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Female Characters as Role Models in Young Adult Literature

Julia Stamper

CHP Senior Thesis

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Introduction

I have been an avid reader for my entire life. As a child, I read constantly, always searching for longer and longer books to keep me entertained. I also had a fairly high reading level for my age, which sparked my early interest in young adult literature. Since books for teens were generally longer and more complex than ones meant for my own age group, I started reaching for young adult literature in elementary school. That early interest never really faded, and I continued reading books for teens all throughout elementary, middle, and then high school. Even as a college student, and well past the age range that these books are geared towards, I remained intrigued by the types of books available for teens and pre-teens.

However, reading these books at my current age is certainly a different experience than reading them when I was younger. It is not as easy to get swept away in the story, stereotypes and clichés are harsher and more glaring, and the social issues and larger questions raised by the novel become just as, or even more important than, the entertainment factor. It was through a class on children's literature as well as my own re-reading of favorite books from my past along with newer young adult literature that I knew this was a topic I wanted to study in more depth.

First, young adult literature must be defined. It can be a confusing term, since it generally does not refer to those in early adulthood, but to teens and even pre-teens. Traditionally defined as novels meant for audiences aged 12 to 18, it has been expanded in recent years to include an even younger audience of 10 and 11 year olds (Value, Cart 1). The term "literature" has also been shifted to include works of nonfiction and poetry, as well as more visual works such as graphic novels (Value, Cart 1). Some have argued for the upper age limit on young adult literature to be radically changed to 30 or even 35 since these books often appeal to people well beyond their teenage years (What is, Cart 734). Though the exact parameters of

young adult literature are constantly in flux, for the remainder of this paper I will use the more traditional definition and limit myself to novels written for people aged 10 to 18.

As a female, I often gravitated toward books specifically geared toward girls when I was a young teen. As a result, when I went back to re-read these books I had enjoyed so many years before, most of them prominently featured female characters. Yet I picked up on something almost immediately that I had not noticed or had not cared about when first reading these books years ago—not all female characters are created equally. In fact, they fell across a whole spectrum, from active, fiercely independent characters, to weak, passive, horribly stereotypical ones. This observation helped me narrow in on the focus of my thesis: the way female characters are portrayed in a variety of different types of young adult literature. I was curious to see whether these issues appeared in only some types of literature or whether they were common across the board. This topic is important to me, because as a great fan of stories and literature, I know just how much of an impact they can have on a person's life. This is not to suggest that teens will learn all their life lessons from books or that they will consciously try to model their life after that of a favorite character, but regardless of the degree, I believe books do have an impact. If they were not important, if they did not change our lives or shape us as people in some way or another, we would have stopped reading and studying them long ago. So I decided to look at the way that these female characters function as role models for their readers, especially the younger ones. With the lower limit on young adult literature dropped to 10 years old, the youngest readers, who are still trying to figure out who they are, can be much more easily influenced by what they read. Whereas an 18 year old reader of young adult literature is probably mature enough to realize when a character is being portrayed in negative or stereotypical light, a younger reader may not be able to process that information as easily. This

makes it even more important to understand the messages that are sent by the way female characters are portrayed and what types of storylines they are featured in.

In this paper I hope to offer a broad overview of the literature that is out there for today's young adult readers. It is not an in-depth analysis, but a comparison of storylines and characters across a range of types of literature, meant to highlight the variety of novels available for readers in this age group. It is also not a warning against or a discrediting of any of the novels mentioned. As a firm believer that any book that makes a person enjoy reading is a valuable book, I would never suggest that any of these books should not be read; merely that some may be stronger than others or may require more adult guidance while reading.

I started by browsing book stores and my own personal collection of books and creating a list of titles that I believed would fall under the heading of young adult literature. I tried to pull a variety of books, and after compiling the list I determined that they could be divided into four general categories: High School Dramas, Supernatural Romances, books with Unisex Appeal, and books that are Not Technically YA, but still appeal to the age group. Of course, there are books that do not fall into any of these categories, but many of today's most popular young adult novels do fit into these groups, and it provides the best framework for studying and comparing the books on the list.

Though many books for young adults are set in high school, High School Dramas particularly focus on the school setting and the ways that it impacts the lives of the characters. Other than that common thread, this category of books can feature a wide range of topics, from light-hearted comedies about everyday life to dealing with more serious issues such as relationships, illness, and death. The structure of these books can take on varying forms as well, with some devoting a different chapter to each character or writing it in the form of a character's

diary. The books I have selected for this category are *The Princess Diaries* series, *Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants*, *Speak*, and the *Confessions of Georgia Nicolson* series.

Paranormal Romance has only recently burst onto the scene as a genre in and of itself, but now most bookstores have an entire shelf set aside for them within the YA section. As the title suggests, these books are focused on relationships and romance, but distinguish themselves from the general high school category with the use of mythical or paranormal creatures such as vampires, werewolves, or ghosts. The books I am using to represent this genre are *Twilight* and the *Mediator* series.

Of course, any novel could appeal equally to both male and female readers, depending on the preference of the reader. However, certain books and series have found a great deal of success across a broad range of readers. Whereas the previous two categories are more likely to feature females as the protagonists, books with Unisex Appeal are just as likely to have a male main character, though no matter which sex is the protagonist, there is generally an important secondary character of the opposite sex. These books are also generally focused on action or some type of adventure, rather than everyday life or romance. For this paper, I will focus on the *Harry Potter* series, *The Hunger Games*, *Peeps*, and the *Uglies* trilogy.

The last category I created for this paper may seem out of place, since I am studying young adult literature and these books don't technically fall into that range. And while literally any book could be appealing to a young adult, I have found a few books that were originally intended for adult audiences that have become very popular amongst younger readers. The three books I have chosen for this category, *The Secret Life of Bees*, *The Help*, and *The Lovely Bones*, have all been made into movies and feature teens or young adults as the main characters, which could increase their appeal to young adults.

Given the wide variety of books available for female young adult readers, it would stand to reason that the way female characters are portrayed is just as diverse, and that all of these portrayals may not be positive. I will look to see if there are any trends, either within the specific categories or across the board, as to how the female characters are presented and whether they can be seen as role models for the young women reading about them.

High School Dramas

Novels about high school are fairly ubiquitous in the young adult genre, since it common experience shared among nearly every teen. Their storylines are often easy for teens to relate to, as they generally deal with issues surrounding school, transitioning to adulthood, and relationships with family, friends, and romantic interests. However, they can range in tone from light and comedic to rather dark and serious, making the present-day high school setting one of the only common threads among all of these types of novels.

A popular sub-genre in the high school drama category is the novel written in the form of a diary. Nearly always featuring a female protagonist, these books are almost always lighter and more casual in tone, often including lots of slang and pop culture references, mimicking the way teenagers actually talk. Two of the books I chose for this category are diary style books: Meg Cabot's *The Princess Diaries* and Louise Rennison's *Confessions of Georgia Nicolson* series. Cabot's series of novels follow the story of Mia, an unpopular teenage girl who learns that her father is the prince of a small European country, and that she, as his only child, is a princess who must take lessons to learn how to rule someday. However, Mia is more concerned with the troubles of high school, such as doing poorly in her classes, being teased by the popular students,

and dealing with friends and crushes. Rennison's series is very similar in style, following the life of Georgia, an average British girl who is embarrassed by her family and would rather spend time with her friends and flirting with boys than focusing on schoolwork.

The other two high school dramas I chose feature heavier storylines. *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* by Ann Brashares follows the lives of four best friends who are spending their first summer apart from each other and decide to share a pair of pants amongst themselves to help them stay connected to each other. Though there are light and funny moments and a high focus on friendship, such as in the diary books, the girls also deal with a number of more difficult issues, such as a father's remarriage, first sexual experiences, and the death of a friend from cancer.

Laurie Halse Anderson's *Speak* is the darkest of the high school dramas I studied. It follows the story of Melinda, who decides to stop speaking her freshman year of high school after being raped at a party and subsequently ostracized by her peers, who do not know the truth about why she called the cops to the party. The discussions about recovery from sexual assault alongside the plotlines about underage drinking and struggles both with friends and family make this book much heavier in tone and more controversial than the others. However, these are issues that teens relate to and sometimes even face, making novels like this just as necessary as the lighthearted stories about everyday life.

The protagonists of the diary style novels are portrayed in a very different light than those in the other two novels in this category. Some of the key traits of the girls in the diary novels are that they highly value their friendships, are obsessed with boys, concerned with their physical appearance, embarrassed by or trying to disassociate from their families, and struggling with school. Both first books in both *The Princess Diaries* and *Confessions of Georgia Nicolson*

series manage to tackle all five points within the first several pages. Mia, in *The Princess Diaries*, immediately sets the tone by complaining that she is already “five foot nine, flat-chested, and... the biggest freak in the entire school” before her mother “has to go out with my Algebra teacher,” a fact that is particularly distressing since she is “flunking Algebra” (Princess, Cabot 1-3). She goes on less than a page later to talk about getting a sample of her crush’s cologne so she “can smell Josh whenever I want to, in the privacy of my own home,” despite her best friend telling her she has an “overactive imagination” when it comes to boys (Princess, Cabot 4). Georgia, in *Confessions*, follows a similar pattern. She begins by complaining about her dad and uncle, saying, “He doesn’t seem to realize that I no longer wear romper suits... I am bursting with womanhood, I wear a bra!” (Rennison 1). A few pages later, she recalls getting ready for a party with her best friend before declaring that, “I can already feel myself getting fed up with boys and I haven’t had anything to do with them yet” (Rennison 9-11).

These are all genuine concerns that most teens readily face and relate to, so by leading with these types of statements, it can create a sense of camaraderie between the protagonist and the reader. Many teen girls could easily see themselves in the same sorts of situations, and therefore may be more likely to feel sympathy for the character and become engaged by their story and their life. However, by starting out immediately with a heavy focus on issues such as appearance and family embarrassment, the novels also run the risk of making their protagonists sound shallow and self-absorbed. So while those tactics may draw some readers in and make them feel a sort of companionship with the narrator, it is not always a guarantee.

The protagonists of the other two high school dramas are definitely presented in a different light, which is unsurprising considering the vastly different subject matter. *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* starts off with a more relaxed, casual tone, similar to the

previous two novels. There is an immediate focus on the connection between friends when one of the four girls states that “this was our first summer apart, and I think it gave us all a strange, shaky feeling” as well as addressing the issue of body image and appearance when the narrator states that her “butt has specific requirements for pants” (Brashares 3-4). However, the other hallmarks found in the diary style books, such as school, romantic interests, and distancing from family, are not present at the beginning, and will not be the focus of the storyline when they appear later on. Instead, the novel opens by telling the story of how the four friends came to be so close, and how determined they are to maintain that emotional closeness even when physically separated. They will eventually deal with family and romantic issues, but the underlying thread through the whole plot is their desire to remain close and be there for each other no matter what happens.

Speak starts with a strong focus on the school aspect, with the protagonist Melinda informing the reader that on her first day of high school she has “seven new notebooks, a skirt I hate, and a stomachache” (Anderson 3). It also jumps right in to the friendship storyline, as the narrator ponders where to sit in class, deciding that “if I sit in the front... it’s the best chance I have to make eye contact with one of my friends, if any of them have decided to talk to me yet” (Anderson 3). Though Melinda seems to have many of the same key traits as her fellow high school drama protagonists, the tone of *Speak* is stark from the very beginning, giving the reader an early clue that it is not meant to be a comedy about everyday life or tale of retaining friendships, but one of overcoming and recovering from an obstacle.

Overall, the characterization of the protagonist of the high school drama novel depends entirely on the plot and circumstances that she finds herself facing. It may be easy to view the diary narrators as simply shallow, but since their stories address day to day life, they are likely to

face the same problems as the average reader, and are therefore generally relatable. It is mostly in looking at those stories in comparison to the more dramatic ones that they seem shallow, but that is simply a matter of circumstance. Of course the character whose greatest decision for the day is which dress to wear will appear less mature than the one who is dealing with the aftermath of rape or who has befriended a girl dying of cancer. Yet both types of stories are important to the overall high school drama category. Teens need to learn about the larger issues in life, especially since most will experience things like the illness or death of a loved one, and reading novels with characters facing those problems is certainly one way to do so, but even the day to day stories are more relatable. Furthermore, those books show girls learning how to deal with their everyday stresses, which the average teen deals with on a daily basis, rather than the larger, dramatic events that only happen on occasion. Both types of high school dramas can be useful, entertaining tools, and even the protagonist that seems shallow at first glance can function as a role model (or as a cautionary tale of what not to do) when handling everyday life.

Paranormal Romances

This category is easily the most controversial of the types of books I am studying. Though other books with similar storylines predate it, the genre was essentially created by the huge success of the *Twilight* series by Stephenie Meyer. Just as a number of books about schools of magic popped up following the publication of *Harry Potter*, there has been an upswing in the number of books featuring paranormal creatures such as vampires and werewolves in recent years as other authors try to capitalize on the craze for all things paranormal that *Twilight* created. The influence of *Twilight* can be seen just by walking into the young adult section of a

bookstore—most now include a whole subsection just for paranormal romance, featuring titles such as *Vampire Diaries*, *Vampire Academy*, *Thirst*, *Sucks to Be Me*, and *House of Night*. Even the cover art seems to have been inspired by Meyer's quartet of novels, using mostly dark colors with one or two brightly colored stand-out images as a focal point.

Twilight, by Stephenie Meyer, tells the story of Bella, a teenager who moves to Washington to live with her father. There she meets and falls in love with a mysterious, seemingly young man named Edward, who she comes to find out is actually a century old vampire. She remains with him anyway as he and his family protect her from the attack of a rival group of vampires. The first novel ends with Bella's request to be transformed into a vampire herself.

The *Mediator* series, by Meg Cabot (the first novel of the series was written under her pen name, Jenny Carroll), follows the life of Suze, a teenaged mediator who helps ghosts move on when they are trapped on earth by some sort of unfinished business. In the first book, she moves across the country so her mother can remarry. When she moves into her new house, she finds her room already inhabited by the ghost of a young man named Jesse who died in the 1800s. Over the course of the series, she falls in love with him, and as a mediator is able to see, touch, and interact with him as though he is a human being, but cannot be with him because he is not alive and can only be perceived by Suze and other mediators.

The main hallmark of a paranormal romance is the romantic storyline between two teenaged characters, one, or sometimes both, of which is some sort of paranormal creature. Drama and tension is ordinarily generated through this human/ non-human divide, often creating a near Romeo and Juliet situation where circumstances beyond the character's control is what keeps them apart. Such is the case in both *Twilight* and the *Mediator* series. In each, a teenage

girl falls in love with a nonhuman boy whose “otherness” threatens to keep them from being together. *Twilight*’s Bella is kept apart from Edward because he is a vampire who thirsts for her blood, whereas *Mediator*’s Suze cannot be with Jesse because he is a ghost. In each case, the girl is one of few who is privy to her love interest’s secret: Bella is the only human who knows Edward is a vampire and Suze is the only one who can see Jesse’s ghost because she is a mediator who has communicated with ghosts her whole life.

Despite the similarities in their romantic storylines, the protagonists of these two series are portrayed in vastly different ways. In her essay about gender and sexuality in the *Twilight* series, Anna Silver repeatedly references the ways in which Bella is completely consumed by her love for Edward and conforms to a number of “outdated and troubling gender norms” (Silver 121). After moving in with her father, she “immediately takes on the domestic chores... volunteering to do all the cooking and laundry” (Silver 122). Beyond her home life, Bella’s relationship with Edward seems based on his control and authority over her, calling her an “insignificant little girl” and telling her what to do in a voice that is described as “low, but full of authority” (Meyer 271, 166). Bella, who is frequently described as clumsy, not only has to be rescued from a number of situations, but ends up depicted as a child at times, such as when she says Edward “reached out with his long arms to pick me up, gripping the tops of my arms like I was a toddler” (Meyer 297). Through these interactions, Bella is robbed of any control over her own life, and is instead rendered passive and helpless. Things happen to and around Bella, but she is rarely an active participant in her own life.

Suze, on the other hand, has a drastically different attitude toward her paranormal paramour. Though, like Bella, she is initially struck by the physical attractiveness of the ghost of Jesse, saying, “it isn’t often I run into a ghost who also happens to be a hottie... I was already

trying to catch a peek at what was going on beneath the white shirt he was wearing very much open at the throat,” she also wastes no time in telling him “you can do all the hanging around you want... but you can’t do it here” upon finding him in her bedroom at her new house (Carroll 35, 37). She even contemplates punching him to get her point across. Both Bella and Suze are in the process of trying to adjust to life in a new city, but Suze’s direct confrontation with the attractive man standing in the way of her goals is a far cry from Bella’s first experiences with Edward, from describing him as “devastatingly, inhumanly beautiful” from across the cafeteria to the first time she interacted with him and she “looked away quickly, shocked, going red again [as she] stumbled over a book” (Meyer 19, 23). Of course, since it is a romance, Suze does come to care for Jesse a great deal by the end of the series. When faced with the prospect of changing the past so he doesn’t die young, therefore preventing her from ever meeting him as a ghost, she says that “It will hurt. Because deep down, I’ll know there was someone... someone I was supposed to have met. Only I’ll never meet him. I’ll go through my whole life waiting for him to come along, only he never will” (Twilight, Cabot 167-8). This certainly sounds like the type of sentence that would be said in *Twilight*, but unlike the vampire novel, this statement is preceded by five books worth of friendship, conversation, and cooperation leading up to the relationship between the two central characters.

So though some may believe that all paranormal romances have passive female protagonists, based on many of the reactions to *Twilight*, it is possible to have a character who both fits into the genre yet is able to hold her own and speak up for what it is that she wants and needs. Suze provides a sharp contrast with Bella as an example of an active and independent character who is not completely reliant on a love interest. The *Mediator* series is also an example of a romantic relationship that forms out of a friendship—Suze does not immediately

fall for Jesse, but befriends him, the romance growing over time as he helps her with other stubborn ghosts while she tries to help him cross over into the next life. None of this is to say that *Twilight* should not be read simply because Bella cannot be classified as a particularly good role model, willing to give up her family, her education, and even her human life for the man she loves, just that there are other books with similar types of stories that may not be quite as problematic. Knowing about those series, such as *Mediator*, can be useful when guiding young readers, especially those who may have been reluctant to read before *Twilight* came along, so that they know there are other books and characters to turn to besides Bella and Edward.

Unisex Appeal

Though any book could of course be labeled as appealing to both young men and women, there have been several series in recent years that have become popular with incredibly diverse audiences, attracting readers regardless of sex, age, or location. Coming of age stories mixed with a healthy dose of adventure and action, such as *Harry Potter*, *Hunger Games*, *Peeps*, and the *Uglies* trilogy seem to speak to teens across the board, inspiring legions of fans and no doubt gaining even greater popularity when the stories are translated to the big screen.

Harry Potter, the J.K. Rowling penned series now known all around the world, follows the story of Harry, a young boy who discovers that he is a wizard who as an infant miraculously survived the dark wizard attack that killed both of his parents. He is sent off to wizarding school where he makes friends and discovers a magical world he never knew existed. Throughout the series he must continually fight against the dark forces that are threatening to return, all while dealing with the normal stresses and pressures of friends, relationships, growing up, and

attending school. Though Harry is the central character, his friend Hermione plays a large role in the events of the novels.

The Hunter Games, by Suzanne Collins, takes place in a dystopian future North America, where teenager Katniss takes her younger sister's place in a televised gladiator style fight to the death. She must survive by killing the other opponents, including a boy from her own district, Peeta.

Scott Westerfeld's *Uglies* also features a dystopian future. In this society, teenagers of a certain age are required to undergo plastic surgery to become perfect-looking. Tally looks forward to the day she can have surgery and become one of the "pretties" until she discovers that the surgery may also affect her brain and her free will, so she runs away.

Also by Westerfeld, *Peeps* follows the life of Cal, a young man infected with a sexually transmitted parasite that causes vampirism. He is only a carrier, and therefore immune to the negative effects, but he uses his heightened senses to track down other vampires, starting with those he inadvertently created before realizing he was a carrier. He is joined along the way by Lace, a curious journalism student, who demands to know the truth about what he does and refuses to take no for an answer.

Unlike the previous two categories, these books are just as likely to feature male protagonists as they are female. Of the books I studied for this section, *Harry Potter* and *Peeps* have main characters who are male (Harry and Cal), while *Hunger Games* and *Uglies* feature females (Katniss and Tally). However, in each novel or series, there is an important secondary character or side kick that is the opposite sex of the main character—Hermione and Lace are the female counterparts to Harry and Cal, and Peeta and David the male friends of Katniss and Tally.

Another significant difference is that though these books may include a romance storyline, it is generally not the primary or even secondary plotline. Instead, the story focuses on a specific task or challenge that must be completed, generally with very high, often life or death, stakes. In *Harry Potter*, Harry and his friends must try to stop a dark wizard from coming back to power, in *The Hunger Games*, Katniss must learn to survive in a gladiator-style fight to the death, in *Uglies*, Tally runs away from a society that forces people to have plastic surgery to make them look perfect, but that also restricts their free will, and in *Peeps*, Cal must stop a vampire epidemic. Each of these stories eventually adds in a romantic element to the plot, but it is never the main focus. The romance is one way of helping to further develop the characters, but it could be omitted from the story without any serious detriment to either the plot or overall characterization.

Though this category features females as both protagonists and highly important sidekick characters, they all share many of the same characteristics, regardless of whether or not they are the central focus of the story. Katniss, Tally, Hermione, and Lace are all presented as clever, headstrong women who are more than capable of keeping up with (or even outshining) the men in their stories and who sometimes have to bend a few rules to get what they need.

Katniss and Tally, heroines of *The Hunger Games* and *Uglies*, live in an oppressive, dystopian society, yet are not afraid to fight back when necessary. Katniss hunts illegally, even though it is a crime that “carries the severest of penalties,” in order to provide her family with food and income from trading (Collins 5). At the end of the games, when it looks as though she will be forced to kill her friend and ally Peeta in order to survive and go back home, she devises a plan to fake a double suicide, forcing the government to let them both win with the knowledge that “they have to have a victor” because “without a victor, the whole thing would blow up in the

Gamemakers' faces" (Collins 344). Though it is Peeta's words from earlier in the novel that inspire her plan, it is Katniss who puts it into action and must quickly convince Peeta to go along with her idea. Tally, on the other hand, grows up trusting and believing in the society around her and looks forward to the day when she gets to become one of the "pretties." She acquiesces when the government forces her to go find her friend who ran away before undergoing her surgery, but when Tally learns about the negative effects of becoming pretty, she decides to stay with the rest of the runaways. Instead of activating a special tracking necklace that will let the government find out where the runaway camp is located, she, "focused all her doubts on it, all her fear of discover, her terror... [then] opened her hand and threw the necklace into the center of the fire," showing her commitment to the new group and to remaining an "ugly" forever (Westerfeld, *Uglies* 281).

Even as sidekicks to the male protagonists, Hermione and Lace of *Harry Potter* and *Peeps* prove themselves to be just as clever and resourceful as their leading men. In *Peeps*, when Cal asks Lace to stop researching the disease, she defiantly responds with "Stop what? Acting like I have a brain?" (Westerfeld *Peeps*, 196). Her research leads her to the truth about Cal being a carrier for the parasite, and she berates him for not telling her earlier, saying they "Had a deal... you weren't supposed to lie to me" (Westerfeld *Peeps*, 207). Like Hermione, she finds power in her knowledge and is relentless in her determination to know as much about what is going on around her as she can, refusing Cal's attempts to demand her to stay behind whenever he has to do something dangerous.

From her introduction, Hermione is revealed as the intelligent one. She is described as having a "bossy sort of voice" and is quick to point out her superior magical abilities to Ron, telling him she has "tried a few simple spells for practice and it has all worked" and that she's

“learned all our course books by heart, of course” (Rowling 105). Her strong attitude clearly annoys the boys at first as they declare their desire to not be in the same house as her, but by the end of the novel they have become friends, and it is Hermione who plays a key role in defeating the obstacles that lead to the villain who is attempting to steal the Sorcerer’s Stone. Though women are often stereotyped as emotional and irrational, Hermione’s skill in the final chapters of the book lies in her clear thinking as she realizes that their task “isn’t magic—it’s logic—a puzzle” (Rowling 285). She solves it quickly and correctly, further cementing her position as a strong female among the two, often bumbling boys. Hermione is not alone in her position of power within the novels, as Rivka Kellner notes that Rowling has created a world where “two of the founders of Hogwarts were witches, not wizards...the sports coach is a woman, not a man... [and where] Hermione Granger may be book smart, but she is also a member of Gryffindor House, the house of the brave” (Kellner 367). However, she also points out that despite the many equalities that the women of this world are afforded, “the nuclear family structure is intensely traditional and patriarchal, and the books, of course, focus on a hero not a heroine,” (Kellner 367). This raises a valid point, and while of course the main character of the series cannot change halfway through, other, newer novels that do feature a female lead character, such as *Uglies* and *The Hunger Game*, are helping to diminish this problem in general.

One thing that particularly stood out and interested me as I compiled and started researching the list of books for this paper is the number of parallels between Westerfeld’s *Peeps* and Meyer’s *Twilight*. Both published in 2005, each novel puts an original spin on the typical vampire tale. Though they tell very different stories, each one takes traditional vampire lore, such as sleeping during the day, avoiding sunlight, fear of crucifixes and mirrors, and the

connection between vampirism and sexuality, and twists it around, providing a new explanation for the same characteristics.

Whereas many stories describe vampires as sleeping in coffins during the day because they are burned by sunlight, the vampires of *Twilight* do not sleep in coffins during the day—in fact, they do not sleep at all. They avoid sunlight because it makes their skin sparkle, revealing them to be supernatural and not human. *Peeps* also takes a different track, describing vampires as being hurt but not destroyed by sunlight. The novel further explains this, as well as traditions like vampires avoiding mirrors and being frightened by crucifixes, by saying that when people become vampires they are repulsed by the things they once loved, such as their appearance, the daylight, and for many people, their religious symbols and beliefs. However, Meyer forgoes the inclusion of traditions surrounding these objects, instead having the vampire characters themselves dismissing them as superstitions. Vampires have long been connected with ideas about sexuality and sexual transgressions, and both *Twilight* and *Peeps* address this, though in very different ways. In *Twilight*, people become extraordinarily beautiful upon turning into vampires as a way of enticing victims. Everything from their physical appearance to their smell draws humans to them, making them the ultimate sexual predators, as the purpose of enticing the humans in the first place is to feed on them. *Peeps* takes a scientific approach to the creation of vampires. The premise of the novel is that vampirism is a parasite that can be sexually transmitted from person to person. A person who has become a vampire is not a supernatural being, merely one who has come into contact with a dangerous parasite that takes over their mind. Yet even with the pseudoscientific look at folklore, the novel still inextricably links sexual behavior with the act of vampirism.

However, despite the common concept that these books share, *Twilight* has gone on to become one of the most popular books of the past decade, leading to three other books in the series as well as a multi-million dollar movie deal, whereas *Peeps* remains decidedly less well-known. Which leads to the question: why one is so much more popular than the other? Objectively, they seem to fill the same literary niche of old folk and fairy tales that have been modified and updated as a new way for today's audiences to experience familiar stories. Since, despite their similarities, I have placed them in different categories for the purposes of this paper, I believe it is the stronger romance storyline of *Twilight* that plays a key role, drawing young girls not only to the adventure and mythical side of the story, but that it is the story of Bella and Edward's relationship that has captivated so many.

Not Technically YA

The books I have chosen for this section, while written for a general adult audience and not shelved with the young adult books in most stores, seem to hold a great deal of intrigue with young audiences. *The Lovely Bones* by Alice Sebold and *The Secret Life of Bees* by Sue Monk Kidd both feature teenage protagonists who deal with the many of the same issues that characters in young adult literature face. The central character of *The Help* by Kathryn Stockett is older than the others, a college graduate in her early twenties, but is still easily relatable to teens as she is in a transitional period of her life and living at home with her parents.

These books all deal with fairly heavy issues, such as murder, rape, and racism, but that alone is not enough to distinguish them from young adult novels, which also address a variety of sensitive subjects. With character ages and storylines similar to those found in young adult

novels, the biggest differences between these books and actual YA books are the author's intended audience and, in some ways, the quality of writing. Since they were written about but not specifically for teens, they are more likely to contain higher level vocabulary as well as a more in-depth discussion of the issues that are raised within the text. These also contain less slang and have their young characters speak with greater eloquence (though less realism) than specifically YA novels.

Yet these differences are small enough that the novels have gained great popularity among younger audiences, with teens reaching for them in droves. Though the novels may have originally been aimed at audiences closer to the age of a teenager's parents, they have worked their way down into younger hands, possibly because of their proximity to young adult novels, their use as required reading in some schools, or most likely of all, the fact that all three novels were made into Hollywood films, each starring big name actors.

Sebold's *The Lovely Bones* tells the story of a young teenager in the 1970s who is raped and murdered, then watches from heaven how the aftermath of her disappearance affected her family. Though the protagonist, Susie, is dead, she still matures throughout the novel, continuing to grow in her experiences and curiosities and facing many of the same issues that teenagers deal with, such as sexual desires and her relationship with her family. Aside from the disturbing subject matter, one element that could keep this novel from being classified as young adult is that it deals heavily with the experiences of the adult characters, Susie's parents and grandmother. Whereas most young adult novels only feature adults as background characters, a great deal of time is spent showing how Susie's death affected her parents and how they dealt with her loss for years to come.

Kidd's *The Secret Life of Bees* is the story of a teenaged girl named Lily who lives in South Carolina in the 1960s. She escapes from her abusive father along with her African-American nanny Rosaleen. They travel to the town where Lily's deceased mother used to live and find a trio of outspoken, independent African-American women who take them in. Just as in *The Lovely Bones*, this novel features a teenaged protagonist, but spends just as much time developing the adult characters. Yet even though Lily is one of the few younger characters, it is still her story. The reader perceives the events through her eyes, and along with dealing with issues such as racism and the loss of family members, it is a coming of age story as Lily matures and learns more about her mother's past.

Stockett's *The Help* is probably the least YA of these three novels, since it features no teenaged characters and only one third of the story is told from the point of view of the youngest character, who is in her early twenties. However, it contains many of the same coming of age themes as young adult novels as the story follows Skeeter, a recent college graduate in 1960s Mississippi who has moved back home and is being pressured by her parents to marry. Instead, she takes a job working for the newspaper, where she gets the idea to write a book about the lives of the African-American maids who work for many of the families in town. The other two thirds of the story are told from the point of view of two of the maids that Skeeter interviews, Aibileen and Minny, and deal heavily with the extreme racism and violence that their families and community face.

The protagonists of these three novels are all curious, independent, and determined young women, eager to learn as much as they can about the situations around them. In *The Help*, Skeeter is more concerned with finding a job where she can put her college degree to use than she is with finding a man, much to her mother's disappointment when she complains about "four

years my daughter goes off to college and what does she come home with? A diploma” (Stockett 64). Rather than getting married and having children, as most of her friends are doing, Skeeter sets her sights on writing a book about a topic that truly interests her, hoping it will improve her chances of landing a job at a New York publishing company.

Susie, from *The Lovely Bones*, is faced with a very different situation. She suddenly finds herself in heaven, alone, and able to look down on her family as their life continues without her. She comes to learn that her version of heaven can be anything she wants it to be, though at first, “we had been given, in our heavens, our simplest dreams” (Sebold 18). The more time she spends there, she realizes that although she can no longer grow up, she can “at least watch the living” that other people do and learn from them (Sebold 19). By the end, Susie has learned that heaven is about more than just the small, simple desires and the ability to watch over her family, but a “wide wide Heaven [that] includes all my simplest desires but al so the most humble and grand” (Sebold 325). Though she cannot actually age and grow and mature, Susie is at last finally able to find the peace and control in her afterlife that she was not afforded on earth.

In *The Secret Life of Bees*, fourteen year old Lily stands up to her abusive father, yelling, “You don’t scare me” before leaving a note that says “don’t bother looking for me” and leaving town with her long-time nanny Rosaleen (Kid 38, 42). When she meets up with three sisters who knew her mother, she starts to learn more about her mother’s past and her mysterious death, though she also admits that “fear stopped me. I wanted to know, and I didn’t want to know. I was all hung up in limbo” (Kidd 176). She matures greatly during the time she and Rosaleen live with the sisters, after seeing how racism affects their business as bee-keepers and realizing that everyone has secrets that shape who they are. In the end she has gained enough courage to confront her father and ask him about her mother’s death, and is able to forgive herself when her

father tells her, “It was you who did it, Lily. You didn’t mean it, but it was you” (Kidd 299). She is able to realize that she has “All these women, all this love” in her life after years of neglect (Kidd 299).

Though the young women in these novels face vastly different circumstances, they are all shown as having grown and changed. They do not let the people around them hold them back from new experiences or from achieving their goals. All of them actively seek out the information that they need and do not sit idly by, letting others take charge of their lives. Although they all face rather tough issues that may not be directly relatable to teens today (since all three stories take place in the past), they still portray young women as being strong and actively involved in shaping their futures.

Conclusion

Overall, the category that a young adult novel fits into does seem to have some effect on how the female characters are portrayed, but there are always exceptions to the rule and other factors to take into account. While Paranormal Romances may get a bad reputation for having passive, heavily stereotyped protagonists, it is not always the case, with some even featuring rather strong female characters. At first glance, the girls in some High School Dramas can be viewed as shallow, and therefore not the best role models, but the overall subject matter of the book also plays a large role in determining whether or not a character actually needs to be deep, depending on if the issues the novel is featuring are everyday stresses or larger, more life-changing events. In general, the novels that have a great amount of Unisex Appeal have some of the strongest, most role-model worthy characters. It may be impossible to tell whether the

characters were created specifically to appeal to a wide audience or whether those characteristics are what made the books so popular in the first place, but it does beg the questions: why do the books marketed to both boys and girls have good female role models, but the ones targeted specifically at girls tend to have characters less worthy of that title? Why are the young male readers treated to girl power in their novels, while the girls who have just as much, if not more, to gain from reading about characters like that left by the wayside? Of course, it is also important for young men to see examples of strong, active, female characters, but why limit it when the girls could clearly benefit as well? And last of all, the novels that are Not Technically YA also tend to have curious, independent young women at their forefront. These more sophisticated and complex characters, sometimes facing slightly weightier issues than those found in young adult fiction, provide a clearer and more accurate representation of the human experience. They are flawed, but ultimately find their way, showing teen readers that mistakes are normal and happen to everyone, but that they can be overcome.

Young adult literature may not always be seen as the most high-quality, especially when there often seems to be multiple series based around the same basic ideas (such as vampires or snobby mean girls), but there are some truly well-written and captivating novels to be found if one is willing to search for them. I am constantly fascinated by the variety (or lack thereof) of novels that are available for teens, and I honestly hope that the field can keep expanding, drawing in even more talented writers and young enthusiastic readers, looking for the next story that will both steal their hearts and capture their imaginations.

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