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A Quest for Identity through the Literary Genre of YA Science Fiction

A passage in *Literature for Today's Young Adults*, defines science fiction as a genre that launches, “contemporary problems... hundreds or thousands of years into the future, [creating] new views of overpopulation, pollution, religious bickering, political machinations, and sexual disharmony [which] often give[s] readers a quite different perspective on our world and our problems.” Through setting a plot in an alternate reality and futuristic world, we can escape into a different time and place, possibly shedding light on an aspect of our world that is corrupt and possibly threatening if it goes unnoticed. In this respect science fiction acts as something of a cautionary tale. The stories teach us not to be mindless of evil within our own world, culture, and society. A good science fiction novel is one that makes us aware of societies<sup>1</sup> shortcomings and dangers, teaching us to be critical and conscious in our actions that consequently affect the future.

Honestly, it was not until after I read *The Giver* and *Gathering Blue*, by Lois Lowry, when I realized what an important genre science fiction is for young adults. Reflecting on Jonas and Kira’s communities, it is clear that the main issues are centered around control, deception, and mindlessness. If it were not for their special gifts, they would have been just another mindless inhabitant in their districts, being completely unaware that everything around them has been shaped to keep the masses of people under the control of a few. In an interview with Lois Lowry that asked her to reflect on her writing, she stated that her goal is to give her readers a connection with the characters through portraying real life experiences that are thought provoking and make the reader

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<sup>1</sup> I am aware of your advice to not use the word “society” in our writing, but seeing as Science Fiction deals extensively with questions about society, I hope you can forgive the usage.

"confront society with all its imperfections." Additionally, Lowry states that she measures her success as an author by her ability to "help adolescents answer their own questions about life, identity and human relationships."<sup>2</sup> The reason I chose to share this knowledge about Lois Lowry and her intentions as a writer is because one of the main messages I took away from her novels was that of self-discovery through finding identity and meaning in oneself. Jonas and Kira both discover they have special gifts that separate them from others. They become individuals in a community that is tightly bound and manipulated, and through their gifts they find that they can make things different if they only tried. Their discovered identity shows them that they are important and that they have power. Each uses their power and gift in different ways, but each react against their communities control to free others from the confines of their world.

During my research I found that the theme of identity in the genre of science fiction kept surfacing, particularly dealing with self-discovery or the existential questioning of one's identity. Often times set in a dystopian world where survival seems improbable, science fiction novels tests humanity in ways that "opens a window into who we are and what we are capable of."<sup>3</sup> Therefore, the novels I have chosen to discuss inherently deal with this concept of identity through self-discovery that may be unfolded through adventure, quest, or survival. Either way, each protagonist ultimately faces tests that reveal their humanity, through contrasting the dualities innate in us all. Their stories are relatable because we all have the ability to perform good and evil, and our identities are sometimes blurred from the decisions we make.

Taking a quote from *Literature from Today's Young Adults*, "Science Fiction tells about the future so we can know about the present," it is understood that this genre has a much deeper function and importance as a literary genre, and should be acknowledged for it. Science fiction novels that

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<sup>2</sup> "Learning about Lois Lowry." *LOWRY PAGE*. N.p., n.d. Web. 25 Nov. 2013.

<sup>3</sup> "Company News | MessageMakers." *42 Things Science Fiction Can Teach Us About Learning*. N.p., n.d. Web. 25 Nov. 2013.

touch on issues of identity where the heroine engages in a sort of inner battle of humanity are important to discuss with young adults because they offer the opportunity to have important discussions about ethics, politics, religion, morals, society, control, and good and evil as it applies to our contemporary lives.

#### Annotated Bibliography

Collins, Suzanne. *The Hunger Games*. New York: Scholastic, 2008. Print.

It is time for the annual Hunger Games, where one girl and boy from each district is chosen to fight in a simulated game where survival is near impossible and killing is required. When Katniss Everdeen's sister is chosen to participate, she sacrifices herself to go in her place because she believes she has more of a chance of survival. Together, Katniss and Peeta embark on a seemingly impossible journey, giving this years game a new twist.

When Katniss gets to the Capitol she is coached on how to poise herself on television so she can gain sponsors to aid her in her fight. The identity she must embrace on camera is that of a love struck and naïve young woman. She grapples between her identity and the one the capitol has assigned her, and if she plays her part well she understands she has a chance of survival. This theme is interesting because it is suggestive of how young adults might change their identity to please and match others, and brings to the surface the question of whether we lose ourselves in doing so.

Collins, Suzanne. *Catching Fire*. New York: Scholastic, 2013. Print.

In this sequel to the *Hunger Games*, it is clear that the Capitol is angry at Katniss' trickery from the games. As a result of her actions she has sparked rebellion in the districts and has become something of a hero for defying the Capitol. Together Peeta and Katniss must prove to the districts that they are deeply in love for their own survival. The Capitol wants revenge and so they are challenged to yet another impossible battle.

When Katniss returns home after the games she experiences an identity crisis. She deeply wants things to go back to normal, but she has to play the love stricken role she was forced to

embrace during the games. If she fails the Capitol might find out her secret, and the results could be deadly. After living through the gore and death in the games, Katniss loses her sense of self. She has become a sensation as a hero to the people oppressed in the districts, and an enemy to the Capitol. Katniss battles with the task of trying to unite the pieces of her old life and new life together into an interwoven identity. This struggle shows how life tragedies and events might have profound effects on our sense of self and our identities.

Condie, Ally. *Matched*. New York: Dutton, 2010. Print.

There is no freedom in Cassie's futuristic world. All decisions are made by the society, everyone is constantly being watched, and they must conform to a strict schedule that has been created for them. The society decides what "you eat, what activities you can participate in, the career you will have, the person's you are perfectly matched for, and even when you will die" (Summary has been adapted from Ashleigh Burgos' book talk).

This novel provides an interesting twist on identity because Cassie's identity has been chosen for her. Young adults can ponder in ways their identity might be influenced by others in their family, community, culture, or society, as well as reflect on the ways they conform to it.

Lowry, Lois. *Gathering Blue*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000. Print.

After the death of her mother, Kira is left an orphan at risk of being sent to the Field of Leaving for her twisted leg that makes it hard for her to keep up with the demands of her community. Kira would have undoubtedly met her death in the hands of the Beasts that surround the fields, if it were not for the Council of Guardians who acknowledge that Kira has a gift; a gift that they need to fulfill a very important task. Given a new abode and purpose in the community that grants her great privileges, Kira learns that it comes at a price.

When Kira discovers that she is gifted and has a purpose within her community, she develops a greater understanding of her identity through self-discovery. Her gift grants her certain privileges, and through them Kira learns that her community and freedom are not what they seem. Her new

identity leads her to discover the truth and gives her the strength, power, and inspiration to make a change.

Lowry, Lois. *Messenger*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2004. Print.

“For the past six years, Matty has lived in Village and flourished under the guidance of a Seer, a blind man, known for his special sight. Village was a place that welcomed newcomers, but something sinister has seeped into Village and the people have voted to close it to outsiders. Matty has been invaluable as a messenger. Now he must make one last journey through the treacherous forest with his only weapon, a power he unexpectedly discovers within himself” (Summary is from Goodreads.com).

All of Lois Lowry’s novels in *The Giver Series* deal with complex and controversial themes that also journey her characters along paths of self-discovery and identity. In this novel, it is Matty’s turn to find the gift and power he holds. As he begins to learn more about his discovery and identity, he also learns what his purpose is and how he can use his gift to change the xenophobic community in which he lives.

Lowry, Lois. *The Giver*. New York, NY: Bantam, 1999. Print.

Jonas has been chosen to be the new Receiver of Memory, which he is told is a great honor. Through his training he is introduced to a new existence, one that he never knew was possible and is forbidden to share. As the Receiver, Jonas is forced to bare all memories of pain, war, hatred, and even love so that his community could live according to the new way; a way of secrets, lies, and void of emotion. His new understanding of his society makes it impossible for Jonas to stay and ignore the brainwashing of his society. He must do something, but what?

This novel gives an alternate perspective to a world different than ours, a world that does not know pain or suffering, family, or love, unless you are The Receiver of Memory. Jonas and the Giver are the only ones who know the truth. Jonas’ gift entitles him to his new role and identity in the community, but he does not want a part of it. He wants to free his community from their numbness to

memories and emotions. As a result, in this novel Jonas grapples with his identity as the Receiver of Memory.

Meyer, Marissa. *Cinder*. New York: Feiwel and Friends, 2012. Print.

“Humans and androids crowd the raucous streets of New Beijing... From space, a ruthless lunar people watch, waiting to make their move. No one knows that Earth’s fate hinges on one girl. Cinder, a gifted mechanic, is a cyborg. She’s a second-class citizen with a mysterious past... [When] her life becomes intertwined with the handsome Prince Kai’s, she suddenly finds herself at the center of an intergalactic struggle, and a forbidden attraction. Caught between duty and freedom, loyalty and betrayal, she must uncover secrets about her past in order to protect her world’s future” (Summary is adapted from Goodreads.com).

This popular read is a favorite among young adults today, possibly attributed to the excitement of the alien world, but also for the love triangle within it. Cinder is representative of the human condition, which complicates all of our inner conflicts. She comes to learn hidden things about her family, resulting in self-discovery that reshapes her identity.

Roth, Veronica. *Divergent*. New York: Katherine Tegen, 2012. Print.

“In Beatrice Prior's dystopian Chicago world, society is divided into five factions, each dedicated to the cultivation of a particular virtue--Candor (the honest), Abnegation (the selfless), Dauntless (the brave), Amity (the peaceful), and Erudite (the intelligent). On an appointed day of every year, all sixteen-year-olds must select the faction to which they will devote the rest of their lives. For Beatrice, the decision is between staying with her family and being who she really is--she can't have both. So she makes a choice that surprises everyone, including herself” (Summary accredited to Goodreads.com).

Beatrice grapples with her identity throughout the novel. She must choose which faction or identity she wants to be a part of, weighing all the consequences of each decision. In order to be a part of a society, she must undergo extreme challenges that test her physically and psychologically.

Like Beatrice, we all have to find a way to fit into our world and lives. We choose our friends and sometimes through peer pressure we do things that we wish we didn't. We all question our identity and the friends we have because we want to live a life worth living.

Roth, Veronica. *Insurgent*. New York: Katherine Tegen, 2012. Print.

“One choice can transform you, or destroy you. Every choice has consequences, and as unrest surges in the factions all around her, Tris Prior must continue trying to save those she loves, and herself, while grappling with haunting questions of grief and forgiveness, identity and loyalty, politics and love” (Summary accredited to Goodreads.com).

As a sequel to *Divergent*, this novel touches on many of the same themes. Beatrice, now known as Tris after an initiation passage, wants to change her seemingly utopian world but through the challenge she learns a lot about herself and how much she is willing to sacrifice. Tris' character and her quest are relatable to us all because the internal struggle of right and wrong, love and hate, and learning to forgive is inside all of us.

Walker, Karen Thompson. *The Age of Miracles: A Novel*. New York: Random House, 2012. Print.

“Luminous, haunting, unforgettable, The Age of Miracles is... a story about coming of age during extraordinary times, about people going on with their lives in an era of profound uncertainty... 11-year-old Julia and her family awake to discover, along with the rest of the world, that the rotation of the earth has suddenly begun to slow. The days and nights grow longer and longer, gravity is affected, the environment is thrown into disarray... Julia is also coping with the normal disasters of everyday life--the fissures in her parents' marriage, the loss of old friends, [and] the hopeful anguish of first love...” (Summary is adapted from Goodreads.com).

Julia embraces the same struggles and confusions that make it so hard to be an adolescent, especially when parent's marriage is falling apart and friends come and go. From Julia's story lessons can be learned about overcoming a loss of identity from the utter chaos of the world to the blossoming of coming of age and finding a niche in the world.

Yancey, Richard. *The 5th Wave*. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 2013. Print.

“After the 1st wave, only darkness remains. After the 2nd, only the lucky escape. And after the 3rd, only the unlucky survive. After the 4th wave, only one rule applies: trust no one. Now, it’s the dawn of the 5th wave, and on a lonely stretch of highway, Cassie runs from Them. The beings who only look human, who roam the countryside killing anyone they see. Who have scattered Earth’s last survivors. To stay alone is to stay alive, Cassie believes, until she meets Evan Walker. Beguiling and mysterious, Evan Walker may be Cassie’s only hope for rescuing her brother—or even saving herself. But Cassie must choose: between trust and despair, between defiance and surrender, between life and death. To give up or to get up” (Summary is adapted from Goodreads.com).

In an interview with Richard Yancey, he reveals his inspiration behind the writing of this novel. He believes that a good young adult novel must spark existential questions within themselves such as “who am I, how do I fit in, what is fundamentally “me” and what is being defined for me by peers or my parents or the people in the community?” These questions cloud the minds of us all, and we can actively see how Cassie is forced to evaluate and answer these questions as she journeys through her quest.