

# Birth/Death/Rebirth: Pairing Young Adult and Classic Novels To Teach Situational Archetypes

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The archetype, as defined by Carl Jung, is “a figure . . . that constantly recurs in the course of history and appears wherever creative fantasy is freely expressed” (817). Because archetypal pairings can be made between novels which on the surface seem to have little in common, a study of archetypes helps students realize that analysis of literature goes beyond the basic elements of plot and character. The use of YA literature to introduce the complex literary concept of the archetype is ideally suited to teachers of gifted students in high school classrooms. Once students understand the concept of archetypes in literature, they can begin to make deeper connections among all of the literary works that they read. (Please see Appendix A: Three Resources that Suggest Ways to Bring YA Books to Gifted Students.)

One of the most basic of these archetypes is the situational archetype of Birth/Death/Rebirth. The pattern of birth, death and rebirth in literature involves a struggle that leads to a new realization of self (Herz and Gallo 65). Characters are spiritually reborn as a result of the trials they endure. Given the predominance of this pattern in the classic literature which makes up the high school curriculum and the fact that it is often a means by which this literature is discussed, an understanding of the archetype is imperative. In addition, since one of the basic elements of all YA literature, according to Richard Peck, is that it ends with a beginning (Reed 117), this archetypal pattern is one which occurs frequently in YA novels. The presence of this pattern in YA novels which are developmentally appropriate for most students makes these novels useful as an introduction to the archetype. Therefore, YA novels can then be paired with classic novels that develop the archetype through similar situations.

Four novels often considered staples of the high school curriculum are Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*, Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* and Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. One of the ways each of these novels can be discussed is by using the archetype of birth, death and rebirth. By pairing each of these novels with a YA title which can be discussed using the same situational archetype, students can begin to make important literary connections. Four YA novels that pair well

with these classic titles on the basis of situational archetype are, respectively, Margaret Mahy's *Memory* (1988), Cynthia Rylant's *I Had Seen Castles* (1999), Aidan Chambers' *Dance on My Grave* (1982), and Suzanne Fisher Staples' *Haveli* (1993). In each case, the YA novel is a work which can stand on its own literary merits, but which can also serve as a bridge to a deeper understanding of these canonical novels.

## *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *Memory*

In *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, the archetype of birth, death and rebirth is clearly developed. Having been forced to live with his alcoholic father in an isolated cabin, Huck must stage his own death in order to escape. The remainder of the novel chronicles Huck's rebirth and search for identity. Huck is guided on his search by Jim, a runaway slave. Witnessing Jim's treatment by society helps Huck to form his own opinions about prejudice and to eventually take action to help Jim escape. This novel can be introduced to students by pairing it with Margaret Mahy's novel, *Memory*.

In *Memory*, Jonny Dart is haunted by the death of his sister. His own drinking and fighting have caused his alienation from society. When he meets Sophie, a bag lady, and witnesses the way she lives and how others treat her, he tries to help. In doing so, Jonny is reborn. In this novel, a scene on the roof in the rain provides a baptism ritual. “OK—come on!” He said to the tap. ‘Baptize me while you have the chance. Make me all new . . . I dare you’” (*Memory* 246). Jonny emerges from his experiences with Sophie with the strength to face his enemies and his sister's death. “Jonny felt very powerful. He felt as if he had died, and had then been born again . . .” (*Memory* 276).

## Theme Connector:

Huck and Jonny are both isolated from society. Each befriends an outcast and learns about the way society treats these people. Huck comes to understand Jim as a human being with feelings and emotions. “I didn't do him no more mean tricks, and I wouldn't done that one if I'd 'a' knowed it would make him feel that way (*Huck Finn* 110). Jonny realizes Sophie's humanity and comes to despise those who

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exploit her. "Surely there must be someone he could go to, someone who could tell him just whose job it was to look after Sophie" (*Memory* 135). Each character encounters villains and must find ways to outwit or overpower them. Huck faces the king and the duke, who are willing to sell Jim for a profit. Jonny must face the bullies who have tormented him throughout school and who are now stealing from Sophie. When Huck completes his journey, he decides that he does not want to return to society. He chooses, instead, to remain on the outside; "But I reckon I got to light out for the territory ahead of the rest, because Aunt Sally she's going to adopt me and sivilize me, and I can't stand it" (Huck Finn 372). When Jonny's rebirth is complete, he is finally able to come to grips with the tragedy in his life, and he plans to eventually return to society, although at the end of the novel he is still with Sophie. "I'll go out when I want to . . . I'm not planning to be a nurse. Just be around" (*Memory* 272). Both of these novels feature protagonists who must remove themselves from society in order to discover who they really are. Each does so with the help of an unlikely guide. At the end of these novels, both Huck and Jonny have just begun to find themselves.

#### *A Farewell to Arms and I Had Seen Castles*

In *A Farewell to Arms*, the death, birth, and rebirth archetype is set against the backdrop of war. Frederick Henry, an American citizen, enlists in the Italian army during World War I. Isolated from his family in the United States and from his fellow soldiers, to whom he is a foreigner, he falls in love with a British nurse, Catherine Barkley. The relationship deepens while he is recuperating from injuries which he suffers during a mortar attack. When their affair is discovered, he returns to his unit. Here, he begins to realize the horror and futility of the war. He is on the verge of execution by his own troops when he escapes by jumping into a nearby river. He emerges from the river cleansed of his former identity. "Anger was washed away in the river along with any obligation. I was through" (*Farewell* 232). He assumes a new identity apart from the war, reunites with Catherine, and attempts to live a life as a civilian. Tragedy intervenes, forcing Frederick to begin his life yet again. In what seems to be another symbolic baptism, he walks out alone into the rain after Catherine's death at the end of the novel. This novel has much in common with Cynthia Rylant's novel, *I Had Seen Castles*.

*I Had Seen Castles* is also a war story. This is the story of John Dante. He is seventeen when the Japanese bomb Pearl Harbor and change his life. As the focus on World War II begins to dominate everything, his father leaves for California, his mother goes to work in a local factory, and he and his sister are left to fend for themselves, at least emotionally. As John waits for his birthday and enlistment, he meets Ginny. Due to the war, their relationship moves quickly despite the fact that John can not share Ginny's pacifism. When John is sent to Europe, the horrors of the war forever alter his life. He is reborn. After the war he returns home, now able to understand Ginny's pacifism, but unable to bring himself to search for Ginny or to function in post-war America.

#### Theme Connector:

The obvious connection between these novels is that they are both war stories. Each treats war realistically. In *A Farewell to Arms*, Hemingway writes, "I knew I was hit and leaned

over and put my hand on my knee. My knee wasn't there. My hand went in and my knee was down on my shin" (55). The violence in them is graphic, as in Rylant's description of a mortar attack: "Then mortar shells began to land in that meadow, and the sheep were hit and lay bloody, half-alive, their bowels spilling among the meadow flowers, and we were all in it. We were all in the Second World War" (71). Both leave the reader with a sense of the tragedy, horror, and futility of war. In both, survival becomes the motivating factor and the only justification which the protagonists can find for the killing. Each features a protagonist who survives on the battlefield, but who dies and is reborn as he experiences the war. Frederick Henry begins the novel as a soldier with no ties to anyone and no feelings about the war that he is fighting. As he falls in love with Catherine, he develops emotionally. "God knows I had not wanted to fall in love with her. I had not wanted to fall in love with any one. But God knows I had . . ." (*Farewell* 93). John Dante is motivated to enlist by patriotism, but he is not passionate about it. "I was a mess of emotion. Thrilled at the prospect of wearing a uniform and scared out of my mind I might die in it" (*Castles* 57). As he fights in the war, the death of his innocence will no longer allow his patriotism to justify what he sees around him. At the end of the war, he returns home an emotionally shattered man. "The day the sheep were bloodied in the meadow was the last day I knew the boy in that home" (76). Both novels are also love stories, but they do not end "happily ever after." Frederick does return to Catherine, but he eventually ends up alone at the end of the novel when she dies in childbirth along with their baby. John never returns to Ginny and spends the rest of his life alone. Finally, both of these novels are flashbacks, and it is clear that for these characters, though time has passed, their rebirth remains a painful experience.

#### *The Great Gatsby and Dance on My Grave*

In *The Great Gatsby*, the characters themselves manipulate the archetype of birth, death and rebirth. The novel is the story of Jay Gatsby. It is told by Nick Carraway, who comes to know Gatsby one summer on Long Island. Jay Gatsby began life as James Gatz, but at seventeen he was taken in by Dan Cody, who was yachting on Lake Superior. From Cody, James Gatz learned the ways of the wealthy. His rebirth as the rich and mysterious Jay Gatsby had begun. Several years later, still penniless, he entered the army during World War I and met Daisy Buchanan. With his uniform as a great equalizer, he passes himself off as someone wealthy enough to be worthy of Daisy's affection. After the war, he gets the money to complete his transformation into Jay Gatsby and returns for Daisy. While Gatsby does manage to renew his affair with her, he is blinded by the ideal image of her that he has created. In reality, she is insincere and swayed only by Gatsby's wealth. His attempt to recreate himself and his past with her ends tragically with his death. This particular analysis of *The Great Gatsby* pairs up very well with Adian Chambers' novel, *Dance on My Grave*.

Like *The Great Gatsby*, *Dance on My Grave* explores the notion of characters recreating themselves. This novel is the story of Hal Robinson. After a sailing accident, he is pulled from the Thames River by Barry Gorman. This signals a rebirth of sorts for Hal. He falls in love with Barry, who he sees as "his boy with magic beans," a complement to himself

for which he has been searching. Slowly Barry begins to transform Hal, changing his clothes, his hairstyle, and his life. In his mind, Hal also transforms Barry by creating an ideal image of who Barry should be. When Hal must deal with the real Barry and his infidelity, the result is an argument which ends in Barry's death. Hal must face a second rebirth as he struggles to deal with his loss and with finding his true identity.

#### Theme Connector:

At first these two novels seem very different. However, the quote from Kurt Vonnegut used as an epigram in *Dance on My Grave*, "We are what we pretend to be, so we must be careful what we pretend to be" (8), can be applied to both of these books. They both explore the notion of transforming oneself into someone worthy of an ideal love. James Gatz falls in love with Daisy and feels he must become Gatsby to be loved by her. Hal Robinson willingly lets himself be remade in Barry's own image so that Barry will love him. The novels also look at the result of idealizing one's lover and falling in love with that ideal. The young girl whom Gatsby fell in love with five years before exists only in Gatsby's mind. When he wants Daisy to deny her past, she can not: "Oh you want too much!" she cried to Gatsby. "I love you now — isn't that enough?" (*Gatsby* 140-141). Blinded to whom she really is, he can not foresee the tragic consequences their relationship will have when he sacrifices himself for her. Hal, too, has fallen in love with an ideal. As his friend, Kari, explains, the boy Hal was in love with never actually existed. "I think the truth is, Hal, that you fell for a face and a body and then put the person inside you wanted to find there" (*Dance* 246). Hal's devastation in discovering Barry's infidelity is the result of his blindness to whom Barry really is. In *The Great Gatsby*, it is Nick Carraway, not Gatsby, who survives the entire episode, reflects on it, and attempts to move beyond it. "... I wanted no more riotous excursions with privileged glimpses into the human heart" (*Gatsby* 6). In *Dance on My Grave*, Hal, like Nick, is given the chance to reflect and grow. It is a very painful process, but Hal is once again reborn. Gatsby dies convinced that one can repeat the past, "Can't repeat the past? He cried incredulously. Why of course you can!" (116), and Nick's final words echo this sentiment, "So we beat on, boats against the current, borne ceaselessly into the past" (189). In contrast, Hal chooses to begin his life again, certain that what matters is escaping the past, not repeating it, "The only important thing is that somehow we all escape our history" (*Dance* 252).

#### *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *Haveli*

In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, the archetype of birth, death and rebirth is woven into a story about the struggles of a female protagonist. Janie Crawford is being raised by her grandmother. When she is sixteen, her grandmother sees her kiss a boy and fears that she will give herself to "no count" Johnny Taylor. To prevent this, she marries Janie off to an older man, Logan Killicks. For her, this marriage is a type of

death, the death of her youth. Her idealized notion of love guarantees that she will never come to love her husband. "Ah wants things sweet wid mah marriage lak when you sit under a pear tree and think" (*Their Eyes* 22). Eventually Janie leaves Logan for Jody Starks. Jody is also older than Janie. What he wants is a wife who is a trophy. He becomes mayor, and Janie spends twenty years "on a pedestal," longing to be accepted for herself rather than as the wife of the mayor. When Jody dies, Janie goes south with Tea Cake, a much younger man who loves Janie for the person she is. Though tragedy ends their relationship, during her time with Tea Cake, Janie is reborn and eventually returns home at peace. This is similar to Suzanne Fisher Staples' novel, *Haveli*.

In *Haveli*, the protagonist is also female. Shabanu, the daughter of a nomad family living in the Pakistani desert, has been given in marriage to an older man, Rahim. While Rahim adores her, she must face the intrigues of his other wives and children as she struggles to protect her own daughter, Mumtaz. Her marriage has signaled the death of her innocence, and she is reborn into a world of wealth, power, and duty. She must battle her own will in order to conform to the role of a woman in her culture. She must also struggle against her own passions as she falls in love with her husband's nephew, Omar. When her husband is assassinated by his brother, Shabanu must "die" in order to survive. As the novel ends, she is a widow, separated from her family, hiding at the haveli, and on the verge of another rebirth.

#### Theme Connector:

There are some clear similarities between these two novels. Both are the stories of young women who experience a type of death as their childhood ends quickly with a marriage to an older man. Both of them are strong willed in societies where this is not always a welcome trait for women. Both Janie and Shabanu are discriminated against because of their backgrounds. Janie is biracial, the child of her black mother's rape by a white schoolteacher. Consequently, she is not fully accepted in either community. Shabanu is a child of the desert and is ostracized by the wealthy, highborn members of Rahim's household. In Janie's second marriage to Jody and Shabanu's marriage to Rahim, each woman is the wife of a powerful man who is obsessed with duty above all else. Eventually the women are widowed, but while Shabanu feels genuine regret for her husband's death, "She spent some time thinking about how good Rahim had been to her" (*Haveli* 230), Janie can only give the appearance of grief, "Then she starched and ironed her face, forming it into just what people wanted to see . . ." (*Their Eyes* 83). Both Janie and Shabanu fall in love with another man. Janie has a passionate relationship with Tea Cake. Shabanu can only imagine a life with Omar. It appears that he will fulfill his duty and marry his cousin, Leyla. In their conclusions, these novels differ because Shabanu and Janie have reached different stages in their lives. At the end of *Haveli*, in order to escape her husband's enemies, Shabanu must let everyone think she is dead. Another rebirth is about to begin. "And Shahzada

and his sister left Shabanu to mourn her only friend until it was time to decide how she would live her life as a ghost" (*Haveli* 247). In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, although Janie is forced to kill Tea Cake because he has rabies, she realizes that their love will go on. Her searching has come to an end. "Ah done been to de horizon and back and now Ah kin set in mah house and live by comparisons" (*Their Eyes* 182). At the end of each novel, the women return home, Janie to her house in the Florida panhandle and Shabanu to the haveli. Janie keeps the memories of the past in her heart, "Here was peace. She pulled in her horizon like a great fishnet. Pulled it from around the waist of the world and draped it over her shoulder" (*Their Eyes* 184). Shabanu imagines what the future might hold for her and her daughter, Mumtaz: "She lived with hope . . . But now, Shabanu thought, Omar is my heart; and Mumtaz, Mumtaz is my freedom" (*Haveli* 259).

Given the literary complexity of the YA novels used in these pairings and their value as a means of introducing situational archetypes, a strong case can be made for the inclusion of YA literature in high school English courses. These novels do not represent a watering down of the traditional curriculum, but rather a means of enhancing it. As an introduction to situational archetypes, they serve to deepen the students' understanding and appreciation of the classic novels with which they are paired. More importantly, they provide a foundation on which a deeper understanding of all literature can be built.

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#### Appendix A: Three Resources that Suggest Ways to Bring YA Books to Gifted Students

John Bushman and Kay P. Bushman (Haas) in their book *Using Young Adult Literature in the English Classroom* (1997), suggest that "some teachers and many more parents feel that young people who are labeled *gifted* should read only the best literature, and the best translates into reading the classics" (21). The authors point out that the problem with this notion is that while "intellectually gifted students can read the words, phrases, and sentences very well," (21) responding to literature is more complicated. "Success in reading relates strongly to the life experiences the reader brings to the literature" (21).

Joan Kaywell, editor of *Adolescent Literature as a Complement to the Classics* (volume 4, 2000), states that the "classics are often too distant from our students' experiences" (ix), and provides, in the chapters of the four volumes of her series, pairings of young adult titles with works from the school canon.

Sarah K. Herz and Don Gallo, in their book, *From Hinton to Hamlet: Building Bridges Between Young Adult Literature and the Classics* (1996), note that one finds in YA books "the same elements as those in adult novels: a consistent point of view, a significant setting, a well-delineated although relatively simple plot, vivid characterization, realistic and lively dialogue, and an attractive style" (8). They pair young adult with classic texts to illuminate ways of teaching both.

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