



RESEARCH PAPER

A Critical Study of Topographies and Thematic Concerns in Alcott's *Little Women* and Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables*

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to highlight topographies and thematic concerns of Young Adult literature - Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* (1871) and Lucy Maud Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables* (1908) fulfilling social responsibility while exploring into its origin as a literary genre. For this, the article argues that Young Adult fiction through the topographies, settings, stylistic concerns, and thematic constructions thoughtfully fulfil the overarching idea of social responsibility of bringing reforms in a society. Berman's scholarship on Social Responsibility, Nodding's views on Caring, and Greene's idea of Social Imagination, Social Problems, and Social Justice serve as a theoretical lens to analyse the novels. The article concludes that the selected classics of the genre assume the social responsibility to educate Young Adults through their subtle storyline, plot, and thematic constructions, as highlighted by the given theorists.

KEYWORDS Adolescence, Multicultural Representations, Social Imagination, Social Responsibility, Young Adult Literature

Introduction

It is argued that Young Adult Literature (YA literature) existed with the 1930s publication of the *Little House* series by Ingalls Wilder; however, it was, as Chris Crowe writes that 'not in trend to accept those books as a literary genre' (Crowe, 2001, P. 147) and the debate over its origin is continued even at present. Due to parental criticism, the generation gap, and delicate issues, people were turning away from young adult literature. It was only in 1978 that the phrase 'Young Adult' - devised by the "Young Adult Library Services Association" (YALSA), was familiarized with great concern of adults who thought, "Some young-adult fiction resist, or undeniably challenge to disrupt society" as they attempted modern-day realism of a mature kind by defying the practices going on in American society (Blakemore, 2015, P. 20). Nevertheless, in 1980, writers sought a canon of young adult fiction as the genre started tackling issues of real depth (Mertz, 1978, P. 98).

Contextualizing the given details, first, the article contributes to the ongoing debate on the origin of YA literature and tries to establish its origin as a literary genre in the first quarter of the 20th century. Second, it highlights the selected texts' promising contribution regarding fulfilling social responsibility, contributing thoughtfully to society and young adults. Serving as a prologue, the article also opens prospects for further debates, and furnishes the idea that the origin of Young Adult Literature falls to the second half of the 19th century. The research is significant since it unveils the promising perspective of literature to impart awareness and bring reforms in a society and therefore complying the necessity of YA literature to be included in the literary genre.

Bearing in mind that Young Adult Literature (YAL) is considered an American phenomenon - originating, and growing primarily in the American context, and adolescence and teenager being American developments have moulded the ways to observe and absorb this literature (Aronson, 2001, P.10). The selected YA writers for present study provided the prototypes for this literature since the qualities present in these classic novels have paved way for contemporary writers writing for this genre. Psychologist G. Stanley's observations about adolescence that it is a new stage in development, assert that "America was a growing nation in adolescence, struggling for its purpose and identity. It was well-thought-out, a young country rooted in the repercussions of the Civil War and was searching for an identity as a nation" (Stanley, 1897, P. 192).

Literature Review

Deborah Stevenson, while adding to the hardships in the inception and evolution of young adult literature as a literary genre, writes that intellectuals working in literary and critical theory are lagging in discovering the workings of YA literature. They hardly believe that works of this genre can only be analysed in connection with the past or in terms of psychology. They dismiss the work as not in connection with the literary community when they come across the phrase YA (Stevenson, 1997, P. 67). Terry Davis believes, there is a need to bring the genre into the mainstream literary arena since it holds the standards of literature (Davis, 1997, P. 89). Hence, this emerging genre is being appraised to ensure it as a part of the mainstream literary world. In contrast, literary criticism and its purpose is explained in the words of David L. Russel, "discussion of this literature is undertaken to translate its meaning and to investigate its worth," and its purpose is to impart high standards in the literary world and to encourage appreciation among literary readers" (Russel, 2005, P. 23).

Keeping in view the function of young adult literature stated by Russel, there can be added texts, like *Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott (1871) and *Anne of Green Gables* by Lucy Maud Montgomery (1908), which truly serve the purpose in this respect. Looking into its evolution as a literary genre, the other classics included *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret* by Judy Blume, *Home before Dark* by Sue Allen Bridgers, and Susan Cooper's *The Grey King* (*The Dark is Rising* series) (Dean, 2017, P. 17). Furthermore, works like *The Outsiders* (1967) by S.E. Hinton, Paul Zindel's *The Pilgrimage* (1968), and *The Chocolate War* (1974) by Robert Cormier were taken as blooming time for 'Young Adult literature' with the burden of creating a better world for the adolescents. Among others, the recent development in the literary field of young adult literature includes Sarah Dessen's *That Summer* (1996) winner of Michael L. Printz award; Walter Dean Myers's *Monster* (1999); Award-winning novel, *Copper Sun* by Sharon M. Draper (2006), and *The Sun is also a Star* by Nicola Yoon (2016).

Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* (1871) came to the scene after the American Civil War, and the reader quickly found traces of Young Adult literature in this germinal work. Americans knew well that they were living in a country in a phase of transition and were interested in stories showing transitional or in-between space. Brenda O. Daly marked another trend in YA books which explored "the territory of female imagination" (Daly, 1989, P. 55) with an inclusive portrayal of teenagers. In the same terrain, the popularity of *Anne of Green Gables* can be noted on *Green Gables'* birthday, as Margaret Atwood specifies: "The "Annery" available to the text's supporters: "Anne boxed sets, Anne notepaper and Anne pencils, Anne coffee mugs, and Anne aprons, Anne candies and Anne straw hats..." *Green Gables* has transcended the limits of time and the narrow geographic

space of Prince Edward Island, inflating into a beloved international literary commodity" (Slater, 2010, P. 10).

Methodology

Concepts of the theorists like Berman, Noddings, and Greene have been used as a lens to analyse selected texts. Sheldon Berman, an American philosopher, adds his views on Social Responsibility, an individual's personal efforts for the happiness and security of people of this planet," including primary social obligations (Berman, 1997, P. 15). Young Adult literature is a meaningful way for young adults to understand social responsibilities through mature literary narratives. These stories should transpire with ethical and moral standards to bridge the ongoing social problems and predicaments. As an educationist, Berman gathered ideas from citizenship education, moral development, political socialization, and psychosocial and prosocial development and provided the researchers with evolutionary understandings.

Nel Noddings, another American philosopher, working on the philosophy of education, wrote extensively on caring in schools' syllabi. She wrote that caring is a prime element of school curriculums and exceptional attention can primarily manifest this value in young adults. She further extended the definition that caring is caring for friends, ideas, family, human-made objects, ecosystems, and distant others. She associated caring with Berman's idea of Social Responsibility, which is central to teaching; therefore, teachers' social responsibility is to impart for caring (Noddings, 1991, P. 110).

Sarah Maxine Greene's concept on Social Imagination also scrutinizes the selected YA writings. This American educational philosopher defines the concept as "personal ability to design ideas and visions of doing something productive for our flawed society, for our surrounding where we reside, and for our institutions" (Greene, 1995, P. 5). She expands her views that teaching on social imagination permits students to interrogate the world, find meanings, and have a vision for erecting a better world. Novels can serve this purpose via themes of peaceful living in a multicultural community, global awareness, environmental literacy, peace, control and propaganda, and nonviolence as a social responsibility (Evans, 2010, P. 89). Hence, with diverse concerns, all three theorists consider social responsibility a crucial concern and help to analyse the selected texts.

Results and Discussion

Little Women by Louisa May Alcott

The novel portrayed a realistic picture of family life on one side, and the development of young women on the other. It was only the 1960s and 70s feminist movements that played their substantial role in making readers look at this novel inversely. These women readers, now feminists, took the novel seriously and went under impregnable scrutiny. It was included in adult 'literature' sections in libraries and bookstores with new prefaces and without illustrations (Rioux, 2020, P. 02). Moreover, a debate continued over whether it was sentimental or realistic and whether it portrayed women as liberal, broadminded, or relapsing. Jo, who has been depicted as a tomboy and an archetypal character in most of the stories, is also taken as an egalitarian or a progressive reformer; as she gets married to Professor Bhaer, and she gets married at all (Alcott, 1871, P. 20). These instances of what Sarah Greene calls social imagination indicate where society was lagging and what this literature should do to fill deficiency. The narrative puts the book in the stream of 'young adult fiction with the characteristics of its narration about girls of age 12 to 16 and then about the issue of marriages which is shown as a coming-of-age

story in the second part of the novel, therefore, the issues it manifests indicate that the writing is fulfilling social responsibility as Berman also argues that young adult literature should be built on ethical and decent values to bridge the social quandaries. Alcott has put her personal investment as a creative responsibility and written meaningfully for young adults by devising strategies for living with morals in a social setup that was down falling rapidly, as Susanne Baake also claims that writers write for a cause of a specific community, in this way, the literary narrative has power to subvert community narratives to recontextualize it (Baake, 2009, P. 39). Alcott's novel subverts the ongoing practices of gender hierarchy in American culture and reconceptualizes that notion of power by empowering female characters.

Similarly, Seelinger Trites points out several similarities between *Little Women*, written by Louisa May Alcott, and the germinal phase of *The Adolescent Reform Novel* (2007), and she observes the eternal influence of this novel on young adult fiction. Jo becomes a metaphor for reform as Trite also calls it a reform novel by taking the protagonist as a symbol of reform, where young characters reflect the stamina to change themselves while living in American culture in transition. She further remarks that adolescent novels highlight an interconnected web between the protagonist and the rest of the community by navigating the ethics of the individual and the community and that there might be a conflict of interest between the two. Alcott's novel reflects the ethics of gender, race, and politics, which informs the primary material or narration, and the narrative is what Sheldon Berman says with 'evolutionary understanding' by knowing the psychosocial, moral, and political development of the period (Berman, 1997, P. 21). The disjunction of ethics or conflict of interest between the protagonist and the community is highlighted as an ethical flaw on society's part that Berman believes to bridge up by developing a narrative like *Little Women*.

In contrast, the hero's development shows that culture can also modify as the narrative presents a method for this reform and achieving that growth. It is this similarity between the development of the main character and society's need to develop through change, what Trites informs the hallmark of adolescent reform novels (Trites, 2007, P. 10), and Sarah Greene calls the understanding of social imagination. Since Trites has taken the book as an adult read, there is another critic Boyd Anne Rioux, who puts her remarks to the novel, it is a significant memory that The novel, *Little Women* is not a single book, instead it is a visionary book with two sections as it is published also in two volumes everywhere except America. Part one of the novel deals with four sisters of age from twelve to sixteen, and second part is what we call a young-adult novel or a bildungsroman; a classification that has been carefully marked as literary as think of - *The Catcher in the Rye* or *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (Rioux, 2020, P. 20).

Furthermore, Ann Hood explains by putting her inspiration as:

First time, I read the novel, *Little Women* in the year 1963, I was seven years old then. I used to call my mom Marmee and insisted my cousins to play as Jo sisters in the play I wrote. The Story of this novel and why it is significant inspired me to pick the book again yet with a transformed insight and empathy (Hood, 2018, P. 3).

Published in two volumes, novel narrates the story of the March family, the most significantly the evolution of four sisters, Meg, Jo, Beth, and the youngest, Amy. Meg is sixteen, while Amy is twelve; and their father, Mr. March, is on duty in civil war. Autobiographical elements such as Alcott's adulthood period with her sisters have a significant impact on this writing. Alcott's characters are exemplary. Four sisters paved the way for the women of society to do what they could do as Berman's philosophy explains

that this genre does to improve education, citizenship, political socialization, and prosocial development (Berman, 1997, P. 2). Berman's concepts are significantly shown in the personality of four characters as Meg was an example of beauty, while Jo had a bold and strong personality with a love of reading and writing (Bachelder, 1980, P. 1). However, Beth though a covert character, yet showed interest in music. Amy, engaged with art and aesthetics was narcissistic. Four sisters' endeavours also exhibited what Sarah Greene called the capacity to invent visions for a deficient society. Thus, Alcott's narrative also provides a vision by opening vistas of professions for women in society like America, and therefore fulfils social responsibility.

The four characters interrogate with the social world by situating themselves in the better positions, try to construct meanings of human life above gender inequalities, and provide solutions for a better world (Greene, 1995, P. 5). Camille Cauti (2004) comments that Jo was Alcott herself – complex, entirely realistic, and inevitably the most loved and remembered character among readers across generations and time, which puts readers in their fantasies and ambitions (Cauti, 2004, P. 1). Furthermore, novels like *Little Women* and *Anne of Green Gables* caught readers' attention, no matter what age, and the compulsory education in the United States with the 'compulsory attendance act in Massachusetts in 1852' helped maintain this attraction in literate young people. Thirty-seven percent of adults aged fourteen to seventeen were enrolled by 1920. Hence, a peer society came into being with an agreement with these education laws. That is why these novels as Nikolajeva and Mary Hilton claim, have "a strong sagacity of adaptation between children and incipient adults" (Nikolajeva and Hilton, 2016, P. 12). In North America, *Little Women* inspired writers like Kate Douglas Wiggin and L. M. Montgomery in writing *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm* and *Ann of Green Gables*, respectively, in which heroines cover a transitory phase from childhood to adulthood. Then they became popular among the youth, like *Little Women* (Byle, 2012, P. 1).

Rejection of Gender stereotyping like a woman cannot be an artist, subversion from norms, quirky character, doing work as a productive phenomenon for inner goodness, love for family, and above all, humanity – as Jo sells her hair for the sake of others, which we lack even in the 21st century is what this novel conveys to be fit in the genre of Young Adult Literature and also be fitted social document fulfilling the necessity of social responsibility, care, and compassion.

***Anne of Green Gables* by Lucy Maud Montgomery**

In Atwood's comments, the novel transcends its geographical boundaries from local to global, showing its humane appeal and thematic concerns to young adults. This novel unfolds the journey of 11 years old heroine with an "overactive imagination" (Montgomery, 1908, P. 48), from being a misfit teenager to an adorable young – pursuing her dreams of beauty, dress, and red hair. Anne says, "You can almost continually enjoy things if you are decisive steadily to carry out" (Montgomery, 1908, P. 1), so, more than dreaming, it is a matter of making up mind to get something that is important for her. The character transmits Berman's idea of social responsibility while sharing the attribute of being determined, composed, and fixed to thrive in a society. In the chapter, *Morning at Green Gables*, Anne sees her dream broken as she says, "I thought I would have so many things to love and nothing to deter me. However, that fleeting dream is over. At another point, she talks about a pink dress, and Marilla says that red-headed people cannot wear it even in imagination, to whom Anne replies, "Well, that is one more expectation vanished. My life is a immaculate cemetery of buried hopes" (Montgomery, 1908, P. 49). The textual reference exhibits that she seems a silly girl talking about her dreams and wishes all the time. However, as a grown-up, she turns into a sagacious character serving humanity, or

as Nel Noddings scholarship informs that caring is an exceptional quality that is central to humanity and Anne has this philosophical gradient towards humanity, or as Berman has informed that caring is also a social responsibility towards which Anne has been transformed.

Anne is shown as a round character whose upbringing starts at Ms. Marilla's house when she instructs Anne to obey her as she orders and scolds her for overplaying the game of truth and dare with Avonlea's friends. Later, under the shadow of her passionate teacher, Miss Stacy she acts on stage, though with a little stage fright, and wins esteemed 'Avery Scholarship'. Miss Stacy has imparted the values of as Nel Noddings explains "care, compassion, and affection" (Noddings, 1991, P. 45). Anne rejects when she learns that Marilla has caught cataract and she is getting blind; she determines to stay with her at Green Gables and teach nearby and therefore prefers care for Marilla. Miss Stacy has enabled her as Berman points out to interrogate the world and find meaning for humanity's greater good (Berman, 1997, P. 34), that is why she gives up her aspirations for a four-year degree (Montgomery, 1908, P. 386).

Furthermore, she learns many things to do with this upbringing, which shows her experimental nature of being a teen and her talent, which can be noticed when she wants to see Diana and asks for permission from Ms. Marilla. She does impulsive things like she has a green dye over her red hair. "We have arranged a way to gesture with our candles and cardboard. We set the candle on the windowsill and make flashes by passing the cardboard back and forth. So many flashes mean a particular thing. It was my idea, Marilla". (Montgomery, 1908, P. 186). However, to go beyond her teenage dreams, a shift in her character from silly to humane (*Bildungsroman*), her experimental nature, making friends, and showing rage, where it is needed, are the protrusive points which juvenile readers enjoy and learn from it. Moreover, her humanist gesture to help the old lady is all those concerns relevant to social responsibilities fulfilling Greene's idea of global awareness, literacy, peace, and Noddings' idea of caring as a fundamental concern (Greene, 1995, P. 23; Noddings, 1991, P. 34).

Conclusion

While reiterating the complete article, it has been concluded that though Young Adult as a genre has grown in momentum recently as an American phenomenon, its roots are yet embedded in the classic works of the 19th century and early 20th century. It has been noticed that these classics remarkably narrate realistic issues with an impressive aesthetic appeal for young adults fulfilling the ideas of promising theorists Berman, Noddings, and Greene on satisfying social responsibility, the idea of caring, and social imagination amid the prevalent social issues. It has also been deduced that selected texts have accomplished these principal concepts on social responsibilities through their topographies, characterization, and thematic concerns and therefore allow us to envisage new potentials embedded within this literature. All the indicators in the light of selected scholarship accessibly place these selected texts as classics of the young adult fiction, genre intending to guide the adults who then hope to navigate the ever changing world without complexity. Hence, these classic texts are executing the substantial concerns of social responsibility in the literary genre of Young Adult fiction.

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