, male and female authors are able to use approaches that might seem insufficiently calloused and cynical in mainstream literature? In any case, our analysis suggests **a** remarkable commonality of vision among the authors of recently published books of *literary* merit geared to young adolescents. It is **a** vision that not only entails the transition to **a** sense of competence and **a** questioning of childhood identification and values, but even more striking, it involves the view that only through responsibility and connection to others can adult identity be achieved.

CONCLUSIONS

Literature is meant to entertain, to delight, perhaps to inform. It is probably not best written with therapeutic values in mind. Yet, if there are obvious ways for educators to encourage the exploration of issues of psychosocial development and morality among adolescents, they may not wish to avoid them. The themes of "separation" and "connection" are obvious issues of adolescent concern. The evident fusion of identity and intimacy stages suggests **a** common perspective of *adolescence* among recent Newbery authors and points to likely insights for their readers. This common vision of development is what has been called "female morality" (Kazemek, 1986), but which is really an "ethic of care and response" in contrast to "an ethic of justice and rights" (Gilligan, 1986).

While researchers continue to debate the extent to which there are actual differences between the genders in their orientations toward morality (see, for example, the debate between Greeno & Maccoby, 1986, Luria, 1986, and Gilligan, 1986), the fictional characters show similarities. It is not the ability to "separate," that is, the capacity to

distance oneself from concrete situations in order to establish just rules for mediating relationships, nor is it *a* morality of justice and rights that is accentuated in the books. Instead, the fictional characters analyzed here are most frequently depicted as achieving an acceptable sense of their own distinction (separation) from others (whether it be in terms of *a* keener sense of initiative, industry, or identity) in conjunction with *a* greater sense of their connectedness with others. And each of them acts on the basis of the ethic of care. They concern themselves with the pain and suffering of others and recognize their responsibility to them.

If it is true that *adolescence* is *a* period of "impatient idealism," as Erikson has called it, and *a* quickening concern for the moral life, then it may also be *a* time when readers are most susceptible to *literary* analyses that at least acknowledge moral concerns, and are most prepared to deal with alternate views of what *a* moral life may be. This brief discussion of recent Newbery winners suggests *a* remarkable commonality of vision among authors of outstanding fiction for young adolescents, *a* vision that may or may not reflect common concerns for *a* world that sometimes seems poised on the brink of human destruction, but *a* vision that seems to be generating different ways of perceiving ourselves in relation to one another and our environment. To her credit, Gilligan has provided us with the tools to discuss such *a* vision.

Appendix 1 Newbery Medal Winners and Honor Books

- Bauer, M. D. *On My Honor*. New York: Ticknor & Fields, 1986.
- Brooks, B. *The Mouses Make the Man*. New York: Harper and Row, 1984.
- Fleischman, S. *The Whipping Boy*. New York: Greenwillow Books, 1986.
- Fox, P. *One-Eyed Cat*. Scarsdale, New York: Bradbury Press, 1984.
- Mazer, N. F. *After the Rain*. New York: William Morrow, 1987.
- McKinley, R. *The Hero and the Crown*. New York: Greenwillow, 1984.
- Myers, W. D. *Scorpions*. New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1988.
- Paulsen G. *Dogsong*. New York: Bradbury Press, 1985.
- Paulsen G. *Hatchet*. New York: Bradbury Press, 1987.
- Rylant, C. *A Fine White Dust*. New York: Bradbury Press, 1986.

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