

## A Shift from Didactic Approach to Rebel Spirit in American Young Adult Literature

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### Abstract

The purpose of the article is to compare the protagonists of the three pieces of young adult literature "Paul's Case" by Willa Carther published in 1905, *The Catcher in the Rye* by J.D. Salinger published in 1951 and *The Stargirl* by Jerry Spinelli first published in 2000. The selection of the novels with 50 years interval in their publications has not been random. The article aims to emphasize that the topic of adolescents struggle with identity and society is timeless and universal. The objective of the article is to expose the dynamics of the rebel protagonists and their impact on adolescent readers.

**Keywords:** Alienated protagonist, psychological development, society, young adult literature

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## Introduction

Literature is considered particularly sensitive to social, political and intellectual currents of its time. The universally acclaimed greatest influencers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century humans' mindset like Sigmund Freud and Karl Marx not only have permeated but also completely changed the purpose of young adult literature since the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. From moral indoctrination of controlling behavior, adolescent literature has been transformed into promoting independence and individuality. The article exemplifies the pattern of rebel teenagers, alienated from society, with the three novels "Paul's Case" (1905), *The Catcher in the Rye* (1950) and *The Stargirl* (2000).

The literary genre of young adult literature is a relatively new phenomenon. Before the 18th century the only publications devoted to children were alphabet and spelling books, along with religious and moral indoctrinations. According to Puritan ideology, children were predisposed to misconduct and needed to be directed to the right path. It was during the Enlightenment, the age of innovation in the 18th century that the major shift in the children's upbringing theory occurred referring children to a "blank slate" (John Locke, 1632 – 1704) that could be written upon and children's books were made sustainable and lucrative part of literary market. John Newbery (1713 – 1767) English publisher who is considered "the father of Children's Literature" published his first children's book in 1744 which was revolutionary not only from publishing point of view with its brightly colored cover but also concept. John Newbery, who was inspired by many of English philosopher and physician John Locke's ideas, maintained that more than physical punishment and imposing discipline it was games that could instill good values in children. The main topic of John Newbery's books is the life story of self-made orphans who rise to the top against overwhelming odds. John Newbery's books were widely popular among 18th and 19th century children despite their didactic nature. Literary award "Newberry" for "the most distinguished contributions to American literature for children" bears his name in recognition of his accomplishments.

## The Change in the Approach

Didactics and religion continued to be major theme in American children's literature in early Puritan society. The first children's book published in the New World was *Milk for babes drawn out of the breast of both testaments* in 1675 by Puritan minister John Cotton which exemplifies "the moral duty of adults to prepare children for heaven" (Kathleen, 2014) (p. 10). While the majority of the American children's books were instructional

such as primers, catechisms, spelling books, geographies, there were also few storybooks, which were usually imported from England, obviously only for the rich. However, since the war of independence in 1812, children's books started to reflect the patriotic fever that swept through the American colonies. The purpose of education has been transformed "When nineteenth-century Americans contemplated the future, pride and anxiety alike told them that the Republic's survival depended upon the moral character of the next generation and that sound republican values could not be learned from the literature of old, class-ridden societies. There must be an American literature for American children"(encyclopedia.com, n.d.)

Yet, one thing that American young adult literature before and after the independence had in common was moral instruction. The books with their strong moral messages were meant to improve the reader encouraging new generation to follow society's expectations.

However, since the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when groundbreaking theories of adolescent psychology were developed, young adult literature has witnessed complete reversal of its course and its purpose has been re-examined. It has become a literature "full of misfits, iconoclasts, freaks, geeks, and more than a few non-conformists" cited in Clarissa E.A. (Clarrisa, 2007) (Johns, 2006) (Jones 13).

In fact, the adolescent books can still be coined as didactic albeit with the shifting focus: instead of teaching children to behave themselves and confirm to the established rules, they didacticize non-conformity, emboldening children to develop their individuality and uniqueness (Bernard, 2017).

The least analytical field literature may be, it usually mirrors its interpretation of intellectual and scientific currents of its time. However, the most outstanding pieces of literature are arguably psychoanalytical breakthroughs in their own right that have even contributed to clinical psychological development. Young adult literature produced by distinguished American authors of the 20<sup>th</sup> century who have not been immune to influential psychological theories of Freud's, Ericson's, Paige's and Kohlberg's do not only provide insight into typical adolescent issues and identity crisis but also have become a powerful tool for teenagers' psychological development. In fact, as John Bushman claims, it is contemporary young adult literature more than society that helps teenagers in their maturation process. "It serves young people in their struggle with identity, with their relationships with adults, and with their choices, which often suggest their concern with moral questions of right or wrong"(Bushman, J. H. & Key H., 2006) Cited in (A).(28).

This becomes possible as teenagers vicariously experience rebel protagonist's self-versus-self battle and psychological development rather than observing a static figure bowing to society's pressure.

The three pieces of young adult literature portraying rebels and alienated adolescents that this article looks into have been published with 50 years intervals during 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. Namely, "Paul's Case" by Willa Carther published in 1905, *The Catcher in the Rye* by Salinger D. published in 1951 and *Stargirl* by Jerry Spinelli first published in 2000. Being the products of relatively different eras and completely different disposition and background, the three protagonists are unanimous in resonating with the readers powerfully as they go through psychological development while being in conflict with society.

Paul is an anti-social teenager, contemptuous of his peers, teachers, neighbors and even family members and generally fitting in nowhere. He finds solace in music and theatre where he works as an usher. Yet, he does not make an effort to practice art himself. Music is his way of escaping dull existence. Unfortunately, his other obsession of money is much more complicated and destructive. His unrealistic longings and aspirations of being rich, makes him inveterate liar.

When these stories lost their effect, and his audience grew listless, he became desperate and would bid all the boys good-night, announcing that he was going to travel for a while, going to Naples, to Venice, to Egypt. Then, next Monday, he would slip back, conscious, and nervously smiling; his sister was ill, and he should have to defer his voyage until spring (Chapter 1).

But not only lies, it is due to "worshiping the false idol" (Rosowski, 1975) that leads Paul to ultimate tragedy. By stealing money from theatre, Paul realizes his dream of experiencing rich man's lifestyle immediately after which he commits a suicide.

"Paul's Case, A Study in Temperament" the story's subtitle explains its atypical organization being devoid of dialogues and resembling doctor's notes of a suicidal young man. Just like doctor would, Willa Carther explains the symptoms and reasons for the suicide.

Holden Caulfield, another adolescent social misfit is much more winsome and charismatic than Paul. In fact, although "Paul's Case" is acclaimed one of the most insightful psychological story and interest in it has increased dramatically recently, it has never caused quite as much stir as the novel *The Catcher in the Rye* did, which still remains top bestseller.

Whether it is due to the first-person narrative and catchy idiomatic language or genius of Salinger, readers are induced to inhabit Holden's point of view even when facts speak against him: he dropped out of four schools; he has no ambitions and displays inertia towards his future; he is cynical towards everybody except his family members and has trouble relating to people; And eventually he receives psychoanalytical treatment in hospital. From psychological point of view, the two childhood traumas: the death of his brother Allie and the suicide of one of his schoolmates cannot be attributed to Holden's "crazy" behavior.

*The Catcher in the Rye* has been one of the most controversial and most often banned books in America. Critical interest in the book still has not diminished. In his comprehensive essay, Salzman J. who elaborates on the both positive and negative critical reviews of the novel since its publication, including common viewpoints of Holden being similar to Huckleberry Finn, Marxist interpretation of the novel and even outrageous opinions of comparing the protagonist to Jesus Christ, says: "My own interpretation of *The Catcher* is somewhat different." He continues:

"Salinger's best works – *The Catcher*, "Laughing Man", "Perfect day for "Bananafish" "For Esme with Love and Squalor" are most impressive I think because it is about the failure of resolution, self-deception, and the moral consequences of such failure and deception" (Salzman, 1991).

After 50 years, one more teenage dissenter *The Stargirl* by Jerry Spinelli gives us food for thought on the themes that hit close to home, like self-assurance, identity crisis, peer pressure. With her free spirit, bold and dynamic character, she symbolizes the process of becoming one's best self and having confidence in one's identity. She is juxtaposed with Leo, first person narrator who is a victim of peer pressure. Leo is in love with and awe of the Stargirl but eventually turns his back to her. He tries to assure the Stargirl of the importance of obeying society's rules. In an effort to please Leo, the Stargirl agrees but she still fails to fit in the society. Luckily, the Stargirl continues to be true to herself and stops devaluation to which she stooped out of love for Leo.

The book is full of symbolisms. According to Kohlberg's theory, the Stargirl is already on "post conventional level of development": She is confident and happy with herself enough not to care what people think of her. Yet, she is not complacent and never ceases working on herself. Changing names as she is developing emotionally and personally symbolizes personal growth.

Why are the protagonists above alienated and clashing

with society? An ego psychologist Ericson (1902-1994) who developed psychosocial theory based on lifelong stages put special emphasis on the turbulent adolescent stage which he named: "Identity versus Confusion." According to Ericson, teenagers are intrinsically adventurous and have an urge to explore their independence and individuality. Similar to Freud, Piaget and Vygotsky, Ericson believed that children's identity is determined by the nurture rather than nature. Those who are provided with reinforcement and encouragement through personal exploration will emerge from this stage with a strong sense of self and feelings of control and independence, while those who remain uncertain of their opinions and beliefs will suffer from insecurity and confusion about themselves and the future (Cherry, 2021)

Paul, Holden and Stargirl deal with "Identity versus Confusion" stage differently and have unique reasons for being disaffected and in war with society. Getting his priorities wrong and confusing values result in Paul's tragedy. Lack of ambition and apathy towards future is Holden's doom. While in Stargirl's case, it is society that is in the wrong. The scene when the Stargirl responds to a slap in the face by the jealous classmate with a kiss, symbolizes Stargirl's superiority over the society. Stargirl is one of those bold, fearless individuals who leave their mark behind them.

## Conclusion

As study after study corroborates, the number of adolescents from completely different era and background strongly identifying themselves with Paul, Holden and the Stargirl continues to rise. Thus, with their insightful psychological masterpieces, Willa Cather, Jerome David Salinger and Jerry Spinelli have largely succeeded in assisting adolescents to navigate through the stormy physical, emotional and social developmental stage of adolescence.

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