



EXPLORATION OF PARANORMAL AND DYSTOPIA IN YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE

BY

**DR. BEN-FRED OHIA, DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH AND LITERARY STUDIES,
RIVERS STATE UNIVERSITY, NKPOLU-OROWORUKWO, PORT HARCOURT,
RIVERS STATE, NIGERIA**

Abstract:

Authors have made frantic efforts to educate the Young Adults in the society through literary education in order to better their grow-up. Initially, Young Adult Literature was made for teens of 12 – 18 year age range but this later spanned to Young Adult of 16 – 29 year olds who form the largest group of audience of Young Adult Literature (YAL). The paper explores Young Adult Literature as paranormal and dystopian fiction since the novels for the teens are based on the subject of an imagined future world for the Young Adults where dehumanising, frightening and anarchist societies' burdens are heavy on them. Young Adult Literature is paranormal as it explains to the teenagers what natural forces or science cannot explain. This paper explores the paranormal and dystopian in Young Adult literature and with the trail blazed for Young Adult Literature, a lot of Young Adults have been living sociable lives, manage their emotions, chaos, identity struggles, sexual abuse, drug/alcohol use and suicide. This paper focuses on how novelists through Young Adult Literature (YAL) connect readers to transformation stories to tackle the deepest and darkest issues that teens face in life. In the finding of this paper, Young Adult Literature (YAL) turns out to be therapeutic and a non-scientific discovery that helps to transfigure and transform teens to good as they grow to Adulthood. Consequently, the paper recommends the use of Young Adult literature in the secondary schools and higher schools such as the colleges of education and polytechnics to better the lots of the Young Adults.

Keywords: Paranormal, Dystopia, Young Adult, Young Adult Literature, Young Adult Fiction.

Introduction:

Many books on Young Adult Literature feature teens who are on solo quest to save the world or overcome forces of evil. For instance, Suzanne Collins' *Hunger Games* trilogy is chockfull of prominent themes from Young Adult fiction, chief among them Katniss *Everdeen as the solo heroine*. The hallmarks of Young Adult Literature include love triangles. This is one problem prevalent in high school. It is not out of place to see two guys fighting for one girl's attention. As important as this theme is, Young Adult Literature is inundated with such stories, love triangles abound, and the "twilight" saga too. Taylor Lautner, Kristen Stewart and Robert Pattinson in the movie versions are the first to start this ongoing trend.

The Roots/Beginning

The roots of Young Adult Literature go back to when "teenagers" were given their distinction as a social demographic: World War II. "Seventeenth Summer" released by Maureen Daly in 1942, is considered as the trail blazer written and published explicitly for teenagers, according to Cart (2001). It was a novel largely for girls about first love. In its footsteps followed other romances, and sport novels for boys. The name "Young Adult" was coined by the Young Adult history services association during the 1960s to represent 12 – 18 years age range – novels of the time, like S. E. Hinton's *The Outsider* offered a mature contemporary realism directed at adolescents. The focus on culture and serious themes on Young Adult paved the way for authors to write with more candor about teen issues in the 1970s, Cart said.

History of Young Adult Literature cannot be complete without the mention of the golden age. The first "golden age" of Young Adult Literature in 1970s featured drama and realism. The second peak in the genre happened about 2000 and coincided with "Harry Potter" from "Sweet Valley" to "Hunger Games", teens were drawn to emotion and shared experience. This story was originally published in 2013. In 1998, just as Harry Bells and Katmis were on the verge of owning the front shelves of bookstores everywhere, the Young Adult library service association launched Teen Read week in an effort to mold adolescent book worms.

With Young Adult literature, many Young Adults do not need an excuse to seek out the written word: 16 – 29 year olds are the largest group checking out books from their local

libraries, according to a pew survey, wizards, vampires and dystopian future worlds did not always dominate the genre, which hit its last peak of popularity in 1970s with the success of controversial novels by the likes of Judy Blume.

In the years between, Young Adult has managed to capture the singular passions of the teen audience over a spectrum of subgenres. According to Michael Cart, Young Adult bears asking why Young Adult fiction (YAF) has become so successful. The proof just may be in the timeline. The first golden age is associated with the authors who the parents of today's teens recognised: Judy Blume, Lois Duncan and Robert Cormier. The Young Adult books of the 1970s remain true time capsules of the high school experience and the drama of being misunderstood such as books like Cormier's "The Chocolate War". But once these books developed into "simple-problem novels" – divorce, drug abuse – teens grew tired of the formulaic stories. The 1960s welcomed in more genre fictions, like horror from Christopher Pike and the beginning of R. L. Stive's "fear street" series and adolescent high drama, while the 1990s were an eclipse for Young Adult with fewer teenagers around to soak up Young Adult Literature due to low birth rates in the mid 1970s, books for teens and middle-scholars bloomed. But a baby boom from 1992 resulted in a renaissance among teen readers and the second golden age beginning in 2000, Cart said.

Paranormal and dystopia tales connect so well with teens. According to Jennifer Lyah Barnes, "just like adolescence is between childhood and adulthood, paranormal, or other, is between human supernatural". "Teens are caught between two worlds, childhood and adulthood, and in Young Adult, they can navigate those two worlds and some time dualities of other worlds". Now, reveling in the continued success of fantasy subgenres and series, Young Adult Fiction (YAF) is enjoying a sustained boom rather an afterglow.

Nostalgia: It's not surprising that a Young Adult (YA) is always dealing with transformation, whether it be realistic or supernatural, "author publisher Lizzil Skurnick said. It shows teen life in full chaos and that means constant change". Young Adult (YA) spans and mashes up multiple genres, it connects readers to transformation stories best through emotion. Young Adult (YA) novelists tackle the deepest and darkest issues that teens face, from identity struggles and sexual abuse to drug/alcohol use and suicide. Authors like John Green write about the best and worst of adolescence fearlessly and honestly, building a trust within readers, Peterson said.

Meg Cabot's Teen Escapism and Empowered Heroines

Because Young Adult fiction is always changing, anything goes, said Elissa Petruzzi, web and Young Adult section editor for book club magazine. From sci-fi-fantasy, paranormal and dystopian to classic romance, mystery and contemporary favourites, writers can explore any subject, and readers are eager for new worlds.

Contemporary standalones, non-serial books, have returned to the fore front as a lighter response to dark paranormal and dystopian series, Barnes said. A real opportunity for growth lies in diversity, Peterson said, although Young Adult already surpasses children's fiction in that aspect. Cart is pleased to see more gay, lesbian and transgender characters in Young Adult books but admits that there is a multicultural hole, especially for Hispanic teens.

Cabot strives to amp up the empowerment angle for girls. As a teen, she always looked for role model heroines, so all of her female characters "kick ass" the genre is also just as open to male readers as it is to females, said Trin Setelius, a writer for the Young Adult (YA) book addicts' Blog. "Boys and girls can fall in love with the same books". Because filling gaps is an area where Young Adult succeeds, the "new adult" genre has emerged over the past few years (beginning with St. Martins' Press coming the phrase in 2009), featuring characters in their late teens and early 20s going through the college experience and a second adolescence. Only time will tell whether it's a trend or a building genre, Petruzzi said. Young Adult literature (YAL) has become popular with readers of all ages and has even allowed parents to see what their teens care about through what they are reading, Skurnick said. After all, 55% of Young Adult books purchased in 2012 were bought by adults between 18 and 44 years old according to Bowker market research. "I don't think people are reading it just to relive their teen's moments", Peterson said. "It's so interesting to see what happens when there is all of that living emotion and the heaviness of all that emotion, without the experience. It's such a terrible and beautiful thing to witness.

Dystopia in Young Adult Literature

Dystopia fiction/literature is a form of speculative fiction that offers a vision of the future. "Dystopias" are societies in cataclysmic decline with characters, who battle environment ruin, technological control, and government oppression" (<https://www.masterclass.com>articles>). It is a genre describing an imaginary place where life is extremely bad because of deprivations,

such that are faced by the Young Adults in Young Adult Literature. “Utopian and dystopian fictions are genres by speculative fiction that explore social and political structures. Young Adult Literature (YAL) as a dystopian fiction is considered to be reaction against more idealistic utopian world (which is non-existent); usually set in the future on near-feature societies where life and social structures are in calamitous decline. It explores the darkest facets of the human mind and human nature.

Dystopia is an imagined place or state in which everything is unpleasant or bad (comatose), a strict regime and an oppressed society. Young Adult Literature as dystopian fiction presents an altered world with altered rules, rules which eventually become repellent and adversarial to the people, especially teenagers. Dystopian society is a hypothetical or imaginary society often found in science fiction and fantasy literature. The dystopian fictions as in Young Adult Literature, imagines a future society in decay. It is a modern literature genre invented by Yevgony Zamyatin in his novel, *We*, 1919 “other dystopian novels include Huxley’s *Brave New World* and George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (<https://gosparkpress.com>genre>).

“The hunger games” was one of the original dystopian, series, featuring futuristic, dark settings where teens battle the odds (or Adults) to save humanity. Veronica Roth’s “Divergent” trilogy continues in this vein with weapon toting, butt-kicking heroine tris prior (Shailene Woodley on the big screen).

Paranormal In Young Adult Literature

Paranormal refers to strange behaviour that is impossible to explain by known natural forces or by science. It is magical relations, mind-out of body experiences, voices coming from external sources with sensory mediation. Paranormal literature is supernatural in form. For example, “The appearance of a ghost, very strange experience and not able to be explained by what scientists known about nature and the world” (<https://www.all-about-pyschology.com>).

In paranormal literature, we are into vampires, werewolves, and mermaids or zombies, shape-shifters and fairies. Paranormal plots have long been a fixture of Young Adult Literature.

Margaret Stohl and Kami Garcia revamped the witches trend in their southern Gothic “Beautiful creatures” series.

Themes of Paranormal Literature

In this paper, we hope to identify a framework for a serious literary approach to Young Adult Literature on our continent by exploring basic theoretical and critical issues pertinent to this theme. According to Wilson-Togoe (1992), “Young Adult Literature is a literature book that is produced largely with a teen’s interest and needs in mind, one that deals honestly with Young Adults, portrays them candidly and in a medium to which they can respond with imagination and pleasure” (p.18). Some of the themes in Young Adult Literature include but not limited to: Good versus Evil, Absent Parents, Discovering Abilities and others.

Good versus evil: it is usually pretty easy to tell the good guys from the bad guys in Young Adult Literature. This tension often takes the form of a “good versus evil” struggle, such as in Cascendra Clare’s “The mental instruments” series about shadow hunters with angelic powers (Lily Collins played heroine clary in the movie). Naturally, not all the shadow hunters use their powers for good.

Absent parents: where have all the parents gone? Usually through tragic or mysterious circumstances, parents are often absent in Young Adult Literature, leaving their children to fend for themselves; perhaps most famously in the “Heavy Potters” books. Relatives or parental figures appear, like Sirius Black (although poor Sirius didn’t stick around for long). Daniel Radcliffe and Gary Oldman played Harry and Sirius in the movies. Bad parenting is also on display: case in point, the dreaded dursleys.

Discovering abilities: in paranormal literature everything is perfectly normal until the character wakes up feeling different one morning or suddenly stumbles on a hidden ability. The ordinary becoming extraordinary has long been a fixture of Young Adult Literature/fiction. It personifies the confusion of identity, as well as empowering characters as they realize they are more than average, like Rick Riordan’s “Percy Jackson” series. Hogan Kerman is only twelve when he learns he is a son of the Greek god Poseidon and can manipulate water. Paranormal activity as found in Young Adult Literature refers to any event or situation outside the scope of scientific reasoning.

Themes of Dystopian Literature/Fiction: the following themes reveal general concerns dystopian fiction writers. Their concern is about social and political structures that they explore in their fiction. These themes create cohesion in the interpretation of the Young Adult

Literature texts. “The concept & cohesion is a semantic one; it refers to the relations of meaning that exist within a text and that define it as a text. Cohesion occurs where the interpretation of some elements in the discourse requires or is dependent on the interpretation of another (Nta 2005, p.25).

Government control: many of the novels in Dystopia and Young Adult Literature have an oppressive government or – in some cases – no government at all.

Environmental destruction: the books invite the readers to consider the way to care for the planet and imagine what might happen if we do not improve environmental habits.

Advanced science or technology: many books on dystopia use advanced science or technology as a tool that the oppressive powers use to control (and sometimes distract) its people.

Survival: the books on dystopia fiction address the protagonist’s struggle to survive, highlighting the severity of the dystopian landscape.

Dangers of conformity: the dystopian novels address the conflict between societal and individual needs. Other ask readers to imagine how giving up one’s individuality and conforming to societal ideologies could be dangerous.

Other areas covered by the genre are: susceptibility to current events, origin of reactivity, political and social influence, etc.

The reality of the situation in Young Adult Fiction (Vogels 1996)

However, the literature is not boring in subject matter to young people. Rather, it contains exciting intriguing plots and characters (Christenbary, 1997). Also Young Adult Fiction (YAF) usually has a concise plot with a time span of two months or less, as well as focuses on the present and future in the life of one central character (Vogels 1996, p.98).

Purposes: Young Adult Literature (YAL) serves a number of purposes. It teaches adolescents about diverse peoples and the world beyond their community, provides pleasure reading, demonstrates the range of human emotions and allows adolescents to experience them as a result of reading quality literature, reveals the reality of life, provides vicarious experiences, focuses on “essentials” that make order out chaos, depicts the functions of

institutions of society, allows readers to escape into the realms of fantasy, introduces readers to excellent writers and writing, and increases literacy and the ability to analyse literature.

Ofcourse, Young Adult Literature (YAL) cannot provide these benefits unless adolescents actually read the books. In connecting adolescents and their literature one to one, Patrick Jones (2003) provides a different idea on purchasing Young Adult Literature books (excerpt from Young Adult Literature (YAL) exploration, education and appreciation by K. Bucher, M. L. Manning 2006, pp.9-10).

Themes: Although some children's and adult's books appeal to Young Adults, literature written primarily for Young Adults should reflect several of these books. It should reflect Young Adults' age and development by addressing their reading abilities, thinking levels, and interest levels; it should deal with contemporary issues, problems, and experience with characters to whom adolescence can relate. This includes topics such as dealing with parents and other adults in authority, facing illness and death: dealing with peer pressure, specifically relating to drugs, alcohol, and sexual experimentation; and facing the realities of addiction and pregnancy.

It should consider contemporary world perspectives including cultural, social and gender diversity; environmental issues; global politics; and international interdependence.

Characteristics: Young Adult Literature (YAL) reflects the changes that adolescents are experiencing. Making their first excursions into adult territory, adolescents are learning to take responsibility for their own action. Thus, Young Adult Literature (YAL) reflects their experiences with conflicts, focuses on themes that interest young people, includes young protagonist and mostly young characters, and has language common to Young Adult (YA) (Vogels 1996, p.60). Rather than being watered down in content of style, it is often sophisticated, artistic and compelling (Christerbary 1997, p.101).

Although Young Adult Fiction (YAF) no longer shies away from plots that centre on topics once considered only for adults, authors of Young Adult Literature (YAL) use less graphics details while still conveying the message.

The rise of Young Adult Literature (YAL): Young Adult Literature (YAL) has grown and expanded in the last 50 years. It has interesting topics, themes, and environments. *The Outsiders* is a book written by a teenager and it hooks teens, unlike books about adolescence

written by adults, *The Outsiders* refuses to be nostalgic and sugar-coated, and it has remained popular, even fifty years later. Young Adult literature was created to fill that gap between books written for children and those written for adults.

Formula of Young Adult Literature (YAL) Books

In the 1980s and 1990s, there was a formula for these books. The main character was a teen dealing with teenaged problems, and the story was told through that particular teenager voice. These teen issues were usually coming-of-age topics like sexuality, drinking, drug abuse, identity, beauty, dating, and popularity. Unlike children's books in children's literature, Young Adult Fiction (YAF) often avoids the neat happily-ever-after ending. Many of the books of this time period took place in realistic settings, neighbourhoods, cities, schools, but at the same time fantasy and science fiction novels started appearing.

These books dealt with many of the same problems, but readers enjoyed the escape offered by their fantasy settings. In mid 1980s, classic Young Adult novels emerged, for example, Orson Scott Card's "Ender's Game". In this period, the supposed rules of Young Adult Literature (YAL) were already being broken. The main character is a child rather than a teen, but he (character) narrates the book from a more mature perspective because his intelligence is so advanced. Most of the books take place in an orbiting space station, but life within that station is not that different from the boarding schools in Young Adult books. Ender, the protagonist, struggles with issues of popularity, parent and sibling relationships, and identity, but he also takes on bigger questions about the use of violence, the responsibilities of power, and the morality of genocide.

Also, the typical length for Young Adult Literature (YAL) is closer to 200 pages, but 'Ender's Game' is well over 300 pages. Examples like 'Ender's Game' show the change in Young Adult Fiction (YAF), away from formulaic books about teens to the incredible diversity represented in today's books.

The problem: the problem envisaged in the development of Young Adult literature is that children from non-elitist homes, who hardly attend the nursery school, often enroll for formal education at the end of the pre-operational age and away take a little longer to learn poetry by rote and to read prose - but they would have engaged in role-play at the same age as the children from elitist homes.

Quite unfortunate, the prose genre dominates the entire spectrum of the Young Adult literature books globally. Hence, perhaps, (Watling 1974, p.98) asserts that “the origins of drama and fiction, in Greece as elsewhere, lie far beyond the reach of literary or even archeological evidence. But perpetuity is more certain when adults arouse the interest of Young Adults sufficiently and thus cause them to participate in what is perpetuated. That is how many vital aspects of culture have been perpetuated, for example, folklore, and traditional occupations.

Conclusion:

This paper has explored and analyse the paranormal and dystopia in Young Adult literature as a modern literary genre in-line with post-colonial theorizations. Wilson Tagoe (2006) asked a pertinent question on how to rethink the conjunction of nation, culture and narrative in this global era. “How adequate are theoretical models framed by resistance and hybridity for understanding literature?” (p.94). Young Adult literature focuses on important themes relevant to people in their teens and early twenties. However, some literary critics once write off Young Adult literature focusing on minor problems (such as teenage romance gone wrong). Today, Young Adult literature is a force of its own and has taken over bookstores and box-offices alike.

Young Adult literature thematises on paranormal events described in popular culture, folk, and non-scientific bodies of knowledge in order to educate the teens. Some of the events involve astral, exorcist, occultic, power of darkness and near-death experiences which are supernatural, metaphysical, preternatural and transcendental. Young Adult literature also speaks volumes of societies in cataclysmic decline with characters, especially teenagers who battle environmental rein (deprivation) in order to gain control. Some of the places where the novels are set are imaginary places where life is extremely bad. Young Adult texts focus on that which is contrary to the author’s ethos.

It is all these factors that this paper explores to situate Young Adult literature in the domain of paranormal and dystopia.

Recommendations

This paper: “Exploration of Paranormal and Dystopia in Young Adult Literature” is of immense interest and benefit to pupils, secondary school students and higher school students of the colleges of education and polytechnics. When Young Adult literature is taught at the

foundation level of education, it will go a long way to shape the thinking, behaviour, and character of student at the various level of education. Consequently, it will reshape the society where these students come from, thereby making the society a crime-free, zero bribery and corruption as well as a good society for human habitation.

Similarly, the students will be fully prepared to face life's challenges and forge ahead in life as adolescents.

References

Ashton, M. C. (2013). *Individual Differences and Personality* (Second Edition).

Cambridge Advance Learners Dictionary and Thesaurus. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1950.

<https://gosparkpress.com>genre>.

<https://www.masterclass.com>articles>.

<https://www.all-about-psychology.com>.

<https://med.virginia.edu>paranorm...>

Hyman, R. (2001). *International Encyclopedia of Social and Behavioural Sciences*.

Nta, E .G. (2005). "Cohesion in ELS Children's Discourse: Implication for English Language Teaching" *Currents in African Literature and the English Language (CALEL)*: Calabar: NATOS Affair Publications, p.25.

Walting, E. F. (1974). "Introduction". *Sophocles The Theban Plays*, Trans. E. F. Walting. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd.

Wikipedia <https://en.m.wikipedia.org>wiki>.

Wilson-Tagoe, N. (1992). "Children's Literature in Africa: Theoretical and Critical Issues". *Children and Literature in Africa*. Chidi Ikonne, Emilia Oko, Peter Onwudinjo (eds). Ibadan: Heinemann Educational Book (Nigeria) Plc.

Wilson-Tagoe, N. (2006) "Re-thinking Nation & Narrative in a Global Era; Recent African Writing". *New Directions in African Literature* 25. Emenyonu, E. N. (ed). Oxford: James Currey Ltd. Pp.94-108.