Understanding Young Adult Fiction

I remember meeting with Dean Wilson early in the semester to discuss making my idea of being a Storytelling Major a reality. He was reading *The Sound and the Fury* when I walked in, and before we even started talking about my major, he asked me what I thought of Faulkner. I told him I thought Faulkner was one of the best writers I’d ever read, but his books were among the worst I’d ever read. He then asked what the best book I ever read was. I said *The Golden Compass*. When he asked me why, I told him it was because Pullman’s voice speaks to adults like they’re children, and to children like they’re adults, and to me that was the most magnificent feat in writing I’d ever seen. This was a lie. I say that whenever anyone asks me why young adult fiction is my favorite genre, and it’s true when I say it then. But it’s not why *The Golden Compass* is my favorite book. I didn’t know the answer then, to be honest, but after this semester I’d like him to ask me again.

The young adult genre unites the depth of adult novels with the accessibility of children’s books, which is altogether more difficult than it sounds. Some might mistake the simplicity of the language in this genre as juvenile, yet the ability to make such global and complex themes resonate with young readers requires tremendous talent. As such, there are always two distinct layers to young adult literature, the structure of which is very similar to a dream. There is a more manifest layer, which provides a medium for communication between the author and his audience, and then there is the latent layer hidden beneath it, which contains the actual discourse that takes place between the two parties. Of the two, the manifest layer is what distinguishes young adult fiction from other genres. The themes and subtext are just as complex as those in books written for adults, but they are embedded
deep within the very unique framework of a tale that plays off the imagination of a child. The characters that are found in these tales won’t be found anywhere else, nor will the stories and emotions that define them. As Rachel put it in her response to Ender’s Game, “I am continually astounded by the depth and range Card was able to give to these characters’ emotions. I keep having to remind myself that they are children, younger than even 15 years old, and that it is the genius of the Wiggin children that give them the capacity for such emotions.”

The ultimate success of young adult fiction is its capacity to forge an emotional connection with its audience in such a powerful way. Young adults identify with their genre to an unparalleled degree, and their reactions often contain a surprising amount of empathy, such as in Tessa’s response to Maus. “For the characters, the Holocaust doesn’t just end when they escape or when the war ends – the guilt and the pain follows them every day and everywhere they go. They feel guilt for surviving whereas millions did not, and their children feel a sense of guilt for not being able to empathize or understand, like Art who tries so desperately to record his parent’s story.” It requires a true mastery of language to bring an audience this close to its characters. At some point in the book, they stop being characters to the audience and become actual people. There were a number of times during discussion when the class talked about the characters as if they were their peers, living and breathing alongside them. A poignant example of this is in Jessica’s response to The Amber Spyglass, “My hope for Lyra and Will is that they preserve the memory of each other, that they preserve the memories of their journey, but that they are able to appreciate the value of their intersection, and be able to move on.”

Without doubt, the most astounding quality that defines the young adult genre is this faculty for character building. To empower words with enough personality that they are perceived as people speaks wonders of the writing, or perhaps the audience. The more of this genre I read, the more I suspect that it takes the imagination of a very unique audience to fully realize the magic at work within this manifest layer, to get lost in such a convincing fabrication. And it is for this that I am supremely
envious of my classmates. As the semester progressed and I heard more reactions to the characters and their stories, I began to realize that at some point as a reader I lost touch with my ability to forge similar connections. Instead of identifying with the guilt of the Holocaust as Tessa did, I could only see the parallels Maus makes to the Third Reich’s unconventional views on animal rights. In Ender’s Game, I could only see Card’s commentary on natural selection. And in The Amber Spyglass, I could only read the Freudian precepts behind many of the book’s images. It quickly occurred to me that I could very easily access the latent layer of young adult fiction, though at the cost of experiencing the more unique manifest layer.

This is where my spiritual journey began. I knew long before I took this class that I wasn’t a very emotional person. I can only remember crying four times in my life, most of which were in early childhood, and I’ve always been extremely wary of the effect emotion has on rationality. But somewhere along the line I believe I overcorrected, and lost the capacity to connect to characters, as well as people, in the way my classmates seem able to. The troubling part about this is – I remember there being a time when I did possess this ability, a long time ago. But discussing these books made me realize how out of touch I’ve become, and my early understanding of emotion now seems like a very distant memory. I began to fear that I’d not only lost a certain quality as a reader, but also as a human being.

After unsuccessfully attempting to trace the genesis of this problem, I then studied my classmates’ blogs in an effort to understand the emotional manifest of the readings. I even tried to access my own emotions in the Analytic Paper, though upon completion realized I had failed. The content of the paper seemed more like a philosophical treatise than an emotional appeal, and the criticism I received matched this perception, as detailed by Dorothe, “Love seems to be at the center of your story. The absence of any heads-on exploration leads the reader to feel the presence of it even more strongly. This is good. However, I think it could be even more powerful if you’d find another image.
to add to the idea of Atoms and Dust. There is something that seems to want to express itself but is held back.” I attempted to incorporate this advice into my creative writing project, but met similar results. It seemed at this point that my understanding of emotion had suffered irrevocable damage.

There are merits to the latent layer that I feel I can appreciate. Certainly, the authors themselves are knowledgeable and inject much of their own experience into their writing. Bernard Schlink helped me to learn much about the mindset of the German people following the Second World War just from a single passage, “We should not believe we can comprehend the Incomprehensible, we may not compare the Incomparable, we may not inquire because to inquire is to make the horrors an object of discussion, even if the horrors themselves are not questioned, instead of accepting them as something in the face of which we can only fall silent in revulsion, shame, and guilt.” In one sentence, Schlink not only captures the inner conflict of a single character, but also the conflict of an entire generation, a generation that is real instead of fictional. But there is a difference between knowing this conflict and feeling it, and that difference is the reason why the young adult genre’s rich manifest layer is capable of creating a channel of communication with readers that no other genre can access. I have an eye for the latent layer in books, but only an eye; it seems my heart is missing, and because of this words can be only words for me, and never anything more. Whereas the adult genre might be defined solely by its latent layer, both the manifest and the latent layer work in tandem to create the true meaning behind young adult fiction. Seeing only one side offers an incomplete experience, and for that I cannot fully comprehend the works we’ve discussed in class, despite my best efforts.

As class concludes, I can’t say I’ve come to a sense of closure. I think my spiritual journey has only just begun as I attempt to reclaim my understanding of literature as well as humanity. However, the class has helped me to answer my original question, and perhaps this is also the reason I’m hopeful I’ll find what I’m looking for. When I was young, I read The Golden Compass and was so affected that I remember crying at the end. I remember being on that mountaintop, and feeling the cold of Roger’s
dying body as I held onto him with every word I read, and reading and rereading that one part without letting myself read further, because I didn’t want to let him go. I think this is why The Golden Compass is my favorite book. It reminds me that there’s something very human at my core, even if I can’t always see it. And it reminds me that I’m still capable of catharsis, and that maybe one day, when I’m ready, I’ll be able to experience it.
Quotes:

The role fate plays in this story and the way it affects the characters reminds me of a concept in psychology called the control locus. – Me

It got me thinking about this idea Freud came up with about a life instinct and a death instinct, eros and thanatos respectively – Me

Card seems to approach this dichotomy from an evolutionary perspective; natural selection and the “kill or be killed” mentality are often brought up when examining mankind’s warlike tendencies as well as the source of conflict with the buggers. I think in his eyes, strength outweighs love on the evolutionary scale, - Me

I think by defying this trend and portraying children in such an adult manner, Card is commenting on youth’s true propensity given the lack of societal restraint, or rather, given the right amount of proper facilitation. - Me

What struck me most about this work was the portrayal of human races as animals. I thought this was an interesting stylistic decision, because the Nazis had such strict animal rights laws. It seems ironic that they’d be willing to stoop to such lows with Jews, yet they couldn’t bring themselves to condone basic animal testing. – Me

It’s among man’s innate qualities to fall into a role deemed suitable for him by an authority. It’s why the reformed advisor of Zimbardo’s study was willing to do to the participants what had been done to him in prison, it’s why the pledges become brothers and fill the role of their antagonists, and it’s why the marines become officers and enforce the harsh methods of cultivating obedience within their own ranks. Even if it contradicts our moral standards, we fill these roles because it’s within our nature to obey. I think it’s difficult and unfair to judge people because of our innate, natural function to seek out something greater than us, whether it’s our parents, our bosses, our commanding officers, our politicians, or God. - Me

The second half of The House on Mango Street solidified my opinion that the book was written as a political testament to inner-city latinos. Almost all of the vignettes that compose the second half seem to be directed at the various social functions that are lacking as a result of the inaccessibility of education and welfare opportunities to the urban poor. - Me

I think anything absolute, whether it’s a flawless, epic hero or an evil villain, is uninteresting compared to something that is complex. The villain in this wasn’t complex. He was terrible, but he was one dimensional. I would have liked to see a villain with more depth, and perhaps possessing some traits the audience even likes. - Me

The desire to establish a pattern among particles, or unified meaning to chaos, is shown in both their writings, and perhaps is a common desire among people. – Me
I think Keesha’s House was an artisic examination of the way adversity fosters strength, and reading how each character grew in response to pain reinforced my belief that we are able to not only reach our limits, but expand them when faced with impossible difficulty. – Me

This Isn’t to suggest the plot is cliched; there is a distinct richness to the story, but both the historical narrative and the fantasy exhibit many of the archetypal symbols and devices of their respective genres. – Me

“She is my grandma, because only my grandma could look and smile at me that way. She tells me how happy that would make her, and how excited she is. She reaches for my hand, and I grab it and walk her home. She is still here.” – Rachel

“I am continually astounded by the depth and range Card was able to give to these characters’ emotions. I keep having to remind myself that they are children, younger than even 15 years old, and that it is the genius of the Wiggin children that give them the capacity for such emotions. I wonder, though, if it’s entirely brain function that allows us to feel strong emotion.” – Rachel

“I see myself in God. I see parents and friends in God. And these are people I know how to love. I can’t say this book made me believe in God, but it prompted me to think that there is perhaps a God in all of us. We are all creators; everything we say, think, or feel are our own creations, not to mention the creation of art, music, and sciences. God Is just on a grander scale; otherwise, we are one and the same.” – Catherine

“I am bubbly, opinionated, and unabashedly weird. I love curling up with a thrilling book, dancing on stage, and spending time with the people I care about most. I believe that everything happens for a reason and that laughter is an essential part of every day.” – Nicole

“I left class thinking a lot about silence. I couldn’t decide how I felt about it. In many ways, silence is something that I seem to avoid. These days, I’ve been walking to class listening to music to make sure the void of silence as I walk is filled up. When other people are in the room, I feel a strange compulsion to talk to them. And having been in a long distance relationship, silence from that person only makes me feel estranged. Communication and noise in general seems to have a kind of comforting feeling for me, mainly because it tends to confirm whether what I’m thinking is true or false.” – Nicole

“I found myself being carried away in the children’s stories, in their pain and loneliness.” – August

“My hope for Lyra and Will is that they preserve the memory of each other, that they preserve the memories of their journey, but that they are able to appreciate the value of their intersection, and be able to move on.” – Jess

“While I still have a lot to improve on my side of our friendship, thank you again for teaching me about true friendship. As I continue to progress, I am eager to continue to share this friendship with you. I
would love to continue our weekly lunches. It would be great to have more movie nights and possibly even talk about the movies that we watch in more detail. Finally, I promise to be more conscious of my listening to the exciting events that happen in your life. As we continue along our parallel paths, I hope that we will always brighten each other’s days along our journeys. Love, Margaret”

“This poem, to me, illustrated both how sad it is in Esperanza’s world and how one can find deeper meaning in the overlooked things in life. Esperanza and her friends seem to come across many problems like poverty, gender issues, crime, and violence, but in this poem, I see hopefulness for the characters. In looking up and taking a second look around you, you can find faith, like in God, or simply the beauty of nature.” – Tessa

“For the characters, the Holocaust doesn’t just end when they escape or when the war ends – the guilt and the pain follows them every day and everywhere they go. They feel guilt for surviving whereas millions did not, and their children feel a sense of guilt for not being able to empathize or understand, like Art who tries so desperately to record his parent’s story.” – Tessa

“Siddhartha had one single goal before him...to become empty of desire” – Herman Hesse

“...everything was throbbing with purpose and meaning, but she was cut off from it. And it was impossible to find a connection, because there was no God.” – Philip Pullman

“He was a soldier, and if anyone had asked him what he wanted to be when he grew up, he wouldn’t have known what they meant.” – Orson Scott Card

“...but I’ve got a pretty good idea what children are, and we’re not children. Children lose sometimes, and nobody cares. Children aren’t in armies, they aren’t commanders, they don’t rule over forty other kids, it’s more than anybody can take and not get crazy.” – Orson Scott Card

“We should not believe we can comprehend the incomprehensible, we may not compare the Incomparable, we may not inquire because to inquire is to make the horrors an object of discussion, even if the horrors themselves are not questioned, instead of accepting them as something in the face of which we can only fall silent in revulsion, shame, and guilt.” – Bernard Schlink

“Love seems to be at the center of your story. The absence of any heads-on exploration leads the reader to feel the presence of it even more strongly. This is good. However, I think it could be even more powerful if you’d find another image to add to the idea of Atoms and Dust. There is something that seems to want to express itself but is held back.” – Dorothe

“Shelby pointed out that human ideas such as time aren’t universal, and science is largely dependent on planetary subjectivity. Even the principles we consider “laws” might just be constructs limited by mankind’s paradigms. We as organisms, she claimed, do not have the capacity to understand certain aspects of the universe beyond our earth, and to answer those questions man creates the concepts of god and science. Shelby saw the two words as synonymous, and believed both were flawed in that they attempted to assign order to a universe beyond our ability to fully comprehend.” - Me
“But as I thought more about Shelby’s atoms, I started to see that there could be a connection, because if a part of her grabbed onto me when she died, even if that part was the size of a molecule, even if it was subatomic, it’s still a part of her that’s alive, in a sense.” - Me