



Formal Complexity in Adolescent Literature

Common Core State Standards are a major item of discussion at almost every meeting I attend, whether at our North Carolina state administrators' conference, a North Carolina Literacy Project session, or the NCTE Annual Convention. I always sense a mix of doubts and fears, and on the other extreme, hopes and dreams. But one constant at the center of the discussion is the call for rigor and complexity of texts. Certainly my hopes and those of my students who teach have always been invested in a kind of rigor that moves to depth and an attachment to complexity of texts. So I was relieved and excited when NCTE adopted a resolution on Teacher Expertise and Common Core State Standards calling for "Instruction that reflects the importance of students' academic, social, and emotional needs; background knowledge; and cultures"; "materials that respond to students' interests and that broaden and deepen students' understanding"; and "experiences with multiple forms of literacy" (NCTE, 2013, p. 24). NCTE's resolution lets me fully endorse CCSS because it supports exemplary teaching and recognizes literature's unique power—its

strong emotional and aesthetic connection with students. And though "multiple forms" can imply the requirement to teach nonfiction as well as traditional fictive texts, it also suggests a call to consider the relationship between literature's form and its complexity. I believe that standards of rigor and complexity can be well met when students explore some of the bold formal innovations in canonical literature, but that even better results are achievable using adolescent literature.

I offer here a broad stroke picture of some of the most dramatic innovations in canonical literature, realizing that great swaths of time are overlooked and many classic texts go unmentioned. I know that complexity can be measured by a text's lexiles or its sentence structures, but I lean toward using literature's formal departures, because I believe they are a more authentic measure of complexity. These innovators, now canonized, fulfill the requirement of complexity and the need for reading rigor, but here I offer a parallel list of texts drawn from the world of adolescent literature, ones that are more in tune with the lives of students of our

day. I will describe and illustrate eight surprising formal literary innovations, first in a venerated text and then as they appear in a young adult novel.

Literary Juxtaposition

Epistolary Novels: Richardson's *Pamela* and O'Brien's *Z for Zachariah*

The first of these formal dimensions of complexity is found in Richardson's *Pamela* where he uses Pamela's letters to her parents to form an epistolary novel. It may seem simple because it is a very direct statement coming from a young girl of 15 who is trying to explain her compromised life situation to her parents, but the novel's complexity lies in the basic time and place differentiation between the frantic *now* of the narrator and the reader's more leisurely *later*. The reader and parents know that they are stuck in the helpless *later*, unable to assist Pamela in any way.

O'Brien's diary format in *Z for Zachariah* is complex in much the same way. Although O'Brien's book is not a series of letters, Ann's diary entries give readers the same sense of immediacy and helplessness Pa-

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mela's letters yield. We know that in each entry, we are living in the chilling immediacy of the present, but at the same time, we realize that there is more of the total story to tell and we are anxious to know it. O'Brien's readers become aware of the conflict between nature and artifice, scientific know-how and humanistic dispositions, and other binaries, but their most pressing task is to keep up with the complexities of Ann's present and the uncertain future that lies ahead. Like Richardson's reader, we are hearing from a person in dreadful circumstances. With Ann, this is an even more frantic situation because she is molested and ultimately hunted like a dog.

Genre Shift: Melville's *Moby Dick* and Hesse's *Out of the Dust*
Melville was a fine poet and short story writer, but his most innovative artistry is found in the midst of Ishmael's long narrative in *Moby Dick*. He offers some scenes that become pure drama, complete with soliloquies and stage directions. This slight of hand is occasionally employed by today's writers, but it was particularly audacious and inventive in the middle of the nineteenth century. Melville not only

shifts to a full dramatic presentation, but he laces his prose with lengthy cetological passages where the speaker's steady voice is very unlike Ishmael's troubled narrative. They are as unexpected as the shift to dramatic action. Melville is a deep diver, ever willing to try something new to get at what is so very difficult to grasp.

Hesse's *Out of the Dust* presents a similar genre shift to the radical one Melville offers in *Moby Dick*. As we begin to read Billie Jo's poetic portraits, we realize Hesse is offering both a novel and an extended poem; it's form and style are poetic, but it's overall panoramic view is more like that of a novel. Like a novel, it presents a very clear storyline and a structure that moves through months of time, but like a poem, we partake of it as a series of intense personal explorations, a collection of emotional snapshots. The vignettes are so revelatory that their forward motion is almost undetectable, but readers know it is a full story that is being experienced. They are kept off-balance by this mix, but at the same time brought into a deep state of engagement.

Disingenuous Narrator: Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and Avi's *Crispin*

Huck Finn's voice is central to the complexity of Twain's disingenuous narrator. The notion that a speaker may be telling us things that are unreliable is true for voices in other novels, but in Twain's account of Huck's river journey, we hear Huck speaking in ways that are untrue to his changing core beliefs. We have a clear sense of the difference between his developing beliefs and

those we hear him declaring. We see him try to honor the ideals of his former home while at the same time uttering more natural responses to Jim as their relationship matures on the river.

Some readers may believe that adolescent narrators are by nature a bit unreliable, but when we look closely at adolescent literature, it is difficult to find a narrator like Huck who is consciously crafted by the author as unfaithful to his most authentic beliefs. Avi's Crispin is like that, but his words are not as unpredictable as Huck's. This medieval lad is in a slow unwinding toward a new self. He is very young and naïve at the beginning of the narrative, but unlike Huck who is culturally divided from the start, Crispin is fully shaped by his former society; over time, however, he jettisons that culture's control. He begins to make decisions that are not in tune with his birth family's mores. He has the prodding of his new mentor Bear to encourage him to think for himself rather than appropriating the shibboleths of his past. Because the religion of his family is being slowly discarded and because his pathway toward a new belief system is so steady, his thoroughgoing disingenuousness is somewhat harder to recognize. I know of no other adolescent literature text that has an inversion of this kind.

Stream of Consciousness: Joyce's *Ulysses* and Zindel's *The Pigman*

Joyce's adroit use of language sets him apart from the writers who came before him, but it is his stream of consciousness that provoked readers most and carved

out his unique place as a writer. You get a taste of that power in the *Dubliners* and *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, but *Ulysses* is the novel that made his reputation. In *Ulysses*, Joyce not only moves into an unmediated revelation of the mental meanderings of his characters, but he offers other formal kinds of shifts that are extraordinary. He compresses Ulysses's mythic 10-year journey into one day's walk through the vulgar streets of Dublin. These multiple talents and brave departures from the literary norm set Joyce apart and single out his complex texts as the work of a creative genius.

This is for me a most difficult departure to match. I have a hard time coming up with a text in which the narrator's unmediated mental stream seems to be unvarnished rather than consciously framed by the author. John's and Lorraine's strophic statements in *The Pigman* rising out of their troubled minds approximate this stance. Their utterances are more self-consciously crafted than those of Joyce's narrators, but the two voices tend to move from opposing stances of character, emotion, and intellect that eventually elide as they move through the rigors of their confessional. John's voice becomes tempered by reflection and Lorraine's grows less officious. Writers of adolescent fiction are aware of the power and artistry of canonical authors who use this special formal departure to great effect, but most of them shy away from this challenging departure, knowing that this level of difficulty and complexity could dissuade younger readers from following them into such literary thickets.

**Multiple Perspectives:
Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* and
Childress's *A Hero Ain't Nothin'
but a Sandwich***

William Faulkner's novels feature elongated sentences and convoluted syntax that are extremely complex and set him apart from his contemporaries. His creativity may perhaps be best expressed in his novel *As I Lay Dying*, in which he presents a family whose individual, selfish voices color their speech about the death of their mother Addie. Cash, the carpenter son who crafts his mother's coffin, speaks with exactitude about falling from the barn "Twenty-eight foot, four and a half inches, about" (p. 85). Adding the corrective "about" to the exact distance tells us everything about Cash's zone of proximal concern. Other voices convey their own special character: Darl's distance from his family as he rides apart from the cortege, Vardaman's confusion as he says "my mother is a fish" (p. 79), and Dewey Dell's lusty determinism that she ascribes to providence. The town of Jefferson, Mississippi, that they are all driving toward is much more their field of pitiful dreams than their fulfillment

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Hesse's *A Hero Ain't Nothin' but a Sandwich* broke compellingly onto the literary scene in the 1970s. Its appeal arose from multiple voices from very different layers of society speaking about urban drugs and hoping for family solidity. Benji is scrutinized by a host of people whose perspectives range from his loving mother, to his misunderstood stepfather, to his politically coercive teacher, to a drug-pushing street-preacher, and many more. We witness a lost soul being ministered to but also tortured by those who hope to understand the deep perils of his troubled life. Each voice seems authentic and even today speaks to a huge issue of our time.

**Minimalist Fiction: Hemingway's
"A Clean Well-Lighted Place"
& "Hills Like White Elephants"
and Paulsen's *Nightjohn***

Hemingway has fallen out of favor just now because of the number of macho qualities in his life and writing, but his quiet, almost mute narrative voice secures his place as an innovator who formed a literary movement. The minimalists may not fully acknowledge Hemingway's influence in their work, but his celebrated short stories are majestically minimal. "Hills Like White Elephants" and "A Clean Well-Lighted Place" (in Hemingway, 1987) are two remarkable short stories that are so stripped down that readers must constantly struggle to know who is speaking. Characters often speak and then speak again rather than adopting polite turn taking, so we must figure out who is speaking by trying

to link up their dialogue with what they seem to believe. The narrative is extremely flat and simple; complex sentences and varied levels of embeddedness are uncommon. He pares language down to its core by removing most of the adjectives and adverbs. His minimal style is unmistakable and serves as a terrific departure from the more luxurious language of his peers.

Paulsen uses few words to open *Nightjohn*: “I’m Sarny” (p. 14). He offers no embellishments. Sarny tells us from the first that she’s not dumb, “I’m just quiet” (p. 15). Her entire story is built on learning letters and numbers, but she and Mammy are nervously aware that quiet is smart. Mammy even prays her brief 14-word prayer into a kettle to smother those few words. Paulsen, like Hemingway, lets action speak louder than words. He uses less than 80 pages to tell Sarny’s story. *Nightjohn* enters the story stripped naked with a rope around his neck and returns at story’s end in the silence of night with his foot’s imprint in the dust, its middle toe missing, as his signature. The slaves are minimalized, dehumanized by their master; learning words is penalized by harsh punishment. But *Nightjohn* knows words, and he teaches them letter by letter. At the story’s close, Sarny simply pronounces, “[H]e bringing us the way to know” (p. 92). A part of Paulsen’s minimal posture is the fact that all of the brutality and horror are deeply understated in Sarny’s narrative. She sees Alice tortured, Mammy naked and driven like a beast, and *Nightjohn*’s middle toes chopped off, but shows little emotion. It is Paulsen’s minimal narrative about

such horrific events that causes readers to become deeply caught up in his brief tale.

Authorial Fracture: Barth’s *Lost in the Funhouse* & Coover’s *Hat Act*; Crutcher’s *Ironman*

Barth’s (1968) and Coover’s stories (1969) came much later in the century and mark a departure from the work of Joyce, Faulkner, and Hemingway. They create a fragile world very much more like a funhouse than the painful world that we navigate daily. Barth offers a series of short stories that make the reader feel that the author is losing control of the world he created. Coover’s *Hat Act* uses the metaphor of a magician on stage who begins his act with great aplomb only to lose any sense of control.

A complete authorial fracture is, perhaps, too much to expect in the world of adolescent literature. Crutcher’s *Ironman* nevertheless provides the kind of complexity CCSS standards aim for.

We have no sense of where to draw the line between truth and illusion, between audience reality and stage magic. Both authors seem to be telling us that the illusions of the storyteller are no longer predictable, that art is incapable of providing a comforting illusion, imagined as Wallace Stevens’s “necessary

angel.” The hope of transcendence through the imagination is made somewhat doubtful.

A complete authorial fracture is, perhaps, too much to expect in the world of adolescent literature. Crutcher’s *Ironman* nevertheless provides the kind of complexity CCSS standards aim for. On its surface, Bo’s story is a simple tale of a triathlon contender and his circle of supporters and sworn enemies. But we also know Bo through his occasionally emotion-laden letters to television celebrity Larry King. After each letter, the story suddenly shifts to a much more distant narrative stance where Bo’s actions are recorded from a third-person perspective; no inner thoughts are offered. These more distant narratives are longer than Bo’s 22 self-disclosing letters, but the opposing stances give us both an inside and outside view, the emotional journey and the flat events. Both extremes offer a record of Bo’s tortured yet spirited mind. So the narrative surface is not totally whacked out, but is full of extreme ways of harpooning the truth.

Blended Genres: Mailer’s *Armies of the Night* and Avi’s *Nothing but the Truth*

Norman Mailer’s *Armies of the Night* is a part of Coover’s and Barth’s philosophical world, but he takes a more straightforward swipe at life in the 20th century than did they. His writing seems realistic and heavily sociopolitical, yet he takes great liberties with the genre he has chosen. His reader is never sure of the truth quotient of the narrative. The details make the text seem documentary-like, terribly accurate, yet the reader knows that

Mailer is taking great liberties with the truth. This kind of mixed genre is as confusing to readers as the wild creations of Barth and Coover, though Mailer's followers seem quite comfortable with this blurred authorial stance.

Nothing but the Truth is a brassy example of a mixed-genre text. Avi goes beyond Mailer in creating a "novel" that is built not on multiple narratives, but rather is a cacophony of mixed-media snippets that we are all familiar with but do not expect to see as the center of a novel. A letter to the principal, a clip from a radio talk show, a superintendent's memo to his staff, a supportive letter from a teacher's sister, a school announcement, a patriotic letter to the editor from a local school board member, and on and on—we see the story unfolding from each of these perspectives, but we are never able fully to capture the truth of whether Philip is guilty of humming the Star Spangled Banner or Miss Narwin is over-zealous in keeping the school's rules. We side with her, but Avi's title suggests that we are in a virtual courtroom trying like a jury to sort out the truth. So we have something that approximates a novel, but a document that is very close to a multigenre report. Some readers are intrigued by sorting out the facts of the case while others look for a more personal narrative, but Avi settles for a mix that sets his work apart.

Conclusion

Yeats famously spoke of the "fascination of what's difficult" or complex (Drabble, p. 100), but in order for students to reach such reading

maturity, teachers should consider a developmental approach to their learning. Only through such an incremental process can students engage the formal complexity found in the most challenging, sophisticated texts. Helping them move from simple to complex, from concrete to abstract understanding makes great sense. We know that students can actually recognize the formal departures of adolescent literature and understand its complexity more clearly when they are not initially pushed to their intellectual limits reading highly sophisticated canonical texts. If we accept these propositions about literature, we should consider initially moving to the challenge of Common Core State Standards through the pathway of adolescent literature.

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