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Growing Up with Words: The Evolution and Impact of Young Adult and Children’s Literature through Animation Films

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ABSTRACT

Young adult and children’s literature have consistently functioned as formative instruments in the socialisation and education of emerging readers, guiding their concepts of identity, ethics, and the workings of society. Rooted in didactic moral fables—think Aesop or earlier religious texts—books for the young were primarily vehicles of instruction until the nineteenth-century shift toward imaginative narratives exemplified by Lewis Carroll’s *Alice* and Alcott’s *Little Women*. By contrast, the Young Adult label gained momentum in mid-twentieth-century America, when stories such as S.E. Hinton’s *The Outsiders* began to articulate the tensions and possibilities of adolescence, including class conflict and self-discovery. In their current iteration, both YA and children’s books confront urgent global problems such as systemic racism, mental health stigma, and climate collapse; parallel campaigns like #WeNeedDiverseBooks insist that these conversations be anchored in representative, equitable stories. The present inquiry, therefore, charts the genres’ historical arcs, thematic turnings, and cultural weight, arguing that they cultivate empathy, self-awareness, and a sense of collective responsibility among readers. A related section draws on animated cinema, examining how films such as *Inside Out* and *Zootopia* translate visual allegory into accessible commentary on emotion and bias. Collectively, this study positions contemporary children’s and YA literature as resilient channels for



intellectual and emotional development, equipping young people to navigate an unpredictable future.

KEYWORDS: Young Adult Literature, Children's Literature, Literary Evolution, Identity and Representation, Moral and Social Development

FULL PAPER

Growing up through stories

Literature for young adults and children has been a part of the human experience for many years. It is interesting how humans make sense of the world and engage to connect it. From an ancient narrative tradition to modern storytelling, whatever the format, this literature serves to entertain, inform, socialise, and empower young people. This literature is frequently neglected within literary discussion; the cultural and psychological values of this literature are significant. Young adults (YA) and children's literature provide young and fledgling readers with strategies on how to think about moral values, identity concerns, social roles, and human relationships.

Children's literature began a project of instilling moral discipline and religious virtue, think Aesop's fables, and in the 1930s and 1940s writers began to write for a new audience the emotional and imaginative needs of children, resulting in works to be read through to adulthood such as Alice Adventures in Wonderland and Little Women and a depth and complexity that most adult books could not/ do not offer, to this day. Young Adult literature is a new genre that emerged as a distinct model in the mid-20th century, mainly due to shifts in societal views on adolescence within the broader social construct of childhood. Like many movements, early YA literature tried to address the common issues seen in and experienced by teenagers with stories like *The Outsiders* which depicted real world and social issues dealing with class divides and the search for identity at the same time and more than ever YA literature has been evolving with each passing year; seeming to expand in coverage of themes and topics, genres and forms, ie. Memoir, speculative fiction, and many others. Today, both Children's and YA literature is confronting critical global issues, such as racism, mental health, gender identity, and environmental change, while also drawing on diverse experiences from different cultures. Campaigns like #WeNeedDiverseBooks have initiated the process of storytelling inclusion, not only changing the stories, but also who gets to tell them.

This paper examines the evolution of young adults' literature and its core themes and cultural relevance. Young adults' and children's literature has become an important conduit for enabling empathy, self-awareness, and cultural understanding in young readers.

Historical Background

The understanding of literature among children had its origins in the 17th and 18th centuries. Works like Aesop's Fables and *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* by John Locke had a strong focus on the moral and teaching explicit lessons (Greny 4). By the 19th century there were more possibilities for creation of children's literature, through stories that expressed hope and moved beyond moral objects, including *Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) by Lewis Carroll's *Alice's* and *Little Woman* (1868) by Louisa May Alcott's, which engaged children as imaginative readers who were allowed to explore stories that were not strictly moral lessons.

Comparatively, the understanding of literature among Young adults is a new genre compared to children's literature. It became very popular in the mid-20th century, when novels like *The Outsiders* (1967) by S. E. Hinton featured books with teenage protagonists portrayed with real-world problems. According to Michael Cart, "YA literature was not invented until the 1960s, when teenagers themselves became a social category." (Cart 45). Today, the genre continues to grow in reach, in terms of audiences and subject matter.

Young adults and children's literature have evolved with the social, cultural, and educational thinking of their times, in the 17th and 18th centuries, when children began to gain recognition as an important stage of life. Before that development, children were often treated as small adults, and their reading material - if they had access to any - tended to be didactic or religious. Aesop's Fables is one of the earliest examples of literature written for young readers. These short moral tales about animals behaving like people have been around since antiquity, and are 'the most commonly reproduced' stories on the continent of Europe for educational purposes.

During the Enlightenment, thinkers like John Locke began to influence children's literature. "*Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693) by him emphasised the importance of rational thought and moral education and advocated for literature that interested and stimulated rational thought while stimulating enjoyment of literature. Educational texts like the *Pilgrim's Progress* in 1678 by John Bunyan and *The New England Primer* (late 1600s) influenced this perspective, which combined religious instruction with literacy instruction. The goal of the books was not only to reinforce discipline in young readers but also to instil moral values. The texts became common reading materials in the home and primary schools.

The 19th century marked a significant turning point in the perspectives on children's literature, as the factors of the Industrial Revolution, the rise of the middle class, and increased literacy in English-speaking populations shifted how adults viewed childhood. Children were no longer solely seen as future adults, but knew they were imaginative beings who needed honest entertainment and moral support. The attitude encouraged a whimsical approach to storytelling with a mixture of humour,

moral content, and fantasy. Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) did not use whimsical logic and absurdity to dictate to children or preach morality (questioning if his readers would be looking for moral lessons in his stories), but rather to celebrate the act of imagining. *Little Women*, by Louisa May Alcott (1868), portrays the lives and dreams of young girls without explicitly teaching morals and values of behaviour and conduct by focusing on character development through storytelling. Between the late 19th and early 20th centuries, some other writers contributed to both the diversity and the popularity of literature among children. They included *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* by L. Frank Baum, *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* by Beatrix Potter, and *The Secret Garden* by Frances Hodgson Burnett. Themes of adventure, personal development, and a love of nature in children's literature became common, and the stories began to reflect a more profound respect for children's emotional and psychological life.

Children's literature has undoubtedly been around longer than young adult (YA) fiction, which is a relatively new genre. The idea of adolescence and teenagers as a specific stage of life was not a widely accepted concept until the mid-20th century. Outside of the distinct publication of young adult books, there has not been a collectable and widespread literature for older children to read other than children's books, and the eventual decision to read adult literature. Typically, older children read children's books until they, as readers, transition into the domain of adult literature.

For many, *The Outsiders* (1967) by S.E. Hinton has been heralded for laying the foundation for the young adult literature genre. Hinton wrote a book for teenagers, articulating relevant topics such as class conflict, violence, identity, and belonging from a youthful perspective. The raw realism and the emotional authenticity of *The Outsiders* set the stage for YA as a genre. In the words of literary critic Michael Cart, "YA literature was not invented until the 1960s, because that is when the teenager first became a social category in their own right" (Cart 45). Following the success of S.E. Hinton's novel, the 1970s and 1980s witnessed a surge in realistic problem novels, including *Are You There God? It is Me, Margaret*, written by Judy Blume, and *The Chocolate War*, by Robert Cormier, that would begin to address topics like puberty, sexuality, death, and mental health.

The 1990s and 2000s are marked by further growth and diversification. Groundbreaking series such as *Harry Potter* by J.K. Rowling, *His Dark Materials* by Philip Pullman, and Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games* legitimised YA as a global literary force. These novels, published for "young adults," were successful as works for older teens, but are also popular with adult readers, creating a significant blurring of age demographics. YA literature expanded and incorporated many genres, among them fantasy, romance, sci-fi, historical fiction, and narrative realism, but ultimately, YA fosters an exploration of the adolescent human condition. Today, children's and YA

literature exemplify liveliness and changeability, meaning part of the cultural shift, technological change, and changing reader interests. Children's and YA literature have evolved from morality lessons to a space for representation and empathy, addressing societal issues. These genres remain vital aspects of some of the literature of the present time.

Themes and Issues in YA and Children's Literature

Young Adults' and Children's books often explore major themes that are important to both development and social understanding. These themes often include topics such as identity, interpersonal relationships (family and friends), moral dilemmas, and the transition into adulthood. Recently, there has been a clear shift toward increased inclusion and realism, with books like *The Hate U Give* (2017) by Angie Thomas and *Long Way Down* (2017) by Jason Reynolds addressing serious issues such as racial injustice, police brutality, and grief.

The topic of representation is at the forefront of today's literary conversations. Rudine Sims Bishop's idea of books as "windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors" illustrates the importance of stories that show readers not only themselves but also those who experience things differently. The #WeNeedDiverseBooks movement, both as an organisation and social media campaign, has had a significant impact on changing publishing norms and shaping reader expectations.

Children's and YA literature have always been venues where young people can examine issues that are central to their personal and social development. Reading at an early age exposes children to important subjects that shape their perspectives on ideas like relationships, identities, and moral decisions. YA books tend to present these topics and concerns with complexity, broadening the way that ideas and issues are shown to young readers, moving comfortably from childhood into adulthood. These works provide opportunities to escape reality, and at the same time, examine it.

More formally, literature for young people, from picture storybooks to readers to extensive YA novels, allows for a uniquely powerful medium to explore ideas within the context of personal development and social awareness. Often, literature for youth reflects or comments on the realities the young reader faces each day, sometimes allowing the reader a place to understand some of their emotional and psychological changes. Ultimately, literature for youth can provide young people with a pathway to understand themselves and their place.

Key Themes in Children's Literature

In literature written for younger audiences, themes are usually conveyed in simple, emotionally impactful ways that align with their developing cognitive and emotional abilities. Frequent themes include:

- **Friendship and Belonging:** Characters navigate relationships, inclusion, and cooperation, such as in *Charlotte's Web* or *Frog and Toad*.
- **Family and Home:** Explored through both idyllic and complex portrayals, as seen in *The Family Under the Bridge* or *Ramona and Her Father*.
- **Morality and Justice:** Right versus wrong is often simplified to help children recognise ethical behaviour, as seen in Dr. Seuss's stories or fairy tales.
- **Imagination and Growth:** Fantastical journeys (like *Where the Wild Things Are*) offer space for emotional exploration through symbolism and metaphor.

Central Themes in YA Literature

Young adult fiction has grown more complex over time, mirroring the intellectual and emotional maturity of its teen audience. These stories frequently explore:

- **Identity Formation:**

Gender, race, culture, and self-esteem are prominent aspects of Identity themes in many YA books. *The True Diary* by Sherman Alexie is an example of a Part-Time Indian, which interrogates identity in the context of race as it relates to being Native American in a predominantly white culture.

- **Coming of Age:**

Preoccupation with adolescence as a transformative period during which characters confront choices, development, and new obligations is a hallmark of YA literature. A teenager begins to reclaim her voice and agency after experiencing trauma in Laurie Halse Anderson's *Speak*.

- **Social Injustice and Activism:**

Contemporary books foreground the issues of racism and inequality. In *The Hate U Give*, Angie Thomas offers a striking portrayal of police violence and the Black Lives Matter movement

- **Mental Health and Grief:**

Jennifer Niven's "*All the Bright Places*" treats these struggles in a respectful and meaningful way. Keen value is placed on emotional authenticity, with narratives allowing authors to reveal stories that responsibly discuss mental health difficulties related to anxiety, depression, trauma, and grief.

The Evolution toward Representation

Literature among current young adults and children is diversifying the experiences of their readers. Oft-cited metaphors like "windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors" by Rudine Sims Bishop emerged as a common thread in discussions about literature. This metaphor indicates that:

- **Windows** let readers view lives different from their own.
- **Mirrors** reflect their own identity and experiences.
- **Sliding glass doors** allow them to step into new perspectives with empathy.

Movements like #WeNeedDiverseBooks have pressured publishers to centre marginalised voices, making space for BIPOC, LGBTQ+, neurodivergent, and disabled stories that were once excluded or sidelined.

Literature: Space for Exploration and Resilience

Children's and YA texts offer a safe space to explore real emotions, dilemmas, and learn from characters who make mistakes under societal pressures, rather than providing amusing and entertaining content. They can explore their own difficult emotions, shake their heads in disbelief at the decisions made by some characters, and find strength by connecting with characters who have to move forward from adversity. Children and adolescents derive comfort from the soothing words of picture books and emotional challenges from the daunting and ambitious themes of YA novels. Children's and YA works shape their emotional understanding of the world, their social understanding of the world, and children continue to be shaped by the stories they read.

Common Themes: Identity, Friendship, Family, and Morality

Exploring identity is a key motif in both young adult (YA) and children's literature. In works geared towards younger readers, identity usually unfolds as straightforward questions of what a child's role is in their family, in their community, and possibly in the world. A good example is Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*, which depicts how the March sisters evolve as people while being aware of the various aspects of their identities, from distinct characteristics to aspirations that will help them establish their identity, all the while being grounded in shared love and family experiences. YA literature allows for more complex and nuanced notions of identity because the threads of identity intersect with self-disclosure. Some novels, like

The Perks of Being a Wallflower by Stephen Chbosky and *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* by Benjamin Alire Sáenz examine identity along with themes such as sexuality and mental health, and emphasise the need for acceptance. These coming-of-age stories illustrate the inner and outer conflicts of

adolescence, as teens, amid self-discovery and aligned to discover their identity, must contend with conflicting messages about identity from society.

Friendship and Family: Friendship and family are recurring themes in both children's and YA narratives. In *The Outsiders* by S.E. Hinton, the socio-economic divide between the Greasers and the Socs informs the characters' identities and experiences. The strong bond among the Greasers shows how friendships can provide emotional support and strength. In *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, Harry's friendships help him grow and succeed. Family—whether by blood or by choice—is also a key theme, especially in stories about adoption or blended families. For example, in *The Penderwicks* by Jeanne Birdsall, the siblings stay close and support each other through loss and change.

Morality and Ethical Dilemmas: Stories often explore right and wrong by putting characters in brutal or unfair situations. In *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins, Katniss Everdeen faces hard choices about survival, loyalty, and standing up to a corrupt system. Young adult books often show these grey areas to help readers think about morality and imagine how they might act in similar situations. Shifts toward Inclusivity and Realism

Shifts toward Inclusivity and Realism

Young adult (YA) and children's literature have undergone tremendous shifts toward realism, authenticity, and inclusivity over the past few decades. Contemporary children's and YA literature now forces young readers, North Americans, to confront social realities, like racial inequity, mental health issues, and LGBTQ+ topics, that expose children to the same concerns addressed by many progressive social movements intended to dismantle restrictive and stigmatising societal narratives.

One of the significant changes has been the representation and recognition of diverse characters and authors. Books are increasingly representing a breadth of lived experiences shaped by structural constraints of race, gender, class, and abilities. For example, in *The Hate U Give* (2017) by Angie Thomas's, and *Long Way Down* (2017) by Jason Reynolds, are refreshingly honest, if absurdly clear and accurate critiques set in the backdrop of historical events facing young children, youth, and adults over too many decades including systemic racism, gun, police violence, isolation and grief, children donors (young adult) see and hear a mirror image of the issues they face today.

Starr Carter, protagonist of “*In the Hate U Give*”, navigates the tension between her life in a poor Black neighbourhood and her education at a wealthy white private school. After witnessing her friend's death at the hands of police, Starr wrestles with finding her voice and speaking out, all while facing the risks that come with acting vis-à-vis. The story emphasises how young people of colour are often forced to deal with racial realities and make difficult choices about resistance and silence from a young age.

Long Way Down by Jason Reynolds explores the emotional weight of violence and revenge through the story of Will, a teenager seeking to avenge his brother's death. The novel examines grief, the psychological burden of retaliation, and the difficulty of escaping cycles of violence in underserved communities. The story touches on deep themes such as justice, forgiveness, and generational trauma.

Representation and the Call for Diverse Narratives

Recently, the discourse has focused on whose stories are being told and whose stories are being heard. One of the primary frameworks discusses the notion that books provide "windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors." She argues that literature can allow readers to watch other lives unfold ("window"), see their lives reflected in them ("mirror"), and step into other lives ("sliding glass doors"), drawing attention to the ability of literature to create empathy, self-awareness, and cross-cultural awareness

The #WeNeedDiverseBooks movement, which came to prominence in the mid-2010s, has been instrumental in promoting inclusivity in publishing. This grass-roots movement seeks to promote more varied (in the form of identity) representation across race, gender, sexuality, ability, and class in literature for younger readers. It also challenges traditional ways of thinking about literature by explicitly focusing on books with marginalised voices in the creation of all-gender news and scholarly narratives of youth literature.

Jacqueline Woodson, Angie Thomas, Rita Williams-Garcia, and Alex Gino are authors changing the face of children's and YA literature with inclusive stories. Woodson's *Brown Girl Dreaming* (2014) is a poignant and poetic narrative based on her life, as she wrestles with identity, race, and family, inviting us into her world. Gino's *George* (2015) was the first to give voice to a child's journey toward self-acceptance as a transgender child. As well as these works, these writers challenge previous notions and open up space for honest and necessary conversations about identity and diversity in contemporary youth literature.

This continuing emphasis on diversity, authenticity, and realistic representation in youth literature parallels a larger cultural acknowledgement of the significance of stories that are meaningful to all young readers. These books are intended to provide young readers with reflections of their experiences and perspectives on lives different from theirs, which provide a deeper understanding of themselves and others. As genres, these books and narratives continue to expand, but still serve as a powerful vehicle for young readers' identity and values, and hopefully enable them to navigate a complex and ever-changing world successfully.

The Role of Literature: Identity and Education

YA and Children's literature can create a space to explore identity and teach socially. Developmental psychology supports the premise that stories support a young person's ability to integrate complex emotions and shift perspectives. According to Maria Nikolajeva, "literature creates a 'safe space' to confront and negotiate difficult feelings and situations" and "allows the emotional, cognitive and social interplay to resume" (Nikolajeva 11).

Literature is a well-utilised course of study in education for imaginative reading, literacy, critical thinking, and developing the capacity for empathy. Curriculum decisions have always been a source of heated discussion. The banning and/or challenging of books such as *Maus* by Art Spiegelman and *Gender Queer* by Maia Kobabe continues evidence of powerful convictions surrounding censorship, parental choice, and academic freedom.

The Commercialisation and Globalisation of YA

The success of series such as *Harry Potter* by J.K. Rowling, *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins, and *Percy Jackson* by Rick Riordan has propelled YA into an international industry. These series incorporate action, fantasy, and social commentary, making them attractive to readers of all ages. That said, critics underscore that the commercialisation of any genre can sometimes drift toward formulaic writing or market trend precedence over literary representation (Trites 83).

Conclusion: Animation as Storytelling for Young Audiences

YA and Children's literature is much more than a form of entertainment; it embodies a creative, expressive form that informs, empowers, and engages. Literature for children and YA continues to expand and is influenced by the changing society in which we live, demonstrating growth but also stagnation. Children's literature does not matter if in the form of a fairy tale, anthology, graphic novel, or dystopian novel - stories are a staple of growing up.

Similar to the written word, animation is a medium of storytelling that can engage, inform, and evoke feelings in children. Animation takes storytelling to another level by incorporating visual artistry, sound design, and movement, which adds emotional and moral layers to a story. Much of what we find in children's and YA films parallels the main themes in children's literature - identity, belonging, family, loss, justice, or growing up. A clear example would be Pixar's *Inside Out* (2015), which converts the delicate concept of emotional regulation and mental health into a story that is fun and digestible for children. *Inside Out*, although entertaining, can act as a medium for children to identify and express complicated emotions of sadness, anger, or happiness when they arise..

Education through Allegory and Fantasy

Animated films, like fairy tales and dystopian stories in literature, use memorable settings and characters as metaphors to explore real-life situations. One example is *Zootopia* (2016), which tackles heavy themes related to racial stereotyping, prejudice, and institutional discrimination with humour and anthropomorphic animal characters.

Studio Ghibli's film, *Spirited Away* (2001), also offers a highly imaginative narrative while addressing personal identity, materialism, and personal strength. In putting complex ideas in a fantastical world, the film provides a venue for children to grapple with complexities that are difficult to explore otherwise – this is one of the roles of historical children's stories as well.

The Role of Representation in Animated Cinema

In recent years, animation studios have embraced more cultural diversity and inclusion in their stories. Films like Disney's *Encanto* (2021) and Pixar's *Turning Red* (2022) focus on specific cultures while exploring universal themes like family, identity, and belonging. These films reflect Rudine Sims Bishop's idea of stories as "windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors," helping children see themselves and others in meaningful ways. Like the #WeNeedDiverseBooks movement in literature, animated films are also working toward better representation of real-life experiences.

Building Emotional Intelligence and Moral Literacy

Cartoons often serve as a child's introduction to moral values. For instance, *The Lion King* explores themes of loss and taking responsibility, while *Finding Nemo* highlights perseverance, compassion, and the strong connection between parent and child. These stories help children begin exploring ethical decisions, developing empathy, and recognising good from bad.

Just as YA literature explores emotional and psychological complexity, films such as *Big Hero 6* provide teens with important depictions of loss, creativity, and chosen family and provide emotional release as well as purpose..

Conclusion: Animation as a Living Literature

Animation and children's literature both have the same goal to help children navigate their journeys of growing up. While both genres adapt to societal changes and new technologies, ultimately, they serve the same purpose: to educate, entertain, and inspire children. These forms, whether found on screen or in a book, allow children to make meaning of their world and think about how they may impact it with courage, creativity, and generosity.

In the end, animation can be considered a highly visual and emotional form of literature. Both children's literature and animation evolve with society, but they

provide children with substantive meaning related to themselves and their world. Moreover, both promote individual growth, empathy, and the experiences of the infinite possibilities of youth.

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