



A Discussion of The Principle Theme of Adolescent Novel & Growth in Young Adult Novels in Steven Herrick, By The River, Markus Zuzak, The Messenger & M.T. Anderson, Feed Novels

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to review and highlight the growth in young adult novels of Herrick, Zuzak and Anderson selected novels. The selected novels that have been discussed in this study were discussed “By the River” novel by Steven Herrick, “The Messenger” novel by Markus Zuzak, and the “Feed” novel by M.T. Anderson. The results of this paper show that the depiction of growth in young adult novels of Herrick, Zuzak and Anderson indicates that the issues are inevitably represented and linked to what the adolescent has learned concerning the possibilities for freedom, power and agency. Herrick effectively uses the character of Harry to demonstrate how growth and development empowers a young adult to exhibit characteristics of power, freedom and agency. Additionally, Zuzak uses the character Ed to demonstrate characteristics of young adults in terms of their ability to show power, agency and freedom. Conversely, Anderson uses various characters to demonstrate how young adults deal with issues of power, agency and freedom.

Keywords: Young Adult, Steven Herrick, The Messenger, By the River, Feed, Markus Zuzak, novel.



1. Introduction

The scholars devote big efforts in the dissertations about young adult literature because this type of literature needs a long time of preparation and research process, in order to reveal structure and style in the works of young adult fiction, the characteristics of plot, and its effects on adult and adolescent readers (Kaplan, 2006).

A young Adult verse novel is one of the most prolific literary genres in the United States and Australia (Davidson, 2008). This genre can be traced back to the early works of authors and poets such as Steven Herrick's *By the River*, Mark Zuzak's *The Messenger* and M. T. Anderson's *Feed*. The principle theme concerning the adolescent characters in these novels appears to be the vicissitudes and pleasures that come with growing up (Goodson, 2005).

This paper analyzes the depiction of growth in young adult novels of Herrick, Zuzak, and Anderson, as the experience and process of development is inevitably linked to what the adolescent has learned about the possibilities for freedom, power, and agency. These three aspects of teenage experience allow the individual to gain a greater understanding of their inner desires, potential ability and capacity for building meaningful relationships with people and places. The central characters commonly explore their personal power to confront challenges, make significant choices and accept dramatic changes as part of their growth process. These positive outcomes are achieved through the agents of change, most notably the people in one's immediate social surroundings.

1.1 Problem and questions

The principal theme of adolescent novel may appear to be the depiction of growth, growth in this genre is inevitably represented as being linked to what the adolescent has learned about the possibilities for power, agency, and freedom. On the other hand, this paper will discuss three types of novels by the writers Steven Herrick "By the River", Markus Zuzak "The Messenger" and M.T. Anderson "Feed", by answering the following questions:

1. What is the adolescent novel theme according to Steven Herrick, *By the River* novel?
2. What is the adolescent novel theme according to Markus Zuzak, *The Messenger* novel?



3. What is the adolescent novel theme according to M.T. Anderson, Feed novel?

2. By the River

By the River is a verse novel written by Steven Herrick to depict the way of life of young adults living in Australia. The novel sheds light on the tenderness as well as the resilience of youth living in a country town in Australia (Herrick, 2004). This story is about the protagonist, Harry, who goes on a journey of physical and psychological development from childhood to adolescence, all the while experiencing different pleasures and difficulties that accompany the process.

Herrick depicts how Harry struggles with power, freedom, and agency as he transitions into adulthood while trying to find answers to perturbing questions regarding human life, belonging and self-identity. Harry is a fourteen-year-old boy living in a small town in Australia with his father and younger brother, Keith. Harry's mother had died when he was seven years of age. Without the presence of a motherly figure, Harry becomes self-sufficient and independent, gaining the freedom to manage their lives as they cope with poverty, grief, despair, anger, and jealousy in the environment. Harry has not only lost his mother but also his potential girlfriend Linda who is swept away by the floods. His earnest goal is to leave his town to get a better life in another place.

Harry's sense of freedom is shaped by his personal struggles to cope with life after the death of his mother. After his mother dies, Harry gains the freedom to seek for direction in life according to his own individual desires since he is now a 'grown-up'. He has the freedom to choose the path to follow—whether he should leave the town or remain with the father and brother. His father has given him the freedom to leave and teach him ways in which he can get out of the small town and go to a place where there is no grief, poverty, anger, and boredom. Harry's father believes that he is old enough to take care of himself. It is for this reason that he gives him the freedom to leave anytime he wishes.

"I know,
Someday,



Sometimes soon enough,
I'll have to choose.
And I know
My dad
Has given me directions out
In his strong, calm voice. "
(Herrick, 2004).

This emphatic admission that he'll "have to choose" his own path demonstrates that he, like Linda, secretly rejects the suffocating lifestyle in the country. Herrick conveys the idea that as one grows up, he is given the freedom to choose a lifestyle that best suits his desires and dreams. Harry had also attained the age that would allow him to make the right decisions regarding his departure.

However, this desire for escapism is paradoxically balanced with Harry's appreciation of the idyllic countryside life. The author states that life for Harry was about swimming in Pearce Swamp, racing through butterflies in Cowper's Paddock, surviving schoolyard battles, and eating large pieces of watermelon with his dad and brother.

After school
We stop at Cowper's Paddock
And look for field mice
We sit on a log
Watching the hawk
Wheel above
A targeting arc,
Till his wings fold
Into a glorious drive.
(Herrick, 2004).

This poetic imagery of Harry becoming a part of the landscape shows the level of freedom he enjoyed as a trouble-free, naive teenager who has yet to begin his transition into adulthood.



Linda, who was the girl that Harry and his friend both loved, gave him ‘sweet orange cakes’. Such sensual delights leave behind vivid memories that intensify his love for her: “I ate two helpings of Linda’s cake, six years and four days.” This meticulous count of the days that he shared with Linda demonstrates the purity and innocence that characterize adolescents. However, the subsequent revelation that “she died in the flood” explains how his love for the small town died along with Linda. Furthermore, Harry’s new relationship with a new girl, Claire, who arrived in the small town helps to consolidate his desire to escape the countryside in search of the bigger world. All of these encounters and experiences become crucial aspects of his coming-of-age process, teaching Harry about romance, friendship, and the simplicity of family unity.

Harry yearned for independence and freedom from the circumstances of poverty and despair, making him desperate to escape his surroundings which led to his unhappiness. For instance, his inability to forget the death of his mother, poverty, and jealousy in his hometown caused him to be sad. Nevertheless, despite the desperation to escape, there was an agency of independence that his father grew in to him to solve the mystery that surrounded the town given the fact that he was now a young adult and could make sound judgments.

When Eve Spencer became pregnant, her newly found love and responsibility for the unborn baby provided an agency for her to take up the courage to leave the small town. Her physical state could not allow her to stay peacefully in the small town.

" Miss Spencer
Deserves more
Than having to leave town
In shame." (Herrick, 2004).

She also wanted to hide from everyone and find a better place where she could bring up her baby. The decision of Miss Spencer to leave town not only depicted the agency of motherhood but also showed that she was grown up to take care of herself better as a person with greater wisdom.



Along with the interpersonal agency provided by the people in Harry's life, the physical attributes of the environment also provided an agency, such as the necessity to move whenever it rained in the town because the river banks would burst and flood the entire area. The people in the town were forced to shut down their houses and move out of their household items to avoid the loss of washing them away from the floods.

"...as the branches
Scrape their fingers
Down my window,
And the clock ticks slowly
In the hallway,
I lie awake
Thinking how
People leave this town:
In an ambulance,
Or worse....." (Herrick, 2004).

Harry also narrates how Linda and her girlfriends were driven away by a rainstorm and heavy drops which forced them to stay indoors. Due to being forced to remain inside, the characters gain an opportunity to understand each other's personalities, attitudes, and emotional states. In a way, while the flood is destructive, it also offers an agency through which people become more intimate, as they care for each other in times of great hardship and grief.

Closely linked with the themes of freedom and agency is the aspect of 'power' that allows the young adult to make his or her own life decisions. This is demonstrated by the power to leave town, which is a choice that was in Harry's hands since his father had allowed him to leave at his own will and accord. Nevertheless, he had suffered terrible loss in his life and abhorred his brother growing up with the same experience. Harry understood the challenges that came with growing up. However, despite having the power to accomplish his wishes, he hardly wished for the brother to experience them.



He had to take care of his brother and father who depended greatly on him especially after the accident. Harry's reliability and sense of duty demonstrate the greater power that he wields as the protector of his family.

3. The Messenger

The Messenger is a novel written by Markus Zusak and published in the year 2002. The author evidently depicts personal growth as the major theme of the story. Zusak charts the personal growth of a young man named Ed Kennedy who lives in Sydney suburb with his hard-nosed mother after the death of his father who was an alcoholic (Martin, 2013). He depicts how Ed, the protagonist, comes to terms with power, agency, and freedom as a young adult throughout the book.

Ed is a taxi driver and has a few friends with whom he drinks beer and plays cards. According to the narration, Ed is in love with Audrey, his best friend, but does not have the courage to inform her of his true feelings. His grief over the loss of his father makes him lose self-esteem. Unlike Harry in *By the River* whose father proved to be a significant agent of growth, Ed in *The Messenger* must look elsewhere for that agency. As a result of Ed's father's death, he loses his personal dreams and ambitions. However, this occurred after stopping a bank robbery which made him become a hero in his community (Zusak, 2007).

Slowly, Ed's personal growth was evident; he stopped feeling sorry for himself and became a responsible adult. He was willing to help other people despite the risks involved. He uses the cards he receives from a mysterious source as a guideline to help strangers and those close to him. Shortly after Ed becomes a hero in the eyes of the public, he receives Ace of Diamonds from unknown people in his mail. There were three addresses in each ace which represented a sequence of tasks which he had to complete. The tasks seemed urgent since he had to attend to them promptly. He begins his mission to be a force for good in society despite the risks involved. Ed is determined to accomplish each task. "I don't look back because I am determined to walk through the door again later tonight" (Zusak, 2007).



The tasks involved rescuing a woman from her abusive husband, bringing congregation to a parish that had been abandoned by the people, comforting an old lady who was lonely, helping a teenage girl to develop self-confidence, and taking control of her own life (Martin, 2013). Some other tasks involved going to a cinema which had no audience, buying Christmas lights for the poor families in the town, buying ice-cream for a poor woman, talking to an intimate friend who nearly drowned in the middle of a river, making Audrey admit her love for him, and helping Marvin Harris to develop courage to finally meet with his daughter. These series of heroic and charitable acts become the building stones (agents) of his adulthood.

Ed had the power to fulfill his missions because of his courage and love towards the community and those close to him such as Audrey and Marvin. He becomes a messenger who helps the less-fortunate people in society. Ed also had the power to get over his troubles especially the lifelong feeling of unworthiness. After the bank robbery incident, Ed recognized his value to the community and changed his mind concerning the way he viewed himself. His personal growth begins when he abandons his poker friends who were bad influences and becomes a responsible individual (Mueller, 2008). He commits himself to help others and becomes the savior of many people. This dramatic change gives Ed the power to learn about his potential and weaknesses as well as the personal characteristics of other people. He managed to overcome the grief over the death of his father after realizing his potential. He begins thinking of others and looks for ways to help them through the use of hearts, diamonds, spades, and clubs to solve their mystery. The playing cards become an analogy and symbolism of the different types of growth that he undergoes, such as physical, emotional, psychological and spiritual.

Ed had the freedom to drink beer and play cards with his friends, but instead chooses the path of a more meaningful life. This shows the power to control his own destiny. The skill as a driver also shows that Ed had the freedom to choose his career despite the fact that the mother was not pleased with it. He also had the freedom to choose whom to love. For example, he fell in love with his best friend, Audrey, but did not have the courage to tell her (Ventura, 2009). Ed also had the freedom to become a messenger without anyone forcing him. He did it out of goodwill and desire to become worthy in society.



4. Feed

The Feed is a young adult novel written by M.T. Anderson and published in the year 2002 (Blasingames, 2003). It is science fiction novel exploring a society with a worldwide web known as the “feed”, and how it affects society (Bradford, 2006). Through the perspective of a teenager, the author takes the readers into the future where America is ruled by corporations and the economy revolves around advertising.

Anderson depicts how the adolescents are affected by consumerism. Almost three quarters of the American population are connected with “feed” which is implanted in everyone’s brain. This gives the citizens the power to access information they require about other people. Corporations can also obtain information regarding their consumers (Kerr, 2004). This has led to the fall of America as the environment continues to decline and fall apart while the citizens become dumber each day since they rely on the feed. The young people struggle to break free from the omnipresent commercialism and stupidity brought by the feed. While travelling to the moon, Titus, the protagonist in the book meets Violet, a young brainy girl who is against the feed and fights it. After their feeds are hacked, Titus and his friends struggle to comprehend what caused their malfunction.

According to the author, the corporations which owned the feed had immense power to run the school system in the U.S. As a result, this caused the systems to be hacked. The students used the feed in school effectively. They had the power to access technology easily through the use of internet as they searched and obtained information (Bullen, 2008). This left the nation powerless making it vulnerable to the world especially countries contemplating war against it.

Parents had the power to instill ‘feed’ into their children immediately after birth such as in the case of Titus. However, they also had the power to determine when to instill the feed in their children especially in the case of Violet whose parents instilled the feed on her when she was seven years old (Dams, 2004). Titus who had the ‘feed’ since birth her system works like a Robot, unlike Violet where her Feed was incomplete and she died because it does not function very well . Violet was home-schooled so his gave her the power to develop personal confidence



in critical thinking, unlike Titus who depended almost completely on the feed which made him intellectually limited. She fought the feed even though at the end of the novel she becomes weak.

Titus and his friends enjoyed their life in the world in which they lived. For instance, they attended parties, danced, drove cars, listened to music, even drunk beer. However, the author states that their world is extreme with elements such as “electronic drug substitute”, “extreme consumerism”, “disposable tables”, and “standardized lingo” (Anderson, 2008). This shows that the young adults had the freedom to enjoy themselves, and use technology for various reasons. Through the feed, they could obtain immense digital knowledge as databases could communicate with invasive corporations in personal terms (Hepperman, 2004). They could also share their virtual experiences and interact telepathically on multiple channels simultaneously. Everyone had the freedom to access information regarding the other person. However, this means that there was no privacy, and if any, it could be obstructed by corporations easily. Such restrictions show the decrease in personal power due to the absolute control by the corporations. While individuals are given unlimited access to entertainment and information, they become slaves to the system that keeps every detail about their identity and personal agendas.

There was an agency to fight feed because it was ecologically devastating. Trademarked clouds had replaced the natural clouds implying that the atmosphere was polluted by artificial replications. The waters had been toxified and became acidic. Conception became artificial because sexual reproduction was impossible. Additionally, women are in-vitro fertilized while their children are designed in a custom way (Robyn, 2013). Such unnatural way of conception further demonstrates how people have lost the power to live a normal life of natural reproduction, which also shows the loss of religious faith and the continuation of human sinning.

The girls had to make an hourly trip to the washroom to keep with fashion trends and hair style. This is because there was an agency for female identity without which they could not be recognized in society. The consumerist society had dehumanized individuals, and propaganda as well as advertisements directed human character.



5. Conclusion

In this paper three type of novels were discussed “By the River” novel by Steven Herrick, “The Messenger” novel by Markus Zusak, and the “Feed” novel by M.T. Anderson. It is concluded that the depiction of growth in young adult novels of Herrick, Zusak and Anderson indicate that the issues are inevitably represented and linked to what the adolescent has learned concerning the possibilities for freedom, power and agency. Herrick effectively uses the character of Harry to demonstrate how growth and development empowers a young adult to exhibit characteristics of power, freedom and agency. Additionally, Zusak uses the character Ed to demonstrate characteristics of young adults in terms of their ability to show power, agency and freedom. Conversely, Anderson uses various characters to demonstrate how young adults deal with issues of power, agency and freedom.

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