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English 112B

6 November 2018

Rationale: The Catharsis of Fictional Peer Relationships

A characteristic that is often overlooked in young adult literature is the timeless introduction of peer relationships. Whether these relationships exist in a modern or fantastical world, the elements remain the same, and furthermore are relatable to readers. These components can range from the main character enduring confusion, angst, joy, or self-fulfillment through a peer relationship. In an *Atlantic* article, Zimmerman states, “The YA books that have been popular with adults are dark and serious and hard. People might go to YA literature to sink into a reality different than their own, but I think they sink into that reality to encounter feelings, challenges, and relationships they recognize from their lives” (Zimmerman, 2017). As Zimmerman points out, young adult literature echoes aspects of relatability that feel real and valuable to readers who tend to search for themselves and their own experiences in books. Readers who find themselves within stories feel reassured and understood in times of despair or loneliness, and this connection allows readers to put themselves in the character’s place to enter a parallel universe. As mentioned, whether this universe is realistic or fantasy-based, fictional peer relationships also permit readers to connect their own relationship strains in real life and compare them to the fictional world. If enough parallels are drawn, readers can find solstice and solutions within a text that can be applied to real-life relationships.

Dessen, Sarah. *The Truth about Forever*. Speak, an Imprint of Penguin Group, 2012.

The centerpiece of this project is *The Truth About Forever* by Sarah Dessen, a novel that follows the story of Macy, a high school teenager struggling to find herself due to her lack of friendships with peers. Since her father's death, Macy has done everything in her power to numb the pain by following the orders of her mother and molding herself to her boyfriend's lifestyle, rather than her own. However, despite living a life of conformity, Macy cannot deny her desire to find her true self by living differently, rather than remaining stagnant. She finds comfort and friendship within the Wish catering business, where she meets Wes and his family. Through playing the game of Truth whenever the two are together, Macy is finally able to acknowledge her grief and allow herself to mourn, all while learning to stick up for herself and her true passions. Dessen presents the fragility and vulnerability of peer relationships, and how both of these aspects are completely normal in relationships. These fictional components ring true in reality, as we are often faced with having to establish and maintain peer relationships.

This centerpiece text proves how peer relationships are vital to releasing suppressed emotions. The peer relationships shown in the following texts also highlight the power of friendship and how having relationships with peers, whether platonic or romantic, can strengthen one's core and soothe fears or insecurities. People rely on others for support and, most importantly, acceptance. Young adult fiction encaptures the impact having a community of peers, big or small, can help one explore and discover their identity.

Young Adult Literature Selections

The following sources have all been personally read by me:

Asher, Jay. *Thirteen Reasons Why*. Random House, 2012.

Summary: When Clay receives thirteen cassette tapes that Hannah Baker has left behind after her suicide, he is alarmed by the story that unravels on each side of the tape. Clay must piece together the stories of each person that Hannah describes, and how all of them-- including him-- caused her to kill herself. He must also deal with both the grief and guilt burdening his shoulders since her scandalous suicide. The novel highlights not only the importance of friendship but how being someone's friend can help improve or even save a life.

Commentary: This novel is perfect for readers dealing with bullying of any shape or form, as Hannah Baker dealt first hand with bullying at school and out of school. The story also emphasizes the impact peer relationships can have on young adults, and how vital it is to be careful with our words and our actions. Because the novel deals with heavier issues such as sexual assault and severe bullying, Exeter Quality 6 best encompasses the plot and the struggles of each character, particularly Hannah and Clay. Through discussing both the platonic and romantic elements of their relationship, readers can learn the do's and don'ts of being someone's friend or romantic partner.

Green, John. *The Fault in Our Stars*. Dutton Books, 2012.

Summary: Hazel has been diagnosed with cancer for several years now, and practices her fearless and nonchalant attitude towards death by re-reading her favorite book, *An Imperial*

Affliction. Her desensitized outlook on life changes when she meets Augustus Waters, a boy who begins attending her cancer group meetings. The two quickly bond over books and several other aspects and eventually fall in love. Their relationship allows Hazel to realize that her life story extends beyond simply having cancer; she is a multi-dimensional human being with a purpose, too.

Commentary: Hazel is a character whose defiance against becoming attached to others as a way to protect them from her illness can be deemed as both admirable yet harmful. This self-inflicting tactic may lessen emotional harm, however, it does not allow one to thrive socially and emotionally. This proves to be one of the most powerful lessons throughout the entire novel: that Hazel only realizes her true purpose in life after Augustus' death. The story encompasses Exeter Quality 4, due to Hazel's atypical background story dealing with cancer and hospital life, as well as Exeter Quality 5, due to Augustus' highly intellectual and whimsical way of speech: "I'm in love with you, and I know that love is just a shout into the void, and that oblivion is inevitable, and that we're all doomed and that there will be a day when all our labor has been returned to dust, and I know the sun will swallow the only earth we'll ever have, and I am in love with you" (108).

Han, Jenny. *To All the Boys I've Loved Before*. Simon & Schuster, 2014.

Summary: Lara Jean would rather pour her love for all the boys she has fallen for into a series of letters rather than tell them to their face. When her letters mysteriously get sent out one day, Lara Jean has no choice but to reveal the reasoning behind her letters to the recipients who inquire about them. In the midst of all the chaos, Lara Jean not only grows close to one of the letter's recipients but also learns to exit the shell she timidly stays inside in order to expand her

horizons socially and emotionally. The story highlights the positive impact peer relationships can have not only on one's social life but also on one's internal happiness and sense of life fulfillment.

Commentary: *To All the Boys I've Loved Before* is a helpful book for readers who tend to fear the outcomes of diverting away from introversion. Though introversion is not necessarily labelled negatively within the novel, stepping out of her comfort zone (though unexpectedly) allows Lara Jean to explore the sides of herself that she is afraid to inspect, such as being more honest and open with those she feels intimidated by-- *especially* with the boys whom she has written letters to. The novel also highlights diversity, as Lara Jean is Korean American, and the importance of family, as she is extremely close with her two sisters, Margot and Kitty. Exeter Quality 2 is principally emphasized due to the secrecy of Lara Jean's letters and emotions, along with each surprising reveal as to what revelations will cause Lara Jean to open up another part of herself to the boys she has loved.

Matson, Morgan. *Since You've Been Gone*. Simon & Schuster, 2014.

Summary: Emily and Sloane have been best friends for years. Unfortunately, Sloane mysteriously leaves Emily behind one summer, and Emily is only left with a bucket list of thirteen dares that Emily would otherwise never be caught committing-- until now. Though Sloane's presence throughout the novel is bare until the very end, the power of their friendship, and Emily's intertwinement with other characters during her bucket list adventure, is greatly emphasized. Through each challenge checked off, Emily begins to grow more confident and assertive.

Commentary: This novel is ideal for readers who, again, often feel overshadowed by their peers, yet feel hesitant to create their own spotlight. Emily may follow the list because it is similar to spending a fun, wild summer with Sloane, however by the end of the novel she has grown exponentially by becoming more courageous and more self-assured of her own desires and passions. Exeter Quality 2 best fits with the novel because Emily does not know what to expect each time she faces a new task on Sloane's list. The story is filled with a series of surprises and revelations that bring into question what it means to be a true friend, and whether or not Sloane has been a true friend to Emily. This can allow readers to evaluate their own friendships, and how they treat their friends in times of need.

Oliver, Lauren. *Before I Fall*. Hodder & Stoughton, 2010.

Summary: Sam seemingly has everything she needs: an exclusive group of friends, a popular and rapid social life, and most importantly, confidence. However, her image is shattered one day when she dies in a car accident, only to wake up the very next morning and relive the same day. Sam must repeat the motions of this day seven times, and through this repetition, she slowly begins to realize her shortcomings, as well as how toxic her friendships are and what a negative toll this has taken on her overall personality and wellbeing.

Commentary: This novel explores dark issues, from death to bullying to suicide. Sam is forced to explore her identity and the impact of her actions, and in the end, it is this realization that causes her to sacrifice herself in order to save a girl who should not have died and did not deserve to die from the very beginning. Sam learns that her actions have consequences, and it is only fair that these consequences are paid forward, despite this meaning costing her own life.

Exeter Quality 1 entirely captures the novel, as there are constant time shifts of Sam's day being repeated a total of seven times. Exeter Quality 7 also encompasses Sam's story, as readers can grow to learn why Sam acted so selfishly and how she begins to become a much better person after acknowledging the weight of her actions upon others.

Perkins, Stephanie. *Anna and the French Kiss*. Usborne, 2010.

Summary: Anna is anything but ecstatic when her father decides to ship her away from her home in Atlanta to Paris, where she is to spend her senior year of high school. Having to depart from her best friend and longtime crush is not an easy feat, and Anna experiences severe homesickness. Luckily, the peers she meets at school ease her loneliness, particularly a boy named Etienne St. Clair, and Anna learns to appreciate the beauty of Paris and the wonders of immersing herself into her passion for film.

Commentary: This novel is ideal for readers who appreciate a storyline placed into a foreign setting, which is precisely what *Anna and the French Kiss* deals with: Parisian culture and Anna's Parisian peers. Furthermore, Anna's blooming, forbidden romance with St. Clair and her newfound friendship with Rashmi proves how, despite being in foreign territory, Anna inevitably makes new friends in order to deal with the stress of completing her senior year, as well as finding acceptance amongst an otherwise sea of strangers. Exeter Quality 3 is shown throughout the novel, as Anna experiences what most seniors in high school feel: anxiety towards the unknown future and continuing trying to fit in with other peers at school. Through her new friendships, Anna is able to hone in on her craft of reviewing films, as well as come to terms with who her true friends are.

Rowell, Rainbow. *Eleanor & Park*. Thorndike Press, 2012.

Summary: This novel centers around the lives of high school teens Eleanor and Park, whose social status as outcasts unites them into becoming good friends. This friendship blossoms into a beautiful romance, and the two discover the importance of their differences and how it is better to embrace their authenticity rather than deny or reject it. Eleanor and Park's relationship help them to make peace with their insecurities. Park is a Korean American minority, and is therefore often stereotyped by his classmates. Along with Eleanor's insecurities about her red hair and her thick body shape, she also is withdrawn from others due to her family's low-class status in town.

Commentary: This book is ideal for readers who often feel ostracized and wish to find hope within a peer relationship, whether platonic *or* romantic. This is also perfect for readers who appreciate diversity in literature, as Park is Korean American. Furthermore, the text wisely acknowledges serious topics such as domestic abuse and struggling with cultural identity, thus exceeding the stereotypical expectancies of a young adult novel that is solely romance filled. The novel fulfills Exeter Qualities 1 and 7, as the story alternates between Eleanor and Park's perspectives. The crisis of social identities allows the reader to gain emotional and intellectual growth.

Sachar, Louis. *Holes*. Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1998.

Summary: Stanley Yelnats is sent to a boy's correctional facility, Camp Green Lake, for a crime he did not commit. The story centers around Stanley's family's "curse" of bad luck-- a

curse that has yet to be broken. During his stay at Camp Green Lake, Stanley not only makes friends with several of the other campers, particularly Zero, but uncovers a secret treasure of the land that has been searched for years by historical figures from the past. Stanley's present ironically intertwines with the past of the land, and through this discovery, he learns about his family's history, as well as his very own identity.

Commentary: This novel is best suited for readers who enjoy friendships filled with mystery and adventure. Stanley's journey at Camp Green Lake is an adventure all on its own, however, his true expedition begins when he goes out to search for Zero, after Zero decidedly runs away. The book highlights important topics such as the significance of peer relationships and how the actions of others will always affect related parties in the present day, along with other issues such as illiteracy, poverty, and diversity. Exeter Quality 6 defines the novel because readers can gain insight towards how adolescents are treated for crimes, the importance of literature and being able to read, along with the self-positivity and self-assurance peer relationships can have on an individual who otherwise feels hopeless and belittled.

Shakespeare, William. *Romeo and Juliet*. Cambridge University Press, 1999.

Summary: Known as the most timeless and tragic love story, Romeo Montague and Juliet Capulet are adolescents who fall in love at first sight. However, the two cannot be together due to their families' persistent feud. Despite this unspoken prohibition, Romeo and Juliet still decide to marry one another against their families' wishes. This attempted matrimony unfortunately only results into the death of both teens.

Commentary: *Romeo and Juliet* is perennial due to the well known, whirlwind relationship of the two star-crossed lovers. Readers to this very day find something both admirable and frightening about a love so indestructible that it becomes a destruction within itself. This play highlights the impact peer relationships can have not only on peers themselves, but also on the families of those peers. Exeter Quality 2 is captivated throughout several scenes in the play, particularly scenes in which Romeo and Juliet find out that the other belongs to their family's rival. Exeter Quality 8 also encaptures the play, as the classic tale sets readers up to find similar patterns or motifs in contemporary novels they may read in the future.

West, Kasie. *Listen to Your Heart*. Point, 2018.

Summary: Kate would rather go boat riding on her family's lake than have an actual social life. However, her family's constant pestering for her to try other hobbies causes her to accept a school podcast job offered by her best friend, Alana. Kate finds herself giving advice to those who need it on air, and she slowly begins to realize that perhaps exploring other ways to spend her leisure time is not such a terrible idea.

Commentary: Readers who feel uncertain about dabbling in other pastimes aside from their favorite hobbies will find this book enjoyable. Not only does expanding one's horizons in hobbies allow one to discover different talents about themselves but it also opens up one's social circle. Because Kate agrees to be a podcast host, she meets other podcast peers, as well as connects with Diego, a frequent podcast caller, and her eventual love interest. Peer relationships are established through joining a new club/association, and this is an important tactic that readers can carry with them in their personal lives. Exeter Quality 3 is highlighted throughout the novel,

especially through Kate's overall character, who is initially stubborn and withdrawn until her voice becomes a public platform.

Works Cited

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