YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE: THE REALITY ON THE PAGE

Chelsea Elmore
Southeastern University - Lakeland

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

Part of the American Literature Commons, Children's and Young Adult Literature Commons, Literature in English, North America Commons, and the Modern Literature Commons

Recommended Citation
https://firescholars.seu.edu/honors/88

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by FireScholars. It has been accepted for inclusion in Selected Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of FireScholars. For more information, please contact firescholars@seu.edu.
YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE: THE REALITY ON THE PAGE

By

Chelsea Rashael Elmore

Submitted to the Honors Program Committee

In partial fulfillment

Of the requirements for University Honors Scholars

Southeastern University

2017
Acknowledgement

I just want to say thank you to my wonderful parents and to my hardworking advisors, Professor Marlon Dempster and Dr. Linda Linzey. I cannot express how grateful I am for the countless hours you have dedicated in helping me in this thesis journey. Not only have you played an invaluable part in this process, but you have encouraged me to keep going, to do better, and to always stay curious.
ABSTRACT

The genre of young adult literature has grown from a didactic category made of problem novels and taboo themes into a mimetic vision of modern life by way of dystopian fiction. In my thesis, I will discuss the ways in which young adult literature has changed over time and what those changes will mean for its readers and its future as a genre. The first section will analyze three groundbreaking novels that have disrupted the previously established didactic mindset of young adult literature. The publication of such novels (*The Catcher in the Rye*, *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret* and *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*) has set a new standard for the genre—one that encourages honest teen portrayal. The most recent trend of young adult literature, however, is dystopian styled texts. In the second section of my thesis, I will analyze why teenagers have suddenly become interested in this genre—and explore one particular novel in detail according to my theory. In applying mimetic theory and narratological transference to Veronica Roth’s *Divergent*, I will explore child malleability and identity formation in an attempt to explain how literature can impact readers in a positive or negative way.

KEY WORDS: Didactic, Young adult literature, YA literature, Problem novel, Bibliotherapy, Mimesis, Reality/realistic, Dystopia, Narratology
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 1: Introduction .................................................................................................................. 1

Chapter 2: Methodology .................................................................................................................. 6

Chapter 3: The Fluctuation of Didactic Ideas Over Time ................................................................. 10

Chapter 4: Following the Trend as Young Adult Literature Rises in Popularity ......................... 34

Chapter 5: Mimetic Reading of *Divergent* .................................................................................. 44

Chapter 6: Psychological Potential for Young Adult Literature ..................................................... 62

Chapter 7: Literature Review .......................................................................................................... 68

Chapter 8: Conclusion ..................................................................................................................... 86

Works Cited .................................................................................................................................... 88
Chapter 1: Introduction

*The Hunger Games. Divergent. The Giver.* Whether one remembers seeing these three titles advertised at the local box office theater or sitting on a bookshelf in Barnes and Noble, it is well known that the three works have received much publicity in the last ten years. They are, in a sense, a good representation of the young adult literary genre as a whole in relation to the 21st century. The idea of dystopian society, action-packed heroism, and encouraged revolution are not uncommon for young adult dystopian literature; however, the genre has undergone drastic change to arrive at its present destination. This change, while common in most literary genres, is important to acknowledge because of the rapid rate at which the category has undergone such transformations.

Young adult literature, otherwise known as YA literature, has only been around for about 70 years. In relation to the thousands of years humanity has existed, that time period is simply a blink of the eye. It is incredible, then, that such reconstruction has occurred so quickly. Looking back upon the category and analyzing what concepts have been altered and why they have been transformed since YA literature has become its own genre is valuable because the category continues to transform at the same fast pace. Young adult novels are gradually becoming more and more like adult novels in content, language, and style. This has become a great cause for concern with most parents because the differences between the adult and young adult genres have significantly decreased over the years. As the genre seeks to reach the teenage demographic, the content needs to
reflect real teen issues, which more and more reflect adult issues. Thus, the books being read by teenagers are taking on new content and their influences are shifting as well.

The study of YA fiction is valuable to acknowledge because the category has such an effect on young readers. It is no secret that identity is developed most widely during the adolescent years, so it is not much of a leap to consider literature an important factor upon a teenager’s identity development. Film and literature hold much sway over teenage identity; thus, it is extremely important that young people and adults alike are aware of the items most commonly influencing them and how these items do so.

Since the beginning of the category, young adult literature has most commonly been written with the underlying intentions of teaching something—a lesson, a trait, or a certain behavior. This method of writing with a purpose in mind is known as didacticism. Didactic literature commonly targets the young, malleable minds in order to inspire change. The didactic style of young adult literature is most evident in the earlier stages of the genre: works written before 1960. The YA novels being published at this time were extremely didactic. Parents suggested literature to their own children with the mindset of correcting behavior or modeling how a good, modern citizen should act during that time period (Myracle 36-37). Book suggestions and authorial inspiration at that time strongly emphasized the didactic quality of a novel.

As a result, the adolescent novels of that time—junior novels—tended to be “safe.” They were not dealing with real issues, but simply the issues that adults
desired their children to know. The didactic quality went through rapid transformation, however, during the 1970s. No longer were young adult novels written as adolescent guidebooks for good behavior; these books dealt with serious issues and addressed taboo concepts otherwise unheard of in previous literature for teens (Ellis 94-95). There were a few specific books that were especially groundbreaking in building up the new model for the young adult novel.

Three major works that inspired change were as follows: The Catcher in the Rye (1951), Are You There God? It’s Me, Margaret (1970) and The Perks of Being a Wallflower (1999). The books mentioned here contained content that was considered inappropriate—profanity, sexual promiscuity, dishonesty and alcoholism. Regardless, such content took the category by storm and made necessary adjustments to subject matter, character development, and realistic depictions of teenage life.

Because of these “outlandish” novels, the young adult category began to undergo a reformation. The books being published, while still containing some form of didacticism, were less obvious and more thought provoking. The changes inspired a whole new framework for the young adult category. In 1983, Maia Mertz and David English co-wrote an article outlining the ten major traits of a YA fiction novel, and the traits are still applicable. In fact, they are fitting to define why critically acclaimed dystopian novels such as The Hunger Games, Divergent and The Giver qualify as YA fiction. These particular novels have struck a chord with young readers—and have especially drawn attention since they have all recently inspired film adaptations in the last seven years.
Although common teen issues and problems are still being discussed—and are still being recognized—most of the recent YA novels are leaning on the new dystopian trend. According to the idea of mimetic realism, explored in detail by theorist Matthew Potolsky, works of art tend to reflect the truth in reality (Potolsky 93). In applying his mimetic theory to recent trends in literature, one could argue that YA dystopia is not depicting fantasy, per say, but is simply presenting a selective portrayal of modern, realistic society. Thus, the recent increase in dystopian literature has less to do with its fantasy implications and more to do with its realistic similarities to modern world issues.

Since teenagers are reading fiction and noticing similarities between the novelistic fantasy worlds and their own realities, they must learn how these observations are affecting them. This thesis will act as a manual for learning transferability and reading trends/effects. The changes that occur in the genre, then, can be identified through what they do—impact readers. The literary changes that take place in the young adult category over time affect generations as a whole because teens are still forming their identity through the texts they read. At the rate it is going now, it is difficult to predict what will become the next groundbreaking concept, but it is valuable to be aware that change is occurring.

The genre of young adult literature has grown from a didactic category made of problem novels and taboo themes into a mimetic vision of modern life by way of dystopian fiction. This thesis will address the aforementioned issues by answering the following research questions:

How are children/teens affected by literature?
How has YA literature become its own category and in what ways have the modern frameworks for YA literature changed in theme and subject matter? How does the increasingly popular YA dystopian fiction reflect realism and mimesis?

By answering how YA literature has changed over time and what those changes mean for its readers and future as a genre, readers will be able to use the information to formulate their individual response and resulting action. Some may resort to further refining their book choices or increasing their awareness of the genre as a whole.
Chapter 2: Methodology

In keeping with the purpose of observing trends in primary and secondary literature, this thesis will be using a “literature review” methodology in order to observe the growth of YA literature over time and analyze the implications that might result from major changes in form and content. It will utilize literary sources for basic and necessary information as well as specific literary works in order to reveal what is being stated in the professional journals and articles. My plan is to first support my claim that YA literature has been didactic from the start and has morphed into something more realistic and ambiguous before analyzing a contemporary text in a mimetic light. In the following paragraphs, I will give background information on mimesis considering it is the theory I am applying to my text.

Understanding mimesis, then, becomes an integral piece to my study; in order to follow the textual application in Chapter 5, readers will need to understand the concept’s general meaning along with its connection to narrative transference.

Mimetic theory, in its simplest form, is the theory that “describes the relationship between artistic images and reality” (Potolsky 1). Most often, the theory implies that art or literature imitates the real world in some way, shape, or form. Plato especially focuses on this idea in the way that he discusses visual art, story telling, and performances. According to Plato, the understanding of mimesis should open our eyes to the artificiality of art. Art can be used to create mere shadows of reality, and thus, it leads people further away from absolute truth and knowledge (Potolsky 22). Plato warns people against imitation in story telling and
performances (tragedies specifically) because they invite people to experience a false sense of reality. Thus, Plato maintains a negative view of mimetic art due to its false portrayal of truth and its connection to his allegorical cave.

Aristotle, however, has some differences in thought. He does agree with Plato in the sense that art imitates reality, but in Aristotle’s opinion, such imitation is not a bad thing. Art has value because it imitates real life; scholar Sylvia Carli reaffirms his idea by quoting Professor Stephen Halliwell:

Aristotle can be understood as fiction only if “by ‘fiction’ we . . . understand the modeling of a world whose status is that of an imaginary, constructed parallel to the real, spatiotemporal realm of the artist’s and audience’s experience: imaginary, in that it rest on a shared agreement between the maker and the recipients of the mimetic work to suspend the norms of literal truth; but "parallel," in that its interpretation depends on standards of explanatory and causal coherence that are essentially derived from and grounded in real experiences" (19-20).

The clear connection between reality and fictional worlds in Halliwell’s explanation only further supports Aristotle’s view on mimesis. In examining the relationship between fictional worlds and audience responses, Aristotle also addresses the effect of the narrative on readers/audience members, just as Plato did; however, Aristotle concludes that transferential qualities of a narrative are beneficial to humanity instead of harmful.

Both philosophers dabbled in narratological concepts before their ideas were ever labeled as such, but it was theorist Peter Brooks that officially established these
notions and developed topics like transference and narrative desire. According to him, narratology represents the study of "how stories are told and how they are listened to" (Brooks 216). It combines both the literary aspects of the text and the psychosocial aspects of the reader. This being said, a reader can approach a text with their individuality and read that same text differently than another person. The reader is, in a sense, producing his/her very own narrative (Ko 12). Such an occurrence is frequent with readers; it implies that anyone participating in the act of reading will indeed insert themselves into the story and bring all of their personal experiences and memories along with them.

This personal relationship between an individual and the text can also be referred to as transference. By transferring one’s feelings or thoughts onto characters, the “fictional distance allows [people] to learn from representations, whereas [people] might respond emotionally to the actual experience... mimesis allows for a particular kind of learning and pleasure” (Potolsky 37). Therefore, transference not only provides some sort of pleasure, but it resolves the narrative desire that readers harbor within. Scholar Dino Felluga discusses the specific ideas as they were developed by Peter Brooks: “we are driven to read because of our drive to find meaningful, bounded, totalizing order to the chaos of life; however, that drive for order is most fulfilling after the detours or dilations that we associate with plot” (Felluga, “Introduction to Peter Brooks...”). Thus, readers practice transference in reading in order to reach some kind of psychosocial closure. Readers would not, however, be able to insert themselves into the narrative if it did not represent a form of reality they recognize. In consonance with Aristotle and Plato, the textual art
does indeed replicate or mimic reality. It is valuable then to study how mimetic texts affect readers and how bibliotherapy is accomplished through narrative desire and transference.

Chapter 5 will address the mimetic theory in response to specifically dystopian literature for young adults. Although the dystopian world established in the novel *Divergent* may seem unrealistic, mimetic theory suggests that Veronica Roth wrote what is true, even if she was selective. It would make sense, then, that the reason behind recent interest in dystopian literature is connected to the fact that teens see it as a representation of real life. Plenty of authentic connections between dystopian structures and modern day issues exist, but they are not always plain to see. Some of the hidden realities that I will address within my thesis are as follows: obsession with technology, fear of government, increase in violence, and disruption of familial dependence. These concepts will be tied in to *Divergent*, and I will discuss why recent interest in YA dystopia is important to note.
Chapter 3: The Fluctuation of Didactic Ideas Over Time

When children utter their first words, the normal reaction is neither shock nor confusion. The words “mommy,” “daddy” or “bye-bye” do not come unexpectedly out of their mouths; parents know that their children’s first words will be mere copies of the words they have heard growing up. Generally, adults understand that children do not speak of their own accord until they are much older. By the time toddlers begin developing their own distinctive personalities, people have come to accept this childlike, imitative behavior as normal. However, this type of behavioral repetition is continuous; some theorists, such as Matthew Potolsky, even suspect that this habit defines humankind’s identity development as a whole—that people never stop imitating those around them.

The Influence of Literature on Child/Adolescent Identity

Potolsky traces this idea back through multiple reputable theorists of the past to represent how imitation has impacted humanity over time. Potolsky especially emphasizes Freud’s opinion in the matter—the notion that people do not stop the imitation of others in psycho-social formation of identity throughout the entirety of their lives. Freud’s thoughts on the matter tie back into his established theory of therapy and psychoanalysis because “the aim of psychoanalysis is to give patients an understanding of the unconscious forces that govern their behavior, and thus to give them some perspective on the ways in which our present unwittingly imitates a repressed past” (Potolsky 119). Thus, Freud acknowledges the influence
of imitation on identity development during childhood and the ways in which this behavior affects the adult persona.

Potolsky maintains this idea that humanity is made up of continuous representations. His studies support several other renowned philosophers—Aristotle, Plato, and Freud, to name a few. The core belief that “human existence is but a series of copies without a true original” unites them all (Potolsky 116). Such a concept is difficult for some people to accept, but the root of it is fairly simple. From early childhood to adolescence, adults encourage children to discover and embrace their true selves. It is nigh impossible for them to do so without looking and learning from others. Children assume habits from different types of places and people. The possibility for external influence is endless, so it makes sense that children learn and adapt themselves constantly as their social environments expand and transform.

The alterations that children undergo in relation to identity are vital to healthy growth and construction of selfhood. The influences that maintain the strongest impact on the progressing mind of youths continue to impact those minds as they age and mature into independent adults. Potolsky reminds his readers that “despite the influence of education, work and other intense emotional relationships, [a person’s] earliest structural identifications continue to shape [them] even, perhaps especially, when [they] do not recognize—or when [they] actively seek to resist—their power” (Potolsky 123). This being said, the earliest years of a person’s life hold utmost importance to the development of their identity.

The time period between infancy and adulthood often contain some of the most defining moments and developmental decisions of a person’s life. Teenagers
especially are susceptible to their circumstances. The adolescent years are the prominent years of change; it is no wonder that Eric Erikson has identified five stages of psychosocial growth within the first eighteen years of life and only three stages beyond (McLeod). Youths undergo rapid transformations in an extremely short period of time, the most important of these changes occurring in adolescence.

The adolescent fifth stage deals with “identity vs. role confusion, and it occurs during adolescence, from about 12-18 years. During this stage, adolescents search for a sense of self and personal identity, through an intense exploration of personal values, beliefs and goals” (McLeod). Despite the fact that the rapid transition phase leaves young people vulnerable to outside pressures and influences, it also allows them a window of time in which they can “[explore] identity during [their] adolescent years... free from the social and professional commitments of adulthood” (Ferry 13). Although vital to self-discovery, the change that occurs during such time is dangerously vulnerable to external forces. During the fragile period of growth, teens are exposed to a world of influences that they cannot control. Because of the indicated defenselessness, adolescent minds are invariably swayed, and thus, external forces easily alter their identity development.

Some of the influencers include, but are not limited to, television shows, family members, friends, literature, and social media. An experiment conducted by Laura Ferry reveals that young people truly do allow themselves to be shaped by literature. In fact, she agrees with fellow theorist Louise Rosenblatt when she “construct[s] the argument that reading occurs as a ‘transaction,’ with readers and texts affecting each other” (Ferry 20). By placing themselves within the literature,
young readers reveal the truly personal experience that reading has on their beliefs and thought processes. They are not merely reading a story, but they are imagining themselves as the main character. The way they work through fictional problems alters the way they might deal with real ones. Unbeknownst to literate young people, their reading habits strongly affect their worldviews. In fact, Peter Brooks calls this “transaction” transference, the experience in which readers “feel the need to re-transmit that contamination, ‘the passing-on of the virus of narrative, the creation of the fevered need to retell’ (221). Brooks is interested, then, in ‘the desire, power, and danger of storytelling’ (233)” (qtd. in Felluga, “Modules on Brooks”). Thus, Brooks sees transference as a metaphor of an infection that must be psychologically healed by retransmission. In the discussion of text, readers find their own resolution; therefore, talking through the literature helps them understand their own transference.

For as long as children’s literature has been around, educators and parents alike have taken advantage of its heavy impact on young, impressionable minds. They have utilized literature as a didactic tool in order to “instruct their readers, whether in facts, religion, morals, social codes, ways of thinking, or some other set of beliefs or ideas” (Grenby). While the initial concept of educating youth is appealing, the didactic approach being used began to move in a dangerous direction. Author and literary theorist Clementine Beauvais even refers to the earliest forms of didactic fiction as a type of propaganda (71). She is not entirely off base in saying so because these early novels contained several of the issues she addressed.
One major error within the previously mentioned novels—otherwise known as junior novels—was their glorified sense of morality: “Moral perfection, in the sense of lack of transgression, was the overt goal for early children’s literature. Virtue was rewarded, vice punished with suitable poetic justice, and moral virtue seldom overlapped with transgressive behavior” (Mills and Nelson 102). The lofty ideas about perfection and good behavior were laughable for the teens reading them, and thus, junior novels were leaving less of an impression with their target audience. Teens generally did not enjoy the novels meant for them due to the second issue at hand: the writing style. Rather than writing in such a way as to relate to teenagers, novelists were writing to change minds and fix unacceptable behavior. Authors such as Betty Cavanna, Henry Felsen and John Tunis made the mistake of “writing about kids rather than through kids’ eyes” (Myracle 37). The preachy writing style found in junior novels made the books both forgettable and unrelatable. For a long period of time, adolescent literature was limited by the junior novel ideal. Finding a realistic or relatable adolescent narrative from this period is almost impossible. The forgettable flat characters and story lines found in junior novels have hindered their ability to impact lives long after they were published—the content has hindered their ability to last the test of time.

Discovering the flaws and improving the structure of young adult literature has been a time consuming process, but it is one that has gradually been refined over the years. As of the late twentieth century, books for teens have drastically improved and have lost much of the dreaded didacticism. Young adult literature began “using character focalization [to invite] reader identification, [using] texts [to]
focus on protagonists’ negotiation of ethical challenges as part of a multifaceted approach to becoming strong, self-actualized, and well-rounded, developing meaningful relationships, and ... creating positive roles” (Mills and Nelson 105).

Much of the adaptations provided solutions to the junior novel errors. The new and improved methods of writing young adult literature began to drastically shift the genre as a whole after the late 1940s. Teens were finally able to read stories that related to their own lives, and young people were connecting with literature in a new and real way.

**Groundbreaking Novels of the Late Twentieth Century**

The transition from stiff, didactic teen fiction to life-like, psychologically complex, and relatable young adult literature did not come without its own set of challenges. Parents especially resisted the concept of books inspired not by adults but by the children and teens themselves. In order for young adult literature to achieve the amount of growth necessary to reform the genre, brave authors such as J. D. Salinger, Judy Blume, and Stephen Chbosky had to take a leap. All three paved the way for contemporary YA literature in different—and sometimes similar—fashion. Some of the most important novels to impact adolescent literature were Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951), Blume’s *Are You There God? It’s Me, Margaret* (1970) and Chbosky’s *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (1999).

Not only were these three novels controversial for content and subject matter, but they also rebelled against the expectations and cultures at the time of publication. *The Catcher in the Rye* came as a shock in 1951 for many reasons—the
most important being the protagonist persona, sexual promiscuity, vulgar language, and excessive alcohol use. Such traits, along with the tone of the novel, especially upset parents in the early 1950s.

When the novel was released, America was still living in the post-World War II era. Therefore, analyzing the war period and its resulting culture helps readers truly understand why *The Catcher in the Rye* was such a controversial piece. During World War II, Americans developed a strong sense of patriotic pride. War efforts increased not only overseas, but on American soil as well; people were buying bonds, planting gardens and building weaponry in order to back the American cause. The war “demanded a monumental production effort to provide the materials necessary to fight ... Americans rose to the challenge of doing whatever was necessary to support the war effort” (Winkler). While the men were making the most dangerous sacrifices by fighting, women all over the country began to make bolder decisions as well. With so many men on the battlefield, the women left behind were forced to begin working their own jobs in addition to maintaining their households. This wave of preliminary feminism was short-lived, however. The war was won, the men returned to work, and the women filled their housewife roles once again.

In fact, the end of the war sparked a feverish desire for normalcy. The article “Post World War II: 1946-1960” reiterates such an idea: “Soldiers returned from the war eager to return to normal life, to buy homes, start families, and hold regular jobs. There was a national enthusiasm for a return to normality that created pressures for people to conform to standards of dress and behavior.” People were
tired of fighting, struggling, and sacrificing; conformity seemed to be the best solution. The adults were especially keen on the idea even when the youth began to revolt. The pressure to be a certain way had the opposite effect on the younger generation after the war.

One of the first and most obvious signs of rebellion was the instant popularity of rock ‘n’ roll music. It was loud, outrageous, and extremely inappropriate in the eyes of any respectable adults. For this particular reason, the genre rapidly acquired a large following of young people. Richard Welch confirmed the idea when he said, “Teenage enjoyment of rock ‘n’ roll was greatly enhanced by the condemnations heaped upon it by the adult population, especially the guardians of conventional popular culture” (36). In addition to music preferences, teenagers rebelled once again in their literary taste. Salinger published The Catcher in the Rye, and it quickly gained popularity with youth. The young people of the 1970s and ‘80s loved the novel; contemporary critics even discussed it fondly. The 1951 review by The New York Times praises Salinger’s first novel:

Mr. Salinger, whose work has appeared in The New Yorker and elsewhere, tells a story well, in this case under the special difficulties of casting it in the form of Holden’s first-person narrative. This was a perilous undertaking, but one that has been successfully achieved. Mr. Salinger’s rendering of teen-age speech is wonderful: the unconscious humor, the repetitions, the slang and profanity, the emphasis, all are just right. Holden’s mercurial changes of mood, his stubborn refusal to admit his own sensitiveness and emotions, his
cheerful disregard of what is sometimes known as reality are typically and heart breakingly adolescent (Burger).

Despite positive critical reviews, however, the educators of the time were deeply troubled. Such disapproval landed Salinger’s most famous work onto countless banned book lists over the years.

In fact, an excerpt from “Are Your Children Being Brainwashed?” reveals one school board’s response to *The Catcher in the Rye*. It records a letter written to the Dade County School System highlighting the many reasons why the novel should be excluded from the educational canon of literature: “This filth is being recommended to your children for extra-curricular reading… Is this the kind of book that should be recommended reading by teachers in our public schools?… Pages 182-84 reveal passages even more vulgar than those printed here, but postal regulations would not permit the mailing of this pamphlet if they were reprinted here” (French 441).

To this day, certain secondary schools are sensitive about teaching *The Catcher in the Rye*. The constant obstacles and protests only further support the idea that it is one novel that has forever challenged and transformed the genre of YA literature. Although there are many reasons why parents dislike the novel, the majority of the reasons address its self-destructive questioning of social institutions. Holden Caulfield, the main character in *The Catcher in the Rye*, represents many of the rebellious ideas that parents tried so hard to quell in their own children.

Due to this perception, many parents maintain negative opinions of Holden. James Symula, scholar at State University of New York at Buffalo, supports the idea in his dissertation; he quotes Longstreth’s thoughts from 1951 regarding the novel:
“He [Holden] is alive, human, preposterous, profane, and pathetic beyond belief. Fortunately, there cannot be many of him yet. But one fears that a book like this given wide circulation may multiply his kind— as too easily happens when immorality and perversion are recounted by writers of talent whose work is countenanced in the name of art or good intention” (11). Longstreth’s fear of Holden was not uncommon for the time period. Parents also took note of Holden’s behavior and witnessed his intense distrust and cynicism towards the adult world.

The way in which Holden interacts with teachers, parents, and blue-collar workers only reveals his bitterness towards the mature and taxing adult reality of growing up. Not only does Holden begrudge the older generations, but he also fantasizes the world of child-like innocence. He seems to value the qualities of wonder, playfulness, naivety, and simplicity that he observes in younger children around him, while simultaneously resenting his path into adulthood. Throughout the novel, Holden appears to be stuck in the black and white mindset between youth and middle age. Time passes, but Holden does not know how to handle the impending change upon his life. Frustrations with his circumstances cause him to rebel against the cultural expectations.

Rather than finishing school, getting a job, marrying a pretty woman, and starting a family, Holden is kicked out of his fourth high school, continuously struggles with sexual desire and morality, and refuses to grow up even when the world is telling him he must. Towards the end of the novel, Holden seeks help in a psych ward. The common interpretation of Holden’s actions is that he is selfish and incredibly immature. Such misperception of his personality makes it easier to
understand why Holden is and was so resented. People seeking that normality after the sacrifice of war did not appreciate Holden’s lack of sensitivity and thought for others’ feelings. Parents who read it no doubt felt the narrative transference themselves and feared the literary power. They subconsciously transferred their fears following the war onto Holden and were unpleasantly surprised to discover a protagonist unwilling to provide the closure and reassurance they sought after. Instead, *The Catcher in the Rye* left its readers with a newfound sense of uncertainty.

Parents read *The Catcher in the Rye* and feared that their children would aspire to be like Holden—unsure of the future and unmotivated to try. However, Salinger uses his novel to reveal a different truth. Holden is not written as a role model; it is very clear that he is lonely, sad, depressed, and confused with his lot in life. In fact, Salinger identifies Holden as someone unsuccessfully seeking psychological fidelity. His journey hints that Holden has yet to establish faith in others, ideological commitment, and independent thought; and thus, he represents the cautionary tale of what happens in an existentialist society. Teacher and writer Helen Frangedis reassures the parents of her class that “Holden’s feelings and actions are those of a very troubled person who deserves our sympathy more often than our praise” (72). She wanted to clarify that although the character’s actions appear questionable, the book does not promote his actions whatsoever. Throughout the novel, Holden tries to hide his dark and sullen feelings with excessive and repetitive language, drinking, and sexual advances, but nothing makes him feel better. His inability to accept the changes in his life make him a character to be pitied, not idolized. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye* is full of latent psychological
tension, but parents have a hard time seeing these qualities amidst his repetitive uses of “goddamn,” “hell” and “damn,” his interactions with women and prostitutes, his constant drunkenness, and his cynical attitude toward “phony” adults. Parents have a hard time overlooking the raw animus that is not easily resolved or comfortable to discuss. They recognize the unsolvable conflict—either subconsciously or consciously—and try to suppress the uneasy feelings. Peter Brooks spends some time discussing these feelings in regards to Freud’s theory of closure—how Freud believes the unsettling moments of the past influence the moments of the present. Thus, Brooks would agree with Freud that people want—even need—to resolve their inner conflicts, whether through situational repetition (as is the case in Freud’s theory of psychotherapy) or through narrative transference in novel resolution. In *The Catcher in the Rye*, however, the novel is missing the closure that readers often desire. Because of this problematic aspect of the novel, parents disliked Salinger’s book and its seeming lack of closure.

Salinger’s novel broke many of the prior traditional “rules” regarding junior novels, but his book did something incredibly important for the young adult literary genre. *The Catcher in the Rye* showed authors and teens alike that it is cathartic to include real struggles in literature for young people. After all, it was Salinger himself who used his fiction to express his own war trauma and the effects of PTSD on his mind. Therefore, as much as parents might not enjoy it, writing about the real aspects of life means that there might be cussing, sex, drugs, or mental illness. By including this information, novels are proving more helpful than hurtful in most cases. Teenagers do not need to read about other perfect teenagers; they need to
read about Holden Caulfields. In fact, scholar and author Joni Bodart addresses this controversial opinion in her book *They Hurt, They Scar, They Shoot, They Kill: Toxic Characters in Young Adult Fiction*:

Flawed characters are frequently unlikeable, and they sometimes say or do dangerous or inappropriate things that teens recognize from their own experience but that adults may object to. But it is their flaws that force them to change. It is their flaws that make them valuable to the reader, because the reader is able to see the character in the book change and grow, and can apply that wisdom to his or her own life and situations (xix).

Thus, the power of the fiction is its transferential pull toward closure: youths must be able to relate and identify with characters in order to work through their own issues both by reading and retelling the plot, even when those characters do not represent the ideal adolescent model.

Although not as racy as Salinger’s work, Judy Blume wrote *Are You There God? It’s Me, Margaret* a few years later and received a similar uproar in response—the majority of resistance rooted in her direct address of female sexuality and religious contexts. While many critics including *The New York Times*, *Education Digest*, and *New Statesman* were impressed with her work, others such as *Book Window* believed differently: “‘when the author rhapsodises about the wearing of a sanitary napkin, the effect is banal in the extreme, and disbelief is total. Suddenly a sensitive, amusing novel has been reduced to the level of some of the advertising blurbs...’” (Naylor and Wintercorn 32). With such a mixed reaction at the time of publication, Blume’s novel was and, in certain areas, still is banned from schools.
nationwide. Although the text does not seem overtly inappropriate in itself, it was quite controversial because of sexual mores at the time of publication in 1970. Blume utilizes her ability to reach young readers by discussing taboo topics that either had not been deemed appropriate for teens too immature to ponder the material or had not been addressed in such an honest way. The most memorable of these topics include the protagonist Margaret Simon’s oncoming period and her religious confusion.

Despite the fact that Margaret’s menstrual cycle lacks the sexuality of contemporary YA literature, it did come as a shock to the teens and adults of the 1980s. Puberty was not commonly discussed in YA literature, and female sexuality was abject. Blume faced the heat for her public discussion of both: “despite her reputation as a trailblazer for the inclusion of female sexual development and expression in her novels, Blume received a low rating from the Council on Interracial Books for Children (CBIC) for being sexist” (Bowles-Reyer 295). Even though the CBIC’s claim was unsupported, it was accepted by the public regardless due to the time it was released. Adults wanted to find fault in Blume’s writings because they were still sensitive about her focus on sexuality in her young adult novel for girls. The mixed reception of Are You There God? It’s Me, Margaret confirms that- “the explicit treatment of female sexuality, with a few notable exceptions, was a new development in the literature of the 1960s and 1970s” (Bowles-Reyer 20). Margaret’s constant fixation on bras and impatient prayers regarding her period came across as wildly explicit. Blume’s ideas were new and controversial, and, thus, opposed within schools and homes.
Parents were not comfortable with their children reading books that explored the confusion of periods and the unexpected bodily changes that occurred during the pubescent years. In fact, the years following World War II were full of controversy regarding female sexuality in general; scholar Joanne Meyerowitz “draws on the recent literature [of] the postwar era to present the evidence for both sexual conservatism and sexual liberalism” (295). For example, the first educational film discussing menstruation was released in 1947 (*The Story of Menstruation*), but strayed away from any gritty details regarding the experience (Martin 21). As the culture continued to change and adapt to female sexuality, menstruation knowledge became more public. The journey toward this newfound attitude, however, was a rough one. Female sexuality was one subject that provoked strong reactions. On one side, conservatives of the 1960s were fighting for the restoration of the innocent female adolescent—the girls that said “no to male advances so that they one day could become ‘good’ wives and mothers” (Keup 102). However, the sexual movement was on the rise during this time and could not be completely stamped out; female empowerment continued to develop between the 1960s and ‘70s.

Even teenagers were noticing the societal changes in regards to female sexuality. According to the book “Sexual Content in the Young Adult Novel: Reading Between the Sheets,” the sexual confidence of the 1970s was restored in teenagers due to “the ability to access condoms and other birth control methods without parental consent [which] made it possible for adolescents to disassociate sexual intercourse and pregnancy as a natural cause and effect, thus lessening some of the fears associated with contracting a venereal disease” (Gillis and Simpson 13). Thus,
sexual behavior and awareness of female desire underwent a transformative process in the 1970s; however, the process hit some speed bumps heading into the ‘80s. The normalization of sex did not agree with all Americans. Many were opposed to the sexual revolution; in the end, the conservative belief won the battle in book bans.

Critiques of *Are You There God? It’s Me, Margaret* truly gained prominence during the 1980s. At least seven different schools banned Judy Blume’s novel from their libraries. The resistance to sexual revival was so strong that even “American postwar psychoanalysts [were] defin[ing] nonnormative sexuality and portray[ing] it as psychotic, neurotic, arrested, and immature” (Meyerowitz 298). One can only imagine how parents were feeling at the time. Public knowledge regarding female sexuality and menstruation cycles were becoming more and more common.

Evidence points to parental discomfort and desire for censorship in regards to the subject—no matter what form of media in which it was presented. Literature was not the only area facing backlash for sexual promiscuity. TV shows were also expected to uphold the cultural conception of modesty. According to Thomas Johnson, author of the article “TV Sex in the 1990s,” a few minor sexual innuendos on the show “Married...With Children” incited protests from its viewers as late as 1989. The attitude toward sexual morality remained untouched for many years following Blume’s novel. However, her work did spark a change in the American attitude towards female body empowerment and sexuality. In fact, another educational film discussing the female body and the reality of pubescent change was released in 1992—*Always Changing* (Martin 21). This film provided a more honest
and straightforward look at periods and bodily changes—unheard of before that point. *Are You There God? It’s Me, Margaret* was one of the novels that paved the way for honesty in YA literature and film—even if telling the truth was awkward.

Just as puberty and the body were written with a touch of humor, Judy Blume stealthily incorporates this same heartfelt comicality when approaching Margaret’s religious indecisiveness. Besides sex, religion was probably the second most avoided topics in YA literature during the 1970s. Author from *The English Journal*, James Brewbaker, analyzes the amount of novels that dare to make faith central to storyline, but his research reveals that most authors do indeed seem to sidestep religion in their writings altogether (83). Not only does Blume break such molds, but she also does so in a complex and thought-provoking manner. Her main character Margaret deals with faith in a new and creative way since each parent practices different religions.

With a Jewish father and a Christian mother, Margaret is raised religion-neutral. Neither parent wants to force their religion on her, so she struggles to find a faith to call her own. Although her grandmother pressures her slightly, the main source of urgency in the matter results from her own identity confusion. Her mixed background, while not overtly wrong, causes unnecessary puzzlement. For this reason, Marshall Sklare ("father of American Jewish sociology") makes his disapproval apparent when he reports that “Intermarriage has breached large-scale proportions throughout the country as a whole. Yet, despite the gravity of the problem, the Jewish community... has devoted little attention to the matter” in the 1970s (Krasner 26). His particular view of intermarriage contributes to the
controversial aspects of *Are You There God? It’s Me, Margaret*. In the process of solving such controversy through psychologically dramatizing tensions, the novel only ignites more protest for those religious neutrals in the readership.

Margaret is told her entire life that she is neither Jewish nor is she Christian—she is nothing. Margaret cannot deal with this, and, thus, embarks on a journey to discover what her relationship with God and religion truly mean. Throughout the book, “Her conversations with God provide a venue for her to unpack her thoughts and feelings on a whole variety of issues, from breast development and boy-girl parties to morality and religion” (Krasner 25). Praying to God is the only consistent factor of her religious quest. And despite the fact that religious pursuit is common in America now, the literary aspect of Margaret’s religious quest was taboo for the genre when Blume published her novel.

One major reason Blume’s novel was met with such distaste in schools particularly was the implications it made about faith in public education. Not only does Margaret focus much attention on her faith-based quest, she does so in order to fulfill a school project. The combination of school and religion did not sit well with the public during the early 1960s. At the time, schools had begun removing religion from education entirely by prohibiting school-sponsored prayer and organized Bible reading (Elwood, Lupu, Davis, Masci, and Tuttle, R. 2). Schools did not appreciate the fact that Blume was sponsoring religion in an obvious way—that she was going against the very state and religion separation they were so eagerly working toward. Margaret’s school project entailing the details of her relationship
Elmore 28

with God was a major contributor to *Are You There God? It’s Me, Margaret*’s controversial reception.

While Margaret’s direct approach to sexuality and faith were not celebrated by the adults per say, Blume’s novel did gain popularity with the younger generation. In a small way, they were able to recognize the unique qualities of her work undeveloped in previous junior novels. Blume was finally writing about the topics that interested them—the ones that sparked their curiosity but were nowhere to be found in teen literature. *Are You There God? It’s Me, Margaret* reminded the authors of YA literature to refocus their attention on their readers’ needs and interests; its author Judy Blume also inspired writers of the genre to boldly address anything important in their novels—no matter the consequences that discussion might unfold.

Over the years, a few authors have followed in her footsteps, but most of them have not been as successful. That is, until Stephen Chbosky’s *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* was published in 1999. He received massive amounts of press after his book release because of the way the infamous novel not only explored topics of sexuality (heterosexuality and homosexuality), mental illness, drugs, and alcohol, but did so within the protagonist Charlie’s freshman year of high school. Somehow, Chbosky identified all the parental fears associated with Holden Caulfield and Margaret and integrated those values into his hero Charlie. Chbosky’s novel sparked controversy with parents and educators for several, if not all, of these reasons.

The most obvious cause for disapproval included descriptive sexual encounters and constant glamorization of drugs and alcohol within the text. Most
parents were not fond of their children reading about Charlie’s “firsts”—his first time masturbating, having a sex dream, getting an erection, getting drunk, and trying a weed brownie. What was meant as an honest coming-of-age tale is more often interpreted as an explicit novel glorifying sexual awakening and mindless partying. Although many similarities between Holden Caulfield and Charlie exist, the message of the stories differ. Whereas Holden’s story is written to showcase what readers should avoid, Charlie’s exploration into high school, relationships, drugs, and abuse is normalized—glamourized even. The critics’ praise not only labeled *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* as relatable, but also as realistic. Only a few years after publication, *The Santa Fe New Mexican* writes, “Let *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, hailed as a modern *The Catcher in the Rye*, remind you about setting your own boundaries and experiencing ‘growing up’ firsthand” (Bacon). Therefore, many readers and critics viewed Charlie’s story as a model for teenage experimental behaviors; he became a staple character that revealed the woes of high school and the ways to overcome such struggles.

It is not surprising, then, that *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* has made banned book lists across America and still faces resistance to this day. Just recently, Wharton High School in Florida experienced backlash for adding Chbosky’s novel to a required reading list for class (Morelli). The reception of the novel, however, has been mixed in the last decade. The film adaption that was released in 2012 helped reshape the image of the novel and gave it a more positive spin in the public eye. Understandably, however, the adults of the 1990s and the 2010s alike feel apprehensive about the novel’s content.
Two of the major triggers addressed in *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* remain homosexuality and mental health. The mention of either in novels prior to the 1990s are scarce, thus, their mention in 1999 came as a shock to many people. For some, their presence was a pleasant surprise while others were critical of them.

The homosexual content within Chbosky’s novel was interpreted as either repulsive or encouraging to its readers depending on who was doing the reading. At the time of publication, gays and lesbians had little representation in young adult literature. In fact, young people that identified with the LGBTQ community felt like they were not being acknowledged. Many professors within the young adult literary genre such as Thomas Crisp and Suzanne Knezek believe that “the catalog of LGBTQ texts must continue to increase in both quantity and quality and that teachers must explicitly engage students in critical discussions of the ways in which texts work to construct for readers what it means and looks like to be gay” (77). Thus, these critics acknowledge the importance of fictional mimesis for the readership to process the meaning of their sexual feelings. For readers of the same mindset, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* represented a breakthrough of literary representations. Although Charlie does not experience homosexual desires personally, the book does examine the woes of same-sex relationships through his dear friend Patrick. Patrick’s arc in the story, while positively received by some, was resisted by just as many when the book came out. At the time, the gay rights movement had not covered much ground.

In the years leading up to 1999, the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy was instated by President Bill Clinton as well as the Defense of Marriage Act (“Gay Rights Timeline”). Both political statements were in favor of heterosexual relationships.
Americans leaned heavily on the side of traditional marriage standards, and despite the progress that the gay rights movement was making at the time, the American culture was still prevalently against homosexuality in the political sense. People who identified as gay or lesbian were denied the opportunity to marry, adopt, and practice their sexuality when serving in the military. Gay rights activists were doing all they could to change how LGBTQs were perceived, but the common response was judgment. People struggled to accept the homosexual character in *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, even when it was not the central focus. This negative perception can be rooted in several traditional worldviews. Through extensive research and survey, Ayanna Jackson proved that fundamental religious beliefs often disapprove of the gay rights movement. Even as America is moving away from its religious roots, the opposition against LGBTQ members remains controversial. For this reason, Chbosky’s novel received mixed reviews when it was published in 1999.

People who read his book were often struck by his blunt approach to contentious subjects. For the most part, Americans were struck by the open sexuality portrayed in Charlie, his friends and his family. However, another central focus of the novel is Charlie’s mental health. He experiences an underlying depression all throughout the novel. It is initially brought on by the tragic death of his aunt and the suicide of his friend Michael. The results of such traumatic events have a drastic effect on Charlie’s mental state. By reading his letters, readers know that Charlie sees a psychiatrist often and takes medication for reasons unknown. For a while, Charlie experiences a source of joy in his newfound friends. However, he reaches a breaking point at the end of the novel. It is revealed that Charlie is a victim
of sexual abuse and has blocked out the memories. When he finally realizes the truth, Charlie goes into shock and must be admitted to the hospital. Although his portrayal of mental health is truthful, it does make parents wonder if it was treated the right way. Chbosky covers psychologically alarming issues in his novel, and some educators believe he is overexposing vulgar content to young people (Monaghan 39).

And yet, in the name of being honest and real with young adult literature, Chbosky writes about what teens experience and are forced to keep secret. It might be difficult to read Charlie’s story of disintegrating mental health, but it is something that occurs around teens all the time. Although “Charlie is exposed to, either personally or as a witness, sexual abuse, substance abuse, and emotional abuses, rape, homophobia, anxiety, depression, and very likely post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)... Chbosky is particularly effective in his representation of Charlie’s own experiences” (Monaghan 39). He is unrealistically capable of dealing with such matters on his own right away. Charlie is the kind of teenager who struggles, witnesses other people struggle, and feels the pain of both the decisions he can control and the ones he cannot. The way Chbosky uses Charlie to represent mental health is actually a portrayal of narrative transference thus modeling the way a teen processes the raw emotional exposure to pain and suffering. Teen readers therefore vicariously experience that same trauma that exposes the honest truth.

The Perks of Being a Wallflower, while including topics still deemed inappropriate for young minds, does so in such a way that teenagers can relate and feel less alone. By writing Charlie's story in such real and accessible way, students
have a resource that not only shows them what life might look like, but provides hope that things will get better. In writing his novel, Chbosky drastically changes young adult literature by including a homosexual romance and not shying away from the hard experiences of life.

Authors like Chbosky, Blume, and Salinger have challenged the genre and forced it to improve its realistic and psychological compelling message. They helped do away with junior novel didacticism and instead inspired books about real teen issues. Young people can now read a novel, place themselves in the main character’s shoes, and work through an issue they may be facing or will face in the future. Because of these groundbreaking novels, YA literature has become more open and available to adolescents—it has finally become a genre for teenagers about teenagers.
Chapter 4: Following the Trend as Young Adult Literature Rises in Popularity

Young adult literature has gone through significant change since the release of the groundbreaking novels *The Catcher in the Rye, Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret,* and *The Perks of Being a Wallflower.* Because the novels have shifted young adult literary expectations, the types of novels that followed have been able to adapt their styles and accomplish new purposes. Authors have now begun addressing authentic teen issues and fears through various subgenres in the YA literature category. The increase of problem novels and dystopian novels has generated a renewed focus on the teenage readers’ needs. Present day young adult novelists are writing to provide bibliotherapeutic models and problem-solving plots for their young readers.

Contemporary Guidelines for the Genre

Despite the alterations made over time, YA literature has been able to establish some specific standards for the genre and maintain the standards consistently over the last twenty or so years. For example, certain characteristics have become so intrinsic to the genre that their very presence allows a novel to be categorized as young adult rather than adult literature. Some of the traits may seem obvious, but others are subtler.

Scholars Maia Mertz and David England have classified these items and created a list in their article “The Legitimacy of American Adolescent Fiction.” The standards discussed in their article may seem self-explanatory at times, but they also address the more in-depth expectations that are associated with young adult
literature. The simple list, created by Mertz and England and clarified by *The English Journal* author Robert Small, Jr. is as follows:

1) Adolescent fiction will involve a youthful protagonist.

2) Adolescent fiction often employs a point of view which presents the adolescent’s interpretation of the events in the story.

3) Adolescent fiction is categorized by directness of exposition, dialogue, and direct confrontation between principal characters.

4) Adolescent fiction is characterized by structural conventions.

5) Main characters in adolescent fiction are highly independent in thought, action, and conflict resolution.

6) Adolescents are depicted as reaping the consequences of their actions and decisions.

7) Adolescent fiction will draw upon the author’s sense of adolescent development and the concomitant attention to the legitimate concerns of adolescents.

8) Adolescent fiction strives for relevance by attempting to mirror current social attitudes and issues.

9) Adolescent fiction most often includes gradual, incremental, and ultimately incomplete “growth to awareness” on the part of the central character.

10) Adolescent fiction is, finally, hopeful.

(Small 282)
According to Mertz, England, and Small, the aforementioned characteristics can be found in most, if not all, YA novels. If an adolescent novel does not contain all factors, it most likely contains a large majority of them. In using the list of identifiers, readers can more easily recognize young adult literature both in content and form.

**Problem Novels**

One of the more popular styles emerging in contemporary adolescent literature is the problem novel. They contain plot arcs that are used to analyze specific issues as the protagonist learns to deal with or overcome said issues (Forman 94-95). The variety of topics ranges from parental divorce to bi-sexual acceptance. The goal of the problem novel is not to offend or inform, but to aid and comfort any struggling teen that relates to the subject matter. In fact, Professor Brian Sturm and his colleague Karen Michel reiterate this fact when they comment, the young adults in junior high and high school look to their reading to identify with story characters—to see themselves in their reading—and to explore the ‘other.’ They want the familiarity to help them feel they are not alone (despite what peers or society might tell them), and they want the novelty to broaden their horizons and to play with future possibilities. Problem novels address both of these needs (Michel and Sturm 41).

Problem novels invite readers to journey with the main character and discover a way to cope. Unlike previous didactic novels, the problem novel does not teach in a direct manner, but merely allows readers to glean secondhand experience from the
characters in the book. Teenagers have shown additional interest in problem-type stories because the conflicts are more relevant to their lives and their own personal dilemmas. The growing popularity of the problem genre is evident not only in the sizeable quantity being published, but also in the amount of recognition that these novels have received in the last ten years.

Over time, the problem novel has risen in scholarly value as well as entertainment and therapeutic value; in fact, the Michael L. Printz Award has been given predominantly to problem novels in the last decade. Winning or receiving honorary mention by the Printz Foundation has been significantly important to a novel’s success. The Printz Committee selects books based on their merit and literary excellence. For example, one of the Printz Honors novels of 2017 was Louise O’Neill’s *Asking For It*—a story that addresses the rape of a young girl and her journey of restoration in the aftermath. Such an obvious problem novel must have struck a chord with more than just its readers; in fact, the Printz Committee decided that the book was worth the honorary recognition. By awarding *Asking for It* with Printz Honors, the committee placed value on its honest portrayal of adolescent rape and the consequent problems that ensue. Books of this kind—not only dealing with rape, but other serious topics as well—have been receiving recognition off and on since 2000. Almost every couple of years, a problem novel or two makes it on the Honorary lists or wins the Printz Award. As of 2017, the problem novel continues to thrive.

Needless to say, the benefit of a problem novel is its ability to help young people deal with specific issues in their life—to provide a therapeutic experience.
This method, otherwise known as bibliotherapy, has existed for a while, but is only recently being examined in detail in an organized methodology with psychologist approval.

**Bibliotherapy**

Therapy that involves literature is not uncommon, but is more recently being recognized and called by its true name. Bibliotherapy more simply defined is “the guided reading of written materials in [order to gain] understanding or [solve] problems relevant to a person's therapeutic needs” (Myracle 36). Bibliotherapy works to substitute plot and character scenarios from a novel with suspected patient issues, thus the patient has a personal connection with the story. Such substitution between the narrative and its reader (narratological substitution) is Freudian in nature because it moves the trauma relation (the latent material: the actual trauma experienced by the reader) to characters who do not initially trigger a subconscious response (the manifest material); thus, like Freud's dream theory, the manifest play of human-like characters is showcased in a plot not identical to the analyzers' traumas. For example, a young person dealing with the recent death of a loved one might read a book addressing that very same issue and learn how to deal with their own circumstances. In that case, reading a novel would “[allow] a kid a safe way of confronting dilemmas... and [an] opportunity to identify, to compensate, and to relive in a controlled manner a problem that they are aware of” (Myracle 38). Through the characters in problem novels, readers can learn to cope with their issues more intuitively. Bibliotherapy has the potential to change lives, but it has
been especially effective in adolescent literature because the younger audience is more susceptible to influence. Reading has a way of affecting the minds of young people; the effects become more apparent when the teens are reading problem novels such as *Thirteen Reasons Why*, *I’ll Give You the Sun*, and *The Fault in Our Stars*. The connections between readers and characters are easily made due to the realistic setting of the problem novel. However, other genres of YA literature can and do serve the same therapeutic purpose without the realistic background.

**Dystopian Trends: Out with the Old and in with the New**

Dystopian novels have only recently caught the attention of young readers. As I predict the popularity of problem novels will gradually wane, dystopian novels are lining up to take their place. Although these types of books do not seem as relevant as problem novels, they intrigue adolescent readers for that very reason.

In fact, they offer catharsis in ways far subtler than problem novels. Whereas problem novels involve realistic worlds and directly applicable dilemmas, they have not quite escaped the didactic framework entirely. Because of their therapeutic form, they utilize didactic practices. Also, the way in which these novels win awards can be cause for questioning. For example, the awards bestowed upon problem novels are decided by adults, not teens. The Printz Committee has the right idea in fairly voting and deciding winners, but it does not actually involve teenage readers. By doing so, the committee is communicating that adults are the only ones capable of assigning literary value and deeming books worthy of applause. If this were not true, adolescents would have more say in the award process. By excluding them
from the decision-making, the adults are practicing yet another form of parental or adult control over the young, developing minds of teenagers. Adolescents may very well still enjoy the books being awarded by the Printz Committees, but the fact of the matter is that they are awarded for teens, by adults—a detail that should be considered in the scheme of parent-adolescent literary connection.

In contrast, the rise of dystopian novels has been true to their juvenile audience. The “‘critical dystopian vision’ has continued into the early 21st century, and has been extended from fiction and film to television, music, and games, equaling the cultural ubiquity that demonstrates its strength as a socially critical genre” (Hall 3). Dystopian novels, films, and television shows have been receiving consistently high ratings in the last 20 years or so. The newfound popularity is the result of multiple factors. First and foremost, adolescent readers find therapy in dystopia. Teenagers have a special interest in fictional worlds because they feel like 1.) the epic emotions of the plots and characters match their own feelings and 2.) they can work through their own issues without facing them head on, or in transferential safety. The fantastical settings depicted in novels such as Divergent, Hunger Games, and The Giver provide an outlet to address personal difficulties and learn to overcome them, all without ever thinking of the trouble directly. Reading dystopian novels allow adolescents to make more abstract parallels between their lives in the real world and the characters’ lives within the futuristic world.

In fact, there are plenty of reasons why adolescents might enjoy dystopia so much. Authors Jeffrey Wilhelm and Michael Smith analyze four in their article “The Power of Pleasure Reading: the Case of Dystopias.” Their reasons are as follows: 1)
the pleasure of losing oneself in a fictional world, separate from reality, 2) the pleasure of drawing connections between oneself and characters within the book—and learning how both should interact with others, 3) the pleasure of solving challenges within the book—while solving one's own challenges in the process, and 4) the pleasure of the work—of learning something and applying it in the real world (55). In reading about the fictional conflicts of book characters, teens can find relevance in their struggles. The comparison between the two is not as far-fetched as it once seemed.

In fact, dystopian novels provide a unique form of bibliotherapy absent from most problem novels. Rather than replicating teen issues in literary form and providing helpful—if not direct—advice, Eastern Illinois University professor Melissa Ames argues that dystopian novels “mirror and criticize reality, forcing readers to consider reality, ironically at the same time as they are escaping from it’ (Hintz & Ostry, 2003, p. 6). [They] play upon deep, unresolvable fears from ‘reality,’ exaggerating (and sometimes solving) them in fictional scenarios” (Ames 6).

Without blatantly discussing adolescent issues, dystopian novels allow readers to escape in the text and deal with their issue absentmindedly. Scott Westerfield—author of the popular dystopian series Uglies—believes that the futuristic world of fiction strongly correlates with the reality of readers. He explains “the genre’s fit for adolescence [by] describing high school as being a dystopia of sorts: ‘Bound by the rules of teachers, parents and society, with little power over your own existence, life as a teenager can feel like living in an authoritarian state’ (as cited in Bertagna, 2011, p. 2)” (Ames 9). Much of dystopian plot points or character struggles can be
related in similar fashion. The issues at hand are obviously not the same, but the feelings and emotions that result from various circumstances create a unique bond between reader and character. The adolescent reader makes the connection easily and absently.

English Education scholar, Melissa Ames, believes that the sudden interest with dystopia is rooted in the post 9/11 sociopolitical atmosphere of the United States. She interprets adolescent fascination with futuristic governments and political unrest as an outlet for political involvement; in her own words, Ames discusses how “the reading preferences of this generation indicate that this label of ‘apolitical’ may not be as fitting as some believe. In fact, the popularity of young adult dystopia, which is ripe with these political themes, suggests that this group is actually quite interested in these topics, although they often turn to the safe confines of fiction to wrestle with them” (Ames 3). It would appear, then, that teens who were previously uninterested in political issues have proactively become more immersed in civil news and culture. Although most young people do not clearly remember the actual tragedy that occurred on September 1, 2001, they do have experience with the aftermath.

As teens continuously grow more connected through social media and news, and fear and uncertainty taint the American worldview, adolescents have started to reveal how their politically informed status has affected them. The dystopian novels that deal with fear of government and war open a window of opportunity for young people to work through their traumatic cultural encounters; Ames articulates these exact thoughts when she says “in terms of YA dystopias in particular, the fact that
teenagers are eagerly consuming these themes suggests that they are seeking a safe space to wrestle with, and perhaps displace, the fears they play upon—fears that are set and, not unimportantly, resolved amidst the comfortable narrative threads of young adult narratives” (Ames 7). Thus, the sudden interest in YA dystopia literature is in part due to the politico-economic environment of America. Teenagers seek dystopian novels out in order to deal with certain types of trauma, as well as work through issues that are difficult to address directly.

Assuming that teens enjoy YA dystopias for their exciting plot and impressive literary value is a nice thought, but one that is probably incorrect. Many explanations are possible but the two that make the most sense (and have the most support) are both in some way therapeutic. This mentality of reading for closure, comfort, or guidance is not entirely different than the problem novel’s aim, but the approach differs immensely. The recent dystopian trend has especially become apparent through the release of *The Giver* in 1993, *The Hunger Games* in 2008, and *Divergent* in 2011. The previously mentioned books, while meeting the requirements for YA literature categorization, have gripped the attention of young people in America in a way that has not previously been observed. All three have done so well that they have their own movie adaptations. Analyzing the root of their popularity is important in order to understand the adolescent development and mind better. In seeing what the young reader sees, one is able to predict how reading choices are made and the effects that result from them.
Chapter 5: Mimetic Application to Divergent and Harmful Reading

The reason that dystopian literature works so well with bibliotherapy is its mimetic portrayal of reality. Young readers are able to find closure in fictional worlds because the worlds are less fictional than previously thought. According to the mimetic theory addressed in Chapter 2: Methodology, any art—including literature—represents or copies reality. This being said, fictional worlds existing in literature would be considered imitations of the real world. Only with the aforementioned belief does bibliotherapy make sense; teenagers are not going to relate or find hope in literature that is completely unrelatable to their day-to-day lives. They find meaning, instead, through dystopia because it mimics what they know and experience all the time. Young people see the similarities easily, albeit unknowingly. Their interaction with the text and its plot structure does maintain the potential to positively or negatively affect their development. The connections made between fictional world and reality, reader and narrative, are valuable to note.

Mimetic Reading of Dystopian Literature

Some theorists believe that readers form a visceral contract between themselves and the texts that they read. In doing so, the reader makes personal connections with the text and practices transference to satisfy their narrative desire for closure. Peter Brooks’ theory of narratology directly applies to dystopian literature despite its fictionality. Mimetic theory suggests that teenagers can find therapeutic closure in a dystopia because the text represents a shadow of reality rather than its harsh actuality.
For example, a reader that has struggled in the past could read *Divergent* and transfer their confused feelings of identity onto the main character Tris. She is, after all, asked to choose her identity forever at the age of sixteen. In her world, teenagers select the trait they value most—honesty, selflessness, bravery, knowledge, or peace—and commit their lives to that trait at a very young age. In the novel, Tris is asked to choose between her family and herself—she feels trapped: “Tomorrow, those two qualities will struggle within me, and only one can win” (Roth 37). The inner battle between selflessness and bravery reflect the confusion every teen faces in establishing their own values. Even so, the protagonist of *Divergent*, Tris, still wavers between Abnegation (selflessness) and Dauntless (bravery) at the very last moment.

Despite the fact that teens do not share in the cultural expectations of Tris’ world, they can relate to the stress and pressure caused by friends, family, and limited time. They too feel as if their identity confusion should be resolved sooner rather than later. Thus, the therapeutic attachment to Tris and her journey provides comfort to readers. In fact, the young adolescents might indeed find closure within their own lives once Tris finds confidence in her own choices. The teenagers partaking in her journey will share in her joy when she realizes: “I am no longer Tris, the selfless, or Tris, the brave. I suppose that now, I must become more than either” (Roth 487). Because Tris’ journey gives hope to the young reader’s journey, one can draw the connection between the real world of the adolescent and the fictional world in *Divergent*. The book mimics the real, and thus, the narratological reading of desire and transferential behavior can be applied to dystopian texts like
Divergent. Specifically, Divergent—along with many other YA dystopian novels—displays such mimicry through four distinct issues of modern day: obsession with technology and science, fear of the government structure, increased violence, and expectation that independence should be established through separation from familial units.

Divergent’s Perspective on Technology and Science

The first and most obvious characteristic of a dystopian novel is the obsession with technology and science. According to scholar Rachel Wilkinson, reliance and fear of technology goes hand in hand with most dystopian settings (24). For this reason, many of these dystopian worlds come across as utopic until either the presence of science or technology obsession breaks the spell. The government structures in dystopian texts tend to overuse or abuse technological and scientific advancements. For instance, Divergent combines the natural sciences with technology and machinery in order to produce a controlling and invasive environment for its inhabitants.

The most common way that the development in Divergent is incorporated into civilian lives is through the simulations—especially aptitude testing. They involve a serum that allows members of society to experience reality without the consequences—an experience that alters perception of the world alongside a machine recording the physical responses to that simulation. Tris undergoes her first simulation during the aptitude test: "In the center of the room is a reclined chair, like a dentist’s, with a machine next to it... The light hurts my eyes. Tori busies
herself with the machine on my right... Humming a little, she presses another electrode to my forehead... She tugs wires toward her. Then she passes me a vial of clear liquid” (Roth 10-13). In the novel, the aptitude test procedure scene is associated with fear. In fact, any time the machines and serums are used, they symbolize fear. Tris’ first experience with the simulation is high pressure because it determines her future; however, her next experience with the machines and serums is intended to identify and overcome her biggest fears. Obviously, she begins to establish anxiety in response to the simulations—to technology beyond her understanding. Before she enters the fear simulation, she thinks to herself, “Simulations aren’t real; they pose no real threat to me, so logically, I shouldn’t be afraid of them, but my reaction is visceral. It takes all the willpower I have for me to steer myself toward the chair and sit down in it again, pressing my skull into the headrest. The cold from the metal seeps through my clothes” (Roth 230). Not only does Tris fear the simulations, but the entire society comes to fear them as well after hundreds of good people are brainwashed via serums in order to accomplish an immoral goal at the end of the novel. Society’s sudden distrust of technology and science only confirms Tris’ original belief.

The fear associated with serums and machinery only continues throughout the narrative, increased by the fact that data collected from these simulations is processed and reviewed by the government before assessment. Therefore, Tris concludes that the serums and machines are simply a way of maintaining power. She interprets the users of such technology and deceit—the government—as the enemy. She acknowledges the type of surveillance they have established over
society and notes that somehow, they seem to know everything. In fact, Tris’ mother tells her to be aware of how she behaves when she warns her daughter: “I suspect they are already monitoring you” (Roth 188). This aspect of surveillance adds another layer to the fear intertwined with technology and science. Citizens are being watched—their information being recorded and used by the government. The lack of privacy is terrifying. Toward the end of the novel, the leaders go so far as to insert tracking devices into civilians (Roth 398). As is normal in the dystopian society, a good amount of fear arises from the constant observation and scrutiny.

The same established fear of technology and surveillance is evident in 2017. The fear that Tris harbors is a reflection of the real fear people face in modern society. *Divergent* simply imitates reality and emphasizes its impact in order to catch the reader’s eye. The truth of the matter is that people are frightened of what technology and science might do if they continue to progress at an accelerated rate. However, the fear varies in form.

For instance, some people fear the surveillance and control that comes with technological advancements. The internet has brought with it an obstruction to privacy. Once someone creates a social media account, all the consecutive advertisements and commercials become tailored to personal interest. Passwords are saved on web browsers, and text messages and phone calls can be traced. With the creation of the internet, the world has been faced with the recent debate between privacy and security. Scholar Angela Rulffes states “73 percent of [American adults who use the internet] use at least one type of social networking site, and 71 percent of them use Facebook (Duggan & Smith, 2013). Facebook
recently expanded how it utilizes user data for advertisement purposes (Miners, 2014; Vara, 2014). Such expansion has caused many to raise questions about privacy issues while using the platform, with some arguing that the expansion significantly increases the intrusion on users’ private information (Miners, 2014)” (14-15). These results recorded from a reliable study merely reveal what most young people know to be true. The internet is a wonderfully unchartered territory. Scientists still do not know for sure how its use will affect humanity long term.

Due to technological advances, simple aspects of life have drastically been altered: research, communication, reading, thinking, etc. According to Pulitzer Prize Winner Nicholas Carr, “Never has a communications system played so many roles in our lives—or exerted such broad influence over our thoughts—as the Internet does today. Yet, for all that's been written about the Net, there's been little consideration of how, exactly, it's reprogramming us” (61). He goes on to analyze the way the human brain functions and speculates how brain processes in regards to reading and thinking creatively might have changed since the internet’s creation. His argument, as well as MIT Technology Review writer David Byrne, is rooted in fear—fear of what the technological advances might lead to in the future.

Byrne, however, focuses more on the social aspect of human connection rather than the skills and developmental stages of growth when it comes to reading and absorbing information. He believes that the rise of technology has affected the way human beings interact with one another (8). Moreover, he discusses recent progressive tools, such as online ordering and home delivery; automated check out; driverless cars; ride hailing apps; and social media. In regards to the technological
tools meant to increase efficiency, Byrne suggests that the people using the tools have, in return, lost human interaction. The more science and machinery progresses, the less people will speak to each other. Both Byrne and Carr vocalize a fear that is very real—and very common: the internet is changing the American culture. However, people have become so dependent on technology and science that they are blinded to the potential for disastrous results. It is through novels like *Divergent* that people are made aware of real issues; they see how the dystopian world reflects or imitates their own. Tris is not just a girl living in a dystopian society unrelated to her readers; no, her life is very realistic in terms of modern thought.

**Divergent's Perspective on Government Distrust**

Fear and distrust of government structure is yet another common theme between the dystopian world of *Divergent* and the real world of its readers. Although the government in the novel portrays a more extreme version of reality, it nonetheless depicts an issue that Americans face daily: fear of government corruption.

In Tris’ experience, her government utilizes violence to punish those that fall out of line—the people who practice insubordination and independent thought. Tris, both stubborn and independent, is immediately targeted as a threat. Her friend Tori warns her to be careful when she says, “’Make no mistake—if they discover what you are, they will kill you’... ‘Think about this,’ she says. ‘These people taught you how to use a gun. They taught you how to fight. You think they’re above hurting you? Above killing you?’” (Roth 260). Tori’s insistence on self-preservation indicates
the level of danger that Tris faces from her own leaders. It takes Tris the whole book to realize it, but she finally understands what her corrupt government is capable of doing in the end when she sees the results with her own eyes. The moment she witnesses what they have done to her friend Will—forced him to become a murderer—she is devastated. That is the moment her fear becomes a reality—when she sees how long the government’s wide reach and ruthlessness have gone unchecked.

In fact, Tris is not the only who sees the dark truth. Considering the Erudite and Dauntless leaders’ behavior in the book and their attempt to commit potential genocide, they have given the citizens good reason to be afraid—to fear their corrupt system. And just as fear sets in, chaos breaks out. Obviously an attempted genocide produces strong reactions of all kinds. Tris makes note of this confusion when she admits “Abnegation and Dauntless are both broken, their members scattered. We are like the factionless now... We are creatures of loss” (Roth 487). The civilians are—and after what happens, should be—a government so eager to gain power and control that they are willing to sacrifice a whole people group. The kind of government portrayed in Divergent is one that should be feared, if not stopped. Their blatant cruelty and violence towards innocent people verifies the dystopian system of ruling as an unsuccessful one. However, Americans experience and take part in identical political fear every day.

Just like Tris, the citizens of the United States have their own reservations about government. They may not be in the same immediate, life-threatening danger as she is, but they do share the same distrust in political leadership. According to
Mary Bowerman, *USA Today* journalist, a 2016 survey conducted with 1,511 American citizens revealed that 60.6 percent of them listed “corruption of government officials” as one of their top fears. Such staggering numbers only further support the idea that the democracy in America is not as perfect as advertised. In fact, *Orange County Register* writer Adam Summers backs this idea up when he reports:

> The American public’s growing mistrust and disdain for political leaders and institutions has been a long-term trend, spanning decades, though it seems to have deteriorated even faster over the past 10 or 15 years. Trust in political leaders has fallen more than 20 points — from 63 percent to 42 percent — just since 2004, Gallup polls show. And, while Congress has never been hugely popular, confidence in the legislative body has plunged from 40 percent or more during the 1970s to mere single digits today.

Considering these statistics were made public in April 2017, one would have to agree that fear of government is still a prominent one in America. People are afraid that they are not represented fairly, that their leaders will switch parties, or make decisions rooted in greed rather than justice. Summers records a few separate incidences from California legislation that have occurred in the last ten years or so that reflect such unethical behavior. The point he makes is a valuable one: fear of government is not unfounded and is in fact very real. The modern dilemma of distrust is one of the reasons why *Divergent* is so popular. The readers enjoy relatable issues—even if they are represented through a fictional, dystopian world. The novel is merely a reflection
of the modern day truth, and such reflective qualities are evident to American
adolescent readers (and American adults).

*Divergent*'s Perspective on Increased Violence

Just as technology, science, and government control spark fear in the lives of
American citizens, the increased violence in both media and current events has
become a cause for concern. Parents especially do not appreciate the early exposure
to violence that *Divergent* undoubtedly provides to its young readers. However,
*Divergent*'s inclusion of violence is important because of its authenticity; it is not to
scare readers, but to prepare them—to warn them—of the violence that they might
experience right outside their very own front doors. Heightened violence is a human
problem, not a fictional one.

In order for *Divergent* to honestly mimic contemporary issues, it must
include violence. In fact, *Divergent* spends a good amount of time describing violent
scenes and rough encounters between characters in order to reflect modern day.
Fighting is encouraged during Tris’ training in Dauntless and is necessary for
survival afterwards. Her initiation journey begins with hand-to-hand combat against
one of the larger initiates, Peter. She describes their fight in graphic detail: “Peter’s
mischievous look disappears. His arm twitches and pain stabs my jaw and spreads
across my face, making my vision go black at the edges and my ears ring... He darts
in front of me and kicks me hard in the stomach. His foot forces the air from my
lungs and it hurts, hurts so badly I can’t breathe, or maybe that’s because of the kick,
I don’t know, I just fall” (Roth 110). This fight—Tris’ first fight—represents the
violent tactics used to toughen up the initiates. The fighting, then, sets a precedent for increased violence throughout the novel.

Several separate incidents occur as Tris trains for Dauntless. Some include stabbings, beatings, kidnappings, and fistfights. Tris not only deals with these impromptu acts of violence, but she also develops her own skills in order to defend herself. The form of such violence varies. Besides hand-to-hand combat, Tris learns to throw knives with accurate precision and also learns how to aim and then shoot a gun. Even her fear simulation requires her to be tough—to make a difficult, albeit violent decision. When she experiences pseudo-reality in her fear simulation, she must face her greatest fears—one of which is the death of her family members. In her serum-induced coma, she is faced with the choice: their lives or hers. Tris must decide whether or not to shoot her family in order to save her own life (Roth 394-396). Simply put, Tris faces many obstacles involving violence—some standing against her and some created by her; the fact of the matter is that violence is an integral part of her life. Such value is not one that parents encourage in adolescent literature. However, mimetic theory suggests that this difficult reading is only reflective of the day-to-day lives of young people.

The increased violence represented in dystopian literature is just as prominent in twenty-first century America. The realistic connection between the two is partly what makes Divergent so mimetic. Not only does the violence increase throughout the novel, but it also represents multiple methods of performing violence in the real world. For example, Tris’ interaction with guns relates to a very real issue in modern day America. Gun violence has become an obvious problem in
North America in the last few years (2014-2017). During that span of time, gun violence has significantly increased; the percentage of mass shooting fatalities has risen from 12 to 58 percent in the course of a year (Soffen). Several major mass shootings have occurred since then, and undoubtedly, increased the amount of ongoing violence recorded in America. The shootings that took place at the Orlando club (2016), the Ariana Grande concert in Manchester (2017), and the Route 91 Harvest Festival in Las Vegas (2017) have played a huge role in the growing paranoia that surrounds American crime and violence. Scholar John Donahue reiterates such information in his article “Comey, Trump, and the Puzzling Pattern of Crime in 2015 and Beyond.” He reports, “In 2006, 45% of Americans were worried a great deal about crime. By 2016, the number had jumped to 53%” (Donahue 1297). Although he mentions American fear in response to crime, Donahue does not actually believe that murder rates have risen in recent years.

But the issue on the table is not murder; in fact, the central concern of the study focuses on the levels of violence, of which America has seen plenty. In the last few years, America has witnessed the revival of several different cultural revolutions. The first movement known as “Black Lives Matter” is a response to police brutality in regards to racial discrimination. The people involved in this movement are making a statement; however, many of the Black Lives Matter protests have become increasingly violent and unpredictable. For example, the group started a dangerous riot in Baltimore that involved physical assault of innocent civilians and vandalism of business— “The rioters in Baltimore didn’t direct their actions exclusively at agents of the state. In addition to targeting at least one
widely televised police car, they also vandalized property, some of which is surely
owned by supporters of the Black Lives Matter movement, and assaulted fellow
citizens, including journalists” (Beutler). Although protesting a just cause (the police
murder of Freddie Gray), their revenge-fueled actions were not focused on attaining
any sort of justice.

In response to the growing media coverage of street violence and car stops
resulting in heightened police brutality and shootings, an antithetic group has
formed: Blue Lives Matter. To combat the Black Lives Matter protests that have
become increasingly violent, police have created support for government
institutions of law. The tension between Black Lives Matter and Blue Lives Matter is
one that replicates the Divergent’s in the sense that the government opposes the
direct needs of the people. Such violent and revolutionary responses to the
government in America continue to gain media coverage and mixed responses.
However, the drastic measures taken by the Black Lives Matter Movement are now
rivaled by the up and coming Antifa Group.

Antifa—anti-fascist—is yet another culturally revolutionized group of
Americans who have joined together to fight for their beliefs. They could be
considered extreme leftists or radical liberals. It makes sense then, with Donald
Trump as President, that Antifa members have been making more of an appearance
as of late; their presence has actually caused serious conflicts in locations such as
Ferguson, MO, and Baltimore, MD, and Berkeley, CA. Despite their claims of peace,
Antifa is better known for their violent and radical protests amidst conservative
public gatherings. The Wall Street Journal recorded an Antifa related incident at
Berkeley in 2017 that is rather shocking: “Politically charged street brawls broke out in Berkeley, California, on Sunday, with police arresting 13 charming participants on charges including assault with a deadly weapon. One Twitter video showed a masked activist [Antifa] kicking a man curled in the fetal position on the ground; the beat-down stopped only when a journalist, Al Letson, shielded the man with his body” (“Behind the Bedlam in Berkeley”). Such an outburst of cruelty is not uncommon in an Antifa protest; and yet, members feel justified in their actions.

Their attitude towards the necessity of violence, in agreement with Black Lives Matter, is one that further supports the claim of increased violence in America—not only through destructive behaviors, but also through government revolt. Just as the idea of government revolt has become more common, the literature of the time period reflects this truth. Teenagers—and adults—are able to make the connection between political unrest in the world and social factions of Divergent. Thus, such social factions and familial loyalties to binary politics are what teens experience at school and transact or transfer in relationships.

Divergent’s Perspective on Independence

The one tried and true aspect of young adult literature that has yet to be dismissed or outgrown is the “coming of age” story. In American culture especially, the plot structure and character development mean that the novel centers around a young teenager discovering himself/herself through separation from the parental units. In Divergent, readers can follow Tris’ identity development as she alienates herself physically and emotionally from their influence. For example, her first step
towards independence is her decision to physically leave her family's faction, Abnegation, and join a completely different one—Dauntless: “it’s time to leave. The Dauntless exit first. I walk past the gray-clothed men and women who were my faction, staring determinedly at the back of someone’s head. But I have to see my parent’s one more time. I look over my shoulder at the last second before I pass them, and immediately wish I hadn’t” (Roth 48). Tris feels guilty about taking a different path than her parents—about leaving them and the home they built. Her decision, however, is instrumental to her personal growth. She learns who she truly is—and the process is not easy: “This is not the first time I have failed my family since I got here, but for some reason, it feels that way. Every other time I failed, I knew what to do but chose not to do it. This time, I did not know what to do... Have I lost part of myself?” (Roth 270). During her time in Dauntless training, Tris undergoes physical stress and emotional stress, so it is not unusual that her separation from her parents begins to take a toll. She must realize how to act—who to be—all on her own. It takes time, but Tris eventually reaches such resolution: “I feel like someone breathed new air into my lungs. I am not Abnegation. I am not Dauntless. I am Divergent. And I can’t be controlled” (Roth 442). She realizes her true identity is not something her parents have given her, nor is it something she found on her own; her identity is made from all her prior experiences, thoughts, and decisions. She comes to terms with the fact that she cannot be Abnegation to please her parents and she cannot be Dauntless no matter how badly she wants to be. Tris discovers who she actually is—a little of both—Divergent. When Tris reunites with her parents at the end of the novel, she realizes what an influential role they had in
her life—how they shaped her persona. However, such a realization is only made possible by her physical and emotional detachment. Tris needs the time apart before she sees her situation clearly.

This same desire to be separate from the parental figures is a common one in most teenage lives. American culture says that adolescents should begin forming an identity separate from their parents—that they should strive for independence at an early age. Scholars Sabrina Koepke and Jaap Dennisen connect the idea to Erikson’s developmental stages when they address “a second process of separation-individuation to take place in adolescence, in which separation consists of a disengagement from internal, infantile images of parents as omnipotent figures of authority. Adolescents become increasingly capable of independent self-regulation and are willing to take up responsibility for their actions” (Koepke 76). Thus, the separation of child and parent, albeit short lived, is instrumental when it comes to development and growth. The separation referred to in the above quote implies that a physical or emotional separation is required for adolescents to fully mature.

Because physical separation is often times impossible for young American teens living at home, they participate in a form of emotional alienation otherwise known as the “rebellious, teen years.” Therefore, the ties between parents and children are temporarily severed, and the adolescents begin their self-discovery free from parental figures. Behavior like this is actually quite common in America because the culture values self-reliance and self-efficiency. In fact, many young adolescents
do not display the degree of respect for their parents people in more traditional or family-oriented societies commonly display. [The teenagers] have the conception it is a historical or biological accident that put them in the hands of particular parents. Parents fulfill their responsibilities to the children while the children are young, and when children reach ‘the age of independence’ the close child-parent tie is loosened, if not broken (“Key American Values”).

The idea of independence is one that not only affects teen development, but American culture as a whole, as well. Therefore, it is a necessary American value to create distance between parents and children during the teen years in order to establish identity. In doing so, the hope is that the teens will come away stronger than they were before just like Tris. The period of separation is invaluable to adolescent identity formation because it allows them the opportunity to explore their own decisions and behaviors. In reading about Tris’ separation and growth away from home, young adult readers learn to recognize the very same behavior in their own lives.

Although it may not be immediately apparent to its young readers, dystopian literature appeals to their personal sense of reality. When they read certain scenes or incidences in Divergent, they are able to recognize the reality of their own world. The recognition they experience is directly tied to the mimetic view of literature—that it imitates reality. The teenage readers see a reflection of their reality specifically in Divergent’s obsession with technology/science, the fear of government, the increased violence, and the alienation of child from parent. When
Tris experiences these aspects of life, young readers unknowingly recognize the truth of the matter underneath the fictional elements. They transfer their own hopes and fears onto Tris’ and respond in a cathartic or therapeutic way.
Chapter 6: Psychological Potential for YA Literature

Because literature can have such a heavy impact on youths’ psychosocial development, acknowledging its influence—and the variety of its influence—is extremely important. In doing so, readers will be able to identify how a book has changed them and in what way—positively or negatively. While many books do provide a therapeutic outlet for problem solving, others act as triggers that worsen already existing behaviors. Because young adult literature is a rapidly changing and growing category, the trends are constantly shifting. Thus, knowledge of the genre’s evolution and continued change can help both adult readers and young readers identify its impact on their mental states and select their books accordingly.

Following the Trends Within the Genre

When studying young adult literature as a whole, patterns can easily be traced because the genre is in a constant state of evolution. The most recent trend has been dystopian, but some people would argue that even this is becoming outdated. Vox writer Constance Grady believes that “teen suicide stories are starting to fill the place in the pop culture landscape that until very recently was taken up with stories of teen dystopias.” In her opinion, young adult literature has already begun to lose momentum with its young audience and an obsession with teenage suicide has taken its place. According to Grady, the transition from dystopia to suicide is one that will lower the morale and eliminate the hope factor that is often found in dystopian literature. The sudden and powerful genre change is actually the
kind of change that readers and parents should watch for, since it is occurring all the time.

Another one of the recent concerns within YA literature is its uncanny likeness to adult literature. The only difference between the two seems to be the age of the protagonist. In fact, scholars Michael DiCicco and Paula Taylor-Greathouse conducted a survey with popular young adult authors Neil Shusterman, Chris Crutcher, Marion Dane Bauer, Sharon Draper, Carol Lynch Williams, Holly Black, and Lois Lowry only to discover that many of them did not feel they were obligated to write moral books. They believed instead that their only task was to write good stories (76). Considering the types of YA novels being produced as of 2017, this outlook on authorial obligation appears to be a common one. The books that have become popular in the last few years often deal with issues such as death, sexuality, or violence to name a few—not necessarily the types of books that have parental approval. Some of these books have maintained their spot on The New York Times bestseller list for long periods of time throughout the last few years. Titles like The Hate U Give, Thirteen Reasons Why, and If I Stay represent the notion that teenager literature is moving forward yet again, and will possibly leave dystopias behind in the near future. It would seem that the young adult story simply gets darker as time passes.

Books are no longer limited to a specific moral construct—yes, schools can still ban “inappropriate” books, but the content itself no longer contains the shock value that it once did. The sexual, violent, and crude behaviors of young adult protagonists are beginning to imitate adult protagonists more and more. In fact, The
Atlantic journalist David Brown raises a valid question: “But if everyone is reading this subset of fiction where seemingly no subject is taboo, why is it corralled as young adult, anyway?” Young adult author Non Pratt supports such claims that adolescent literature is not much different than adult literature when she analyzes the lack of forbidden content in the genre. In her article published by The Guardian, she says, “Today a teenager could ask for a book on almost any traditionally taboo topic and [there is] a writer who is prepared to take [them] there” (Pratt). Her point in saying so is to emphasize that young adult authors are free to write whatever they want in the twenty-first century. A book critic is much less likely to criticize a contemporary YA novel because it is too honest, raw, or graphic; such controversy has gradually become a nonissue in the literary world, and thus, must be treated carefully.

Reading with Caution

The lack of boundaries should be cause for concern because books strongly impact their readers, and the moral YA novel appears to be going extinct. This is not to say that readers should avoid novels that include graphic material, but they should be aware of their impact. Each young adult book is likely to contain a wide variety of good and bad qualities, but if the reader is unable to identify such qualities, they become subject to the influence of both.

As previously discussed in Chapter 6, many young adult novels have the therapeutic ability to comfort or reassure readers; they are cathartic to the teenagers’ psychosocial development. Most young people do not even realize that
they are being influenced at all. Some fields of study are very intentional when it comes to bibliotherapy. Clinical social workers actually prescribe reading as a way to help patients cope with an issue or situation. Jean Pardeck, author of *Using Books in Clinical Social Work Practice: A Guide to Bibliotherapy*, argues that “many emotionally troubled people learn more by reading than interacting with a therapist or group” (126). Thus, reading provides a type of therapy unattainable by any other means—a way for readers to transfer their feelings onto fictional characters in order to reach literary (and real) conflict resolution. This being said, the influence of media, television, friends, and family may very well play a part in the young reader’s identity development, but the books read during such a time have a distinct impact unlike any other. Bibliotherapy does not mean that the books being read are full of perfect characters or happy endings, but it does mean that the content in the text provides some opportunity for readers to connect with characters and receive guidance within their life.

In contrast, young adult novels hurt as easily as they help. The potential for harm is always there, but awareness of such depends upon the individual reader and their personal struggles. Certain books, especially of the young adult genre, contain content that acts as a trigger to generate unhealthy behavior in the reader. *Slate* writer Katy Waldman explains it as such: “a trigger can be any stimulus that transports a PTSD sufferer back to the original scene of her [or his] trauma… Some people are triggered by the smell of cigarette smoke or traces of a specific perfume. Others react to spoken or written language: words that switch on the brain’s stress circuits, bathing synapses in adrenaline and elevating heart rate and blood
Subject related trigger words and phrases, then, can create an instinctual reaction in trauma victims. For example, someone that has been raped in the past may experience anxiety or fear when reading about a character that has been raped or is being raped in the context of the story. The transferential reading of the text, therefore, has the power to draw out those painful memories and recreate the original trauma for the reader. In some ways, the direct confrontation of such tragedies can actually help the reader overcome traumatic incidents from the past.

However, another reaction to such trigger words exists and does not bode well for the reader. The danger that readers face with trigger words is the potential to experience behavioral setbacks. The preexisting triggers of a text can cause a person to fall back into an old habit or unhealthy behavior. For example, Laurie Anderson’s book Wintergirls tells the story of Lia, an adolescent girl struggling with anorexia. A writer for The New York Times acknowledges Lia’s attitude toward eating (and not eating) and agrees that her story may act as a trigger to readers with similar pasts (Feinberg). People who have previously struggled with anorexia might read the novel, put themselves in Lia’s position, and give in to the urge of their destructive behaviors. This being said, literature does have the capacity to harm people. Its impact, however, is most significant when it comes to young adults as they are still developing their own sense of identity and personhood. For someone that is still figuring it all out, novels containing triggers can completely change their life.

For this reason, reading should not be taken lightly. Every book carries weight whether readers are aware of it or not. Plenty of books result in positive
mentalties, but not all offer the same benefits. Triggers can appear in a wide variety of ways, but their presence is one that should not be ignored. Some universities (and many high schools) have implemented trigger-warning requirements, but reading does not always take place in a classroom. Anyone that reads should be aware of his or her book selections; parents should watch what their children read because the line between eye-opening material and triggering material is very thin. An informed reader is one that selects their books wisely—reading a combination of challenging texts without becoming overwhelmed by the challenges.
Chapter 7: Literature Review

Although young adult literature may seem fairly popular as of late, the category is still very new and is continuously growing. It has undergone much change in the last hundred years; some of the most important changes have dealt with content, format, and theme. It is important that young readers are aware of these changes and are able to identify the current development process within YA literature. The following review will examine the existing literature in regards to the young adult genre and its growth over time. Using the thematic approach, this review will cover concepts including the YA didacticism, identity development, the noticeable changes within YA literature’s modern framework, the rise of dystopian literature, the apparent connection to mimetic theory, and how the growth of YA literature is affecting young adults.

YA Didacticism

Didacticism is a type of philosophy used in art and literature used to present a lesson or relay information with a specific goal in mind. To say that literature is didactic is to say that it is written in order to convey a specific message to its readers. Lauren Myracle strongly believes that young adult literature began in a didactic format. She addresses the fact that parents were incredibly involved in their children's book choices because they believed the types of books being read could guide their children’s thinking, shape their behavior, or fix their problems in some way.
Such parental approach to young adult literature presents a didactic treatment of the genre. In connection to didacticism, Myracle specifically discusses the concept of bibliotherapy—the idea that books can help people understand or solve their issues in a therapeutic manner. She begins her article, “Molding the Minds of the Young: The History of Bibliotherapy as Applied to Children and Adolescents” by addressing the misconceived notion of bibliotherapy in the beginning stages of developing the YA literature category. Instead of writing for the teenagers, the books being published were written more so with the parents’ alternative motives in mind. Parents were literally suggesting books to their children in order to “fix” certain aspects of their behavior. Myracle then goes on to explain how this approach was gradually deemed inefficient and replaced with more relatable, adolescent-centered themes and plot structures.

Myracle’s contribution to the topic is important because, while many other sources address the issue of didacticism briefly, it is not their chief focus. They might mention the didactic period in which YA literature began, but Myracle provides a thorough explanation of the term and its application to the adolescent literature genre. Another scholar, Michael Cart, addresses the concept briefly when he discusses the benefits of relatable teen novels (Cart 159-160). He supports the idea of bibliotherapy as an outlet for young people to work through problems or receive guidance.
Identity Development

Although bibliotherapy can be beneficial in many circumstances, its didactic roots are significant to the impact it has on young people. Teens are in a constant state of identity formation that can easily be affected by outside factors. Saul McLeod discusses the eight psychological stages of development created by Erik Erikson in his article “Erik Erikson” (McLeod). He specifically explains the fifth stage that involves 12-18 year olds. According to McLeod, this is the period in which identities are formed and minds are trained to think for the future. Such a theory supports the idea that adolescent years are valuable to identity development. In a similar fashion, Theo Klimstra discusses adolescent identity development in regards to personality traits and types. He creates three categories to describe different personality types and connects the types to the maturation of young people. When a teenager starts to develop a stronger sense of identity, often times, their personality types will shift (Klimstra 82). Klimstra analyzes the numerous studies that have been conducted in his field, but is inconclusive about specific outcomes.

In order to obtain more information regarding adolescent identity development and its relation to young adult literature, it is of value to read Laura Ferry’s thesis, “Interactions Between Young Adult Literature and Adolescent Identity Development.” She first defines young adult literature and explores the basics of adolescent identity. Ferry then connects these two ideas by examining professional psychological theories and applying those theories to teen identity development, suggesting that literature has an effect on the process (Ferry 19-20). She looks at two forms of reader interaction with the text. The first resembles a
reader response theoretical approach, while the second has more to do with the text itself. Young readers might interact openly with the text and come to their own conclusions; in this method, they would read themselves as the main character and use that as bibliotherapy, placing themselves in the same situations as the hero/heroine and imagining their own responses (Ferry 23). The second method of reader interaction observes the adolescent empathizing with certain virtues or qualities—albeit already present in their own personalities, but unrecognized—and confronting those same qualities as they are emphasized within the text (Ferry 24-25).

Toni Blake also analyzes several psychological studies of identity development, but specifically focuses on Erik Erikson in Chapter 2 of her book *Enduring Issues in Psychology*. She walks through Erikson’s eight stages of development—including adolescence and young adulthood. During these phases, she mentions the changes that occur between identity and identity confusion as well as intimacy and isolation (Blake 118-120). Blake suggests that the young adult attempts to solidify their personal identity in relation to their social behaviors.

In a similar fashion, the article “Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road from Late Teens Through The Twenties,” discusses the fluctuations that occur through the teenage years into the young adult years; it considers the cultural shift in expectations and that effect on identity development. Although the author Jerry Arnett writes about an older brand of adolescence (18yr-20yold), he does acknowledge the fact that “In both love and work, the process of identity formation begins in adolescence but intensifies in emerging adulthood” (Arnett 9). Whereas
teens are tentatively exploring possibilities in work, love and the idea of self, young adults/twenty-year-olds must be more confident in regards to those aspects (Arnett 9-10). This thought process, in fact, agrees with the common understanding that college years are the ones meant for “settling down,” while the younger years are meant for exploration.

Recent Changes Within the Genre That Set up modern framework

Because there is so much identity adjustment during the young adult period of life, it is valuable to study the strongest influences on teens—and how such influencers have changed over time. If a reader compared the very first published young adult novel to a YA best seller today, the two books would not even equate.

Young adult literature is a category that has aggressively grown since its recent birth into the literary world; during this time, it has transformed drastically. These changes have become evident as early as 1956 when Emma Patterson published her theories of developing junior novels (YA novels). She believed that the category of books for adolescents had been altered and expanded to form what she knew as modern young adult literature. Patterson focused on the rising categories of each literary phase. First there were historical novels; next they were books about school relationships, and lastly came the novels that were academically focused. Patterson noticed that in the year her article was published, junior novels were becoming more focused on gender specific interest (Patterson 383).

Although Patterson believed that the junior novels were going through extreme changes at the time, W. Geiger Ellis’ work, “Adolescent Literature: Changes,
Cycles, and Constancy” contrasts that idea by revealing that the real changes did not come until the late 1960s. He claims that the previous junior novels were “formulaic,” “predictable,” and “safe” before the social revolution of the 60s (Ellis 94). Ellis addresses the dramatic shift from didactic formula into an extremely honest portrayal of teen issues and behaviors. He claims that the prior rules of writing for adolescent literature were lost and reset during the cultural shift.

In the same way that Ellis criticized the junior novels that were published before the 1960s, Robert Small Jr. exercised his own form of dissent in his journal piece “The Literary Value of the Young Adult Novel.” Small also believed that such junior novels avoided real issues and contained no deep thematic content. Small recognized the same turn of events in literature history during the 1960s and ‘70s. He noted that these novels underwent a stylistic change, content change, and tonal change (Small 278).

In more recent publications, authors are still observing the YA category’s frequent transformations. Frank Serafini and James Blasingame address three major changes they have noticed in adolescent literature prior to 2012. According to Serafini and Blasingame, adolescent literature has increased its inclusion of visual images, has begun utilizing various forms of narration (email, text, notes), and has started to develop popularity and success through the dystopian genre (Serafini and Blasingame 145).

Many of the changes that have occurred within the specific form of literature are a result of a select few books that challenged the preconceived notion of expectations. Chris Crowe spends the entire time within his article, “Young Adult
Literature: YA Boundary Breakers and Makers,” examining these contradictory books and the improvements they have made to the genre as a whole. He particularly focuses on new concepts such as YA poetry, homophobia, revisions of classic fairy tales, graphic novels, and mixing genres (Crowe 117). Crowe goes through the literature in chronological order and specifies what changes occurred during what time period as a result of a “culturally-challenged” book.

One challenged book that has altered YA literature is *The Catcher in the Rye*. Although such a book is thought to be too corrupt for young readers and is commonly disliked by parental figures, Helen Frangedis discusses the positive elements this book can bring to the high school classroom. She addresses many of the common issues within the novel that are thought to be negative and explains how they can be seen in a positive light (72).

Although her opinion of the challenged book is an optimistic one, there are plenty of novels that were and still are banned by teachers and school boards alike. Other than *The Catcher in the Rye*, books such as *Are You There God? It’s Me, Margaret* and *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* are also challenged because they go against the cultural norms regarding sex, profanity, religion, and family.

Plenty of schools have attempted to rid their curriculums and libraries of these “inappropriate” books. In “Banned 43: *Are You There God? It’s Me Margaret,*” the author provides a list of all schools that have banned or attempted to ban the Judy Bloom novel on grounds that it is too sexual and sacrilegious. In a similar fashion, Quan Truong uses his article “Glen Ellyn D41 Removes *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* from Schools” to explain the extenuating circumstances involving a book
ban in Illinois. He discloses both sides of the argument and concludes that the fight has still not ended. His argument to restore *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* to schools is confirmed in Stacy St. Claire’s article “Glen Ellyn Reinstates Banned Book After Judy Blume Weighs In.” Claire also writes about Judy Blume’s involvement with Glen Ellys D41’s reinstatement of *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* into their school library.

Books such as *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, *Are You There God? It’s me, Margaret* and *The Catcher in the Rye* are significant markers in young adult literature because they challenged the cultural values of their day. In order to understand why they were so controversial then—and even still today—it is important to study what America looked like during the specific publication year of each novel.

Because *The Catcher in the Rye* was published first (1951), one must spend time studying the 1940s and 50s in order to get a feel for the cultural and historical environment of that era. During the 1940s, the United States joined the fight in WWII and came out with a victory in 1945. Amidst the period of warfare, the country itself underwent several changes. Women (both white and black) began to work in the absence of their husbands. Both Allan Winkler and the author of "Introduction to World War II and Post-War Social Policy" agree that once the war ended and soldiers returned home, the sparks that were ignited for equal rights between genders and races continued to grow ("Introduction to World War II and Post-War Social Policy" and Winkler). Along with these new ideas, the government also began to take greater responsibility for the returning WWII veterans. Anyone
fighting for America would now receive free education along with social and economic benefits. According to “Cultural Relations and Politics” by Akira Iriye, the years following WWII were full of globalization and imperialism; America was spreading her values all over the world after her victory in World War II in 1945 (Iriye). There was a certain pride and confidence that came with America’s new title: most prosperous country in the world.

However, one should not expect a historical time period with zero issues or struggles. According to ”Post–World War II: 1946–60,” there was, in fact, an increase in conformity after the return of soldiers from the war. The men coming home, as well as the wives that stayed home during the war, were eager to return to their normal lifestyles once more. During that time, it was very common for families to fit into a specific mold, to dress a certain way and to act their parts, happily (“Post-World War II: 1946–60”). From their appearance to their behaviors, Americans desired sameness—a return to routine. However, Richard Welch, author of “Rock and Roll and Social Change,” suggests that such complacency did not register as well with the young people of the day. The ideology of sameness incited a rebellion of sorts; adolescents refused to fit into their expected roles. This was the time that rock and roll was born. Such music was making its first appearance around the time of The Catcher in the Rye’s publication date. Welch goes so far as to conclude that the rebellious attitude shift explains the popularity of the novel with young people and the outrage it caused with the adults (Welch 2).

Because Are You There God? It’s Me, Margaret was faced with the same challenges after publication in 1970, it is valuable to analyze the 1960s in order to
understand the social current so evidently contradicted in the book. Between 1945 and 1991, the United States engaged in the Cold War. The tensions were high between the two opposing powers, but such rivalry led to positive change and cultural interaction later on ("Introductions to the Cold War: 1945-1991"). One can clearly observe the transformation of American culture by looking over the history and social life of the decade. Studies often show that, while some things remained the same, most things underwent major shifts or renovations. The transition was often difficult for the people that rejected change. Once Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret was published, it was quickly banned from junior and high schools. James Brewbaker alludes to the cause in his article “Young Adult Literature: Are You There, Margaret? It's Me, God--Religious Contexts in Recent Adolescent Fiction.” He addresses the fact that young adult literature was not known for religious reference in and prior to the 1980s. The Judy Blume novel was most likely banned for this reason and this reason alone. Information regarding current events at the time of novel publication is valuable when studying Judy Blume’s novel because it explains a bit about why it was banned so easily in its own time frame.

The historical change is obvious to most, but concepts such as morality become harder to pinpoint over time. According to Thomas Johnson, author of “TV Sex in the 1990s,” there has been an evolution of sexual promiscuity within film. Johnson claims that sexual activity and reference to such activity have significantly increased within TV shows since the mid-70s and are still changing today. Sally Kohn with CNN explains such change in sexual behavior to some extent in her article “The Seventies: The Sex Freakout.” She discusses the beginning of women’s rights,
discovery of birth control, the start of "safe sex" lessons in high schools, and the beginning of the LGBTQ pride and acceptance. Even Michael Cart, author of “Of Risk and Revelation: The Current State of Young Adult Literature,” notes a change in literature during the 1990s. He observes an increase of “realistic” or potentially controversial topics such as sexual activity, violent behaviors, and gay/lesbian characters (Cart 161-163). Along with these factors, he notices that the concepts discussed within YA literature evolve to be darker, and perhaps more relatable to the increasingly rebellious young teens of the time period.

This onset of darker thematic elements is not uncommon in most recent young adult literature; Meghan Gurdon, author for Wall Street Journal, reports the changes in YA literature content (Gurdon). She mentions several popular novels throughout the years and emphasizes their recent shift into darker material. Long gone are the days in which Judy Blume shocked parents and teachers with her novels about puberty and religion; now, the plots and concepts go much deeper. Young adult literature seems to focus more on dark ideas such as rape, sexual assault, drugs, drinking, self harm, etc. (Gurdon).

The darker thematic shift has transformed the Young Adult genre as a whole. In order to clarify what exactly constitutes as a young adult novel, Maia Mertz and David England set up a framework for the genre by listing and exploring ten characteristics that should be found in a novel in order to categorize it in the YA literature section. Robert Small writes an article almost ten years later and reevaluates their set of standards. He reaffirms their ideas and suggests that their
model be used to determine which novels belong to the group commonly known as adolescent literature.

Rising Categories: Problem novels and Dystopia

This new framework of YA literature has seemed to last, even as the types of novels have shifted. Problem novels and dystopian novels have been gaining popularity more recently. Although both types deal with teens and their current issues, problem novels appear to be more straightforward in addressing the conflicts and concerns.

Steven VanderStaay looks into the details of problem novels and develops the coming of age theme most commonly used. In his article, “Young-Adult Literature: A Writer Strikes the Genre,” he addresses Arnold Van Gennep’s formula: separation, margin and aggregation (VanderStaay 49). VanderStaay uses Gennep’s formula in relation to novels such as *Tiger Eyes, Crazy Horse Electric Game,* and *Up in Seth’s Room.* He explains how the coming of age formula is still being used to further develop problem novels in modern day.

In a similar fashion, Brian Sturm and Karin Michel write about problem novels in their article “The Structure of Power in Young Adult Problem Novels”—published as recently as 2016. Their focus, however, is more related to why teenagers need to read problem novels and less about the formatting. They address the teenager’s desire for independence and the outlet that problem novels provide in such matters. According to Sturm and Michel, young teen readers still enjoy problem novels because they are “therapeutic,” “exotic and interesting,” flattering for the reader,
and appealing through “titillation of prurience and peer pressure” (41). Under these ideas, Sturm and Michel conclude that problem novels are still in high demand among young readers. They also briefly discuss how problem novels might continue to change in the future.

While problem novels have had time to grow with the readers, dystopian novels are just getting started. There has been a recent increase in the production and popularity of YA dystopian fiction. Much of the interest, however, can be rooted in the recent political atmosphere. Melissa Ames adopts this idea and looks into teenage interest in politics after 9/11. She states that teens have increased motivation to get involved with politics since the event, which in turn has caused the dystopian category of novels to gain recognition. Ames attempts to prove that dystopian novels provide a therapeutic outlet for young readers to cope with the trauma—known or unknown—regarding 9/11 (Ames 7-8). Jeffrey D. Wilhelm and Michael W. Smith would agree with Ames in the aspect of recent teen interest in dystopia, but not for the same reasons.

In their article, “The Power of Pleasure Reading: The Case of Dystopias,” Smith and Willhelm mention four major reasons why students (middle school or high school) might show particular interest in dystopia. They conclude that the specific type of reading allows them to feel pleasure from complete world immersion, creates social pleasure from self-identification and peer connections, induces intellectual pleasures and causes them to feel pleasure by their own work (Smith and Wilhelm 55). Despite all of these pleasure experiences, there is yet another theory expanding on the reasons why students might be interested in dystopian
fiction. In “The Persistence of Hope in Dystopian Science Fiction,” Raffaella Baccolini presents the idea that teens identify their own world with the fictional world found in dystopias. Reading about the conflict resolution or hopeful endings aid readers in their own thought life. Many adolescents feel as though dystopian literature is similar to their current reality in some fashion. By observing a hopeful ending in the novel, they allow themselves to think that positive outcomes are possible in real life (Baccolini 520).

Mimetic Theory

The concept that fictional worlds could represent real life events is called mimesis. In “Mimesis and Possible Worlds,” Lubomir Dolezel analyzes the mimetic theory in relation to his fictional worlds theory. Dolezel defines mimesis as such: “fictions [that] are derived from reality, they are imitations/representations of actually existing entities” (475). He discusses what works for the theory and what does not in accordance to the relationship between that fictional world and reality.

Getting away from opinionated reviews of the theory, Matthew Potolsky writes a book describing mimetic theory in detail called *Mimesis*. In the text, he specifically addresses the personal application of mimesis as well as the literary and artistic aspects. In regards to people, Potolsky discusses Lacan’s mirror concept in which children do not know their own identity without mirroring other things. In the beginning, they only know how to mirror their parents, but as they grow older, their life becomes a series of mimicry. According to *Mimesis*, humans live in a state of constant imitation (Potolsky 49).
Alongside his idea of personal identity, mimetic theory addresses the arts and literature in its relation to realism. All art and literature are representations of the real world, whether the audience would agree or not, according to mimetic theory. The theory still applies when the art or novel seems completely abstract or unrealistic; one must look at the intent of the creators (Potolsky 93). They are depicting reality, but they might specifically focus on certain aspects. Even when it does not seem to line up, mimesis states that art and novels are always representing reality.

The theory is related to the recent interest in dystopian fiction. The category has gained popularity because young people are able to see their reality within the fictional world represented in a text. Rachel Wilkinson discusses three items within fictional dystopian novels *Feed* and *Brave New World* that people are seeing in their own realities. In “Teaching Dystopian Literature to a Consumer Class,” Wilkinson addresses advertising and industry, instant gratification, and reliance on technology (Wilkinson 22). She maintains the idea that, although the problems are found in a fictional dystopian text, they ring true for many readers. Joshua Garrison, author of “Growing up Dystopian: The Future History of Education and Childhood,” also maintains the idea that children enjoy dystopia novels because they can see their own lives reflected in the supposed fictional world (Garrison 69). He analyzes similar authors that utilize dystopia for a purpose—Aldous Huxley, Jack London, and George Orwell—in order to recognize the full impact of dystopian novels (Garrison 70).
Gorman Beauchamp spends more time writing in this field of study, except he retains focus on the concept of technology within dystopias. He uses “Technology in the Dystopian Novel” to explain that the fictional worlds presented in dystopian texts pique the reader's interest because they relate to the human fear of utopian society and fear of technology (Beauchamp 54).

Cause and Effect of YA Literature Growth

What adolescents read is very important because it will take part in shaping their personas (Myracle 38-39). Young people are much more likely to change based upon what they allow to influence them. Literature for young people is extremely important because of the impact factor. Books are teaching and showing kids how to deal with issues, relate to people, and find their identity. It is beneficial, then, to analyze exactly how teenagers might be swayed. Research conducted by David Russel suggests that, although extremely difficult to measure the level of reading impact on young people, four factors should be considered when studying the effects of reading. Russel believes that the form of material, the content of ideas, the type of reader, and the setting in which response is made all factor into the idea of reading impact on children and teens (Russel 409). According to Matthew Potolsky's book Mimesis, children find their identity initially in their parents (125). They see their mother and father and strive to copy those people until they are able to identify their own individuality. However, some theorists would suggest that one's entire life is a form of mimicry—that people are always in the habit of copying
someone else’s persona. With this information, it is only more imperative that readers are aware of the powerful impact of young adult literature.

Already there is evidence that YA novels are changing the culture they are targeting. Mark Vogel and Anna Creadick wrote “Family Values and the New Adolescent Novel” in order to study the general deterioration of family values in literature and relate that to the real life readers. They conclude that by reading novels that highlight selfish parental figures, the novel can, in turn, change the teenager’s perspective of his/her own family.

There should be legitimate concern with the content of young adult literature because it has such an impact on its readers. It seems that as of late, young adult novels and adult novels have little to no differences. In fact, Betty Carter states that the only difference is in marketing. She uses her article “Adult Books for Young Adults” to explain that age is no longer a determining factor in categorization—it’s all in the publication house organization and marketing to sell. Carter goes into detail regarding the best novel qualities that might appeal to young adults, but ultimately suggests that they are the same as adult novels.

In a similar fashion, Allen Nilsen addresses the shift in book recommendations. No longer are recommendations based on great quality, but instead, books are recommended in order to make the largest profit (70). The selection of “popular” YA novels is not impacted by quality so much as it is affected by the profit drive of the publication companies. The fact that money has a larger role in book selection should cause readers to increase awareness and observations skills in regards to modern literature.
Thus, the gradual transformation of YA literature from didactic to modern form is a lengthy, but valuable development to understand. It should now be clear that YA literature has taken a step away from the strong, parental didactic texts and has shifted into more realistic depictions through a modernized framework. In more recent years, there have been increases in problem novels and dystopian novels. Both allow young people to work through issues in a way that seems somewhat detached from the reality of their situation. Although dystopia portrays a fantasy world, the literature reviewed in such works should clarify how these fictional worlds are still capable of mimicking the real world. Awareness of characteristic changes within YA literature is important because it influences the way adolescents are shaped and guided during development.
Chapter 8: Conclusion

No one ever knows how or when the category will change, but they do know that it is often unexpected. In fact, people of the 1950s, 1970s, and 1990s/early 2000s were most likely caught off guard when “obscene” novels such as *The Catcher in the Rye*, *Are You There God? It’s Me, Margaret* and *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* were released and critically acclaimed after some time had passed. For this reason, readers should be informed of the impact literature can have on their identity—whether they are reading as an adult or as a teenager.

This analysis required a wide variety of research, but always has room to improve. Although the comprehensive array of topics discussed in this thesis were efficiently explored and studied, an actual survey could have increased the authenticity of such claims. In an attempt at deeper analysis and further study, I could have distributed a survey to high school teens in Lakeland, Fl. In doing so, I would have been able to pair the gathered survey results regarding teenage reading habits and interests with my research.

In summation, this thesis works to reveal the turbulent past of young adult literature, the present trends, and the frighteningly murky future of the genre. It spends a significant amount of time analyzing why young people are so recently fascinated with dystopian literature and the potential for mimetic and narratological transference in the popular dystopian novel *Divergent*. Not only does the book act as a form of therapy for young readers dealing with a similar reality, but it also hints at the category’s shift into the dystopian trend. Just as dystopian novels have begun to
overshadow the previous trend of problem novels, the stylistic elements of YA literature will continue to evolve.

Despite the difficulty in mapping such detailed shifts in form, style, and theme, the practice of careful observation can prove advantageous to readers in the long run. Firstly, readers will be more aware of a book’s impact on their emotional states, and thus, their book choices may become more selective. Secondly, their increased awareness will prevent a certain degree of and subjectivity to literary influences.
Works Cited


Brewbaker, James M. “Young Adult Literature: Are You There, Margaret? It’s Me, God--Religious Contexts in Recent Adolescent Fiction.” *The English Journal,


*The Atlantic*,


DiCicco, Michael, and Paula Taylor-Greathouse. “The Moral of the Story: Young Adult Authors Speak on Morality, Obligation, and Age Appropriateness.” English


