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Young Adult Literature

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The Self: Struggles of identity

Identifying oneself is a commonality that all young adults go through. In this day in age, women are bombarded with constant messages of losing weight, letting men dominate, and having children; not to mention the degradation through hip-hop culture and the stereotypical portrayals of the damsel in distress in films. In addition, men are expected to hide all emotions, make a lot of money, hide their sexuality, and get married. Both men and women are being setup to being predisposed to maltreatment, emotional and mental suffering, and at a loss to finding their “self.” The novel, *The Girl On the Train,* written by Paula Hawkins, tells of a story that revolves around three women, all of whom are interconnected by a single man, that endure abuse, and betrayal; use sex as a means of control; and drive a wedge between a marriage in order to satisfy their own desires of having a family. This annotated bibliography is designed in a way to prepare teachers, as well as students, to better understand the issues of identity through *The Girl On the* Train and several other sources.

Rachel, our protagonist, is forced to endure multiple life altering obstacles. She has a good career and a seemingly perfect husband. However, when the two attempt to conceive, she’s unable to get pregnant and turns to alcohol abuse. Her husband cheats on her with his secretary and, eventually, this causes her marriage to dissolve. Rachel is the antithesis of the stereotypical gratifications of a husband, baby, and a life behind the white picket fence: she has tossed away her husband and lovely home due to her failed fertility treatments and debilitating issues with alcohol and, now, she is forced to live with her friend, Cathy, who she can’t tell that she’s been fired from her job in London and, is in fact, taking the morning trains to nowhere. The railway she takes to “nowhere” runs by the perfect home she left behind, she spends the train ride peering at her house, now occupied by her husband’s mistress and their new child. Rachel becomes lost with who she is and where she belongs in the world. “I’m not beautiful, and I can’t have kids, so what does that make me? Worthless” (7). Her self-esteem is at an all-time low, so she’s no longer just “the girl on the train,” but, rather, she’s an unemployed drunkard. Since the novel is told from three different viewpoints, if you were to ask the other two viewpoints of Megan and Anna, they would describe Rachel as a creepy, desperate, weirdo, stalker on the train. Rachel’s debilitating struggle with alcohol has caused her to grapple with her own identity: sober Rachel and drunk Rachel. Drunk Rachel is very violent, destructive, and vengeful—prone to blacking out to the point that she doesn’t even remember what she’s done. Sober Rachel is overshadowed by the subjugation of drunk Rachel, however, when sober, she’s determined, analytical, and highly intelligent. Rachel’s journey in the novel is about finding herself—finding herself through the struggle of addiction and betrayal. When Rachel makes progress, drunk Rachel causes the progressed to be erased while creating new problems. Sober Rachel wants to be helpful and solve the problems that lie ahead but drunk Rachel wants to get revenge and is seemingly self-destructive. Rachel’s struggle with identity is a major theme in the novel. It is important that identity is discovered from within and not affirmed by others in one’s life.

Feminism plays a key role in The Girl on the Train. Hawkins avoids writing about characters that are ambivalent about marriage and children—avoiding writing as if a man and a baby are enough to make a woman happy, and pinning all hopes and dreams on a relationship. The novel depicts its female cast at their worst, Rachel: with her drunken instability; Anna: her promiscuity with a married man, all to satisfy her hopes of having a family; and Megan: with her stereotypical emotional issues. “Being the other woman is a huge turn-on” (26), Anna says. She enjoys being the other woman: being a home wrecker and destroying marriages. Anna is depicted as being selfish and controlling because she outright ignores Rachel’s pain and, instead, focuses on her own “how lucky I am, how I got everything I wanted. A husband and a family” (10). When Rachel sees Megan Hipwell from the train, she assumes that Megan is a model wife, and lives a glamorous life with her husband. However, this couldn’t be further from the truth. “I am not a model wife. I can’t be. No matter how much I love him, it won’t be enough” (4). Megan’s viewpoint is the one that the novel spends the least amount of time in, but, with the time the novel allocates, the more the novel uncovers about Megan, the worse she seems: she’s cheating on her husband, Scott; and she says she hates children. One day, Megan sees Anna yelling at Rachel in the garden and she gets the idea to babysit for Anna in order to find out more about her life. “I think I got the idea after I heard her yelling out in the garden and I wanted to know what was going on” (17). This leads to Megan having an affair with Tom, Anna’s husband. Having an affair is one of the few times that Megan is able to feel in control of her life. “That’s the thing I like most about it, having power over someone. It’s intoxicating” (14). Although the females are initially illustrated in a negative light, as the novel goes on, the female cast is redeemed through their triumphs. *The Girl on the Train* paints a picture of women that endure emotional, mental, and physical trauma, and are able to reinvent themselves by discovering themselves as strong and independent women.

Women are depicted as sexual objects throughout the world: billboards, commercials, television shows—it’s endless exposure of scantily dressed women that conveys the message that women are to use their sexuality to get what they want in life. *The Girl on the Train* uses this as a driving point for the novel’s entirety. The women are interconnected through a single man, Tom. Tom is Rachel’s recent ex-husband, Megan’s lover and father of her unborn child, and Anna’s new husband and father of her newborn baby. Rachel is deemed unfit as a wife due to her sexual inability to bear children. “I am barren. The fertility treatments do not work. I am alone. All I have is my vodka to keep me warm at night” (24). Anna admits that being the “other woman” is a huge turn-on for her and, consequently, she depicts herself as a home wrecking witch. Anna wants nothing more than a “perfect” family and she uses her sexuality to get it, seducing Rachel’s husband. As for Megan—poor Megan—nothing good has ever happened to her: she hates babies because she accidently killed her own child when she fell asleep in the bathtub as her baby sat atop of her. She has abandonment issues as well due to her boyfriend, father of her deceased baby, leaving her and never returning. Also, her older brother, Ben, was brutally killed in an accident when they were teenagers. Megan is emotionally unstable and, due to this internal conflict, she makes many stupid decisions, such as: cheating on her husband (and getting pregnant), and having sex with her therapist, Kamal. Towards the end of the story, Megan finally decides to make the right decision and stop using her sexuality as a means of control. She takes the advice of her therapist: “I can’t help the way I am. ‘You can help what you do, though.’ That's what Kamal says” (33). She decides that she is going to tell her husband of her affair and then inform Tom that she is pregnant with his child. The subject matter of sexuality is prominent throughout the entirety of the novel. It’s illustrated in multiple ways, from multiple viewpoints. The Girl on the Train depicts sexuality in a negative light, showing the destruction it can bring when used as a means of control, as an assertion of one’s character, or a way to obtain one’s desires.

*The Girl On the Train* would be a good novel to teach to young adults due to the wide array of thematic qualities: betrayal, identity, abandonment, and sexuality. The aforementioned portray women at their weakest points but, then, portray them at their strongest. *The Girl on the Train* covers themes that are imperative for young adults to comprehend. Young adults, everywhere, especially young women, are bombarded with messages every day that create confusion and conflict with finding one’s sense of self, affirming that a women’s existence is solely for a man to dominate, and that human sexuality, again, especially for young women, is something that is to be the sole qualifying representative of one’s worth. *The Girl on the Train* not only teaches young adults to not let outside factors determine who you are as a person, but to be strong and independent individuals in a world that attempts to setup the younger generation to emotional and mental suffering.

1. McCann, Maria. *As Meat Loves Salt.* New York: Harcourt books, 2012. Print

This novel is based on Jacob Cullen during seventeenth century England. The country is torn apart by a civil war and, as a result, Jacob is forced to leave his wife, and he’s taken from his job as a servant, and drawn into battle. Jacob is a lost soul: immensely violent and dark. The loss of his wife causes him to become angry with the world and he becomes increasingly sadistic throughout the novel. However, further into the war, he finds love in an unlikely place: a fellow soldier. After falling in love his darkness subsides and he becomes grounded.

*As Meat Loves Salt* is a helpful novel because it heavily deals with the issues of identity. Jacob is ripped from his simple life as a servant and forced into a violent war, driving him mad. He only is able to find himself after falling in love with one of his fellow soldiers. This is a good resource because it perpetuates the notion of finding “the self” and straying from stereotypical concepts.

1. Forster, E.M. *Maurice: A Novel.* London: Castle House, 2006. Print

*Maurice* is set in the Edwardian period of England. The protagonist of the novel, Maurice, is struggling with his sexuality. Straying from the social norms would be a sure way of excommunicating yourself from the world, so, he suppresses himself. He meets a young man at his school by the name of Clive and the two fall in love; however, the relationship is kept clandestine. Eventually, Clive tells Maurice that he can no longer continue the relationship and he wants to live a fulfilling life by marrying a woman and having children. Maurice is left alone and accepts that he will die alone as an outcast. Maurice is able to find love with one of Clive’s servants, Alec, and he accepts his sexuality and begins a lifelong relationship.

This is a helpful novel because it touches heavily on identity and human sexuality. Although it is set in the Edwardian period, young adults today would be able to relate to the themes present in the novel and learn from them by seeing the world through the eyes of someone else or, perhaps, coming to their own terms with their sexuality and identity.

1. Woolf, Virginia. *Orlando.* London: Hogarth Press, 2000. Print.

In the story, Orlando, a man, is suddenly changed into a woman. He is not fazed by this though and continues to live his life normally; however, he begins to be treated badly by those around him because he is now a woman. He is able to see the struggles that woman endure on a daily basis because of this. To add to the matter, Orlando is now essentially immortal, so, he lives through the centuries as a woman and continually endures mistreatment. One day, Orlando decides to stand up for himself and, as a result, transcends time and gender.

*Orlando* is a helpful resource due to the thematic notions the fictional biography presents: feminism, sexuality, identity, and gender roles. Woolf was able to illustrate the life of a man and a woman through the eyes of a singular character; the reader, thus, is able to thoroughly understand both viewpoints (male and female) presented. Unlike the gender role confinements imposed today, Orlando attempts to resist the confinements that he is presented with and, instead, is free. The story will allow students to understand the struggles that women endure (maltreatment, inequality, and harassment), transsexualism, and personal identity.

1. Shelley, Mary. *Frankenstein.* New York: Barnes & Noble, 2005. Print.

A young Dr. Frankenstein creates life—the first man to make life without the help of God. The novel tells the story of Victor Frankenstein: obsessed with discovery, science, and bestowing animation upon lifeless matter. The Dr. is able to assemble a sentient being from stolen body parts; however, upon creation, he flees in terror due to the creature’s hideousness. The creature is tormented in isolation and eventually turns to evil and seeks revenge against his creator.

The novel is the antithesis of this annotated bibliography in a sense. Although Shelley touches on identity, there is no general acceptance on behalf of the creature. In other words, the creature never accepts his identity in a positive way; instead, the creature accepts his identity and decides to go on a murderous rampage. The story also depicts women in a very stereotypical way for the era it was written: quiet, submissive, and no major role. This would be an excellent source to read as an entry novel into a literary course based off of identity, or, it would be a good way to end the course.

1. Winsor, Kathleen. *Forever Amber.* London: Penguin, 2002. Print.

“Abandoned pregnant and penniless on the teeming streets of London, 16-year-old Amber St. Clare manages, by using her wits, beauty, and courage, to climb to the highest position a woman could achieve in Restoration England-that of favorite mistress of the Merry Monarch, Charles II. From whores and highwaymen to courtiers and noblemen, from events such as the Great Plague and the Fire of London to the intimate passions of ordinary-and extraordinary-men and women, Amber experiences it all. But throughout her trials and escapades, she remains, in her heart, true to the one man she really loves, the one man she can never have.”

The novel focuses on Amber, the protagonist, and her struggles through life. Her abandonment by several men throughout the novel cause her to become crushed, having identified herself with these men she feels she doesn’t belong in the world; however, she is able to rise through this and find herself.

1. Pena, Matt. *Mexican-White boy.* New York: Delacorte Books, 2008. Print.

“Danny's tall and skinny. Even though he’s not built, his arms are long enough to give his pitch a power so fierce any college scout would sign him on the spot. Ninety-five mile an hour fastball, but the boy’s not even on a team. Every time he gets up on the mound he loses it. But at his private school, they don’t expect much else from him. Danny’ s brown. Half-Mexican brown. And growing up in San Diego that close to the border means everyone else knows exactly who he is before he even opens his mouth. Before they find out he can’t speak Spanish, and before they realize his mom has blond hair and blue eyes, they’ve got him pegged. But it works the other way too. And Danny’s convinced it’s his whiteness that sent his father back to Mexico.”

This novel obviously focuses on racial identity. This is important, especially in today’s world, because many people do not know how to feel about the rising tensions revolving around race. This novel would be excellent for young adults because it will help teach those—especially those who are mixed—to come to terms with their racial background and to perhaps become more involved with their culture.

1. Crutcher, Chris. *Whale Talk.* New York: Scholastic, 2010. Print.

“There's bad news and good news about the Cutter High School swim team. The bad news is that they don't have a pool. The good news is that only one of them can swim anyway. A group of misfits brought together by T. J. Jones (the J is redundant), the Cutter All Night Mermen struggle to find their places in a school that has no place for them. T.J. is convinced that a varsity letter jacket exclusive, revered, the symbol (as far as T.J. is concerned) of all that is screwed up at Cutter High will also be an effective tool. He's right. He's also wrong. Still, it's always the quest that counts. And the bus on which the Mermen travel to swim meets soon becomes the space where they gradually allow themselves to talk, to fit, to grow. Together they'll fight for dignity in a world where tragedy and comedy dance side by side, where a moment's inattention can bring lifelong heartache, and where true acceptance is the only prescription for what ails us.”

*Whale Talk* is an obvious choice for themes of identity. Every person on the swim team endures some sort of social issues. T.J., for example, endures racial prejudices at his school (and town) for being a mixed minority. The identity issues in *Whale Talk* expand further than race and into mental handicaps. This would be an integral text for young adults due to the serious thematic qualities that are presented in the novel; it will teach young adults to be accepting and to find themselves.

1. Strayed, Cheryl. *Wild: From lost to found.* New York: Knopf, 2010. Print.

“At twenty-two, Cheryl Strayed thought she had lost everything. In the wake of her mother’s death, her family scattered and her own marriage was soon destroyed. Four years later, with nothing more to lose, she made the most impulsive decision of her life. With no experience or training, driven only by blind will, she would hike more than a thousand miles of the Pacific Crest Trail from the Mojave Desert through California and Oregon to Washington State—and she would do it alone. Told with suspense and style, sparkling with warmth and humor, *Wild* powerfully captures the terrors and pleasures of one young woman forging ahead against all odds on a journey that maddened, strengthened, and ultimately healed her.”

A beautiful story of a woman that endures several losses in her life and disconnects herself from it all. She makes the decision to leave her life behind and go find herself. This is a touching story that would be excellent for young adults to read because the protagonist, Cheryl, leaves her life behind after enduring traumatic events and, twenty-six, decides to take off in hopes of discovering who she is and where she belongs in the world. This novel would teach young adults that they don’t have to follow societal expectations and, instead, need to focus on finding who they are and what their purpose is in the world.

1. Cameron, Bruce. *A Dog’s Purpose.* New York: Forge books, 2010. Print

“This is the remarkable story of one endearing dog's search for his purpose over the course of several lives. More than just another charming dog story, this touches on the universal quest for an answer to life's most basic question: Why are we here? Surprised to find himself reborn as a rambunctious golden haired puppy after a tragically short life as a stray mutt, Bailey's search for his new life's meaning leads him into the loving arms of 8-year-old Ethan. During their countless adventures Bailey joyously discovers how to be a good dog. But this life as a beloved family pet is not the end of Bailey's journey. Reborn as a puppy yet again, Bailey wonders, will he ever find his purpose?”

Although the antithesis of human identity, this novel would be a helpful resource because it is written in the point of view of a dog. The overall central theme of the novel is identity and finding what our purpose in life is. Many of the elements can easily be translated into young adults lives. It is important to note that although the story is told through the dog’s experiences, it is completely about human experiences: relationships, self-worth, values, etc.

10. Anderson, Laurie. *Speak.* New York: Puffin, 2001. Print

“‘Speak up for yourself--we want to know what you have to say.’ From the first moment of her freshman year at Merryweather High, Melinda knows this is a big fat lie, part of the nonsense of high school. She is friendless, outcast, because she busted an end-of-summer party by calling the cops, so now nobody will talk to her, let alone listen to her. As time passes, she becomes increasingly isolated and practically stops talking altogether. Only her art class offers any solace, and it is through her work on an art project that she is finally able to face what really happened at that terrible party: she was raped by an upperclassman, a guy who still attends Merryweather and is still a threat to her. Her healing process has just begun when she has another violent encounter with him. But this time Melinda fights back, refuses to be silent, and thereby achieves a measure of vindication. In Laurie Halse Anderson's powerful novel, an utterly believable heroine with a bitterly ironic voice delivers a blow to the hypocritical world of high school. She speaks for many a disenfranchised teenager while demonstrating the importance of speaking up for oneself.”

A very helpful resource due to the central themes of identity. Melinda is lost due to her violent encounter and struggles with healing. She finds herself and fights back, speaking up for herself. This is an amazing story that many young adults could benefit from: instilling values and self-worth.

Works Cited

Hawkins, Paula. *The Girl On the Train.* New York: Riverhead Books, 2015. Print