

Abstract

HAIR, MELANIE SUE. The Literary Merit of Young Adult Novels: Are They as Good as the Classics? (Under the direction of Dr. Barbara Bennett.)

Teaching young adult literature in secondary English classrooms is a controversial topic, and much of the controversy stems from the idea that some educators believe that young adult novels are an inferior genre and do not contain the same amount of depth and merit that traditional classics possess. While young adult literature has made its way into the secondary English curriculum, it is typically only used for lower academic level students, reluctant readers, or for independent reading assignments. Rarely is young adult literature used for advanced students or for whole-class reading units. The purpose of this project is to show that young adult literature does possess many of the same qualities that traditional classics, typically considered “great” literature, possess.

The first chapter lays the groundwork for the rest of the thesis. The focus will be to describe why teaching young adult literature is such a controversial topic, to define the characteristics of “great” literature, and to describe why young adult literature should be included in the English curriculum. The next three chapters analyze four young adult novels, *The Giver* by Lois Lowry, *Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson, *Buried Onions* by Gary Soto, and *The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros to show that the novels are of high literary quality. The last chapter concludes the analysis by discussing how the novels analyzed in the previous chapters exhibit the characteristics of “great” literature and how they could serve as a bridge to the traditional classics.

**The Literary Merit of Young Adult Novels:
Are They as Good as the Classics?**

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A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of
North Carolina State University
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for Degree of
Master of Arts

English

Raleigh

2006

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Dedication

In Loving Memory

*Nanny
Florence Huskins*

April 5, 1928 – February 17, 2006

*To Momma, Daddy, Allen, and Chandler—Thanks for putting up with me when I ignored
all of you and was no fun to be around*

Biography

Melanie Hair was raised in Roxboro, NC. After graduating from Person High School in 2000, she completed her Bachelor's of Arts degree in English Education from NC State University in 2004. She continued her education at NC State and will complete her Master's of Arts degree in English in May 2006. Her future plans are to teach high school English and possibly pursue a PhD.

Acknowledgements

Many, many thanks to Dr. Bennett for all of her time and energy in helping me prepare this thesis. Thanks to Dr. Crissman, Dr. Thunte, and Dr. Miller for their insights and for serving on my committee.

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Setting the Stage: Introduction

Teaching young adult literature (that is, literature specifically written for people between the ages of 12-21) in secondary English Language Arts classrooms is a controversial topic, much of the controversy stemming from the fact that it has had an unsettled history and is still a relatively new genre. Prior to the nineteenth century, adolescence as a time between childhood and adulthood was nonexistent and children were thought only as small adults. As a result, the literature they read was designed to teach them to be good hardworking adults. Because the mortality rate for children was so high, their books were also religious in nature, encouraging them to be pious so that they might have life after death (Lesesne 211-212). From the early to mid 1800s, books for children continued to be formulaic, not well-written, and moralistic, emphasizing “piety, obedience, humility, and service to others, as well as prudence, hard work, and deference” (Lystad 27).

By the 1870s, however, the religious and didactic novels that dominated the reading of young people began to be replaced by the works of Horatio Alger and Louisa May Alcott and domestic and dime novel writers (Donelson and Nilsen 48). Alger and Alcott were the first widely known authors of young adult novels. Alger’s novel *Ragged Dick* was a popular “rags to respectability” story of a young man’s journey to adulthood (Donelson and Nilsen 50). Alger’s works tended to be formulaic with improbable plot events. Nonetheless, his works were widely read and enjoyed by many young people. Alcott’s works, on the other hand, particularly her most well known *Little Women*, were well written and different from most of the literature available. They lacked the sentimentality common in most works, and the plots and characters were both plausible

and varied. *Little Women* was popular not only with young people, but with adults as well, and it still is widely read today (Donelson and Nilsen 49-50). The excellent prose of Alcott thus began to pave the way for future great young adult writers.

Also popular in the mid to late 1800s were various domestic and dime novels. These novels were the starting point for young adult literature's shift away from children's literature since they were aimed at those not children anymore and not quite adults yet. Domestic novels, aimed at young women, were socially, culturally, and politically conservative with women characters who were submissive to men. In addition, traditional religious values were glorified in the characters and plots. Though not always well written and containing predictable plots and stock characters, these novels were highly popular with young women (Donelson and Nilsen 52-54). Highly popular with young men were dime novels. Originally written for adults, young men loved the dime novels' thrilling and adventurous plots, causing publishers to drop the price from a dime to a nickel. The most popular dime novels were set in the western part of the United States and featured unrealistic sensationalized plots and "wondrous heroes" stock characters (Donelson and Nilsen 54-55). Like the domestic novels, dime novels were also not well written even though young adults voraciously ate them up while many adults disliked the trash from "scribbling women" (Hawthorne qtd. in Donelson and Nilsen 52) and the melodramatic plots of dime novels.

Throughout the late 1800s, public libraries were being developed, which in turn caused controversy over the types of reading those libraries would contain for their patrons. At the time, many librarians, teachers, and school officials disliked fiction as one principal noted: "The voracious devouring of fiction commonly indulged in by

patrons of the public library, especially the young, is extremely pernicious and mentally unwholesome” (qtd. in Donelson and Nilsen 58). As evident in this quote, young adult fiction has had a long history of controversy and abhorrence by some adults.

During the latter part of the nineteenth century and early part of the twentieth century, the debate over young adults’ recreational reading material persisted. Because teachers were being pressured to help their students prepare for college entrance exams, teachers and parents began to encourage young people to read what they suggested to them rather than letting them find recreational reading material on their own. Some adults even believed “recreational reading seemed vaguely time-wasting, if not downright wicked” (Donelson and Nilsen 59). Even though librarians and teachers recommended and urged students to read the classics, teenagers continued to read young adult fiction. The most popular books of this time were Stratemeyer’s Literary Syndicate series books, originally begun by the Lee and Shepard publishing company. Stratemeyer’s series books were extremely popular with young adults, and as a result, series books became the method of publishing young adult fiction. The series books did nothing to help improve the opinion of young adult fiction of librarians and English teachers. They were mass produced with unrealistic formulaic plots, stereotypical characters, and repetitive moralistic themes. The writing was of poor quality since once the series began to become popular, Stratemeyer began hiring writers to write the books; he provided plot outlines and character descriptions and writers needing money would fill in the blanks (Donelson and Nilsen 64-67).

Until 1933, only two established classifications of literature existed—literature for children and literature for adults. Books for the young adult age range were either

lumped within the children's literature category or were originally intended for adult readers. For the first time, however, young adults began to have their own category of literature, termed *Junior* or *Juvenile* by the Longmans, Green and Company publisher as a marketing technique. Other publishers soon followed suit, and books for people not children anymore and not quite adults had their own classification (Donelson and Nilsen 67-68).

In 1938, paperback books entered the market, which did much to increase the sales of young adult novels (230 million a year) since they were "easily available, comfortably sized, and inexpensive" (Donelson and Nilsen 71). Schools, however, were not quick to include them in their libraries because they could be stolen easily and many officials believed the "covers were lurid and the contents little more than pornography" (Donelson and Nilsen 71). Nonetheless, the amount of young adult novels increased as well as the number of young adult authors.

With the rise of paperback novels, the quality of young adult fiction also slowly rose. Many of the series books ceased to be read and produced because of changing reader tastes and a lack of paper during the world wars. While most young adult novels during the 1940s and 1950s were still culturally and politically conservative, the novels of the 1950s and 1960s began to take more risks and ignore previous social taboos concerning the novel's content (Donelson and Nilsen 70). Whereas the novels of the 1940s and 1950s dealt with romanticized sports, teen romance, cars, and careers, the novels of the 1950s into the 1960s had a "hard-edged realism" to them (Cart 96). J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951) was one of the first novels to portray honestly the language and emotions of a teenager and signaled the beginning of this "new realism"

movement. Even though the novel was intended for adults, teenagers embraced it (Bushman and Bushman 228). In 1967, S.E. Hinton published *The Outsiders*, which can be considered the first official young adult novel because of its high quality and realistic portrayal of previously unheard voices. Hinton's novel paved the way for other quality novels intended for young people.

The 1970s is considered the "Golden Age" of young adult literature because of the amount of high quality works that were being published (Frey and Rollin 5). Known as the age of the "Problem Novel," the literature published candidly portrayed problems such as divorce, pregnancy, drugs, or alcoholism that many young adults encounter while growing up (Barnard, Feilwel, and Kriney 49). This honest portrayal of uncomfortable topics also caused more controversy concerning whether or not young adults should read this type of literature. The 1980s seemed to take a small step backward for young adult literature with the increased publication and renewed popularity of formulaic and moralistic series books (Cart 96). Though series books dominated the young adult market in the 1980s, many quality novels, such as the works by Gary Paulsen and Chris Crutcher, were available and popular with teenagers (Lesesne 216).

Towards the end of the 1980s, young adult publishing seemed to slow down and some believed the end of young adult literature was near. However, young adult literature in the 1990s experienced a "renaissance" (Lesesne 217). Unlike in previous years, strong and well-rounded female characters began to appear and a variety of genres ranging from problem novel to fantasy to adventure appealed to the widest possible audience. Authors also began to experiment more with different perspectives (be it

character or cultural) and various formats, such as diaries, graphic novels, and nonlinear plot organization (Lesesne 218-220).

Although young adult literature has changed and improved a great deal over the course of its history, its past of poor quality has stayed in the minds of many teachers, librarians, and other adults. Because young adult literature historically was not always of good quality, many adults still believe all current young adult fiction is still badly written and should not be used in secondary schools. Stemming directly from its history, some of the most popular reasons for not considering this genre in English classrooms are that it is inferior and formulaic literature, it is not serious literature, it is not timeless literature, it is not challenging and the literature taught should be intellectually stimulating, it is not known by teachers or bought by schools, it only deals with depressing issues, and it “has no heritage and no respectability” (Donelson and Nilsen 331-332). In other words, young adult literature does not contain literary merit as do the “classics,” traditional works, such as those by William Shakespeare, Charles Dickens, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Henry David Thoreau, that have always been anthologized and taught in secondary schools.

By looking at the history of the quality of young adult literature, all of these reasons for not choosing to use this genre seem valid. There was a time when most of the young adult novels were poorly written with formulaic and unrealistic characters and plots. Those novels certainly were inferior to the adult novels and not considered serious literature. Many of the earliest young adult novels have not survived the “test of time” and are no longer read by young people, and in the 1970s, there was a surge of “problem novels.” That surge of problem novels has influenced the media to make incorrect generalizations that all young adult novels are dark and gloomy, escalating teachers’ and

parents' fears concerning the depressing content their students and children are reading about (Crowe 148). In addition, for much of its troubled history, young adult literature has not been respected by adults.

However, though the young adult genre is still relatively young, it should not be discredited simply because of that newness; all genres have to begin somewhere. While the past young adult novels may not have been the best literature available, the genre has changed drastically and the quality has greatly improved throughout the years and will probably continue to improve. The best young adult novels deal with a variety of topics and issues, are innovative, have survived numerous generations of young adults, are complex and push young adults to think critically about their lives and world, and should definitely be known and respected by adults for its merits.

Another criticism of young adult literature stems from the genre's unique set of conventions. The protagonist of young adult novels is someone of the 12-21 age range who faces problems common to many young adults and who experiences a change or personal growth over the course of the novel. The novel is also often written from the perspective of the protagonist. Plots have a short time span, are fast-paced, and hook readers from the first sentence. The novels tend to be shorter in length and use diction, including the speech characteristic of young adults, and a writing style that is easily accessible to young adults. Because the conventions of this new genre are different from those conventions of adult novels, the "literary quality [of young adult novels] came to be suspect among librarians, critics, literary scholars, and teachers" (Small, "The Literary Value" 278). Even though the conventions of young adult literature are different from that of adult literature does not automatically mean that the differences are inferior.

Young adults are different from adults, so it is only natural that the genres would also be different and written in such a way to be developmentally appropriate and appealing.

In addition, a wide range of quality still exists within the young adult genre; there are good, distinguished books and then there are truly bad young adult novels. As Chris Crowe notes, “a few bad YA apples” (146) have caused critics to view the entire genre as inferior literature. While historically, the majority of the young adult novels were of inferior quality, high quality novels are available today. As with adult literature, a wide range of quality exists, ranging from a “handful of classics, followed by a good bunch of brilliant novels, followed by an impressive collection of readable and entertaining books, but we also have some YA novels marred by weak writing and/or bound in repulsive juvenile covers” (Crowe 146). Just like the adult genre, not every book published will be excellent prose. Unfortunately, because of young adult literature’s history of poor quality, much of the criticism against young adult novels focuses on the historically and contemporary novels that are not well written without taking into consideration the novels that are of good quality.

Another, perhaps equally if not more important, reason why young adult literature is not widely used in secondary English classes has to do with the history of college entrance exams. Throughout the late 1800s, secondary teachers began to feel pressured to prepare their students for college entrance exams, which began to include works such as Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*, *The Tempest*, and *The Merchant of Venice*; Milton’s *Comus*; and Scott’s *Ivanhoe* and *The Lay of the Last Minstrel*. In 1894, the Committee of Ten on Secondary School Studies appointed by the National Education Association declared that students should study English in schools four years for five hours a week

and that college entrance exams should be uniform. Consequently, book lists of works on those entrance exams began to circulate. The book lists consisted of mostly classics, such as Shakespeare, Milton, Irving, and Scott, which then, in effect, developed into the curriculum for secondary teachers (Donelson and Nilsen 61). Colleges expected students to have read and know about the works on those book lists, so teachers began to teach them (Bushman and Bushman 149-150). Indirectly, colleges still affect the works that continue to be taught in high schools. Though those book lists are no longer officially distributed to teachers, teachers still want their students to do well in college, so they continue to teach the traditional classic works that are taught in college literature courses. Furthermore, prospective teachers receive an education in the traditional American and British classics; not all universities require teacher education students to take a course in young adult literature, so many teachers do not know much about this genre. Since classic literature is the literature they know because it was taught to them in high school and college, it is the literature they teach to their students, thereby adding to the cycle of teaching the same literature year after year.

The National Council of Teachers of English was formed in 1911 as a result of the concern over how colleges were controlling the secondary curriculum through their entrance exams and book lists for those exams. The Council urged teachers to include modern works of literature in addition to the classics already being taught from the entrance exam book lists. Unfortunately, very little curricular changes were made in schools since teachers were “terrified by the contemporary reality reflected in these [modern] books—and perhaps equally terrified by the possibility of throwing out age-old lesson plans and tests on classics” (Donelson and Nilsen 62).

Another factor affecting the literature that is taught in secondary schools is the use of anthologies. During the 1970s and continuing through the 1990s, the back-to-basics movement emphasized anthologies so that students would be chronologically presented with their literary heritage, the “literature of the past” or classics (Bushman and Bushman 147-148). Anthologies are also popular with schools and teachers because of the large amount of supplementary material, such as lesson plans and tests, available for a teacher’s use and because it can easily be bought for all students on a given grade level. The inclusion of certain works in those anthologies has affected the curriculum of secondary English classrooms. Traditional adult works that have always been taught and works that were included on college entrance exams tend to be the works that are found in anthologies.

The choice to include of these works in anthologies is not solely based on their literary merit even though most teachers and adults do consider the works in anthologies to be among the best literary works. Issues of money greatly affect what is and is not included in an anthology: “...including old pieces keeps the cost of the anthology down. Authors of literature that is in the public domain do not receive royalty payments when that literature is used in an anthology” (Bushman and Bushman 149). Furthermore, schools often do not have extra money available to purchase materials not already available from the school’s adopted anthology. Thus, money is also one reason young adult literature is often excluded in classrooms. As a result of the use of anthologies and the history related to college entrance exams, the list of works, consisting of those traditional classics, that all students should have read by the end of secondary school have remained a large part of the high school English curriculum.

Because very few young adult works are considered traditional classics and are anthologized, many teachers who have the option to incorporate young adult literature into their classrooms choose not to do so for a variety of reasons. Some of those teachers believe using these works in an English classroom are not worth their time and “handicaps readers’ cultural literacy, weakens students’ minds, and wastes valuable educational time and resources” (Crowe 147). However, not including young adult literature into the secondary curriculum may actually do what teachers fear. Many of the best young adult novels offer students a cultural, social, or political perspective different from their own, and since the language and content are often more accessible to students than traditional classic literature, students are more able to actively engage in the novel, which will encourage more critical thinking concerning the issues the novel presents to its readers. Anything that widens a student’s perspective and encourages critical thinking enhances a student’s learning experience and never wastes educational time or resources. Other teachers opt not to use young adult literature out of fear and a lack of administrative or parental support (Angelotti 74). Young adult literature’s historical context and the controversial issues raised by many of these novels cause it to be widely censored by parents and thus unsupported by administrators and parents. Afraid of dealing with these censors and lack of top-level support, many teachers choose to go the safe route and only use the established classics even though those same classics often contain similar controversial topics, but since they are “classics,” thus great and on the list of “must reads” for students, Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, for example, which deals with young lovers, a secret marriage against parents’ wishes, violence, and suicide,

will rarely be censored while a young adult novel exploring the same issues is much more likely to be challenged in schools.

While young adult novels are slowly making their way into the English curriculum, many teachers still view the genre as substandard due to its history and common misconceptions about the genre. As a result, young adult novels are typically used for independent reading assignments or for lower academic level students or reluctant readers. Rarely are they used in honors or Advanced Placement classrooms or for whole-class reading units, mainly because many of these teachers still believe this genre is lacking in literary merit. The purpose of this project is to show that the best of young adult literature does possess many of the same qualities that traditional classics, typically considered “great” literature, possess, and that all students, including advanced students, would benefit from reading young adult literature in addition to the traditional anthologized literature most often taught in secondary schools.

Great literature is literature that is able to survive time and continues to be read by countless generations, usually as a result of being canonized by its inclusion into college and high school literature courses. It is timeless because readers across different generations are able to relate to the characters or issues presented in the work; it does not appeal to only one generation of readers in a specific time. It explores common human problems, issues, and triumphs. Great literature offers its reader a view of someone else’s life, transforming him into someone different for the course of the work and allowing him to see life as another person sees it, helping to challenge previously held beliefs or stereotypes. Great literature also “stimulates thinking, evokes ideas, creates mental images and engages the emotions” (Winfield 26). Another reason why some

literature passes the test of time has to do with the scholarship on it. Once people begin to write about a work, others begin to read it and add to the scholarship, keeping it on the shelves of many readers throughout time.

Helping to stimulate that thinking, the best literature contains strong themes that encourage critical thinking. Themes in quality novels are universal, appealing to all kinds of people, and are philosophical ideas that explore the human condition. Great literature is not afraid to ask the hard questions concerning life and humanity. Common themes of both traditional classic literature and young adult literature that concern issues of life and humanity include self-identity, innocence, death, growth, and tragedy and triumph. These themes are often explored through a quest motif where the protagonist tries to “make sense of world and find a place in it” (Obbink 51-52). The ideas and themes presented in great literature push readers to question their own lives and beliefs. Encouragement in questioning one’s life and values results in readers who are more aware of their own lives and values and the world around them due to the wider perspective that is gained from great literature. Because the themes in great literature are often complex, they “offer a deeper reading, thematic and moral in scope, not entertaining only” (Dogoode 57). While great literature can be read for entertainment or recreational purposes, they can also be enjoyed for the intellectual stimulation.

Another common aspect of all great literature concerns the development of the characters that live within the novel. For characters to be convincing, they must possess a human depth which makes them appear real (Forster 43-49). In order to encompass that human depth, authors of novels must design characters that are well drawn and multidimensional. Multidimensional characters represent life more so than flat characters

since their characters tend to change over the course of the novel and give the reader a sense of depth to their personality, thus making the character believable. As a result of this kind of character development, great literature's characters are memorable and become known to their readers as "family and friends" (Hipple, "With Themes" 1). Readers can easily relate to and connect to them, and as they are reading, cheer for, worry about, feel sad for, and love the characters. In addition to having strong main characters, minor characters of great novels tend to be well developed, aiding in making the novel and all of its characters, not just the few main characters, more realistic and believable.

Great literature also uses language in a way that is both beautiful and memorable. Diction and style will be rich, artistic, and poetic. Dialogue of great literature is skillfully drawn and true to the characters. In addition, the language of great literature must be able to clearly convey the setting in a novel in such a way that readers are able to mentally experience it. The language must be able to capture vividly the novel's sense of place in a way that makes the setting significant and essential to the novel and not simply something only present in the background.

Many young adult novels possess these same qualities of great literature, and much research supports this view. Susan Rakow notes that young adult novels are "well written, carefully crafted, [and] emotionally powerful" (49). She goes on to state that the literary analysis associated with teaching traditional literature applies as well to young adult novels. Susan Nugent contends that literary theories, such as "sociological, archetypal, psychological, formalist, and affective" approaches, can be used in analyzing young adult novels ("Adolescent" 36). In addition, the same analysis of character, plot, style, point of view, themes, and symbols can be used with this genre. Bushman and Haas

also include setting, alliteration, metaphor and simile, flashback, foreshadowing, novel beginnings, humor, imagery, personification, hyperbole, and allusion in their list of the literary merits that much young adult literature possesses.

Because the best young adult novels have the same characteristics of traditional great novels, there are many reasons why, in addition simply to appreciate the entertainment value or beauty of the novel, students would benefit from reading them alongside those traditional works currently taught. One reason is that the classics were not intended for young adults to read: “They are about ADULT issues. Moreover, they were written for EDUCATED adults who had the LEISURE time to read them” (Gallo 34). As a result of not being an original audience of many of the classics used in schools, many young adults are simply not ready to read the difficult classics that are currently taught. According to John Bushman, the “principle needs of adolescence are emotional and social development, rather than intellectual growth” (35). However, schools usually try to foster students’ intellectual growth by assigning difficult classic texts for students to read. Because many students are not developmentally ready to handle the difficult language, style, or context of the classics and are forced to read them anyway even when they do not understand the literature, students deem them as “‘irrelevant’ because they are not able to see that there is much generalizability from the classic to their lives” (Gambell 106). Thus, they are not able to engage actively in the work. Since students are often required to read literature they do not understand and have trouble engaging in, many students learn to dislike and even detest reading, leaving students with negative opinions of reading who then choose not to read for pleasure (Gallo 34). The National Adult Literacy Survey from 1993 shows that adolescents are not reading as adults, half of

American readers are low level readers, and readers under age 21 are reading fewer books than in the past (Bushman 38).

Students reading young adult literature, a more developmentally appropriate genre, on the other hand, are able to become more involved in the novel because the characters and the situations the characters encounter are familiar to them. Becoming more involved in the novel allows for the novel to be more meaningful to the student so that the connections they have with it “are likely to be significant, rather than trivial and superficial” (Probst 28). Students will learn more from a novel when their transactions with it are of “high quality—that is, committed, interested, reasoned, emotional, personal” (Probst 28). The language of young adult literature is also more accessible, allowing students to see those connections between the novel and their own lives and to become more involved in the text itself rather than struggling simply to find out what is happening. Studies have shown that students may even learn more from young adult literature than the classics:

Interestingly, there have been several attempts to look at the effects on teenagers of a classroom study of junior novels. Every one of those examinations has shown that students actually learn more about literature—its nature and how to read it—from a study of good junior novels than from a study of adult classics. (Small, “Is Adolescent” 61)

Furthermore, Nugent claims that young adult literature may be better to use in teaching difficult literary concepts because “adolescent literature allows students to focus on a new concept, addressing that demand while reading about more familiar content” (“Adolescent” 35). Her point is that reading difficult literature such as classic novels to

teach difficult concepts can hinder students' understanding of both the literature and the concept because of the mental strain that occurs when trying to understand both a text and new concept. By using young adult literature, students' experiences with both the literature and the concept tend to be more positive since they are more successful in engaging with the text and in understanding the concept, which helps to foster students' confidence in their reading abilities.

Because young adult literature does have high literary quality, Rakow defends the use of young adult novels in honors level classrooms in her article "Young-Adult Literature for Honors Students?". She argues that young adult novels should be used in honors level classrooms because they contain the same literary quality as classics while offering more relevance to the students' lives than the traditional literature. Rakow maintains that young adult novels can be more beneficial to honors students than the classics because young adult literature offers students opportunities for literary analysis while helping to "illuminate and validate their own experiences" (48). Young adult novels are more developmentally appropriate because they deal with characters of the same age, and since honors students are constantly encouraged to read adult novels because of their reading abilities, they miss out on the insight that can be gained in reading about other teenagers. By reading about other people their own age who are going through similar situations, the emotional and social development they need are encouraged since many young adult novels deal with the "formulation, or reformulation, of personal identity" (Bushman 35). Reading about other teenagers' coming-of-age helps teenagers to become better prepared and have some guidance in their own development of their identity and of life in the adult world (VanderStaay 51). All young adults

struggle to find their own identity, and therefore, reading about other young adults in similar situations shows teenagers that they are not alone: “They offer hope to the young reader—hope that things can change, improve, succeed. They give hope to be able to cope with all that seems wrong with being a young adult” (Bushman 39).

Likewise, Tim McGee encourages the use of young adult literature in Advanced Placement classes because he has found that some works in this genre are extremely valuable in terms of literary merit, and since they are not full of difficult to understand archaic allusions, syntax, and diction, students are able to engage in “the intellectual debate they are striving for” (58). As an experiment, McGee assigned his AP English students *The Chocolate War* to read independently within a week and then to discuss the novel at the end of the week. During the intense discussion of the novel, McGee discovered that his students were “responding the same way they did to Shakespeare or Milton, with the intellectual search that had marked them as worthy of the AP English classroom” (58). Instead of having to wade through the language just to understand the plot as is the case with most classics, the students were able to jump into the thematic questions the novel raised, which encouraged more critical thinking and engagement with the novel. McGee also found that after having read *The Chocolate War*, his students were able to better respond to classics with similar themes since they were able to compare the characters and themes from the young adult novel to the classic novel (58).

In addition, young adult literature offers students many opportunities to widen their horizons since there is such a variety of good literature available. Characters appearing in young adult novels are more diverse now than in the past, and because the characters face issues common to all young adults, students are more likely to respond to

the characters in young adult novels than in the diverse characters appearing in adult literature who often face issues students do not have the life experiences to understand yet. When looking at characters who are different from themselves, students are able to think critically about other people's perspectives as well as their own perspective in terms of their culture, individual beliefs, and place in the world (Nugent, "Young" 4). Learning about multiple perspectives from literature allows students to be more informed people who are able to look at multiple sides of a given issue. Some students may never learn this difficult skill when the only literature they come in contact with are hard to understand texts that cause frustration and dislike.

In addition, young adult literature encourages students to become life-long readers because their reading experiences with this genre tend to be more positive than their experiences with traditional classics, building on both their confidence and ability. Including young adult literature in the classroom is essential for some students to enjoy reading. Without being exposed to this genre and only being exposed to traditional anthologized works, some students may never realize that there is a genre specifically written for them that they find appealing and can understand. If students enjoy the literature they read in school, they will likely continue that habit once they are adults. If, however, they have not enjoyed the literature, they will instead learn to dislike the chore of reading and read only when forced.

A troubled history of mostly badly written young adult novels and curriculum pressure from outside sources have done much to keep teacher resistance to the genre high and to keep it out of secondary schools. However, the genre has changed and improved drastically over the years and now consists of many excellent works of

literature, rivaling the quality of many traditionally taught and glorified classic works of literature. As current research shows, young adult literature possesses many of the characteristics of great literature. It contains the ability to last throughout time and has strong universal themes and strong characters: "...themes are multiple and identifiable; characters are well developed and experience change over the course of the novel. The protagonist in a YA novel confronts a challenge or test, and the plot moves logically through a succession of events" (Christenbury 17). In addition, language is used well and stays with the reader: "[young adult authors] do it all with prose that causes readers to linger now and again for a second reading, a moment of appreciation for the well-turned phrase or artistic metaphor" (Hipple, "With Themes" 11). Because the genre does have works of high quality and students usually respond well to young adult novels, using these novels alongside more traditional classics can both help challenge students intellectually and foster a love of reading in students than by using traditional classics alone can.

The following three sections will analyze four current young adult novels, Lois Lowry's *The Giver*, Laurie Halse Anderson's *Speak*, Gary Soto's *Buried Onions*, and Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street* in order to show the high literary merit these novels possess. These novels represent a range in terms of themes, characters, and settings. *The Giver*, set in a futuristic society, shows how Jonas, twelve years old, struggles with the knowledge of the true nature of his community and his wish to change the controlling society. *Speak* tells the story of a high school freshman who was raped and then learns to cope with her attack in an innovative printed format and organizational structure. *Buried Onions*, set in the barrios of California, describes how Eddie, nineteen,

struggles to not only survive life in the inner city but make something of himself. *The House on Mango Street*, told through poetic vignettes, tells the story of Esperanza and her struggle to find a home where she belongs.

Sameness: What Is Lost?

Lois Lowry's *The Giver* is the story of how Jonas, a twelve year old, learns the horrible truth about his seemingly perfect community. Lowry's novel is set in a futuristic, highly technological society where all citizens in the community get along, have everything that they could ever need, and have their entire lives planned out for them by the Committee of Elders. At his Ceremony of Twelve, where the community leaders will assign him a job for his adult life, Jonas is to become the community's next receiver of memory. Jonas soon discovers that as the new Receiver, his job is to hold all of the memories—good and bad—of civilization so that his community can live unburdened, forever in the present. Jonas's job requires him to live a life separate from the rest of the community, but Jonas begins to yearn for a different life where all of the memories of the world are shared so that all will have an unshallow life, know love and happiness, and can share the burden of pain. Desperate to save the life of a newchild set to be "released" (killed), Jonas escapes the community in order to try to find a better life for himself, the baby, and his former community. This young adult novel is an example of a dystopia, a philosophical novel that portrays a societal or cultural problem by showing a society that seems perfect on the surface but is actually terrible (Harmon and Holman 169). Through the dystopia genre, Lowry shows readers the danger, the loss of humanity, of a controlling society that does not allow freedom of choices or diversity.

As the novel opens, readers do not know that Jonas's community, Sameness, is a community that has no real emotions, no color, no diversity. The community seems perfect on the surface. People seem content, there is no crime, and life is incredibly easy. Food is brought to citizens every day at mealtime, people do not have to stress over

trying to pick a career, finding a home and money, or starting a family. Not until Jonas begins receiving the memories of the world do we realize, along with Jonas, that the community lacks diversity, color, and emotions and that the community is not as perfect as it seems to be. We do, however, quickly see that the world Jonas lives in is a world tightly controlled by its leaders in their attempt to make the community members' lives predictable and easy. Speakers are in every part of the community, exerting the leaders' authority at all times and giving them access to even the most private places and conversations. Community members are always watched, ensuring that they always obey the leaders and never express negative opinions about the government. The speakers everywhere take away basic human needs of privacy and free expression. Without free expression, new ideas, change, and creativity are stifled, which results in a world of robots who are the same and do the same activities day after day.

Each home has only three books: "a dictionary, and the thick community volume which contained descriptions of every office, factory, building, and committee. And the Book of Rules, of course" (74). By only allowing access to these three books, the leaders are erasing access to history and literature and the knowledge, ideas, wisdom, and creativity that comes with reading about history and literature in order to keep the community ignorant of different kinds of lives, places, words, emotions, or ideas. As a result, the community only knows what it is told to know by the leaders and never has the option of learning about themselves and the world that comes from reading one's history and literature. The limitation on reading materials has also erased the community members' option and desire to learn about themselves and the world, an activity that fosters awareness and wisdom.

Spouses and children are assigned by the elders after an application process, and only two children, a boy and a girl, are allowed per “family unit.” The application process takes away the chance, excitement, and love associated with beginning a family, and families then become merely roommates who miss out on a human’s desire to connect with another human on a deep and meaningful level, to learn from mistakes, and to feel the pride and awe associated with the miracle of having children.

“Thank you,” “I’m sorry,” and “apology accepted” are standard and automatic phrases that carry no meaning. Gratitude, remorse, and forgiveness are not experienced because of the requirement of those phrases. Morning and evening rituals consist of sharing dreams and feelings with one’s family unit, which are then dismissed by the rest of the family. Since they are wiped away as soon as they are spoken, those dreams and feelings lack significance because feelings are simply felt and do not always need to be stated. Since everyone is required to tell his dreams and feelings, no one or no feeling or experience is special.

In addition, everyone wears the same clothing with an identification tag. People then lose their individuality and uniqueness, basic characteristics of humanity, and become merely things for the purpose of work. If a citizen breaks a rule more than three times, he is automatically “released” from the community no matter the circumstance or the individual’s reasoning for the transgression. Even life stages are planned out for the community. Children begin volunteering and lose their “comfort objects,” stuffed animals, at age eight, receive their bicycle, the community’s main form of transportation, at age nine, and are assigned their role as an adult and begin training for that job at age twelve. The members of Jonas’s community are not allowed choices or freedom in any

aspect of their lives. The citizens' humanity is lost because that freedom to choose and learn from mistakes is denied them. The ability to use a mind of their own and exercise freewill and to learn from the consequences of using that mind and freewill are never experienced, and they cease to be human as a result.

The community's control over its citizen extends beyond a vast amount of rules to be memorized. Community leaders even have control over nature. Color does not exist; instead, everything is the "same nondescript shade" (24). The weather is the same all year round and the land is flat and unchanging (83-84). Even people look the same, as the Giver explain to Jonas: "There was a time, actually—you'll see this in the memories later—when flesh was many different colors. That was before we went to Sameness. Today flesh is all the same..." (94). Leaders have become God-like, ensuring that community members always obey them since the leaders control all aspects of life. The leaders have taken Nature's power into their own hands and exploited it for their agenda of standardizing all forms and aspects of life. Power of that nature is dangerous and destructive, as Jonas learns through the memories, because of the depreciation of the value of nature and humanity since differences and variety and the chance associated with that variety is what makes it important and needed since humans can learn so much from those varieties and chances.

Scientists, however, because they are not God, have not completely mastered Sameness, and differences are apparent in some individuals. For example, a few members of the community, Jonas, the Giver, and Gabriel being some of them, have pale colored eyes unlike the rest of the community's dark eyes. These small differences remind readers that the leaders are not all-powerful and their attempt to be so is harmful

because of the consequences. The differences also remind readers how important human differences are for the uniqueness they give to individuals.

When physical or even personality differences are apparent in individuals, community members are trained to ignore those uncomfortable differences and never to call attention to them: “No one mentioned such things; it was not a rule, but was considered rude to call attention to things that were unsettling or different about individuals” (20). Instead of treasuring or taking advantage of people’s inherent differences, Jonas’s community has tried to abolish them and mold everyone into a standard form. The only time differences are even acknowledged is at the Ceremony of Twelve where children are assigned their adult jobs based on those personality differences (52). As a result of standardization, people lose their humanity and the parts of them that make them unique and therefore special, and human life then ceases to have value.

Another source of control that the community exerts over its citizens is the community’s use of language. Ironically, the community prides itself on “precision of language,” their ability always to be objective in their thoughts, speech, and feelings. The community treasures and strives for precise language to “ensure that unintentional lies were never uttered” (70-71), and children are chastised often when words are used incorrectly. Jonas’s friend Asher, for example, confused snack with smack often. Each time he asked for a snack accidentally using the wrong word, he would receive a smack with the discipline wand. The goal of precise language is to make sure that everyone is honest at all times, language always means the same to everyone, and everything expressed is concrete and never exaggerated or embellished in any way. By striving for

precision, the beauty of language, one of the aspects that separates humans from animals, is lost.

Even though the community prides itself on precision, Jonas's language is not precise at all. For example, euphemisms abound in his language and serve to keep the community ignorant of feelings and the truth about the community and to keep people under the leaders' tight control and manipulation. Hormones and sexual feelings, or "Stirrings," are suppressed with pills, keeping people from feeling basic human urges and instead turning them into unfeeling objects. Citizens are "released" when they are old, break the rules, or are different and do not fit into the community by being injected with a liquid designed to kill them. Calling that process "release" puts a positive connotation on the action since release implies a new beginning or a new chance for a better life and keeps citizens ignorant of the murders that occur. Releasing citizens devalues human life since humans are kept only as long as they are useful to the community. Release also takes away a desire and need to help others, compassion, and the value of each life whether or not that life is a contributing member. All humans contribute to the world; no life is ever simply useless and not needed.

"Elsewhere" exists as a place where the old and released newchildren are sent supposedly to live out their lives. All of the community members assume that this Elsewhere leads to another community. As with "release," "elsewhere" connotes a new life in a new place and gives the community members a sense that life does not end but continues for those released. "Elsewhere" then becomes a deliberate lie used by the leaders to keep its citizens with a sense of safety and security for the released. That Elsewhere, though, does not exist since the only way to escape the community is through

death. However, once Jonas begins receiving memories, he senses more to that elsewhere than his fellow citizens; he begins to understand that there is more to life and a different kind of life available than what is given to him in his community. After his first day with the Giver, Jonas dreams of his new memory of snow and knows deep inside himself that there is something more beyond his community and that something is important:

Always, in the dream, it seemed as if there were a destination: a *something*—he could not grasp what—that lay beyond the place where the thickness of snow brought the sled to a stop.

He was left, upon awakening, with the feeling that he wanted, even somehow needed, to reach the something that waited in the distance. The feeling that it was good. That it was welcoming. That it was significant.

But he did not know how to get there. (88)

Jonas eventually learns that the something he senses involves basic human rights, such as freedom, individuality, choices, and strong emotions. He realizes that those human rights missing from his community are what make people humans rather than robots or animals.

“Nurturers” are supposed to be the community members responsible for caring for the physical and emotional needs of the “newchildren,” babies, until they are given to parents (7). However, one of the responsibilities of Jonas’s father, a Nurturer, is to kill babies who do not progress as rapidly as the other children and to choose which baby will be killed when identical twins are born. “Comfort Objects,” stuffed animals, are given to children to sleep with but are immediately taken from them at age eight. However, the children have no knowledge of what the animal is and seem to have no connection to the

objects other than simply sleeping with them. As a result, the comfort objects that should be a source of coziness or reassurance become impersonal or detached objects. The “discipline wand” is used to train children’s behavior and hit them when they misbehave. “Replacement children” are given to parents who lose one child. The replacement child is given the same name as the lost child, and the new child serves to erase completely the memory of and all connections to the lost child. All of these euphemisms make the citizens feel cared for, safe, and secure since every negative aspect of the community, such as people who kill babies, sticks used to punish children, and actions used to murder, is given a positive connotation. Making sure citizens are content and feel secure ensures that the community members will continue to remain under the leaders’ control and manipulation.

The ritual of sharing feelings is also euphemistic in that the community members do not have real feelings. They do not have the life experience or depth of character to have anything more than superficial emotions that are complacent and lacking in intensity. Without real emotions, the people in Jonas’s community become like robots or animals and lose their humanity. Life is meaningless and not worth living without those emotions since they make humans and life special. Jonas understands this lack of feeling once he begins receiving memories of real emotions: “Jonas realized that it was a new *depth* of feelings that he was experiencing. Somehow they were not at all the same as the feelings that every evening, in every dwelling, every citizen analyzed with endless talk” (131). Even love, a strong human emotion and desire, is nonexistent so that the word has become obsolete and meaningless (127). Love is a powerful emotion that causes a person to put that object of love above everything else, including one’s community. With

the community's family and release policies, the leaders cannot let people get attached to each other. No love also means people will not feel the pain associated with love, aiding in making sure the citizens feel content so that they will continue to follow the leaders.

Once Jonas begins receiving memories and learns that there is more to the world and human life than he had ever known, he realizes that his language is not at all precise. When trying to explain his feelings about his new knowledge of color to the Giver, Jonas exasperatedly cries, "It was so—oh, I wish language were more precise!" (95). He also realizes the true meanings behind all of his community's euphemisms and learns of the danger of such a controlling community.

One of the dangers of Jonas's controlling community is the lack of freedom that the community members have. Daily activities are carefully regulated and planned out for the citizens. People do not have the freedom to decide what to wear or eat; clothing and food are given to the community, and it is the same for everyone. Though these simple choices seem insignificant and pointless, learning to make small decisions prepares people for larger, life altering decisions. Jobs, spouses, and children are even assigned to adults. As a result, citizens remain childlike in that they must always rely on someone else to tell them what to do and how to live their lives. They never learn the autonomy that comes from being an adult and making decisions. The only freedom people have is the freedom to choose where to spend their volunteer hours as children. Jonas relishes that small freedom since the rest of the day is so controlled (26), which shows how important freedom, choices, and autonomy are to human life.

On one hand, this lack of freedom and choice keeps people safe since they will not make mistakes, as Jonas believes early on in his sessions with the Giver: "Very

frightening [people choosing their own jobs and mates]. I can't even imagine it. We really have to protect people from wrong choices" (98-99). However, not having those choices or the ability to learn from mistakes leads to individuals who never grow and change or learn to be independent or an awareness of self and the world that comes from making choices, all of which are basic aspects of life that make humans human. Even though Jonas does not realize exactly why yet, he knows not having the ability to make choices is wrong since after this conversation with the Giver, he is left "with a feeling of frustration that he didn't understand" (99). He is beginning to understand that humans need those choices in order to feel like a human rather than an animal or robot.

Another harmful side effect of the excessive amount of control in Jonas's community is the lack of diversity in all aspects of life. People are the same, the climate is the same, day to day activities are the same, and beliefs are the same. Children are trained to "fit in, to standardize [their] behavior, to curb any impulse that might set [them] apart from the group" (52). On the surface of Jonas's community, the lack of diversity seems to be a good system. After all, the community experiences no struggle of any kind or any pain. Any kind of pain that is experienced is small and "there was always a daub of anesthetic ointment, or a pill; or in severe instances, an injection that brought complete and instantaneous deliverance" (109). The world is safe because of all the control and everything is planned and predictable. People do not make mistakes and always know what lies ahead of them. Since everyone has all of the same possessions, there is no jealousy or the struggle or emotions associated with jealousy or not having what someone else has. In addition, because everyone is the same, no one feels out of

place or is put into that “uncomfortable category of ‘being different’” (38). The vulnerability and awkwardness associated with being different is nonexistent.

Even though there are some benefits to Sameness, the disadvantages far outweigh all the good that comes with differences, as Jonas learns through the memories he receives. A lack of diversity leads to a boring and monotonous life since variety and the unexpected are what make life exciting and worth living. Without differences and surprises, there is nothing for people to look forward to and thus no reason why they should strive to live. Creativity of all kinds, such as in thinking and in art, is absent, and people become a single mass of robots rather than individuals, each with unique qualities to offer the world. People then have no way to express themselves and show off what makes them unique and be rewarded for those unique qualities and strengths, resulting in a world where people and their talents are not special and individuals do not matter. A rule against bragging keeps anyone from mentioning the successes of others (27). People are not faced with challenges that would offer them a chance to grow or better themselves. Instead, they simply go through the motions of living without ever enjoying or appreciating their life, feelings that come from being faced with challenges and rewards.

The lack of freedom and diversity contributes to the most dangerous and harmful part of Jonas’s community: that a full life cannot be achieved. A life where people can appreciate differences, those aspects that make each person unique and special and thus important to the world. A life where individuals can show off their uniqueness and creativity. A life where people are able to make decisions concerning how to live their lives to the best of their ability. A life where emotions of joy, love, gratitude, pain, and

sorrow are felt. Because the community is static and one dimensional, it will never experience deep feelings of pain, happiness, love, or fear. Without ever experiencing the unpleasant aspects of life, they will never know and appreciate the pleasurable. They will also never experience the little delights of life that make pain and suffering bearable and life worth living, such as color, the wind on a hot summer day, the songs of birds in the spring, or the smell of a home-cooked meal, as Jonas does once he leaves Sameness: “After a life of Sameness and predictability, he was awed by the surprises that lay beyond each curve of the road. ... During his twelve years in the community, he had never felt such simple moments of exquisite happiness” (171). Without being able to experience these parts of life, people cease to be humans.

Most importantly, members of Jonas’s community feel no sense of connection to one another or a connection to the human race. “Family units” are simply groups of people who happen to live together, and once the children grow up, siblings and parents and children forget about one another. An extended family is not even conceivable in this community. People in Jonas’s community do not even seem to form strong friendships. Childhood friends are forgotten once job training begins, and adults seem to be only concerned about their work and making sure their children are well behaved. Without a connection to others, they will never know love or know the value of a human life. Having no connection with other humans results in a world where people do not care about one another, have no compassion, and are only concerned about their own survival. In addition, because the community has no sense of its past or history, the people in Jonas’s community feel no connection to humanity as a whole. They do not know humanity’s past accomplishments, struggles, or mistakes. Because the community

knows nothing of its history, they lack the wisdom that is associated with knowing one's past and then learning both the good and bad from that past. Furthermore, without knowing where one comes from, one has no sense of community or the feeling that "we're all in this thing called life together." They simply go through the motions of living, and as the Giver admits, "without the memories it's [life] all meaningless" (105). People then cease to have a purpose or reason for living.

Because Jonas and the Giver are the only two who have the memories of the world and know what their community's world is missing and the dangers of missing those aspects of life, they experience an extreme sense of loneliness and isolation as a result. That loneliness and isolation begins as soon as Jonas is named the new Receiver at the Ceremony of Twelve (65) and understands his fellow citizens know nothing of true feelings: "*They have never known pain*, he thought. The realization made him feel desperately lonely" (110). Jonas also experiences a sense of extreme loss after he learns the truth about his community, about what he and the rest of his community are missing, and that human life is not valued and humanity is lost, believing he has no power to change it (135).

Jonas and the Giver are set apart from the community physically because of the pain all of those memories contain and so they will not be bothered with superficial matters, and they are set apart mentally because they know so much more than the rest of the community. They know what is missing from the community, and it is hard for them to be around the rest of the community knowing they will never have the full life that is possible and that humanity is lost. Jonas and the Giver know there is more to life that is available, and once they know what else is out there, they know they cannot go back "to

the world of no feelings” (131) even though they know it will be nearly impossible for everyone to now be human and have a complete life. The Giver admits to Jonas that he wishes the community would seek him out more often so that he could tell them about what they are missing and how little value human life now has; the community, however, likes its orderly way of life: “Sometimes I wish they’d ask for my wisdom more often—there are so many things I could tell them; things I wish they would change. But they don’t want change. Life here is so orderly, so predictable—so painless. It’s what they’ve chosen” (103). As a result, they remain apart from the community and human life continues to have no value because people are treated more like animals rather than people.

Even though Jonas’s community seems doomed to continue this bland, overly controlled, and animalistic life, hope for a better life, a life where humans are of value, is offered through Jonas. Throughout the novel, Jonas not only grows as a person, but he also serves as a hero who tries to save his community from its current way of life. Readers know early on that Jonas is special. He possesses one of the few differences that still remain among his fellow citizens—light eyes. His light eyes signify not only his uniqueness, but also the depth of his character. While looking at Gabriel’s eyes, the same “pale, solemn, knowing eyes” (25) as Jonas, he realizes those eyes give the baby “a certain look...*Depth*, he decided; as if one were looking into the clear water of the river, down to the bottom, where things might lurk which hadn’t been discovered yet” (21). The clarity of Jonas’s eyes shows the clarity he has concerning his community and how its current way of life makes life not worth living since all those aspects—emotions,

individuality, diversity, creativity, thought—that separate humans from every other organism are missing.

When Jonas is assigned his job at his Ceremony of Twelve, he begins his training because he was told to do so. Later, however, Jonas continues his training and sacrifices his own life not because he was told to but because the community needs him to in order to spare them pain. Jonas's strength of character is shown by his willingness to bear the burden for the good of his community. His strength and wisdom is also shown through his willingness to leave his community. The only reason he flees his community is so his fellow citizens can have the chance for life, as is the case for Gabriel and others who are set to be released, and the chance to live that life as humans.

As Jonas begins to receive memories, he increasingly becomes unhappy with and horrified at how his community is run. He angrily argues that gaining control of everything in the world at the expense of losing many good things such as color, emotion, and differences is wrong (95). He understands what has been lost from humanity as a result of the control his government has exercised. He also does not think it is fair that only one person must bear the history of the entire world. Instead, he rightly believes that history should be shared by all so that everyone could know both happiness and pain (112-113), have a sense of what humanity is all about, and be able to appreciate the value of each human life. The turning point for Jonas, though, is learning that to be released is to be murdered (150) because he is able physically to see the little value each human life holds. Once he learns the truth, he is determined to do something to change the community. Jonas has gained the wisdom to know that complete control over all aspects of a person's life is wrong and destructive in that the people cannot live life for

themselves, life has no value, and humans simply become animals. He also understands that people need to experience both the good and bad and have the freedom to make their own decisions in order to appreciate life, and he wishes to change his community so that people would be valued and so that those people could have lives full of love, pain, happiness, choices, and diversity and know that they are special and thus important to the world (128-129).

Jonas then sacrifices his own life, leaving the comfort of his community with no fear or regret (163), to release all the memories he has received so that life can begin to change for his community. He understands that if he had chosen to stay in the community, he would have starved for that valued and full life while others would not have even had the chance for one: "If he had stayed, he would...have lived a life hungry for feelings, for color, for love. And Gabriel? For Gabriel there would have been no life at all. So there had not really been a choice" (173). Jonas even leaves his community early and unprepared so that he can save Gabriel's life. Knowing Gabriel will be released the following morning, Jonas sets out with little food and few memories of strength as he and the Giver had planned, which shows how important he knows human life to be. The release of the "newchild" would have killed a hope for a new life while Jonas's escape with him shows that he already possesses much inner strength and that a new life is not only possible but reachable.

Once Jonas escapes from his community, the reader is left with not knowing whether or not he lives or dies. At the end of the novel, Jonas finds the sled in the snow and sees the home and family at Christmas, two of his favorite memories from the Giver, which suggest the possibility that Jonas is dreaming and will soon die as a result of trying

to change his and his community's lives. If Jonas does die at the end of the novel, his death would emphasize how the life his community has established makes human life pointless, of no value, and not worth living.

While the ending of the novel is ambiguous, since we are never told explicitly whether or not Jonas lives or dies, it does seem to be more positive. Not only does he seem to save Gabriel's life and release the memories to his community to begin the process of changing their lives, but he also appears to find the Elsewhere in his dream of the snowy sled ride. At the end of the sled ride, Jonas has a sense that he has reached his destination and that a new life is waiting for him:

Suddenly he was aware with certainty and joy that below, ahead, they were waiting for him; and they were waiting, too, for the baby. For the first time, he heard something that he knew to be music. He heard people singing.

Behind him, across vast distances of space and time, from the place he had left, he thought he heard music too. (178-179).

Jonas knows he is in a place full of love, unlike his previous home. His memory of the family is no longer only a sensation in his mind; it is a reality that he can physically feel and see the house and family ahead of him. In addition, Jonas's hearing of music, a sensation he had never learned from his previous received memories, shows that he is now in a place where music can be heard by everyone and is not a sensation he can only experience through past memories. Though this could only be a sensation in his physically exhausted mind, his old community also seems to have changed since Jonas believes he hears music from there as well.

The Giver shows readers how a community as tightly controlled as Jonas's community is dangerous. While it appears perfect on the outside and seems like a good idea to protect people from pain and bad choices, in the long run, more harm is done than good because of the little value each human life has. Because the community has no memory or sense of its history, people do not have a sense of who they are, where they come from, or where they are going. As a result, they cease to be unique individuals who have purposeful lives. As this chapter has made evident, this novel offers its readers as many complex philosophical insights as any traditional classic. Like George Orwell's *1984*, another dystopian novel, for example, readers are challenged to consider their government and what they as humans would be willing to give up in order to have a safe, easy, and predictable life and what would be lost if they gave up the parts of life that make it unsafe, hard, and unpredictable. Thought provoking themes of society, government, and humanity encourage critical thinking and personal growth in students, just as any "classic" would.

“Stitched Lips”: Finding a Voice

Laurie Halse Anderson's *Speak* is the story of Melinda, a high school freshman, who must learn to cope with being raped at a party just before school begins. Only Melinda and her rapist know about the rape, and when Melinda instinctively calls 911 after the rape, the party is broken up, making her a social outcast. As school begins, none of her old friends will speak to her, and Melinda feels completely alone and chooses not to speak because she lacks the self-esteem and courage to do so. Over the course of the novel, Melinda eventually finds her voice and is able to stand up to her rapist, Andy Evans. To illustrate Melinda's search for her voice and identity, Anderson uses symbols and imagery to mark her character's progression toward speaking.

Communication is a major problem for Melinda and her family as is shown through her last name, Sordino, which means a muffled or muted instrument. At the party, Melinda tries to tell her attacker no, but her “tongue was thick with beer” (134), causing her not to fully understand what was happening and not be able to speak up for herself as well as she could. When she does speak up for herself, Andy silences her protests and voice by covering her mouth. Since her rape and because her attacker did not listen to her, Melinda now believes “It's easier not to say anything. Shut your trap, button you lip, can it. All that crap you hear on TV about communication and expressing feelings is a lie. Nobody really wants to hear what you have to say” (9).

Angry at being punished for refusing to do an oral presentation, Melinda admits why she is so afraid to speak up about what happened to her: “I simmer. Lawyers on TV always tell their clients not to say anything. The cops say that thing: ‘Anything you say will be used against you.’ Self-incrimination. ... Maybe I don't want to incriminate

myself. Maybe I don't like the sound of my voice. Maybe I don't have anything to say" (157). She does not seem to be sure even that she was raped or if it was somehow her fault. The guilt from that night causes her so much fear of what might happen if she tells her secret that she has decided to keep it all hidden and stay quiet. Immediately after the rape, she attempts to speak by calling the police at the party, but soon after, she does not recognize who she is anymore and seems to have forgotten how to speak (135-136) and is punished for it since everyone at the party begins yelling at her and students at school continue to hate her. She begins to see that speaking out can have negative consequences and so decides to be silent. When she does consider talking to people, she is still afraid that her secret will accidentally come out: "Maybe I should start talking to Them, maybe a little bit. But what if I say the wrong thing?" (127). She also seems to question the validity of all spoken communication and decides that all conversation is dangerous. As a result, she stops speaking all together.

The format of the dialogue in the novel also emphasizes Melinda's silence since there is only blank space where her speech would normally be:

Dad: "It's supposed to be soup."

Me:

Dad: "It tasted a bit watery, so I kept adding thickener. I put in some corn and peas."

Me:

Dad: [pulling wallet from his back pocket] "Call for pizza. I'll get rid of this."

(61)

Another reason why she chooses to keep quiet is in an attempt to forget what happened to her. She thinks that “not talking about it, of silencing the memory, [will] make it go away” (82). As much as she tries, though, she cannot silence the memory, and it along with feelings of doubt, guilt, and fear consume her mind.

Because her voice fails to protect her from getting raped, Melinda seems to now hate her mouth and is punishing it. Her mouth is described as a “chewed-up horror” (17) since she is always biting her lips, causing cuts and scabs. Not only is her mouth in bad shape, but her throat as well: “My throat is always sore, my lips raw. When I wake up in the morning, my jaws are clenched so tight I have a headache. ... Every time I try to talk to my parents or a teacher, I sputter or freeze. What is wrong with me? It’s like I have some kind of spastic laryngitis” (50-51). Her rape and resulting fear, guilt, and shame have caused her to lose complete control over her voice, both emotionally from her choice not to talk about what happened and physically from the problems with her mouth and throat.

Even with her family, Melinda is not able to communicate. Her family does not talk much, and their main form of communication is notes left in the kitchen: “My family has a good system. We communicate with notes on the kitchen counter. I write when I need school supplies or a ride to the mall. They write what time they’ll be home from work and if I should thaw anything. What else is there to say?” (14). The interactions between Melinda’s parents and her interactions with her parents are distant. Her parents do not try to take an active role in their daughter’s life and thus know nothing about her or how to communicate with her. Melinda’s mother’s job takes top priority and when she is home from work, she is still working as is made evident on Thanksgiving

where she spends the day on the phone with employees before finally rushing to work (58-60). The only times Melinda's parents talk to each other are when they are arguing with one another. When she is in the guidance counselor's office with her parents, discussing her falling grades, Melinda refuses to speak for fear that they do not want to hear what her secret is and that they will not believe her (87, 114). Because Melinda's parents cannot talk to each other and because she has such a hard time talking to her parents, the two people she should always be able to trust, Melinda consequently has a difficult time trusting others with her words and thoughts. After Christmas when Melinda's parents notice her drawing and so buy her a sketchpad with charcoal pencils (72), she does not feel so alone simply because they noticed something she was interested in, which leads to her trusting them more.

Communication is also a problem at Melinda's school, paralleling her and her family's communication problems. Except for her art class, Melinda and her teachers struggle to communicate with each other because of the lack of listening, talking, and understanding that takes place. Her Spanish teacher will only speak in Spanish to Melinda and the other students who are taking Spanish for the first time (13). Obviously, they understand nothing she says, and as a result, her communication efforts go wasted. The English teacher, Hairwoman, struggles to get her students to communicate in writing until she begins to have writing assignments that her students are interested in: "The first essay this semester was a dud: 'Why America Is Great' in 500 words. She gave us three weeks. Only Tiffany Wilson turned it in on time. ... The next essay was supposed to be fictional: 'The Best Lost Homework Excuse Ever' in five hundred words. We had one night. No one was late" (84-85). Because she is able to find something that interested

her students and thus connected with them on a more personal level, Hairwoman is able to eventually get her students to trust her enough to communicate. Other than Art, the only subject Melinda tolerates fairly easily is Mr. Stetman's Algebra class because math only has one answer and "there is no room for debate" (38), unlike when she was raped and "no" did not mean "no" to Andy. Through the freedom of speech controversy with David, Mr. Neck's class also shows how words can be powerful but only if one chooses to use that voice. Melinda's school then serves as a microcosm for what is happening in her life outside of school.

Although Melinda physically cannot speak and emotionally does not want to talk about what happened, she desperately wants to let her secret out: "I want to confess everything, hand over the guilt and mistake and anger to someone else. There is a beast in my gut, I can hear it scraping away at the inside of my ribs" (51). She wants to let the beast out to get rid of the guilt and shame, but because she is so afraid of what would happen to her if she did tell someone and of no one believing her, she continues to keep it locked inside of her, letting it slowly eating away at her spirit. When she passes out while dissecting the frog, Melinda wonders if the doctor can see her thoughts in her head (81). Part of her probably wants the doctor to see them just so she could be relieved of some of the burden of carrying around the secret. Melinda comes close to telling her secret to her parents at Christmas, but once she begins thinking back to that night, her fear snowballs, growing larger and stopping her from sharing her secret (72).

Because she has so much trouble communicating with others, Melinda begins to study and admire others who can speak for themselves, such as the basketball player who somehow tells the cafeteria workers to give him extra food (8), Mr. Freeman, who is able

to stand up to the principal and school board (78), and the Suffragettes, who “marched in, full of loud, in-your-face ideas” (154-155) and fought until they had what they wanted. She also admires her lab partner, David Petrakis, for being able to stand up to Mr. Neck, a kind of Andy-like figure for him. David then becomes a foil for Melinda because of his confidence in himself and his ability to communicate with others. Unlike Melinda, David is able to stand up for himself, both verbally when he argues for his right to express his opinion in a class debate and silently since he is able to say “a million things without saying a word” (57). Since he is able to make himself heard, unlike Melinda, he becomes her hero (68). David also gives her good advice about speaking up for herself, and since she does admire him for being able to communicate, she eventually listens to him: “You can’t speak up for your right to be silent. That’s letting the bad guys win” (159). If she continues to keep silent and everything hidden, Andy will have raped her all over again since he has taken away not only her virginity but also her voice, the part of her that no one should be able to take away. Instead of letting Andy win, she has to be strong and fight for herself. She admires all of these people for their ability to communicate and stand up for themselves and wishes she could do the same.

Melinda’s first step in speaking and sharing her secret is through written rather than spoken words. After seeing the vast amount of communication that happens on the bathroom stalls, she begins her own anonymous conversation: “I start another subject thread on the wall: *Guys to Stay Away From*. The first entry is the Beast himself: *Andy Evans*” (175). The bathroom is a safe place for her to begin speaking since she physically cannot use her voice to talk about what happened and no one, except Ivy, would know that she is the one who started the new thread. The note in the bathroom

pays off for Melinda, since a few days later, many others have added their negative opinions about Andy, which validates Melinda's fears, letting her know that she is not alone anymore and "feel like [she] can fly" (186) because those words on the bathroom wall are a source of power for her that cannot be ignored or silenced.

The power gained from the words on the bathroom wall helps Melinda to make the next step of feeling strong enough to tell her secret to Rachel: "I must talk to Rachel" (180). Though Melinda does not verbally tell what happened to her, she writes Rachel a note telling her the truth (182). For the first time, Melinda has found enough courage to be able to find her voice to let her secret out. Because of the positive reinforcement gained through the writing on the bathroom wall, Melinda chooses the now safe and secure written word to tell Rachel about the rape. However, Melinda's fear of no one listening to or believing her happens since Rachel initially does not believe her story.

The tone of the novel also helps to show that Melinda possesses the inner strength to eventually find her voice. Throughout the novel, Melinda's head voice is funny, honest, and powerful, acting almost like a foil to her silent physical voice:

In one universe, they are gorgeous, straight-teethed, long-legged, wrapped in designer fashions, and given sports cars on their sixteenth birthdays.

Teachers smile at them and grade them on the curve. They know the first names of the staff. They are the Pride of the Trojans. Oops—I mean Pride of the Blue Devils.

In Universe #2, they throw parties wild enough to attract college students.

They worship the stink of Eau de Jocque. They rent beach houses in

Cancún during Spring Break and get group-rate abortions before the prom.

(30)

This humorous, honest, and sharp description of the cheerleaders in her school show readers that Melinda has not lost her voice completely because of the rape and the power of her head voice shows that she will find the courage to find her physical voice.

Melinda finally verbally stands up for herself when she is confronted with Andy in her closet. At first, the only sound she can make “is a whimper” (194), but she remembers her first attack and somehow digs deep enough into her soul to find the strength to say no: “No. A sound explodes from me. ‘NNNOOO!!!’ ... I scream, scream” (194). Not only does she find her voice again and stand up for herself, she is also strong enough to silence the one who silenced her: “His lips are paralyzed. He cannot speak. That’s good enough” (195). Once she is able to stand up to Andy, “the last block of ice in [her] throat” (198) dissolves and she is able to tell her story.

An important symbol in the novel that helps Melinda to regain her voice is a poster of Maya Angelou that she hangs over a mirror in the janitor’s closet she hides in at school. In her autobiography *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Angelou describes being raped at the tender age of eight. Like Melinda, Angelou stopped speaking for a period of time. The poster of Angelou seems to serve as a role model for Melinda, watching over her while she is in the closet and helping her to find her voice since she has experienced the same trauma as Melinda. She also feels less alone knowing other women have been raped and have survived by speaking out about their experience as Angelou does in her autobiography, helping Melinda to see words as healing and liberating. When Rachel, Melinda’s ex-best friend, begins dating Andy, Melinda goes to

her closet to try to figure out what to do. The poster seems to speak to Melinda, encouraging her to do what she knows she should do: “Maya Angelou watches me, two fingers on the side of her face. It is an intelligent pose. Maya wants me to tell Rachel. ... Maya taps me on the shoulder. I’m not listening. I know I know, I don’t want to hear it. I need to do something about Rachel, something for her. Maya tells me without saying anything” (151-152). At the end of the novel, looking at the poster also helps Melinda to stand up to Andy and find her voice because Angelou tells her to “make some noise” (194), which she does.

Not only is Melinda on a quest to regain her voice, but she is also on a quest to find out her identity. Ever since her rape, she is unsure of who she is: “...I saw my face in the window over the kitchen sink and no words came out of my mouth. Who was that girl? I had never seen her before” (136). Her rapist stole both her virginity and her power to communicate, two things that are personal and that only she should own and control. Because he was able to take away those parts of her, Melinda sees herself as nothing since she no longer knows her identity (45). While Melinda struggles to find her identity, the school is also trying to find itself, as shown through their many mascot changes. During one of the mascot changes, Melinda asks “Who are we?” (49), showing how the school is “nocultural” (69) and has nothing to mark the school’s uniqueness. After the fifth change, the school attempts to change mascots yet again, but a petition by the student council stops the additional change in identity: “It [the petition] describes the psychological harm we have all suffered from this year’s lack of identity. It pleads for consistency, stability” (141). Without an identity, the school does not know what makes it special or why the students should support the school. Once the school finally is able

to decide on its identity, the reader knows Melinda will eventually find her identity as well.

Melinda's bedroom also serves as a symbol for her lost identity since she describes it as a room that belongs to an alien and that has been decorated by stealing ideas from her old friends (16). Her bedroom is her personal space, and as such, it should be a representation of her personality and her uniqueness. Because she is unsure of who she is and her individuality, she is not able to make her room scream her name. Once she does find that out, however, Melinda does know how she wants to redecorate her room in a way that will represent her identity. In the clothing store, Melinda stares at the hundreds of reflections of herself in the mirror and tries to figure out who she is: "Am I in there somewhere" (124). The day her school has Job Day, Melinda's results are not clear as they are with other students who are sure of themselves. Therefore, Melinda's results are multiple. In addition, Mr. Freeman has a question mark listed next to Melinda's name as her grade. Since art is the key to a person's soul, according to Mr. Freeman, one must know his soul in order to make good art. Because Melinda has yet to find her soul or her identity, she is left with a question mark. While she is searching for her soul, two Melindas have taken over her mind, one that is the carefree child before the rape and the other that is the scared, silent, and cautious person after the rape. Melinda knows neither one is her, but she has yet to find out her real self: "If I kick both of them out of my head, who would be left?" (132). A step forward in finding out who she is occurs when Melinda is able to come to terms with her attack and begin to move on from it: "IT happened. There is no avoiding it, no forgetting. No running away, or flying, or burying, or hiding. Andy Evans raped me in August when I was drunk and too young to

know what was happening. It wasn't my fault. He hurt me. It wasn't my fault. And I'm not going to let it kill me. I can grow" (197).

Seasonal imagery helps to weave the story together and show the progression of both Melinda's quest to find her voice and identity and her recovery from her rape. The novel's division into four marking periods rather than a series of chapters helps to make the division between the seasons clearer. The first marking period signals the end of summer and the beginning of fall and winter. The novel begins just as summer is ending and Melinda is beginning her first day of high school. Summer ending marks the end of Melinda's happy, carefree days, the end of light and warmth, and the end of childhood and innocence, and the beginning of a cold, dark, and lonely journey. When Melinda shares the story of her rape, the imagery included helps to show that her attack is the beginning of that cold and dark part of her life. A "cloud cloaked the moon" (135) as Andy begins to attack her, and right after the attack as she is walking home alone, the "moon smiled goodbye and slipped away" (136). The moon represents Melinda and her innocence since the cloud, the rape and her secret, erases both her innocence and her identity. It also seems to represent happiness, warmth, and light, much like the sun, because the moon is extinguished just before winter begins. The darkness is just beginning for her, and the light of a once happy and spirited child has been smothered.

The second marking period starts just as winter is beginning, and as such, Melinda withdraws into herself and away from others even more, which is emphasized by her falling grades. The third marking period occurs during the middle and late winter. This period is rock-bottom for Melinda. Winter, a trying time for Melinda, is a season she hates: "I hate winter. I've lived in Syracuse my whole life and I hate winter. It starts

too early and ends too late” (136). Like Syracuse’s winters are long, Melinda will spend a long time in the dark and cold before she is able to come to terms with her rape. In the middle of winter, the hardest time for Melinda, she realizes that the sun, a symbol for growth, safety, happiness, and light, has “blow[n] off the world” (136) for a long time: “It has been so long since I’ve seen the sun, I can’t remember” (91). She has been in the dark both literally due to the lack of sunlight in the winter and figuratively because she has been hiding a dark secret that she does not know how to tell.

The large amount of snow that falls in Melinda’s town also works a symbol for her dark secret. While talking about Hawthorne’s use of symbols in her English class, Melinda reflects on her interpretation of snow: “Hawthorne wanted snow to symbolize cold, that’s what I think. Cold and silence. Nothing quieter than snow. ... once the snow covers the ground, it hushes as still as my heart” (130). Melinda, like the snow, is cold and silent and hides everything underneath the surface. Wanting the snow to bury her house (87), she wishes the snow would bury her terrible secret and the shame, regret, and fear she feels because of that secret. Every time Melinda comes close to speaking and letting out her secret, a snowball in her throat (72) keeps the words from leaving her mouth, keeping the secret buried underneath it.

The end of winter, however, signals the beginning of a change since Melinda is coming closer to releasing her secret while spring is inching around the corner: “People say that winter lasts forever, but it’s because they obsess over the thermometer. North in the mountains, the maple syrup is trickling. Brave geese punch through the thin ice left on the lake. Underground, pale seeds roll over in their sleep. Starting to get restless. Starting to dream green” (133). As winter nears its end, Melinda comes closer to

breaking the ice hiding her restless secret. Both the amount of time that has passed since her rape and the idea of new life, change, and growth that spring brings helps her to realize that she is still alive and has another chance at life. At the end of the third marking period, the end of winter, Melinda takes that first step towards recovery by sharing the story of her rape with the readers.

Right after Melinda lets out her secret, the fourth marking period indicates the beginning of spring, and in Melinda's case, healing from her attack. Spring signifies a time for renewal, new life, starting over, light, and warmth. Even though spring has finally arrived and hints that things will soon get better for Melinda, the journey will still be hard for her. She will not automatically be stronger once her secret is out, no longer afraid, and speaking again. She still has a long road ahead of her as the imagery shows: "As much as I complain about winter, cold air is easier to breath, slipping like silver mercury down my lungs and out again. April is humid, with slush evaporating or rain drizzling. A warm, moldy washcloth of a month" (151). As the warm moist air is harder to breath, talking about and recovering from her rape will not be as easy as keeping everything buried under the snow. However, "Spring is on the way. ... The snow is melting for good..." (142), meaning she will not allow her secret to be buried forever, and the sun will help her find the courage to speak.

The sun, a nurturer of growth, is an instrumental force in helping Melinda find her voice and share her secret, giving her the courage she needs to face her fears: "Too much sun after a Syracuse winter does strange things to your head, makes you feel strong, even if you aren't" (180). For each step Melinda has taken in coming closer to speaking, the sun has been a part of helping her take those steps. While in the mall one winter day,

Melinda lies on a bench under the sun and listens to the birds in the building sing, a spring image. As she is being warmed by the sun, Melinda knows she needs to tell someone what happened to her and even thinks about doing so: "I should probably tell someone, just tell someone. Get it over with. Let it out, blurt it out" (99). Melinda, however, is not ready to speak yet. She is only able to find the courage to speak when "real spring" arrives, which ends the rain and allows the warm "butter-yellow" sun to miraculously "coax tulips out of the crusty mud" (165). The warm sun slowly encourages Melinda to let out her deeply hidden secret and helps her find her voice just as the sun coaxes the tulips to grow. The sun was out and the day was warm when Melinda finds the courage to visit the place where she was raped so that she can begin to face her demons, and the day Melinda decides not to hide in her closet any more is the "first day warm enough for a sleeveless shirt. Feels like summer" (192).

Another important image in the novel is closets, safe and closed off places that are hidden from the world, places where Melinda is able to escape and clear her head and analyze her feelings: "My closet is a good thing, a quiet place that helps me hold these thoughts inside my head where no one can hear them" (51). The closet physically hides her while she mentally suppresses her secret and emotions. Her closets, both her old janitor's closet at school and her bedroom closet, are one of the few places where she feels comfortable enough to explore her identity and release her emotions. She hangs some of her art that she does not want to show to anyone else on the walls in the janitor's closet and releases some pent up feelings in her bedroom closet: "When I close the closet door behind me, I bury my face into the clothes on the left side of the rack, clothes that haven't fit for years. I stuff my mouth with old fabric and scream until there are no

sounds left under my skin” (162). Because these places are shut off from anyone else, she feels safe and can escape from the difficult and scary outside world. Once Melinda becomes emotionally stronger, her need for a safe place to hide disappears. After going to the rape site and telling Rachel the truth about the party, Melinda feels stronger and suddenly decides she does not need her school closet anymore: “...WHAMMO!—a thought slams into my head: I don’t want to hang out in my little hidy-hole anymore. ...I don’t feel like hiding anymore” (191-192). This action shows that she is beginning to face her demons, becoming stronger and confident enough to face the outside world. Near the end of the novel, Melinda faces her demons head on when Andy traps her in her school closet, causing a once safe space to feel unsafe (193). It is fitting that the closet is where Melinda must face the past and stand up for herself since it is the place where she feels most secure, comfortable, and confident. She might not have had the courage to stand up to Andy and find her voice had she been somewhere else where she did not already feel safe. Facing Andy in her once safe space helps her to learn that there are not places that are always safe and that she needs to feel safe wherever she is.

Cleaning is another powerful image that serves as a physical reference to the symbolic cleaning of Melinda’s soul. Melinda first cleans her janitor’s closet at school, which is a safe and secure environment for her body while she “cleans” her mind and soul, and is a natural precursor to the more difficult and daunting cleaning of the dark secrets and feelings plaguing her spirit. Melinda’s next step is cleaning her yard at home. Before she begins to slowly tell her secret, she first cleans the dead leaves from around the bushes: “I have to fight the bushes. They snag the tines of the rake and hold them—they don’t like me cleaning out all that rot” (166). Cleaning the dead leaves is symbolic

of what she will have to do to clean out the deadening feelings of fear, shame, and guilt from her spirit to begin to move past her rape. Like raking the leaves from the bushes was not an easy task, cleaning the dead leaves from within her will not be easy either. She must also learn to “rake the leaves out of [her] throat” (168) and find her voice again before she can begin to heal and move on. Raking those leaves out in order to ask her father to buy flower seeds shows she is beginning to find her voice and identity. After visiting the site where she was raped, Melinda comes home and cleans her whole yard before either of her parents come home (189), metaphorically showing how she has taken a big step in cleaning out her soul by facing her attack. Near the end of the novel, after telling Rachel what really happened at the party, Melinda decides not to hide in her closet anymore and cleans out her possessions (192). This last act of cleaning shows that she is well on her way to facing her demons, letting out her emotions, and cleaning the fear, shame, and guilt from her spirit.

Animal imagery within the characters also plays an important role in the novel, showing how Melinda was treated like an animal when she was raped and Andy acted like an animal as he attacked her. The most compelling animal image in the novel is of a frog dissection during Melinda’s Biology class:

Our frog lies on her back. Waiting for a prince to come and princessify her with a smooch? I stand over her with my knife. Ms. Keen’s voice fades to a mosquito whine. My throat closes off. It is hard to breathe. I put out my hand to steady myself against the table. David pins her froggy hands to the dissection tray. He spreads her froggy legs and pins her froggy feet. I have to slice open her belly. She doesn’t say a word. She is

already dead. A scream starts in my gut—I can feel the cut, smell the dirt, leaves in my hair. (81)

This scene of the dissection of a frog is obviously a rape scene, paralleling Melinda's own rape. At this point in the novel, Melinda has not told the reader what happened to her at the party. However, after this scene, it would be hard for a reader to not know what had happened to her. Melinda describes the frog as a "she" rather than an "it," and the frog is in the same position as a rape victim, on her back while the rapist is over top of her. The knife Melinda has to cut open the frog is a phallic symbol, and the metal from the knife is a recurring element during Melinda's interactions with Andy over the course of the novel, showing how he continues to cut her every time she sees him. Like Melinda, the frog does not have the power to speak, and it is dead, much like Melinda's spirit. As she attempts to cut the frog's belly, Melinda remembers her own rape, identifies with the frog, and mentally takes herself out of being a student in a biology class to becoming the "raped" frog, which is why Melinda can feel the cut and smell the dirt and leaves in her hair before passing out.

Another recurring animal image is that of rabbits. The rabbits seem to symbolize innocence or childhood since Melinda prizes her stuffed bunny collection from her youth and survival because in her mind, she transforms herself into a bunny when Andy is near her as a way to hopefully be invisible to him. The first time Melinda thinks of rabbits when she is confronted with Andy happens outside of a bakery on her way to school: "I stop on a frozen puddle. Maybe he won't notice me if I stand still. That's how rabbits survive; they freeze in the presence of predators" (97). Each time she is faced with Andy after this incident, she actually becomes a bunny in her mind, such as in Merryweather

In-School Suspension where upon seeing Andy, she thinks “I am BunnyRabbit again, hiding in the open” (117). One can also see how much Andy has hurt her emotionally when he comes into the art room after school one day while she is working: “IT is there. Andy Beast. Little rabbit heart leaps out of my chest and scampers across the paper, leaving bloody footprints on my roots” (160). Like the rabbit, Melinda sees herself as soft and vulnerable. The rabbit leaving bloody prints on her tree’s roots is much like the way that Andy has gone across her soul and destroyed her roots, or spirit, in his attack on her. Thinking of herself as a bunny helps Melinda to cope with seeing Andy and helps her know what to do: “BunnyRabbit bolts, leaving fast tracks in the snow. Getaway getaway getaway. Why didn’t I run like this before when I was a one-piece talking girl” (97). She did not know what to do when or even immediately after she was attacked, but the rabbits are helping her know what to do now. Thinking of the bunnies when she is confronted with Andy may also make her think of a time when she felt safe, her childhood, which then helps her to cope with seeing Andy since it allows her to regress to a safe time in her life.

Animal images are also present in Merryweather High School’s many mascots, correlating with the different stages of withdrawal and recovery that Melinda goes through. The school’s first mascot is the Trojans, a pop cultural icon of sex, which corresponds to her rape at the end of the summer. The next mascot, the Blue Devils, signifies both Melinda’s depressing or “blue” disposition and Andy and students at the school who are so mean to her in the beginning weeks. Just before Melinda’s first confrontation with Andy since the rape, the school changed the mascot yet again to Tigers, vicious predators, which is how Melinda views Andy. The Wombats, the

school's fourth mascot, is a symbol for Melinda. At the announcement of this mascot, Melinda describes the Wombats with adjectives that also describe herself: "Wombats, woozy, wicked Wombats! Worried, withdrawn, weepy, weird Wombats" (69). Actual wombats are solitary and nocturnal animals, just like Melinda since she is completely alone and is not able to sleep at night. The school's last mascot, the Hornets, can be symbolic of spring and new life since these insects are essential in the pollination and new growth of plants. They are also out during spring, corresponding to the time of the year when Melinda begins to find her voice and identity.

Another animal image is that of a Beast, which is associated with Andy Evans, Melinda's rapist. Melinda first refers to him as Andy Beast or IT: "I see IT in the hallway. IT goes to Merryweather. IT is walking with Aubrey Cheerleader. IT is my nightmare and I can't wake up. IT sees me. IT smiles and winks. Good thing my lips are stitched together or I'd throw up" (45-46). Andy sewed Melinda's lips together when he silenced her voice, and this image shows how inhumane he is because of his treatment of her. Melinda even describes him with animal imagery by referring to him as a predator and by describing his smile as a "wolfsmiles" (97) with "lips [that] move poison" (150). Andy, animal-like in his treatment of Melinda, seems to think of her as an animal, something he can conquer and control:

I'm hanging a poster outside the metal-shop room when IT creeps up.

Little flecks of metal slice through my veins. IT whispers to me.

'Freshmeat.' That's what IT whispers.

IT found me again. I thought I could ignore IT. There are four hundred other freshmen in here, two hundred female. Plus all the other grades.

But he whispers to me.

I can smell him over the noise of the metal shop and I drop my poster and the masking tape and I want to throw up and I can smell him and I run and he remembers and he knows. He whispers in my ear. (86)

Andy calling Melinda “freshmeat” shows that she is just another conquest and not a person with feelings. It also shows that he does not care what he did to her and has no remorse. Seeing Andy causes so much fear and pain that metal seems to be slicing through Melinda’s body, like the frog was sliced by a metal knife in its “rape.” That pain and fear slicing through her body slowly kills her spirit, so Andy still continues to hurt her after the attack. Even Andy’s “short stabby name” is like a knife (90). Simply hearing his name stabs her emotionally because of the fear he causes her. The intense fear Melinda has for him causes her sense of smell and hearing to mix together, illustrating how much Andy has affected her mentally and emotionally. Even the smell of his cologne becomes a source of fear for Melinda (she names his cologne Fear [160]), choking her (161) and making her afraid she’ll wet her pants (193).

Mr. Neck, Melinda’s History teacher, is much like Andy. On the first day of school, Melinda refers to him as a predator, just as she did with Andy (5). Also like Andy, Mr. Neck does not listen to her. He does not give her chance to speak up for herself at the assembly on the first day of school, and when she walks into his class, he automatically assumes she is trouble before she even says a word (7). At lunch after

mashed potatoes gets thrown on her, he does not give her a chance to explain what happened, and since he did not listen to her earlier in the day, she assumes he will not listen now, leaving her voiceless: “Would he listen to ‘I need to go home and change,’ or ‘Did you see what that bozo did’? Not a chance. I keep my mouth shut” (9). Mr. Neck’s silencing of voices does not only apply to Melinda; he also does not let his class share their opinions about immigration when they go against his opinions and closes the class debate when it is not going his way, metaphorically putting his hand over their mouths to keep them quiet just as Andy did to Melinda. Furthermore, by requiring her to give a report orally in order to receive credit, Mr. Neck tries to force Melinda to do something she is not ready for as did Andy at the summer party (155).

Art is the main factor that helps Melinda through her crisis. Generally, art is known as “a language that communicates ideas, reveals symbols, forges connections, and helps prepare [students] for life” (Wilson qtd. in Holloway and Krensky 355). Art is also the “expression of emotion through inspiration that leads to self-discovery and self-definition” (Holloway and Krensky 357). For Melinda, art does serve as really her only way of communicating or expressing her emotions and gives her a space that allows her to heal and grow. The uncertainty and progression of her art also parallels her uncertainty about her rape and her identity and the progression of her emotional healing. Like her closets, the art room is a “Sanctuary” (9) where she can feel safe and secure (160). Melinda feels that her art class is the only bright part of her day, calling it “like [a] dream [that] follows nightmare” (9). As Mr. Freeman, her art teacher, tells the class on the first day, art will teach her to survive and help her “find [her] soul, if [she] dare[s]. Where [she] can touch that part of [her] that [she’s] never dared look at before” (10). The

one assignment for art is to make an “object say something, express an emotion, speak to every person who looks at it” (12). This task is difficult for Melinda since she has worked so hard to quiet her voice and hide every thought and emotion out of the fear of letting her secret out. Art, however, will help her find the courage and give her an alternative outlet for her voice and suppressed emotions so that the burden of hiding them does not kill her spirit completely. Mr. Freeman is able to see some of those suppressed emotions when Melinda makes a sculpture from Thanksgiving’s left over turkey bones: “I see a girl caught in the remains of a holiday gone bad, with her flesh picked off day after day as the carcass dries out. ... This has meaning. Pain” (64). Melinda’s sculpture is one of the few times that she freely lets her emotions control her art. As a result, those emotions are released so that the sculpture becomes a direct parallel to how Melinda is feeling. She is caught in the remains of a party gone bad while every day at school, her spirit dies a little bit more from her isolation from the world and pent up emotions and secrets that eat away at her. Art also lets her be comfortable enough to think about talking about her emotions. She even asks Mr. Freeman how she is supposed to make her art show emotions, demonstrating that she wants to let out her hidden emotions and secret.

Another reason why she is able to connect to art so much is because art does not have to be perfect to be good, a lesson Melinda learns over the course of the year. As Mr. Freeman tells her, “Art is about making mistakes and learning from them” (122), as is the case in real life. Melinda eventually learns this lesson about both art and life, and her work shows that. Over the course of the year, her art has gone through stages just as she

has gone through different stages in her journey to repair her spirit after the rape and find her identity:

There has been some progress in this whole tree project, I guess. Like Picasso, I've gone through different phases. There's the Confused Period, when I wasn't sure what the assignment really was. The Spaz Period, when I couldn't draw a tree to save my life. The Dead Period, when all my trees looked like they had been through a forest fire or a blight. I'm getting better. Don't know what to call this phase yet. (151)

Mr. Freeman is instrumental in Melinda's journey to express emotion in her art and in her journey to find her voice and release her secrets. One way that he is able to help is that he lets her know he cares about her and encourages her every step of the way. He tells her she is learning and progressing even when Melinda does not realize it (121), and he helps Melinda find the courage to keep going, both in art and in life: "If he thinks I can do it, then I'll try one more time" (153). He also does not care about how many mistakes she makes, letting her ruin linoleum block after linoleum block and tells her that he would listen to whatever she has to say: "You're a good kid. I think you have a lot to say. I'd like to hear it" (123). Even though she is not ready to let go of her secret and unearth her emotions yet, just knowing someone would listen just makes that connection to art even stronger, giving her more confidence to eventually find the courage to speak. Mr. Freeman never forces her to speak or do anything that she is not ready for, such as when he asked her what her turkey sculpture meant. She was not ready to release those emotions, and he understood and did not force her to (63). When she is ready to speak,

he is the person she turns to at the end of the novel since she trusts him and knows he will listen to her.

Trees are another important symbol in the novel that help Melinda both express her pent up emotions and save her from destruction. Though she was raped underneath trees at the party, they ironically become one of the elements that help to save her. Trees then become a symbol for her spirit and growth over the course of the novel. In the beginning of the novel, the trees that Melinda paints are damaged like her spirit is: “...I’ve been painting watercolors of trees that have been hit by lightening. I try to paint them so they are nearly dead, but not totally” (30-31). Similar to the trees, Melinda has been hit by lightening—Andy—and even though he did not physically kill her, he almost killed her spirit completely. Just as she struggles to get her trees just right for her art class, she struggles to come to terms with her rape and find her identity. As a result of trying to draw perfect trees, the ones she does draw look “so flat, a cheap, cruddy drawing” (55). Trees, like people, are not perfect, and Melinda has not realized to learn from her mistakes and to make peace with her scar, her attack. When she tries to draw the big oak tree in her yard, she cannot make it seem real: “I can’t figure out how to make mine look real. ... I can see it in my head: a strong old oak tree with a wide scarred trunk and thousands of leaves reaching for the sun. ... But when I try to carve it, it looks like a dead tree, toothpicks, a child’s drawing. I can’t bring it to life” (78). Somewhere deep inside of her, she knows that scars will heal and that no one is perfect like this tree. However, since she has not admitted this to herself yet and has not faced her demons, she struggles to draw the tree. Like the tree, she wishes to be strong, reach for the sun, and

survive, but she just has not found the means necessary to find the strength and voice that will help her reach for the sun to grow.

Not only do trees help Melinda to release hidden emotions, they also save her life. The moment that Melinda begins to find her voice and heal from her rape is when she sits underneath the tree where she was attacked:

I crouch by the trunk, my fingers stroking the bark, seeking a Braille code, a clue, a message on how to come back to life after my long undersnow dormancy. I have survived. I am here. Confused, screwed up, but here. So, how can I find my way? Is there a chain saw of the soul, an ax I can take to my memories or fears? I dig my fingers in the dirt and squeeze. A small, clean part of me waits to warm and burst through the surface. Some quiet Melindagirl I haven't seen in months. This is the seed I will care for.
(188-189)

This is the moment where Melinda realizes that she has survived being raped, will grow, and will learn from her past. Coming back to the place where she was attacked is the first step in repairing her scarred spirit. She knows now that she needs to unbury her emotions and hidden secrets so that she can find her voice and identity again. In her climatic confrontation with Andy, just when Melinda thinks she will not be able to fight him off, she reaches "overhead, looking for a branch, a limb, something to hang on to" (195). She does find that branch, a block of wood, that she uses to break the mirror. Thus, not only do trees metaphorically save Melinda's spirit, they also help save her physically.

By the end of the novel, Melinda has faced her demons, found her strength, and regained her voice. She has learned that scars and mistakes will not kill the person or the

tree and that she must let out her emotions before they make her sick and kill her. Once she realizes this, she is able to draw the oak tree, giving it life and making it speak as the tree has done so for her:

My tree is definitely breathing; little shallow breaths like it just shot up through the ground this morning. This one is not perfectly symmetrical. The bark is rough. ... Roots knob out of the ground and the crown reaches for the sun, tall and healthy. The new growth is the best part. ... I look at my homely sketch. It doesn't need anything. ... It isn't perfect and that makes it just right. (196-198)

Melinda has finally freed the secret she has buried and has begun to release all of the emotions that she has kept hidden for so long. Like the tree's shallow breaths, she still has a way to go before she can be completely healed, but she has begun the journey. She accepts her imperfections, just as she accepts the imperfect tree, and her past as a part of her that she cannot simply erase or ignore; she has learned to accept it and try to move on.

Over the course of the novel, Melinda is able to find her voice and identity through the help of art and Mr. Freeman. Her art class and teacher give her a safe place where she is free to express some of her hidden emotions and know that mistakes will not kill a person. Imagery, such as seasonal and animal imagery, shows the progression her character makes on her journey to recovery and develops the characters. Symbols, such as trees and Maya Angelou's poster, are also essential in helping Melinda find her voice and identity.

As with *The Giver*, the quality of *Speak* rivals that of traditional classics. The way in which language is used in this novel to illustrate the various symbols, images, and Melinda's voice is beautiful and powerful, making this novel useful in showing students how creatively language can be used and how the language of a novel can have a profound affect on readers. This novel also represents a female perspective, a perspective that needs to be heard since the majority of literature taught in classrooms is still from the male's perspective. Reading about multiple perspectives broadens students' horizons and makes them more aware of ideas and experiences different from their own. Kate Chopin's "The Storm," a classic short story, would be an excellent companion to *Speak* in that both works represent a female voice and use language in such a creative way that each word carries meaning and is essential to the entire work. In addition, because this novel is an initiation tale where the character struggles to find her voice, young adults would be able to relate to Melinda since all teenagers struggle with the same issues as Melinda. As a result, students would be more interested in and engaged in the novel, which will enhance their confidence in and pleasure with reading and encourage them to continue reading as adults.

Onions, Houses, and Prisons: Struggling to Succeed

Gary Soto's *Buried Onions* tells the story of Eddie, a Mexican American living in Fresno, California, who struggles simply to stay alive. The novel begins shortly after Eddie's cousin Jesús is murdered. One of the main conflicts Eddie faces is trying to avoid his aunt and Angel, Jesús's friend, who want Eddie to murder the man who killed Jesús. Another conflict Eddie faces is trying to find work in order to support himself and make something of himself. After finding a job, bad luck caused by the massive amount of crime in the city destroys Eddie's hope of working a decent job and supporting himself like any other man. Not only does Eddie struggle with his work life, he also struggles to make sense of who his enemies are after hearing a rumor that Angel killed Jesús. Eddie knows he needs to leave Fresno if he ever wants to live peacefully, but his only choices to do so are to live with his mother or join the military, neither of which he wants to do. After turning Angel into an enemy, Eddie has run out of options and must leave the city in a hurry before Angel succeeds in killing him, so he decides to join the Navy.

Similar to *Buried Onions*, Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street* tells the story of Esperanza, a young lady searching for the American Dream of a house and the status and security associated with it, just as Eddie is. Through a series of poetic vignettes, Esperanza describes her life and the lives of many people who live in her neighborhood. Both novels are told through a minority's voice and show how minorities are marginalized from mainstream society and are not offered the same choices and opportunities that are afforded by the majority culture. According to Chiu-Wai Tsang and Tracy Dietz, "women and ethnic minorities have been the victims of discrimination throughout social institutions in the United States. ... Hence, being White and being male

in the United States historically has led to greater employment opportunities, greater advancement, and higher wages” (61-62). Helping to show this idea that our society on the surface claims to embrace diversity but does not treat everyone with the same equality and options the majority benefits from are symbols of the onion and water in *Buried Onions* and of the house in both novels.

Images of onions permeate *Buried Onions*. Eddie imagines an onion is buried under the city and that onion becomes a metaphor for the hardship, bad luck, and poverty that surrounds Eddie’s life. In describing the heat vapors rising from the asphalt on hot days, Eddie describes his theory of the onion:

I had a theory about those vapors, which were not released by the sun’s heat but by a huge onion buried under the city. This onion made us cry. Tears leapt from our eyelashes and stained our faces. Babies in strollers pinched up their faces and wailed for no reason. Perhaps as practice for the coming years. I thought about the giant onion, that remarkable bulb of sadness. (2)

The onion represents the lack of choices and opportunities the Mexican American community and other minorities have and represents the suffering Eddie encounters on a daily basis because of that lack of opportunities. As the onion is buried under the city, one of the reasons for hardship, the prejudices against minorities are buried in the minds and hearts of the community and the country as is shown in how the people of north Fresno look at him: “They glared at me, all of them probably thinking: That homeboy is going to break into our house!” (101). That prejudice is one factor in the limitation of opportunities for minorities since those prejudices cause others to look at minorities with

distrust and dislike because of their physical and cultural differences. For example, Eddie's friend, José, buys three sacks of onions from an African American man (61-64). In order to support his family, the African American man, also a minority, is forced to steal onions from farms and peddle them to people for a lack of a better job. His selling the onions furthers the symbolic representation of the onions as hardship and poverty because he is never guaranteed money for his work since he never knows how many onions he will sell in a given day.

When Eddie helps carry one of the onion sacks to José's car, he remarks that the sack "felt heavy as a body" (64), emphasizing the heavy load Eddie must carry around with him on a daily basis because of his city's poverty, unemployment, and violence. All of that difficulty and bad luck weighs down on the people of Fresno much like the onion sack is heavy to carry. Later in the novel, after talking to Coach about joining the Navy, Eddie's legs "seemed heavy, like those bags of onions the *mallate* had sold me and José" (94). If Eddie wants to have a chance to live a safe life, one where he is not constantly looking over his shoulder, he must leave Fresno. His only options for leaving are to either have his mother send him money so he can go live with her or to join the military. Unlike the majority of the public, Eddie's options are severely limited and neither option greatly appeals to him or would be what he really wanted to do with his life, which is why his legs feel as heavy as the onions. Thus, the onions are also equated with the lack of opportunities available to minorities. In Eddie's town, people either join gangs, commit crimes, go to prison, work low-paying and menial jobs and try not to get shot, stabbed, or robbed, or leave town through the military or by living off another person, such as a family member. Those options would not work for everyone in Fresno, but

because they are the only options, Eddie and his fellow citizens must make them work for them.

Not only is Eddie's life difficult, but the majority, if not all, of the people living in Fresno face difficult lives. Eddie can see and smell their sadness in their eyes and through their onion "vapors." In a classroom at the local community college, the students give "off a vapor of sweat and onion" (40). People trying to better their lives through college still struggle possibly because of the violence in the city, the lack of opportunities available to them, and the difficulty of the coursework so that even they do not escape from the hardship of living in Fresno. As he walks throughout his town, he sees the watery eyes of those, people and animals, who have "breathed in the onion of sadness" throughout their lives (14) and who have struggled simply to live their lives. Those who manage to live the American Dream of having a family and a house are still "plagued by the universal human worry: how to get money" (12), so even they must carry their onion of struggle.

While Eddie is working for Mr. Stiles, onion-like bulbs he discovers as he digs holes seem to foreshadow other difficulties Eddie will soon face. The first bulb he encounters happens on his first day working with Mr. Stiles:

I discovered an onionlike bulb, maybe the source of all our weeping. I examined the bulb and knew it wasn't an onion, but I laughed to myself and said, "Mr. Onion, you're going to die." I slashed the bulb in two and it bled clear tears. I sniffed it. It didn't give off an onion smell, just an earthy vapor that reminded me of work and nothing more. (22)

Because he finds the bulb on the first day of his new job while he is pleased and ambitious of the possibilities the new job will bring him, Eddie easily and happily destroys the bulb, symbolically destroying his previous sadness and hopelessness. He believes this job will be the beginning of a better life. However, Mr. Stiles's truck is stolen while Eddie is on an errand for him a few days later. In the truck's place was a "vapor that could have been heat or onion" (30). His hardship has not come to an end, which is why the bulb Eddie finds really is not an onion.

The next time Eddie finds an "onion" while digging in Mr. Stiles's yard happens just before he is arrested. At this point in the novel, Eddie has helped Mr. Stiles recover his truck and has talked to Coach about getting out of Fresno through the Navy, his only option out. While digging a hole for Mr. Stiles, Eddie again feels his life is looking better: "I felt like I was getting somewhere and then I felt something under my shoe like a baseball. I got out of the hole and, dropping to my knees, I clawed it out. It was a bulb of some kind, onionlike. I peeled off a sheet of its skin and sniffed it. It smelled only of earth" (103). Because Eddie was working again and taking steps to leave Fresno, he did feel like he was changing his life for the better. However, the onion of bad luck was not going to let Eddie off that easy. Thinking that Eddie may have been involved in a crime, Mr. Stiles sets him up, and Eddie is soon arrested after finding that bulb, further emphasizing the onion as a symbol of hardship and bad luck.

Once Eddie joins the Navy and is on his way out of town, the bus breaks down not far from an onion field. Walking away from the bus and towards the men in the field, one of whom is the man that sold José three sacks of onions, Eddie's legs feel heavy again, just as they did when he had made his decision to join the Navy, foreshadowing

the despair he will soon feel. Once realizing that he had walked over acres of onions, Eddie is filled with the sorrow of his life:

I saw Jesús on the ground, then Angel over him. I saw my palms bloodred from all the city wars—those in the past, those now, and those to come when every homie would raise a fist to his brother. Without saying a word, the man raised me up and handed me onions, one for each hand.

(146)

By handing Eddie an onion for each hand, the man seems to understand the sorrow of Eddie's life because it is also his sorrow and hardship since he is a minority as well. By helping Eddie up, he also appears to be telling him that he must keep on going despite the hardship; he must learn to bear his "onions" as all people must bear the difficulties of their lives.

Related to the symbol of the onion, water and the sun are other symbols that emphasize the difficulties Eddie and other town members face. Water usually symbolizes refreshment, new life, and change while the sun usually represents warmth, light, and hope. In *Buried Onions*, however, water and the sun signify suffering and sadness, much like the onion. While actual onions make people cry when they cut into them, the difficult lives the people of Fresno must lead also make them cry. Eddie mentions two women his age who have a tear tattooed on their faces, physically showing the pain they and the rest of the town endures on a daily basis. Like the tattoos are permanent fixtures on the women's faces, pain and suffering are permanent fixtures in everyone's lives. The sun in this southern California town is also vicious and relentless: "The sun was coin-bright and merciless. Not yet noon, and it was already tugging at the

water inside us” (7). The sun, instead of being a comfort, eats away at the people’s energy and spirit, the water inside them, because of its excessive and harsh light and heat. The sun also causes Eddie to sweat, a physical referent to the hardship he faces. Like his town is dirty because of all the violence and crime, the sweat shows how Eddie’s life is also “dirty” and difficult since the sweat is a constant reminder of the harsh heat from the sun and causes him to become like the “Ganges River, muddy and foul” (8), much like how life in Fresno is muddy and foul.

Because many options are not available to minorities in Fresno, many turn to violence and crime as a way to live out their existence. As Eddie explains, “It wasn’t bad enough that we had to live through the vapors of buried onions and poor jobs. We needed dying” (17). The violence and crime is a hardship the people must face in addition to the buried onions, or lack of opportunities and prejudices.

Emphasizing the difficult and violent world that Eddie lives in, the novel begins with an image of death. The novel opens as Eddie is discussing how the mortuary students at the local community college would have good jobs because of the large amount of people dying in Fresno. Eddie then lists the people he has recently lost—his father, two uncles, a friend from high school, and most recently, a cousin. Eddie’s life is surrounded by death, poverty, and violence. People steal from each other with no second thoughts and people kill each other on a daily basis: “The city was teeming with thugs, thieves, and low-IQ killers” (44). The “eye for an eye” culture also promotes the violence since a vicious cycle of killing and hurting comes out of this kind of culture. Eddie struggles to remain apart from this kind of mentality, but finds it very difficult because everyone he knows seems to subscribe to this culture. Eddie is also always

forced to stay alert since he does not know when someone may try to kill him for no apparent reason: “I glanced over my shoulder, slowing but not stopping, because if you stopped and it was your enemy, your life could spill like soda right on the black asphalt, spill before you could touch your wound. ... you had to be careful, quick as a rabbit” (6). As a result of living in such a violent city, Eddie struggles to find safety, a basic human right that should be afforded to all people. For Eddie and others who try to stay away from the crime, “there wasn’t much to do except eat and sleep, watch out for drive-bys, and pace myself through life” (3).

In addition, poverty dominates the city, and people struggle just to eat. Eddie notices the huge hunger problem walking home one night: “Returning to my apartment, I stepped over winos, the homeless, and stray dogs with ladders of ribs poking through. Hunger, I saw, was crawling from one end of the street to the other” (100). Instead of playing sports or doing other safe and law-abiding activities, children and young adults spend their recreation time “ghosting on glue or paint or maybe angel dust” (78) as a way to escape the difficulties of inner-city life. Even the Holmes Playground is not a safe place for children since homies, gang members, spend their days there. Good jobs are not available, and the jobs that are available are low paying and physically demanding, such as factory work and air conditioner repair. With people constantly stealing from one another and always on the lookout for someone trying to hurt them, the people of Fresno stay stuck in a vicious cycle of poverty and violence that has no end in sight. Even if one tries to lead a straight life as Eddie does, one always runs that risk of someone else trying to “mess you up” (135). For example, after Eddie’s friend José comes back to town, it is not long before someone stabs him while he is trying to help Eddie get back his boss’s

truck. As Eddie notes, “The east [is] one large bruise that [is] slowly becoming the night” (34).

Eddie’s wish is simply to live a safe life and to stay out of trouble. He tries very hard to live this kind of life, but between the violence and crime in the city, the lack and opportunities available to him, and bad luck, Eddie struggles just to live that simple life. Eddie never joins a gang unlike many of the other young men in his community, and he tries to stay as far away as possible from those who are in gangs or are criminals. Like the ants he sees in his apartment, Eddie tells himself to “keep a steady weight on [his] shoulders and to stay out of trouble and run a straight line—to stay away from the police and the rumblings of *vatos* who have nothing to do” (4). In order to keep that straight line and weight on his shoulders, Eddie believes hard work is the key. He wishes God would straighten him out and help him find a regular job and stay away from the gangsters in his town (25). Once Mr. Stiles gives him a landscaping job, Eddie is happy to be trusted and to be working and calls him his “dear Savior Mr. Stiles” (19). Without work, Eddie would be like Angel and the other gangsters who waste away their lives doing nothing. Even when he is tired, Eddie knows he must try to keep going like the “little train that could” (21). Eddie also lies to Mr. Stiles, Norma, Coach, and José so that they would think he is different from the majority of the other young men in the town and that he is hardworking and making something of himself and his life. Making something of himself and his life turns out to be very difficult. Even when he does have a job and is trusted, bad luck and high crime rates destroy Eddie’s dream of working. After Mr. Stiles’s truck is stolen, Eddie does not believe he would believe the truth about what happened to the truck, causing Eddie to give up since even when he tries to live his life,

factors beyond his control continue to keep him down: “I wished I had just stuck with stenciling numbers on curbs and had not let my ambition for digging holes get to me. So much for ambition. So much for trying to run a straight line like ants” (31). Even when Eddie does explain to Mr. Stiles what happens and helps him get his truck back after seeing it with the thieves in town, Mr. Stiles sets him up to be arrested. After this incident, Eddie does not go back to work and instead tries to escape Fresno through the Navy. All of the violence, poverty, and hardship Eddie faces illustrate how hardworking and honest minorities, like Eddie, are marginalized and not offered the same opportunities as the majority culture. Anyone in the dominant culture as hardworking as Eddie would have been able to make his dreams come true because of the many more opportunities that are available to him.

Because Eddie’s life is so difficult, he wishes to return to his childhood, a time that was easier and more innocent. Throughout the novel, Eddie remembers playing at Holmes playground as a child and of the foods, such as bologna sandwiches, Fritos, cream sodas, Chee-tos, Wheaties, and chocolate milk, he would eat as a child. He still either eats these foods or craves them, just like he craves to return to an easier life.

Houses are another important symbol in *Buried Onions* and in *The House on Mango Street* that work to show how the house, a symbol for success, the American Dream, safety, and status can also be a prison. For Eddie, his ideal life would be one where he has a job, house, and family:

The good life is one where you go to work, do an eight-hour shift, and return home to your family, where your kids are wild for you. After all,

you're the daddy. Mountains rise from your shoulders, coins jingle in your pocket, and the food on the table is your doing. (35)

After buying a house, a man could bury his onion in his yard (12), symbolizing his success in life since he has the option of burying the hardship and suffering associated with the onion. Instead of having this ideal life and home, however, Eddie lives in a stuffy and hot apartment that is "bare as a gnawed bone" (48) and shares his space with ants and roaches. Because he is a minority, the option of owning a home and thus achieving the American Dream is not available to Eddie as it is available for non-minority people since his choices are severely limited by high crime and poor education.

Like Eddie, Esperanza in *The House on Mango Street* desires a space of her own: "I knew then I had to have a house. A real house. One I could point to" (5). Unlike Eddie, Esperanza does live in a house that her parents own. However, her house on Mango Street is not her ideal home. The house is falling apart with crumbling bricks, has no yard, and is too small with only one bathroom and three bedrooms for six people (4). Esperanza is ashamed of this house and wishes she had a house she felt she could point to, a house that would show the world she is somebody and successful. Esperanza's ideal house is a white one with running water, real stairs inside, a basement, multiple bathrooms, and a big unfenced yard full of trees and green grass (4). She desires a house such as this so that she would have a place that is hers and hers alone that is comfortable and safe, unlike the house and apartment both she and Eddie live in:

Not a flat. Not an apartment in back. Not a man's house. Not a daddy's. A house all my own. With my porch and my pillow, my pretty

petunias. My books and my stories. My two shoes waiting beside the bed. Nobody to shake a stick at. Nobody's garbage to pick up after.

Only a house quiet as snow, a space for myself to go, clean as paper before the poem. (108)

Once Esperanza does have her house, she will make sure that she does not forget where she comes from and will return for those who were not able to leave because since she is a minority, she understands everyone will not have the opportunities that she is lucky enough to have. She will also share her wealth with those who do not have what she has. When dreaming about the house she will have one day, Esperanza vows to offer her home to those who have none: "One day I'll own my own house, but I won't forget who I am or where I came from. Passing bums will ask, Can I come in? I'll offer them the attic, ask them to stay, because I know how it is to be without a house" (87). She will not be stingy with her wealth like many people since she understands how difficult it is for minorities to try to achieve the American Dream.

Unlike Eddie, Esperanza knows she will leave and reach her dreams; she has her writing to help her get out whereas Eddie's only way out of Fresno is either his mother or the military. For many other women in Esperanza's world, however, they will not have the opportunities that Esperanza has and will instead have to rely on someone else to have a home, much like Eddie does in *Buried Onions*. For many of the women in *The House of Mango Street*, their only choice to leave or hope for a better life is through the men they marry. Marin, for example, dreams of a job downtown where she has a better chance to "meet someone in the subway who might marry [her] and take [her] to live in a

big house far away” (26). Instead of relying on herself to reach her dreams, Marin’s only choice is to be dependent on someone else to make her dreams come true.

Because many women must depend on others in order to reach the American Dream, the house also becomes a symbol for a prison. Esperanza’s great-grandmother, who had a wild spirit, refused to marry, an action not well received in her culture. As a result, like a possession, she was carried off by a man and forced to marry and live in a house with her husband. Because she was forced to marry against her will, Esperanza’s great-grandmother was never happy and the house became her prison since she was not able to do as she wished and was instead forced to follow her husband’s orders: “And the story goes she never forgave him. She looked out the window her whole life, the way so many women sit their sadness on an elbow” (11).

Rafaela and Sally both find a man who takes them away to live in their dream house. However, for both women, their husbands are so controlling that they lock their wives inside the house, turning the house into a prison cell from which they cannot escape. For Rafaela, her husband is afraid she will be unfaithful and locks her inside to make sure she never leaves him: “And then Rafaela, who is still young but getting old from leaning out the window so much, gets locked indoors because her husband is afraid Rafaela will run away since she is too beautiful to look at” (79). Just like Esperanza’s great-grandmother, Rafaela spends her days looking out at the world, wishing she could be a part of it. Similarly, Sally marries in order to escape from her abusive father, who also keeps her locked inside like Rafaela because of her beauty. Desperate to escape the prison her father has set up, she marries and becomes yet another prisoner, now to her husband:

She sits at home because she is afraid to go outside without his permission. She looks at all the things they own: the towels and the toaster, the alarm clock and the drapes. She likes looking at the walls, at how neatly their corners meet, the linoleum roses on the floor, the ceiling smooth as wedding cake. (102)

Instead of enjoying her youth and having a happy life, Sally simply stares at the walls in her house and at her possessions. Instead of making her happy and free as she thought they would, the house and her possessions confine her to the boxed prison cell that is her home. Both women believed that once they had their husbands and houses they would have the American Dream and be happy and free to live their lives as they pleased. However, while both women do have their dream homes, those homes are all that they do have. They have no freedom and will live the rest of their lives looking out at the world through their windows instead of living their own lives; they become the object of someone else's life rather than the subject of their own.

Similar to Rafaela and Sally, Ruthie has a husband and house but is instead living with her mother. Terrified of going outside her house, probably for fear that she will miss her husband when he finally comes to take her back home, she locks herself in her mother's house. When given the choice to go out with friends, Ruthie does not know whether she should go: "...Ruthie stood on the steps wondering whether to go. Should I go, Ma? ... Ruthie looked at the ground. What do you think, Ma? Ruthie looked at the ground some more" (68). Her fear eventually wins the battle, keeping her locked up inside the house.

Cultural beliefs and barriers also cause the house to become a prison for Alicia and *Mamacita*. After Alicia's mother dies, she must then take her mother's place in the kitchen and cook for her father. Unlike many of the other women in the novel, Alicia is going to school in order to try to escape her prison. *Mamacita*, who recently arrived in America, speaks no English and desperately wants to return to her home. Because she cannot speak the language and is in a culture different from her own, *Mamacita* locks herself in her house and like the other women, stares out at the world, wishing for her home:

She sits all day by the window and plays the Spanish radio show and sings all the homesick songs about her country in a voice that sounds like a seagull.

Home. Home. Home is a house in a photograph, a pink house, pink as hollyhocks with lots of startled light. The man paints the walls of the apartment pink, but it's not the same, you know. She still sighs for her pink house, and then I think she cries. (77)

Like all of the other women in the novel, she dreams of her own house, not a house that she is forced to live in. As a result of not knowing the language and the culture, she becomes a prisoner in her own home and dreams of the day when she can return home.

For all of the women in *The House on Mango Street*, the house becomes a prison rather than the realization of a dream as they had thought that it would since they depended on the men in their lives to make that dream happen. For the women who were forced into the house, such as Esperanza's great-grandmother and *Mamacita*, the house

becomes a prison because of the lack of choices that are available to them and their marginalization.

Prison imagery is also apparent in *Buried Onions*, much in the same way as in *The House on Mango Street*. As in *The House on Mango Street*, the prison imagery emphasizes the lack of choices and opportunities the characters have. For Eddie, poverty-stricken Fresno and his desire to live a safe and crime-free life are his prisons. Fresno is such a violent place and opportunities are not available so that the town itself becomes like a prison from which he cannot escape. Eddie's struggle to live a safe life and try to make something of himself is also prison-like since it consumes all of his energy and is a goal that seems unattainable because of the violence and other circumstances out of Eddie's control. Even though Eddie wants to live a straight life, he cannot help being sucked into the violence surrounding his world. After hearing a rumor that his cousin's friend Angel killed Jesús, Eddie becomes convinced that Angel will kill him next. He spends his next few days running from Angel until he decides to try to get Angel before Angel gets him. Eddie also notices that more people go into the hospital where people are sick and are treated for injuries that are usually crime related and where people go to die, the police station where people are sent just before being sent to Vacaville, an actual prison, and the bus where people go back and forth to menial jobs and attempt to escape the city than come out (67, 68, 106), emphasizing how people remain stuck in their lives with little hope of getting out or escaping: "I boarded a bus and got spooked again when I noticed there were more people getting on than getting off. We were all poor, all going somewhere. But where?" (68). Many men end up also incarcerated in an actual prison, and Eddie considers managing to stay out of prison a

sign of a successful life. Even those who are able to have the American Dream and own their own home, they become stuck in the prison of continuing to work for the money to support their families and pay for their homes (12).

Through symbols of onions, water, and houses, both *Buried Onions* and *The House on Mango Street* show how minorities are marginalized and are not offered the same choices as the majority culture. Both protagonists in these novels struggle to live simple and safe lives, lives that the dominant culture is usually automatically guaranteed. Because these two novels are told from a minority's perspective, they would be excellent choices to include in the English curriculum since minority voices, like female voices, are often overlooked in much of the traditional literature taught. Students need to learn about all voices so that they can learn about others who are not like them, which will foster more awareness and acceptance of differences. Incorporating more minority voices into the literature that is currently taught is also important for the minority students in those classrooms since they will have the opportunity to read about others like themselves, helping students to make more connections between the literature and their own lives.

Concluding Comments

As the previous three chapters have made evident, high quality young adult novels are available. *The Giver*, *Speak*, *Buried Onions*, and *The House on Mango Street* are well written and of high quality and rival the literary merit of many traditional classics. Each novel is innovative and represents a range of complex themes and issues and well developed characters that are universal and philosophically explore common human problems, issues, and triumphs. For example, *The Giver* encourages readers to question their beliefs concerning freedom, the amount of control exerted by a government, and the importance of the elements of emotions and free thought that make humans human. The novel's protagonist, Jonas, is someone that all young adults can relate to since he, like all young people, struggles with finding his place in his society and questions his identity and the actions of his family and government. *Speak* represents a female voice who also tries to find her identity after being the victim of a horrible crime. Anderson develops Melinda's character through a unique organizational structure, through the novel's rich thematic elements, imagery and symbolism, and through the strong first-person perspective. *Buried Onions* and *The House of Mango Street* examine the marginalization of minorities in America and the protagonists of each of these novels show readers how the American Dream of having money, a house, and a family are not available to all cultures and that minorities must work extra hard to have the same successes afforded to the dominant culture. Because of the variety of content, themes, and characters presented in these four novels, students are able to widen their horizons since they will have the opportunity to read about people and situations different from

their own, which will then help to develop more well-rounded, understanding, and aware adults in an increasingly global society.

Because of the strong and complex themes and issues presented in each of these novels, students will be challenged intellectually and will be encouraged to think critically about their own cultural, social, and political perspectives and beliefs. *Buried Onions* and *The House on Mango Street* challenge students' preconceived beliefs about minorities while *The Giver* challenges readers' political beliefs concerning the role of the government and *Speak* challenges cultural and social beliefs concerning women and the role of art in society. These young adult novels are able to encourage this engagement and critical thinking more so than many traditional classics because the content and language are more accessible to young people. With more understanding of the language used and of the plot structure, students are then able to engage more actively with the novels' deeper messages. Since many students struggle with the simple elements of the plot and language of many traditional classics, they are not usually as able to go as deep into the novel as the novel merits.

Because the characters of these young adult novels are the same ages as young adults and because they go through similar issues, the reading interest of students for these novels is higher. Teenagers' experiences are illuminated and validated by reading about other teenagers facing similar problems, triumphs, and issues as they are. Young adults are egocentric and as such, they want to read about other people who face similar issues and problems. All young adults struggle to find their identity and place in society as Jonas, Melinda, Eddie, and Esperanza do. They also feel alone and isolated as do the characters in these novels. The reading interest of many traditional classics are often

lower for students since those characters often are experiencing events that young people are not developmentally and socially ready to understand. Young adult novels are more developmentally and socially appropriate because teenagers can see themselves in the characters and situations they are reading about, causing more connection to the characters and issues and a desire to want to continue reading the novel.

Furthermore, the higher reading interest and developmentally appropriateness of these young adult novels encourage more positive reading experiences, which will help to promote life-long readers. Any time a student has a positive experience with something he or she has read, he or she will be encouraged to read more and will seek out other novels of similar content. Since these novels are written for people of a young adult's social and developmental stages, teenagers do not struggle with trying to understand the basic elements of the novel as is usually the case with traditional classics written for the adult audience. As a result, that dislike and even hatred usually associated with classics are not present when students read young adult novels, and students then feel more confident with their reading abilities and will want to read more.

These four novels would also serve as a good bridge to the traditional classics. Once students are more confident in their reading abilities and are able to actively engage in a novel and think critically about the issues presented in a work, they would be more ready to move on to the possibly more difficult classic works. *The Giver*, for example, would be a nice bridge to Huxley's *Brave New World* or George Orwell's *1984* since all of these novels examine humanity's basic freedoms and rights and the amount of control that could be and should be exerted by any given government. Sir Thomas Moore's *Utopia* or Orwell's *Animal Farm* would also be a good pair with *The Giver* because of

each novel's look at seemingly perfect or utopian societies. *Speak* could be paired nicely with Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* or *The Story of an Hour* and Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* for their look at women and their struggle with identity and freedom in a male dominated world. *Speak* could also be a good bridge to Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* since both main characters try to deal with having a secret that eats away at their spirits. *Buried Onions* and *The House on Mango Street* could be paired with many of the American slave narratives for their glimpse into the lives of minorities fighting to survive in a society that marginalizes people. F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* could also work with these two novels for the American Dream quest each novel examines.

The best young adult novels should not be ignored by teachers or administrators and should instead play a vital role in the English curriculum. These novels have all of the same qualities that traditional classics possess and would challenge students intellectually. More importantly, students enjoy reading novels in this genre, and because they have positive reading experiences with young adult literature, they will be more likely to continue reading into adulthood. Anything to help foster a love of reading in students cannot be ignored if society wishes to have literate adults.

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