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## Young Adult Literature in the Classroom: What it is and Why it Should be There

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## Introduction

Public education has been part of American culture since the seventeenth century in order to prepare men for highly-skilled jobs or the military. School curricula has come a long way since then, but in general, the system is slow to adapt to changes in society. The fact students still have summers off, when this practice was put in place to help parents run the farm, shows how far behind the times they are. Many middle school and high school classrooms only teach from texts that are more than forty years old as they are considered “classics,” and have inherited value. Students from multiple generations will read a majority of the same texts that were taught fifty years ago. There is much to be learned from authors such as Shakespeare or Harper Lee, including the use and effectiveness of literary devices, life lessons, critical analysis skills and more. However, the same could be said about an emerging type of novel: Young Adult Literature. Young adult novels should be taught in middle school and high school classrooms as they can teach students valuable literary lessons to strengthen fluency, vocabulary, comprehension, and motivation. This is not to say that Young Adult Literature (YAL) should take over for older texts, but rather supplement them.

According to the newest Common Core Standards, English classrooms “require students to learn to be literate and to use literacy skills to learn content and real world skills” (Rybakova, Piotrowski, Harper 37). This is a good start, but I think it should be added that teachers desire to instill a love of reading beyond the classroom. YAL can instill lifelong love for reading as the characters and plots are more relatable to students’ lives. This is not something that can be tested, but will help students further their problem solving skills and other assets later in life.

Planning is one of the hardest things for a teacher as they have to be familiar with the book, tab out the important passages, as well as figure out homework assignments and how long

to spend on each section or the book as a whole. All of this may make it difficult to work in a new text into a class that's been taught a couple dozen times. Some may not be familiar with the YAL titles and don't know where to start. That is why I have come up with YAL suggestions, for both English classrooms as well as other subjects, and several assignment suggestions and class discussions. For a full unit, I have chosen *Perks of Being a Wallflower* as a great text for high school freshman or sophomore students.

## What is Young Adult Literature? What is Classic Literature?

There are many ways of categorizing Young Adult Literature, so it may help to define what it will mean in the context of this paper. For broad purposes, it is any text written for 11-18 year olds, with the point of view being from a teenage character. They will often be written in first person point of view, and in the present tense. However, the character should not be an adult looking back on his or her teen years, as they will have a very different way of looking at their situation in hindsight than if it was currently happening. YAL uses contemporary language, involve teen issues, yet are as appealing to adults as they are for young adult (Herz, Gallo 10-11). On the other end of the spectrum, YAL is being compared against “classic literature.” Here, classic literature is comprised of texts, such as *Great Expectations*, *Huckleberry Finn*, or *The Great Gatsby* that are believed to have a “timelessness,” meaning issues brought up in the novel are still relevant today (Santoli, Wagner 66). These novels are usually meant for adult audiences, and the main character is also an adult.

Some cringe at YAL because they are unfamiliar with it, or they have not seen what it has adapted to. Chris Crowe, a YAL author and professor at Brigham Young University, was disappointed when he saw the YAL section in one high school he visited as it was just classics labeled suitable for teenagers. In other high schools, the bookshelves were stocked predominantly with book series such as “The Babysitters Club,” “The Saddle Club,” and “Full House,” which would suggest that YAL is only for teenaged girls (“What is Young Adult Literature?” 120). YAL has changed significantly over the years, especially since it wasn’t really “created” as a category of fiction until the 1960’s with the book *The Outsiders*.

## How Young Adult Literature Has Changed

Adolescent years were not considered a distinct part of one's life until 1904 when G. Stanley Hall published *Adolescence*. It wouldn't be until the 1940's when world economic and social conditions significantly changed, making it possible to have period past childhood (Wadham, Ostenson 5). There used to only be "childhood" and "adulthood" with no transitional period. Society started thinking about a "young adult" life more when people didn't get married right away, and more students headed off to college, instead of going directly into the work force.

Some of the predecessors to YAL were "The Hardy Boys," which was first published in 1927, and "Nancy Drew" books started in 1930. These novels were published near the same time that the American Library Association formed its Young People's Reading Roundtable, which recommended titles for young adults to read. The books suggested were not necessarily young adult literature since many of the books were written with an adult audience in mind, but it was a good start (Cart 8). Thinking about teenagers and their interests developed new industries such as "Seventeen Magazine," starting in the 1940's. The New York Times published their "Teen-age Bill of Rights" in 1945, which expressed the ten things teenagers are "allowed" to do that we still consider normal, such as the right to make mistakes, move on from childhood, and have rules explained instead of imposed (13).

Stories published up to that point didn't mention drinking or smoking. Rather, the biggest concern is whether or not to "go steady," and how much the teenager in question hates his or her parents (13). The late 1940's and early 1950's introduced science fiction novels and for boys, and romances for girls (19). Sex was absent from YAL until the 1960's. (17). In the 60's and 70's, authors started writing purposefully with incorrect grammar and dialogue with swears (30). The

1970's was a Golden Age for YAL as there were novels published such as *The Chocolate War* in 1974 written by Cormier, *Are You There God, It's Me Margaret*, and *I Know What You Did Last Summer* (31). The 70's was the time of the “problem novel,” where the novel would make a specific social issue the core of the plot (34). By the 80's, the publishing world saw rise in paperback series, as well as new cultural points of view. The immigration acts that were at the heart of political debate may have been the cause for more diverse points of view (41). There was a surge in YAL popularity in the 90's with the “Harry Potter” series.

By the turn of the century, YAL was the fastest growing market in the industry with 2,000 new titles per year (Wadham, Ostenson 5). G. Robert Carlsen, an English professor at University of Iowa, figured out main interests for different ages of young adults. He designated early adolescence to occur between ages 11-14, and they enjoy animal, adventure, and mystery stories. Middle adolescence is 15-16 year-olds, and they prefer war and historical stories. Late adolescence is 17-18 year-olds, and they like personal discovery stories, or stories with social significance (Cart 23).

## **Why YAL Should Be in the Classroom**

### It's a Common Misconception that YAL Doesn't Have Merit

Now that it is defined what YAL is and is not, why hasn't it been in classrooms before now? One reason is because there is a common misconception that YAL does not have literary merit. Virginia Monseau asked her graduate students if they read YAL. Most responded saying they did not because they wanted "something with substance," and "had no need to relive their adolescence." Many think that the plots are watered down and only interest teenagers (70). YAL has the same literary merit that classic literature does. Well written young adult literature includes a variety of situational archetypes such as the test/trial as a rite of passage, the hero's journey, birth/death/rebirth, and the search for self. The elements of literature often found and discussed in classic literature are also used including: character and characterization, setting, conflict, theme, point of view, plot, style, crisis, climax, foreshadowing, flashback, figurative language, and more (Santoli, Wagner 68-69). YAL deals with many universal themes, including the eternal questions "Who am I?" and "Where do I fit in?" They contain the same themes or issues that the classics do: alienation from one's society or group, survival or meeting a challenge, social and/or political concerns about racial or ethnic discrimination, social concerns about AIDS, teenage pregnancy, divorce, substance abuse, problems resulting from family conflicts, fear of death, and political injustice (68).

Literature allows readers to see people as the complex beings they are which can be good, evil, and sometimes contradictory in their words and actions. Controversial topics increases students' motivation to read, discuss, and reflect on their own lives to solve issues affecting them (Rybakova, Piotrowski, Harper 39). Discussing issues in texts engages adolescent students in analyzing literature along with themselves and their principles (Santoli, Wagner 66-67). Not only

does YAL cover a lot of themes, it spans multiple genres including, poetry, biographies, memoirs, informational texts, science fiction, and fantasy (Louel, Dail, Stallworth 55).

The students are aware of the social stigmas that teachers, other professionals, or adults associate with YAL. Monseau gave a questionnaire to a group of Advanced Placement (AP) students. The students had read *The Runner*, *After the First Death*, and *Running Loose* in their classes, which are all Young Adult novels. The students responded that all three fit thematically with the other works they were reading. However, they would not feel comfortable quoting them on the written section of the AP test because “the reader may have a negative opinion of young adult literature,” or “the reader of the exam may not be familiar with the work” (40). Crowe is a reader for the AP test, and of the 6,000 students, only about twenty took a risk and included a YA book to back their responses (“AP and YA” 126). This leads Monseau to ask the question, “What if we don’t label these novels as young adult?” Does the stigma around these novels go away? (40). The stigma affects students outside of the classroom as well. Bonnie Ericson, author of many English teaching books, points out, “To limit our selections of novels, especially to the ‘classic’ novels, is to tell our students that all these other texts, perhaps the students’ preferred types of reading have less value” (Louel, Dail, Stallworth 55). Not all of the blame is to be put on teachers. The bad beliefs about YAL may lie with the school administration or parents. Some teachers want to implement YAL into the curriculum, but fear how administration or parents will respond (Wadham, Ostenson 9).

#### Young Adults Are Interested in YAL, and May Help Them Love Literature

YAL has the literary merit that classics do, but they have another attribute that many classics do not. As Hinton so plainly put it, “Teenagers today want to read about teenagers today” (Cart 21). It makes sense that teenagers want to read material that is relevant to their



lives. It's hard to connect with characters that are dealing with issues the reader has never encountered before, which is often the case with classic literature. Generally, the main characters in older literature are adults, and the society they lived in works much differently than it currently does.

Cultures and traditions are constantly changing. Reading a variety of novels from diverse authors gives students a wider range of seeing the world. Of the top ten books read in secondary schools nationwide, three of them were Shakespeare plays. Only one book was written by a white woman; all other texts were written by white males (Santoli, Wagner 67). The most recent book that students read out of the common canon is *To Kill a Mockingbird*, which was published in 1960 (67). Leila Christenbury, who has over thirty-nine years of experience in education, pointed out that many English teachers rely on their own experiences with literature, which mainly include the classics. Christenbury, however, argued that because the classics are often limited in the American classroom to eighteenth and nineteenth century British and American authors, they provide “nothing more than a curriculum that is an uncritical rehash of the traditional power culture: white, male, Christian, Anglophilic” (67). As explained earlier, the demographics and workings of YAL have changed significantly over the past fifty years. Students are now more ethnically diverse, have different socio-economic backgrounds, and are less religious than before. Considering YAL is a relatively new style of fiction, it brings up more diverse points that interests both teenagers and people in their early twenties.

Adults are even enjoying YAL. A survey in 2012 showed that 55% of YAL readers were actually adults (“Why are so many adults” 1). Books written for children, teenagers, and young adults often sell more copies than popular adult fiction (1). Reasons include the fact that YAL has a large escape appeal with many books being written in the fantasy, science fiction, and

dystopia genres (1). It also evokes nostalgia as adult readers think back when they were teenagers, or books they enjoyed reading in their teens (1). The themes of YAL tend to be the same as other literature, but adults often have a new view on the situation because of life experiences (1). In the past ten years, there has been an explosion of movie adaptations of YAL, which many adults also attend and enjoy including *Twilight*, *Harry Potter*, *Hunger Games*, *Divergent*, *The Fault in Our Stars*, and more.

Having students read literature that interests them promotes and encourages lifelong reading habits (Santoli, Wagner 66-67). For the most part, students enjoy reading outside of classrooms. Cart found that people under twenty-five buy books for leisure at three times the rate of the overall market (Rybakova, Piotrowski, Harper 37). In 2012, 80% of Americans aged 16 and older say they read at least occasionally for pleasure. 36% read for pleasure every day or almost every day (“The Rise of e-reading” 1). Unfortunately, it is a different story as far as academic reading. In 1982, Dan Gallo surveyed 3,400 students, fourth through twelfth graders, in 50 schools, over 37 towns. 40% of boys and 35% of girls said they seldom or never liked required reading selections. Only 1 in 5 usually or always liked assigned books (Herz, Gallo 17).

#### YAL Can Help Develop Literacy Skills Used to Read Classics and May Help Them Through Life Problems

Starting the curriculum with YAL may help students enjoy the classics more if they understood them more clearly. Herz admitted she was a “literary snob” and didn’t think highly of YAL. In one of her middle school classes, she received many complaints after reading *Lilies of the Field*, and realized she created an unpleasant environment for her classroom. She decided to let the students choose their own books, which were mostly YAL, and the students’ attitudes became more positive as they wanted to read and contribute to class more (Santoli, Wagner 71).

Once Herz's seventh grade students became empowered readers by choosing their own texts, the required reading curriculum was not so daunting. They whipped through "A Midsummer Night's Dream," and listened to one another's explanations and acting out parts without feeling self-conscious. She found that her high school students were struggling more with the material, and were less enthusiastic (Herz, Gallo 2).

YAL is a good way to get reluctant readers interested in class discussions. There are many students in lower reading level classrooms because they don't have a desire to read. This leads to a downward spiral as "such an attitude demeans them as readers, assuming that because they will not read, they cannot read" (Monseau, XIV). Some students are put into a slower moving class because they are slow readers, but they are still able to comprehend the material. The major problems that Cassidy, a retired English professor, notes through collaborative research in regards to struggling readers were their issues with fluency, vocabulary, comprehension, and motivation (Rybakova, Piotrowski, Harper 38).

There was a student named Jason in one of the classrooms Monseau audited. She documented,

Although Jason was obviously engaged by the book [*After the First Death*], when the students began reading sections of the novel aloud, he proved to be one of the least fluent readers. He frequently stumbled over words, reading haltingly and with little expression, and Jean sometimes had to fill in words for him. I wondered whether Jason had been in the "bottom group" since primary school partly because his lack of skill at reading aloud had been interpreted as a lack of comprehension. Despite his lack of fluency, Jason knew just about every plot detail in the book... (4-5).

When Monseau began her research, Jason's teacher told her that Jason was a troublemaker in class (12). He was mostly a D student who missed 40 days of school the year before, but after reading *After the First Death* he became very engaged and enjoyed coming to class (90).

Students know instinctively when authority figures are insulting their intelligence. It encourages them not to try, and they end up wearing the "I don't care" shell in defense (12). Monseau was supervising both an advanced freshman English class, as well as a freshman slower reading class, yet both classrooms were reading *After the First Death*. Monseau actually found that the lower level readers were responding more with the literature, and that the advanced readers were more concerned with the "right" answer their teacher wanted (91).

Reading is a social experience. Surveys and interviews show that family and friends motivate students to read. Students choose to read literature based on recommendations they get from friends, family, and even teachers. Students also tend to become more interested and engaged with texts when they talk about them, whether orally or in writing (Rybakova, Piotrowski, Harper 38).

YAL also bridges the skill gap needed to read the classics in high school. Wadham looked at texts taught in kindergarten through eighth grade, and then books for grades nine through twelve. There were many children's books for seventh and eighth graders, such as a Japanese tale, and then the following year the students were required to read *Metamorphoses* (Wadham, Ostenson 23). It's too great of a leap in skill level, leading readers to have lower confidences and resenting class materials. People have motivation when they feel in control, feel they have skill or competence in the area, have appropriate challenges, and have clear goals and feedback (123). YAL deserves a valued and respected position in secondary language arts classrooms. Students often react negatively to teacher-assigned books. G. Robert Carlsen and

Anne Sherrill reported that most of the high school students they interviewed did not enjoy the classics their teachers assigned because the novels were too difficult to understand, seemed to be written in a different language, were often very confusing, had meanings that were too vague to comprehend, and did not relate to them and their present-day lives (Santoli, Wagner 66-67).

On the other hand, some teachers believe that *only* struggling readers, or those in lower grade levels should read YAL as it's easier to read and would not benefit more advanced readers.

Except,

What we often forget is that bright students are not necessarily more advanced socially or emotionally than other students their age...We also forget sometimes that conflicts that seem trivial or inconsequential to us are earth-shattering importance to young people.

Bright students, who may have more capacity for enjoying subtle vicarious experiences than slow ones do, may still have great difficulty becoming involved with the aging, impotent, cynical characters of Hemingway or Fitzgerald. (Monseau 33)

Students can learn about their own social problems by first becoming aware of the relationship between literature and life, and then secondly, thinking critically about fictional events that mirror their own lives (24).

## **How to Implement YAL into the Curriculum**

### General Concepts

So how can YAL become implemented into the curriculum? There are some general things to consider. New Common Core Standards for English and Math were released in 2010. English is now separated into reading, writing, speaking, and listening. This makes it easy to divide assignments based on meeting each of these standards (Wadham, Ostenson 15). Elementary and high schools are meant to prepare students for college and/or entry level jobs, which require problem solving and brainstorming skills. Many teachers think of students as an “empty vessel” in which they can tell them what is important about a text. By not allowing students to formulate their own opinions or ideas about the text, it takes away students skills to interpret texts on their own, and inhibits the development of problem solving skills (Monseau 27). Jerome Harste, a retired professor from Indiana University, suggests to "use writing as a tool for thinking rather than... a formula for how ‘good essays’ ought to be written” (Louel, Dail, Stallworth 58). Many college classrooms are more focused on developing critical thinking skills through classroom discussions. The writing assignments involve arguing one’s own thesis, and using quotes from the text to support that argument. Researchers argue we learn a lot from asking questions, experimenting, evaluating results, and trying new approaches even if results are not what we expect. But many high school students get scared if they’re unsure about the materials because they see questions implying that they’re “wrong” (Wadham, Ostenson 122).

### Choosing a Text

Time restraints are a reality when picking texts for a curriculum. However, YAL can be paired with shorter texts, and YAL is generally shorter than classic literature (Louel, Dail, Stallworth 58). Wadham has excellent suggestions on how to pick out appropriate texts, both in

skill and topic, using a 3 tier pyramid model. The three things to consider are reader and task dimension, qualitative data, and quantitative data. All parts are equally considered when choosing a text (Wadham, Ostenson 20-21). Reader and task dimensions involve how interested the reader is, their prior experiences, and attitudes. Quantitative data involves using formulas based off of how many letters per word, words per sentence, as well as the difficulty of the vocabulary to assign a grade level to a book. Qualitative data is broken down into six sections: format, audience, level of meaning, structure, language conventions, and knowledge demands. In general, the unit will feature a strong anchor text which has a guiding question or overarching theme (121).

Just focusing on one of the of the three sections does not give an accurate representation of the book, especially if teachers rely on only the quantitative data to determine a grade level for a novel. Unfortunately, a wide range of books can get the same score. An example would be the books *The Little House*, *Paddington Helps Out*, *The Flunking of Joshua T. Bates*, *Before We Were Free*, *An Abundance of Katherines*, and *Fahrenheit 451* all got a score of 890, or something appropriate for fourth and fifth graders, which *An Abundance of Katherines* and *Fahrenheit 451* are not based off of subject matter (28).

First thing before choosing a text is to come up with a theme with multiple potential essential questions, anchor texts, assessments, supporting texts, and multimodal connections (172). Once that is figured out, it will be easier to find a text that fits with that theme. Wadham divides the process of choosing a text into three steps. Step one: Choose an anchor text and devise essential question or theme based on student needs and interests. Be concerned with the complexity of the theme (25). A good essential question will matter throughout life time and

time again, and raises important additional questions. It can also be answered in different ways (129).

Step two: Develop a unit assessment (130). Essays are still an important written form, yet new forms of writing are of increasing importance. Digital media can be used to enhance traditional assessment. Common Core Standards do not dictate the forms of writing (personal essay, research paper) but rather the modes they should write (inform, argue, or tell a story). Also consider genres professionals write in. Common Core Standards are meant to create career ready students. Many professionals may not write formal essays but rather letters, reports, brochures, or instructions (131-132). Don't forget about oral communication skills, which are often used as a presentation as an end of the unit assessment (132). Step three: Develop learning outcomes and processes for daily instruction (134). Having an end assessment in mind, including the standards they will meet, will make planning the assignments to get there easier (134). Make sure to create social interaction with students with group work or by discussing the text with others (139).

### Choosing *Perks of Being a Wallflower*

In the back of *Integrating Young Adult Literature through the Common Core Standards* by Wadham and Ostenson, there are blank worksheets to fill in for each book to see if it is worthy of teaching and why, and subsequently, what grade it would be appropriate for. This is based off of the three tier model mentioned earlier, broken down into much more specific aspects. I have filled out the worksheet for *Perks of Being a Wallflower* below.

#### **Quantitative**

Flesch-Kincaid- 5.3 (fifth grade)

SMOG- 4.8 (fifth grade)

Coleman-Liau- 6 (sixth grade)



Automated Readability Index- 4.9 (4-5 graders)

Gunning Fog Index'- 7.3 (fairly easy to read)

Dale-Chall-5.9 (5-6 graders)

ATOS/Accelerated Reader- 4.8 (upper grades 9-12) worth 9 points

Lexile- 6 (6th grade) I got all of these scores through Readability-score.com.

Size: 213 pages but pages only 7" by 5" Rating: 2

Font: I am unsure on the font exactly, but it is around size ten and includes serifs. Seems similar to Times New Roman. Rating: 3

Layout: It is an epistolary novel written entirely of letters from Charlie to an unnamed girl. Each letter written is only a few pages long, and there's space in between the letters. The book is divided into four, roughly even parts. Rating: 2

Construction: Paperback, normal soft cover. Rating 3

Organization: Letters have the date and year at the top of each letter. There are no chapter numbers or titles, but there are four "parts." Rating: 2

Illustrations: none

Audience: The quantitative section would rate it to be at a fifth to seventh grade reading level.

Charlie is entering his freshman year of high school and is 15 years old. Most of the supporting characters are a few years older than Charlie, so the reader gets a glimpse into their lives, and subsequently Charlie's possible future. There are a lot of issues brought up that teenagers Charlie's age or older would be experiencing, however, most are not brought into great detail.

Overall, I would suggest this book for a 14 year old, or incoming freshman. Rating: 4

**Levels of meaning**

Theme: How should one live? Figuring out the difference between when it's appropriate to be selfish or put others ahead of one's self. How should one share their ideas? How do you define yourself as a person? Rating: 4

Conflict: Many issues are brought up in this text including dating and sex, suicide, being afraid of going to high school, physical abuse, relationships with parents and siblings, religion, rape, homosexuality and how others react to it, hazing, teen pregnancy, abortion, drugs, alcohol, and sticking up for self. Rating: 4

Connections: Most of the connections are going to be about events students experience within their own high schools, or in social situations with their peers, such as parties. There are also different family dynamics brought into the mix to see how different families interact with each other. Rating: 3

## **Structure**

Setting: It takes place between 1991 and 1992. Most of the events take place in the high school or at the characters' homes in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Not a lot of detail goes into what the place or people look like, but they are more than likely in a predominantly white, middle-class area. Rating: 2

Plot: The novel takes place over one year: from when Charlie enters high school, to just before he enters his sophomore year. It is easy to keep track of how much time has passed between events as each letter has the date on it. The overarching plot is that Charlie becomes friends with senior step-siblings Patrick and Sam. They teach him the ways of the world by inviting him to parties and using recreational drugs. Charlie loves Sam, but she thinks he's too young for her. Charlie ends up dating another girl, Mary Elizabeth, and is scared and reluctant to try sexual things. Even though Sam tells him exactly how to treat her, Mary Elizabeth ends up with a man

who does the exact opposite. By the end, Sam and Patrick are leaving for college and Charlie is sad to be friendless again, but he realizes that he should go out and do something in the world. Even though his best friends are moving away he still has a more positive outlook on life starting his second year of high school than he did at the beginning of the novel.

Characters: Charlie is naïve about the real world, but he's book smart and he tries to please others. His sister, Sam, and Patrick are the more important minor characters as they help Charlie come to experience the world in very different ways by being Charlie's peers. Charlie's English teacher, Bill, also urges Charlie to "participate" more in his life. For the most part they are understanding of his naiveté, even if they do make jokes about it. The minor characters are the main catalyst for what makes Charlie re-evaluate his life. Rating: 3

Point of view: The story is an epistolary in 1st person point of view through Charlie. Charlie writes with a stream of consciousness. His writing does improve a little as the story progresses because of his English assignments. Rating: 3

### **Language Conventions**

Style and tone: Charlie writes very straight forward about the events that transpire, with little reflection on how he feels about the events. The sentences are very plain and short as he doesn't use descriptive language. However, the stream of consciousness can go off topic and take a while to return to the story. Rating: 2

Literary devices: **Characterization**: "I don't think that there is a favorite in our family. There are three of us and I am the youngest. My brother is the oldest. He is a very good football player and likes his car. My sister is very pretty and mean to boys and she is in the middle. I get straight A's now like my sister and that is why they leave me alone. My mom cries a lot during TV programs. My dad works a lot and is an honest man...My Aunt Helen was my favorite person in

the whole world. She is my mom's sister. She got straight A's when she was a teenager and she used to give me books to read." (5)

"They both told me to have a seat, and they both seemed to mean it, so I took a seat. I listened to Nothing yell at the field. And I listened to his play-by-play analysis. And I figured out that this was a kid who knew football very well. He actually knew football as well as my brother. Maybe I should call Nothing "Patrick" from now on since that is how he introduced himself, and that is what Sam calls him. Incidentally, Sam has brown hair and very very pretty green eyes. That kind of green that doesn't make a big deal about itself. I would have told you that sooner, but under the stadium lights, everything looked kind of washed out. It wasn't until we went to the Big Boy, and Sam and Patrick started to chain-smoke that I got a good look at her. The nice thing about the Big Boy was the fact Patrick and Sam didn't just throw inside jokes and make me struggle to keep up. Not at all. They asked me questions." (19)

**Anecdotes:** "The point, though, is that there is a guy in shop class named 'Nothing.'...The kids started calling him Patty when his real name is Patrick. And 'Nothing' told these kids, 'Listen you either call me Patrick, or you call me nothing.'" 13 His description of family dinner pages 56-60. The gossip about other students Patrick and Charlie share on pages 157-159.

**Foreshadowing:** There is a motif of eating French fries leading to comfort, "I don't really remember much of what happened after that except that my older brother came to Mr. Vaughn's office in my middle school and told me to stop crying. Then, he put his arm on my shoulder and told me to get it out of my system before Dad came home. We then went to eat french fries at McDonald's and he taught me how to play pinball." (3) "The little boy just wiped his nose, looked up at his mom, and said, "French fries" (143). "So, I decided to find another place to go and figure out why people go there. Unfortunately, there aren't a lot of places like that. I don't

know how much longer I can keep going without a friend. I used to be able to do it very easily, but that was before I knew what having a friend was like. It's much easier not to know things sometimes. And to have french fries with your mom be enough." (144) "Then, she asked me what I wanted, and I told her I wanted to go to McDonald's like we did when I was little and got sick and stayed home from school. So, we went there. And it was so nice to be with my mom and eat French fries." (212)

It is noted early that there was something bad that happened in aunt Helen's life, but it is not revealed until later, "My Aunt Helen lived with the family for the last few years of her life because something very bad happened to her. Nobody would tell me what happened then even though I always wanted to know. When I was around seven, I stopped asking about it because I kept asking like kids always do and my Aunt Helen started crying very hard." (5) "I will not say who. I will not say when. I will just say that my aunt Helen was molested. I hate that word. It was done by someone who was very close to her. It was not her dad. She finally told her dad. He didn't believe her because of who it was. A friend of the family. That just made it worse. My grandma never said anything either. And the man kept coming over for visits." (90)

Sister is acting weird on 108, then admits on 116 she's pregnant.

"And I made Aunt Helen a promise to only cry about important things because I would hate to think that crying as much as I do would make crying for Aunt Helen less than it is." (93) "When I thought that, I started to cry....When I realized that this was the first time I cried since I made my aunt Helen the promise not to cry unless it was for something important. I had to go outside because I couldn't hide it from anyone anymore." (118-119)

**Point of view:** 1st person epistolary

**Stream of Conscious:** Tells story of Nothing, “Oh, incidentally, my sister asked for her “Autumn Leaves” mix tape back. She listens to it all the time now.” (13).

Talks about dentist, then MASH, then his cavity (14-18).

“I love Twinkies, and the reason I am saying that is because we are all supposed to think of reasons to live.” (50).

“I wonder what it will be like when I leave this place. The fact that I will have to have a roommate and buy shampoo. I thought how great it would be to go to my senior prom three years from now with Sam. I hope it’s on a Friday. And I hope I will be a valedictorian at graduation. I wonder what my speech will be. And if Bill would help me with it if he didn’t go to New York and write plays. Or maybe he would even if he was in New York writing plays. I think that would be especially nice of him. I don’t know. The Fountainhead is a very good book. I hope I am being a filter.” (167).

**Flashback:** Michael killed himself (3). Helen’s death December 24th 1983 (90-92). Thinking of when he went to the zoo with Helen and the cow pooped on its calf (85). How everyone reacted to the last episode of MASH (16-18).

**Dialogue:** “Did you see that movie?” “I did. I saw it with Harold.” “What do you think?” “She is just lovely.”... (15).

“Are you seeing anything, Charlie?” “Light.” “Does it feel good?” “Uh-huh.”... (35).

“I know how your mom feels about me. I know Helen, too. There was one time...” (58).

Rating: 2

Knowledgeable demands: There are a few references to the early 1990’s or late 1980’s that current technologically advanced students might not understand, like mixed tapes and the lack of cell phones which can make communication harder. There’s also pop culture references to the

show M\*A\*S\*H, The Smiths, and Charlie references book many book titles that he reads for Bill. Rating: 2

Envisioning independent readers: There are many text-to-life connections that can be made through this book with high school students. Just the fact that they have recently changed schools would be a good touching point, but there are so many types of conflicts brought up in this books, chances are a student has dealt with at least one of them. Most of the letters are written with spoken vernacular, but Charlie will throw in some new vocabulary he's learned, so students can strengthen their vocabulary slowly without being intimidated. Since Charlie is spare in his descriptions of events, students at times will have to piece together what is happening between the lines. Rating: 3

Adolescent development: Charlie's main obstacle is finding an identity for himself, which is often what young teenagers struggle with. He has to figure out what is actually beneficial to his friends instead of enabling them, which takes a high level of maturity for friendship that may be difficult for teenagers to understand. Rating: 4

Individual makeup and experience: Charlie is a teenager who is growing up in a middle-class suburban area. Either the reader will be in a similar upbringing, or it is a common enough setting a reader would be familiar with it. Many individuals like Charlie would find themselves in similar social situations of trying to make new friends while exploring things like alcohol and sexuality. Many teens are also unsure of themselves like Charlie, even if they aren't as quiet or shy as he is, so they may relate to him on a personal level. Rating: 2

### **Reader's aptitude**

Interest: The familiarity of a high school setting would make it easy for students to transport themselves into the shoes of Charlie. While Charlie is not involved in a lot of activities, his

friends have diverse interests and hobbies such as sports, acting, and music that could interest the reader. Rating: 3

Experience: The knowledge demands for this novel are fairly low as it takes place in an almost modern time setting. There are some pop culture references that may not be understood, but they are not essential to understanding the meaning of the story. Students who have experienced the social problems brought up in this story can relate to how the characters react to these issues, while readers naïve to these situations can learn and experience them like Charlie is. Rating: 2

Motivation: Since there are many issues brought up with this novel, it would be hard to not be interested in any of them. People may also be interested in the love story between Sam and Charlie throughout and curious to know if they every end up with each other eventually. Rating: 3

### **Task dimensions and text complexity**

Having students fill out a sheet with literary devices for each section will help them realize how they play a part in the overall narrative arc, and how they fit in, such as foreshadowing. Doing a research paper on one of the issues brought up in the novel will give the text more influence on how they perceive the world. Rating: 3

### **Overall assessment**

Because the novel is in a familiar setting, readers will be able to put themselves in the story easily. It is also an easy, quick read which will have unwilling readers more willing to read it. However, there are some very difficult situations that arise in the novel that take maturity discussing. Because of the age of the main character, I would recommend this novel for a freshman English class, possibly sophomore.

### Assignment and Exercise Suggestions



Once a text is chosen, the next step is thinking of assignments and exercises that relate to the text. One of the reasons we read texts is to discuss them, and that means that the reader has questions that not everyone agrees on. Monseau encourages discussion by having her students jot down four or five questions about the text that they read, rather than giving them a list of study questions. The students' questions fell into five categories: character motivation, plot, author motivation, effect on the reader, and evaluative statements about the book (19). Students can experience the challenge and satisfaction of exploring literature from their own perspective, rather than from that of their teacher or another critic. They can address these questions in their individual writing, addressing questions in small groups, or as a class (21). Monseau asks students, "What do you think would be the ideal English class?" Some of their responses included, "Reading enjoyable books," "A class with nothing but reading," and "Read novels all the time and discuss them in class as a group" (11).

There are three different types of assignments that fulfill the Common Core Standards. The first is writing exercises, such as personal essays, as well as more creative, fun activities. These include: make a one act play starring book characters, play as detectives expanding the plot of one of the characters, make a rap song about a character or event. If there is time in class, students could expand on their reasons for what they chose (48-53). Students can put on a talk show interviewing a character. Students can also interview real people in their lives about experiences that relate to what happens in the books read (53-55). Monseau found that impromptu writing sessions led to better essays that had a personal connection with characters than regular assignments that seemed formulaic (62). Students can respond to the book through writing, which could be a journal, short story, letter, newspaper article, song, drawing, or poem

(68). Having students work in groups, or discuss as a class, gives them fresh perspectives, unlike reading alone and answering questions alone (93).

Katherine Kuta's *What A Novel Idea! Projects and Activities for Young Adult Literature* has excellent suggestions on assignments, and even has blank exercises throughout the book to copy. She breaks the assignments up into three different requirement parts. For writing assignments, she suggests an "elements of fiction chart" in which students can find quotes that show conflict, setting, irony etc. (7-8). Students can create "what if" situations for the protagonist and they need to use inferences and support for the character's decisions (19-20). Write a newspaper article about an event that takes place in novel (23-24). Write an additional chapter to the novel (31-32) or a new ending (33-34).

The second section is activities that are for viewing and representing the book. These are more creative and artistic projects, including making a poster advertisement for the novel (46-47), creating a book jacket or book cover (56-57), and comparing and contrasting the novel to the movie if there is one (75-76).

The final section is to meet speaking and listening standards. Students can write a one-minute book talk on a novel not read by the whole class, where they give a short summary, describe the protagonist, state the theme in one sentence, and lastly critique the book (90-91). Have students create a response poem based on theme or feelings (94-95). Individuals or groups can act out a scene from the novel (118-119), and students can have impromptu response speeches where they pull a question about the book out of a hat (131-134).

Every year there is an English festival held in April. 2,400 middle school and high school students read seven YA books before attending. They don't need to be the brightest students, but they are interested and love reading. The goal is to have the students see reading as a pleasure.

There are insight sessions where the students role play, do group work, and discuss. At the end of the of the English festivals, one student asked, "Why can't we do this in English class? It's fun." (Monseau 48).

### Things to Discuss in *Perks of Being a Wallflower*

As stated earlier, teachers should not jump into a text, assuming they know everything they will talk about with a piece, or not the class will respond. However, there are always going to be important or significant passages relevant to discuss, which different classes may have various responses to. Some general questions that can be asked to the class at the very beginning of *Perks of Being a Wallflower* are: Who do you think Charlie is writing to? If he wants to stay anonymous, why does he write "Love always, Charlie" at the bottom? Do you think all of the names are changed? Once the novel is finished, another general question to ask is what they think the importance of the story taking place over a single year would be. Some of the large themes include Charlie's reaction to his aunt Helen's death, the idea of doing something with your life, and how his relationship with Sam develops.

Charlie at least briefly mentions Helen on pages 5, 16, 22, 26, 58, 60, 69, 74, 76, 79, 85, 89-92, 93, 204, and 208-209. Some of these moments are lighthearted and recall memories they shared together. Others foreshadow the challenges she had in her childhood and her death. It is finally revealed on 89 that she died of a car crash on Charlie's birthday. It has been subtly hinted at previously, but on 92 it is more direct when he says, "Despite everything my mom and doctor and dad have said to me about blame, I can't stop thinking what I know. And I know that my aunt Helen would still be alive today if she had just bought me one present like everybody else." Do the students believe that was why aunt Helen went out? Was it a genuine car crash, or was it a suicide based on the unhappiness revealed in Helen's life? Another important moment comes

quickly after when Charlie makes a promise at Helen's grave to “only cry about important things because I would hate to think that crying as much as I do would make crying for Aunt Helen less than it is” (93). Does Charlie react too emotionally? How does this relate to his quote, “I think if I ever have kids and they are upset, I won't tell them that people are starving in China or anything like that because it wouldn't change the fact that they were upset. And even if somebody else has it much worse, that doesn't really change the fact that you have what you have....Maybe it's good to put things in perspective, but sometimes, I think that the only perspective is to really be there. Like Sam said”? (211-212).

Both Bill and Sam advise Charlie take control of his own life instead of putting others ahead of himself, but they go about it in different ways. Bill does it by encouraging Charlie to “participate” in life and in school. On page 24, Bill brings up the topic for the first time, “Do you always think this much, Charlie?...It’s just that sometimes people use thought to not participate in life.” Charlie takes his advice to heart as in his letters he mentions how he is participating more, “I'm sorry I haven't written to you in a couple of weeks, but I have been trying to “participate” like Bill said...In terms of my participation in things, I am trying to go to social events that they set up in my school. It's too late to join any clubs or anything like that, but I still try to go to the things that I can. Things like the homecoming football game and dance, even if I don't have a date” (28-29). Some moments that actually demonstrate Charlie is making moves for his own happiness include when he decides to get in with the Secret Santa on page 61, he visits aunt Helen's grave by himself on 93, he kisses Sam “the prettiest girl in the room” with Mary Elizabeth sitting right next to him on 135, he asked Susan if she missed Michael on 145, and he sticks up for Patrick against Brad in the cafeteria page 151. At the end, Charlie seems to have almost turned over a new leaf when he writes, “Tomorrow, I start my sophomore year of

high school. And believe it or not, I'm really not that afraid of going. I'm not sure if I will have time to write any more letters because I might be too busy trying to "participate." So, if this does end up being my last letter, please believe that things are good with me, and even when they're not, that they will be soon enough. And I will believe the same about you" (213).

However, there are plenty of moments where Charlie does what he *thinks* others want from him, or he puts other's happiness above his own. He agrees to drive his sister to the abortion clinic because "my sister was counting on me, and this was the first time anyone ever counted on me for anything," not because he thought it was the right thing to do, or he just loved his sister so much (118). When things fall apart and his friends stop talking to him he gives up "participating" and writes, "To tell you the truth, I've just been avoiding everything" (142). Sam calls him out near the end of the novel. In response to Charlie never disagreeing with Mary Elizabeth because that's what Sam told him to do, she says, "Charlie, don't you get it? I can't feel that. It's sweet and everything, but it's like you're not even there sometimes. It's great that you can listen and be a shoulder to someone, but what about when someone doesn't need a shoulder. What if they need the arms or something like that? You can't just sit there and put everybody's lives ahead of yours and think that counts as love. You just can't. You have to do things" (200). She then asks him if he wanted Patrick to kiss him those few days. He admits he didn't, but that he understood and he let Patrick do what made him feel best because that's what friends were for. Again, Sam doesn't believe that was the best course of action, "But you weren't [being his friend], Charlie. At those times, you weren't being his friend at all. Because you weren't honest with him" (201). This brings up great points about the difference between accepting someone for who they are, and being an enabler to a friend's issues.

Charlie is attracted to Sam, but because he never makes the first move they never end up being a couple. It's interesting to see how he feels about her throughout the novel, and how that changes when she's single or in a relationship, as well as how he reacts to the relationship advice he received from multiple people. Patrick explains that girls want a challenge and that their mothers teach them all about it, pages 22-23. Sam gives dating advice to Charlie on the type of girl Mary Elizabeth is, even though she's completely wrong on 112-113. He is understandably sad to see Sam with Craig, "But the thing is that I can hear Sam and Craig having sex, and for the first time in my life, I understand the end of that poem. And I never wanted to. You have to believe me" (96). However, Charlie seems to genuinely care about Sam since he is more concerned about her happiness than her being with him. He is upset that Sam is sad when her and Craig break up, instead of thinking this is his chance to date Sam on 179. He doesn't really like the way that Craig sees Sam, and generalizes it to, "I just think it's bad when a boy looks at a girl and thinks that the way he sees the girl is better than the girl actually is. And I think it's bad when the most honest way a boy can look at a girl is through a camera" (49). How do the students feel when Sam says, "I want to make sure that the first person you kiss loves you. Okay?" on page 70? Do they care that she is technically cheating on her boyfriend? Are they rooting them on?

There are many passages that are significant to the novel or life events, even if the quotes stand alone or may not coincide with specific themes. You can discuss what "I feel infinite" (33) or "and in that moment, I swear we were infinite" could mean (39). How does the poem on 70-73 fit in with Charlie's story? Why does he include it in the letter where he does? Which one do students agree with more, "I don't know if it's better to have your kids be happy and not go to college. I don't know if it's better to be close with your daughter or make sure that she has a

better life than you do”? (59-60). How do they cope with this situation, “it’s like looking at all the students and wondering who’s had their heart broken that day, and how they are able to cope with having three quizzes and a book report on top of that. Or wondering who did the heart breaking. And wondering why” (142). What do they make of the story of the two brothers who grew up with an alcoholic dad on 211? Maybe bring up the debate of nature versus nurture. What do the students make of the story of the two rats on page 50? Do they believe that we put up with more difficulties for pleasure? What do they think of Bill’s words, “We accept the love we think we deserve”?(24). What does that say about the sister who puts up with physical abuse? How does that relate to the sister always talking about low self-esteem?

If you want to discuss quotes based on specific themes, then things sexual in nature either occur or are mentioned on pages 2, 12, 21, 27, 44, 70, 96, 110, 113, 114, 124, 126-127, 130, 135, 148, 158, 161, 163, 171, 177. The actual mentioning of suicide is on 2 and 70-73, but it may be hinted at on 92, 96, and 208. Physical abuse is discussed on 6, 11, 24-25, 49, 83, and 86. Characters “hating” parents is on 17, 26, and 56. There's only one mentioning of religion on page 27. Maybe discuss the lack of the mentioning of religion. Rape is brought up on 30-32 and 90. Characters who struggle because of being gay happen on 36, 43, 81, 137, 147 ,150, and 160. Subsequently, there is a bit of hazing pages 82, 147, and 150. One mention of teen pregnancy on 116 and shortly followed by abortion pages 117-119. Characters who are drinking or doing other drugs occur on 35, 45, 56-57, 66, 100, 101-103, 118, 126, 139, 145, 165, and 192.

### *Perks of Being a Wallflower Suggested Assignments*

Discussion is only part of interacting with an assigned reading. Here are some suggestions for in class activities, or homework assignments. On the last day(s) you can watch the movie and have students discuss or write down the similarities and differences. Students

could pick one issue brought up by the novel and offer up a solution, and provide facts about that problem. Have them keep a worksheet of figurative language devices, and have them record quotes for each section as they read along. Students can keep a journal and respond to how they feel about each section they read. This could include any questions they have, and if there are moments of foreshadowing (possibly noted in their worksheet of figurative language devices above), encourage them to take a stab at what they think will happen.

Depending on what central theme or question the unit is being built off of, there are a few classic texts suitable for high school freshmen and sophomores, which could be paired with *Perks of Being a Wallflower*. If the focus is on doing things for oneself, then *Great Expectations* would be good text, as Pip mostly does what others tell him to do, as well as the fact he chases after Estella the whole novel without really ending up with her. Possibly even *Hamlet* with his indecisiveness/procrastination to kill his uncle. *Romeo and Juliet* shows the other side of the coin as both characters go for what they want, but does it end any better for them? *Lord of the Flies* demonstrates how being selfish or thinking about others affects a group of people who are dependent on one another for survival.

If the focus is on a “coming-of-age” story in general, then *Catcher in the Rye*, *The Outsiders*, and *To Kill a Mockingbird* are all good choices for young teens. All three of these novels are quite close to YAL. The main characters are teenagers themselves and they come to define themselves throughout the novel. The main difference between these texts and YAL is that they were published at least fifty years ago. There will be some knowledge demands because of this, mostly pertaining to societal rules at the time.



### Other YAL Text Suggestions

*Perks of Being a Wallflower* is just one of thousands of YA novels that are out today. If you want other novels that are around controversial topics, Rybakova suggests using *Between Shades of Gray*, which is about the Holocaust and genocide, *Thirteen Reasons Why*, which focuses on a girl who committed suicide, and *The Particular Sadness of Lemon Cake*, which is about a broken family (39). *Stargirl* is about accepting others how they are, even if they don't fit the standard "normal" (Crowe "AP and YA" 127). For more genred novels, *The Vanishing Chip* is a high-tech mystery novel. To incorporate Native American history, *Walker of Time* is about a Hopi boy who gets transported back in time 1250 A.D. into an Arizona tribe (128). Rachel Wadham provides a list of several websites or sources to find other YAL in *Integrating Young Adult Literature through the Common Core Standards* (127).

For teachers of other subjects, there's plenty of options as well. For History or Government classes, Roberts recommends *Maze Runner* and *Mississippi Trial, 1955*. Those teaching Science may enjoy *The Compound*, *Life as We Knew It*, and *Tuesdays With Morrie* (Roberts 93-95). Some History teachers may think that there if there's no YA authors during the time period then they aren't able to use YAL in their classrooms. However, there's lots of historical fiction YAL novels that would be set during the time period you may be teaching (Louel, Dail, Stallworth 60).

## Conclusion

In the world of publishing, YAL is a relatively new development. It's changed rapidly to transform to what it is today. YAL is less of a genre, and more of a target audience. Considering the target audience is teenagers and young adults, it would make sense to use these novels in high school classrooms, where the students are teenagers and young adults. Students are already taking interest in these novels outside of the classroom, and we should encourage these reading habits.

Teachers are becoming more accepting of these novels in classrooms. YAL could not be in classrooms in the 1950's because it didn't even exist! In recent years YAL has exploded in popularity, not only in readership but in authorship as well. According to the American Library Association, there were 4,929 young adult novels published in 2010 alone. I believe that in the future, whether it's ten years or fifty years from now, YAL will become a staple in the high school classroom. As younger generations come into the teaching workforce growing up reading YAL, the more likely they will want to include it in their teachings.

Like any other type of fiction, some YAL novels are more complex than others, which is actually useful for teaching purposes. This means there are some novels more suitable for freshman readers as an introduction into close readings and stepping stone for the classics, while other books can be used for senior readers, and may take the place of the central text all together. The novel I suggested using, *Perks of Being a Wallflower*, is an excellent leaping off point for students, but there are plenty of YAL texts that would be appropriate for older, more experienced readers.

One example would be *Looking for Alaska* by John Green. The main character has to deal with an unexpected death that may either be an accident or a suicide. He never gets clear

answers, but must find a way to move on with his life. This book needs a more mature reader to truly understand the situation and to pick out the literary devices.

It would be a good idea to implement YAL into each year of the curriculum. There are classics that are suitable for freshmen, and there are more complex texts that are for seniors. The same goes for YAL. Though it is the new kid on the block, YAL brings a lot of value in and out of the classroom. Hopefully it will be appreciated for its teaching value soon.

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