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A Textual Analysis of the Portrayal of Parents in Young Adult Literature

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A Textual Analysis of the Portrayal of Parents
in Young Adult Literature

A Graduate Research Paper

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Department of Curriculum and Instruction

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University of Northern Iowa

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This research examined the way in which parents are portrayed in young adult literature. Textual analysis was the methodology used to sort and code the 24 books that met the researcher's criteria, which were that books had to be published within the last decade and characters had to be from two-parent, intact families. By looking at the themes, the researcher attempted to interpret the information and draw inferences. The research yielded some surprising results as to how parents are portrayed. In the majority of young adult novels, parents are present at least to some degree. They are typically portrayed in a positive role and whether a positive or negative role, the parent was portrayed accurately in comparison to real parents. Teachers, authors and particularly librarians need to be aware of these portrayals in order to maintain a balanced collection offered to students of all ages.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Background

Each year, Gracie Peaslee, a kindergarten teacher in Pinellas Park, Florida takes her class on a walk through a nearby field. Before going, she has them put a pair of socks on over their shoes. When they return to the classroom they discuss the tiny seeds that have attached themselves to their socks and then plant their socks in flower pots where all sorts of weeds and plants begin to grow. “Young impressionable minds are very much like fuzzy socks” (Cullinan, 1992, p.2). Ideas that are planted by family members early on, and then teachers, librarians, and books that are read later on, affect how adolescents view the world. Because of this, librarians, teachers and parents should be concerned that books written for adolescents provide accurate portrayals of parents so that the adolescents have accurate models upon which to gauge their relationships and behaviors. This research will investigate the ways in which parents are portrayed in books for young adults.

Literature for Young Adults

Literature for young people has changed dramatically within the last 200 years. From the time of the American Revolution until about 1850, books “containing adolescent characters and aimed at adolescent readers were written primarily to instruct young people in religious matters and other desired social activities” (Lystad, 1977, p.27). It was also thought that “by following these behaviors, a young man or woman would be prepared at any moment to die with a pure heart” (p.27). The setting of the books was usually around the home or other familiar group environment. Lystad also notes that life revolved around parents and youth and the proper manner of behavior of the youth

toward the parent. (p.28).

By 1850 more emphasis was placed on social than on religious behavior. Hard work, sobriety and looking toward the future were stressed. The setting for young male characters was often outside the home because their occupation often took them from their own town to larger metropolises. The model related primarily to males and many books were written about ambitious young men and their rise to power and fortune. (Lystad, 1977, p.29).

In the early 1900s there was increasing interest by authors and readers in the adolescent years. More books were being written for this age group and settings were expanding to foreign lands. The purpose of adolescent books was also changing. They were now being written more for amusement than for instruction, and the feelings of adolescents were now being discussed. By mid-century, some writers were starting to write books about the passage from adolescence to adulthood. Although these books were intended for adults, adolescents were reading them because the protagonists tended to be young adults like themselves. In standard literary criticism these books were referred to as *Bildungsroman* or apprenticeship novels, “based on Goethe’s 1795 Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship” (Donelson and Nilsen, 1997, p.77). Another common term for such books is coming-of-age novels. Books that are placed in this category include William Golding’s Lord of the Flies, (1954) Sylvia Plath’s The Bell Jar (1948) and J.D. Salinger’s The Catcher in the Rye (1945)

In the late 1960s, due to changes in societal, education and business values, publishers began encouraging authors to write serious books for young adults about coming-of-age. They were labeled new realism (as opposed to the romanticized stories that were written earlier) or problem novels rather than *Bildungsroman* and were received

favorably by teen readers through libraries and schools (Donelson and Nilsen, 1997 p.77).

Problem novels differed from earlier books in four different ways. The first difference was in the choice of characters. Instead of the idealistic Leave it to Beaver type of family, the protagonist was typically from a lower-class family (Donelson and Nilsen, 1997 p.78). Because of the lower-class characters, the stories also tended to be set in harsher settings, the second difference. The third difference was a change in language. In order to establish the character and setting successfully, authors began writing in colloquial language, the way real people would talk, using ungrammatical constructions, slang and perhaps some profanity. Parents, adolescents, and critics accepted this new attitude toward writing, and with this new attitude came a change in mode, the fourth difference (p.78). This change of attitude allowed writers to use both irony and tragedy in books for young adults (Donelson and Nilsen, 1997, p.78).

Effects of Young Adult Literature

Historically, as has been discussed, books for young readers were written as examples for young people to follow. If young people were to live according to what they read, books should provide this role model. This philosophy changed with the new realism genre. It was now thought that “if young people have realistic expectations and if they know both the bad and the good about the society in which they live” (Donelson and Nilsen, 1997, p.78), they will have a better chance of a happy life.

This freedom allowed authors the opportunity to portray young adults realistically. They recognized that young adults did not live the idealistic lives that were portrayed in older books for young adults and on television shows. They acknowledged that young adults “worried about sex, drugs, money, peer pressure, and health problems. They also showed that not all teenagers had parents as kindly as Wally and June Cleaver

or as cute and competent as the care givers portrayed on *The Brady Bunch*” (Donelson and Nilsen, 1997, p.83).

Joe Wheeler, in *Teachers in Focus*, holds the opinion that “Students are now entering their roller-coaster teenage years. They still need their parents but are beginning to bridge away from them into the adult world. This is a crucial time for cementing life-long character. Stories that incorporate values, but in a more adult way, are needed (November, 1999).

Importance of Parents to Adolescent Development

Despite the attention given to teachers and peers, children's characters are shaped by those close to them early in life, typically their parents. According to Laurence Steinberg, Ph.D. in the *Gale Encyclopedia of Childhood and Adolescence*,

[a]dolescents fare best, and their family relationships are happiest, in households in which parents are both supportive and are accepting of the child’s needs for more psychological independence.

[a]lthough the significance of peer relationship grows during adolescence, the parent-child relationship maintains its importance for the psychological development of the child. As in previous eras, authoritative parenting—parenting that combines with warmth and firmness—seems to have the most positive impact on the youngster’s development. Research shows that over time, adolescents who have been reared authoritatively continue to show more success in school, better psychological development, and fewer behavior problems than their counterparts from other types of homes. Youngsters whose parents are disengaged continue to show the most difficulty (1998, p.484).

Young adult literature should reflect realistic portrayals of parents, whether those

portrayals are positive or negative. Just as it would be misleading in today's world if all parents were portrayed in the June and Ward Cleaver stereotype, it would be just as misleading if all parents were portrayed as child abusers and/or drug addicts. Young adults are affected by what they read. Librarians want to make both realities available in their collections to reflect both the good and bad of contemporary life.

Problem Statement

The shift towards realism of young adult fiction may have resulted in a misleading portrayal of parents in young adult books.

Research Questions

1. Do parents play a major or minor role in young adult literature?
2. Are mothers or fathers more actively involved in the life of the adolescent?
3. Are parents portrayed positively or negatively in young adult literature?

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to examine how parents are portrayed in contemporary young adult problem novels. Available research was reviewed to analyze the role of parents in young adult novels.

Definitions

Young adult literature - young adult literature refers to "serious coming-of-age stories to be read by teenagers themselves as they made that treacherous journey from childhood to adulthood" (Donelson and Nilsen, 1997, p.77). For the purposes of this paper, problem novel, adolescent literature, and young adult literature were used interchangeably.

Adolescent - a person between the ages of twelve years and eighteen years. For the purposes of this paper, adolescent and young adult were used synonymously within the context of this paper.

Parent - For the purpose of this paper, parents were biological parents in two-parent families.

Limitations

Books examined in this study did not include those which deal with the problems of step-parents or divorce. Nor were those involving adoption or immigrant families examined. Only books of contemporary plot were included and the settings of books examined must have been within the United States.

Significance

In *Teachers in Focus*, Joe Wheeler writes, “More than ever, parents and educators understand that kids are shaped by their experiences” (November, 1999). This includes what they read, and what they read is sometimes what is recommended by school and public librarians. Based upon this, parents and teachers, and librarians particularly, must concern themselves with what is offered in their libraries. They must offer a balance of books that will provide answers to problems and reassurance that adolescents dealing with these problems are not alone. Their collections need to reflect the accurate portrayal of two-parent families, single-parent families and everything in between.

Chapter 2

Review of Related Literature

Are parents represented and realistically portrayed in young adult literature? To answer this question, research was reviewed that demonstrates realistic parent involvement in adolescence and the current portrayal of parents in books for young adults.

Portrayal of Parents in Young Adult Literature

Maxwell (1988) presented her findings of a content analysis at the Popular Culture Conference in New Orleans, Louisiana. She was interested in the portrayal of mothers in young adult literature. To be included in her study, books required realistic and contemporary settings and included a characterization of a mother. Attributes that Maxwell was looking for in the mother characters were responsibility, competence, the ability to make thoughtful decisions and whether they were or were not self-loving. She found that approximately “30 percent of the books in the study described mothers who were passive and/or unable to cope” (p.4). She also found that, of the mothers portrayed, “39 percent were wage earners or were preparing to enter the labor force” (p.5). In contrast to Maxwell’s findings, the 1980 census report found that 55 percent of all adult women who have at least one child under the age of 18 are in the labor force (Maxwell, 1988). Maxwell concluded that books in her study under represented working mothers.

Collins (1991) evaluated young adult books to compare the representation of two parent families in young adult literature with the census data pertaining to two parent families. She felt librarians needed this information in order to “manage their collections to reflect the true societal family structure for their readers” (Collins, 1991). The books evaluated were selected from the Best Books for Young Adults lists for the years 1970 -

1990. When Collins compared the representation of two-parent families in young adult literature with the United States Census Bureau statistics, she found that two parents were indeed disproportionately represented in young adult literature.

Hawley (1996), in a graduate research paper for the University of Northern Iowa , analyzed 33 young adult fiction books published between 1980-1995 using a content analysis approach. The focus was on the portrayal of the abandonment of children by their mothers. It was found that the portrayal of abandonment due to the mother's need to establish her own identity was accurate. It was also found that the child(ren's) reaction, negative behaviors, was also accurate. What was inaccurately portrayed was the expression of guilt on the part of the mother after she had abandoned her child(ren).

Realistic Influence of Parents and Peers on Adolescents

Brittain (1959) conducted a study on the influences of peers and parents in adolescence surveying Midwestern rural and metropolitan students. Populations ranged from approximately 225 to 2400. The subjects were 375 girls ranging in age from 14 to over 18 and being in ninth through twelfth grade, with a concentration primarily in the tenth grade. The subjects were given the social situations test typically by the researcher during home economics class. If this was not feasible, it was given during English class by the English teacher who had been familiarized with the study and the testing procedures. It was found that "with respect to choices pertaining to certain issues they (adolescent girls) tended to look to and follow the wishes and advice of parents, but with respect to other issues, peers provided the primary frame of reference determining the choice" (Brittain, 1959, p.124).

Galbo (1981) studied high school juniors to determine with whom adolescents voluntarily chose to associate. Thirty-one subjects consisting of 14 males and 17 females

who were generally academically successful, and came from upper middle class families participated in semi-structured interviews and were given a demographics questionnaire and standard adolescent alienation assessment. He found that, “Of the adults selected, parents were most frequently chosen (1981, p.119) and that a majority of the subjects preferred significant adults of the same sex (p.iv).

Between 1980 and 1983, Youniss and Smollar conducted eight interrelated studies which examined adolescents’ relations with their mothers, fathers, and friends. All subjects were individually interviewed with responses being recorded on previously prepared questionnaire forms by the interviewer.

Purposes and populations of the eight studies.

The goal of the first study (1980-1983) was to assess the adolescents’ conceptions of relations and interactions between them and their mothers, fathers, and same sex friends. Included were 20 females and 20 males, 20 each in age group 14-15 years and 18-19 years. They were from middle- to upper-middle class families living in suburban areas, and all were from homes where both the mother and the father were living together with the family. The second study (1980-1983) investigated the adolescents’ conceptions of the obligations they have to their mothers, fathers, and close friends of the same sex. “In study two, 92 adolescents, [were polled] 50 females and 42 males, with each sex evenly divided into two age groups—13-14 year olds and 16-17 year olds” (p.23) They were from middle- to upper-middle class suburban homes, were living with both parents and had at least one sibling. Study three (1980-1983) was an initial exploratory investigation of the kinds of conflicts or problems that take place in interpersonal relations and how these conflicts or problems are resolved. It involved 312 high school students from a middle-sized town in upstate New York. “The subjects were

approximately evenly divided by sex and by the age groups 15-16 years and 17-18 years (p.23). They were “from families that varied with respect to income levels (ranging from lower-class to upper-middle class), racial and ethnic backgrounds, and family structure (p.23). Students were given questionnaires by their social science teachers to be filled out in class and returned to the teachers. Three types of questionnaires were used. Of the 400 given out, 310 were usable. They differentiated by the specific relations being assessed. “of the 310 students, 57 females and 49 males filled out the form that asked questions about same-sex close friends and fathers; 51 females and 44 males completed the form that asked questions about same-sex friends and mother; and 51 females and 58 males responded on the form asking questions about same-sex friends and opposite-sex friends (p.23-24). This means that the questions about same sex friends were answered by all the subjects, while the questions regarding mothers, fathers, and opposite-sex friends were answered by approximately one-third of the subjects. Study four (1980-1983) determined the frequency of occurrence and the seriousness of potentially problematic events in relationships with parents and friends. Events were selected from the data provided by the subjects in study three. Subjects were equally divided between sexes in groups of 15-16 year olds and 17-18 year olds. They came from homes that varied in income levels and racial and ethnic backgrounds, but were all from two parent homes. Study five (1980-1983) involved 95 subjects from both public and private schools. “All subjects were Caucasian and living with both parents. There were 40 subjects in the age group 15-16 years, and 55 in the age group 17-18 years. Males and females were approximately equally represented in each age group” (Youniss and Smollar, p.25). This study assessed the procedures for resolving a conflict. Conflicts were based on the frequency of occurrence in study four. Conflicts were written up as hypothetical situations and were

presented to subjects in a one-to-one interview. The conflict with parents dealt with coming home after a curfew; the conflict with the same-sex close friends involved one friend spending too much time with someone else. Study six (1980-1983) involved 180 subjects in each of age levels 12-13, 14-15 and 18-20 years with males and females being equally represented in each age level. They were from private and parochial schools, were Caucasian, and lived with both parents in a middle-class setting. Students were given questionnaires to assess the range of topics of communication in adolescent relations with their mothers, father, and friends and the quality of this communication. Study seven started with 220 subjects. Of these, 160 met the criteria of completing all the tasks asked in the questionnaire and living with both of their natural or adoptive parents. They were students at a public high school and there were 80 subjects in each of age groups 15-16 years and 17-18 years. Study seven (1980-1983) was used to validate earlier finding, to expand on information in previous studies, to fill in areas where information was missing and to compare relations with fathers, mothers, same-sex friends and opposite-sex friends through a forced choice procedure. "The questionnaire generated both objective and descriptive data. It focused on styles of communication in relationships, topics of communication, concepts of self in relationships, conflict in relationships, enjoyable activities in relationships, and how persons cause harm to relationships" (Youniss and Smollar, p.27). Study eight (1980-1983) was a study of 52 father-son dyads, all from two parent, white, middle class families living in the metropolitan Washington, D.C. area. The sons ranged in age from high school to college with a mean age being 16 years. The fathers ranged in age from 37 to 55 years with a mean age of 45 years. All were interviewed and asked to indicate what activities they shared with their fathers (with their sons), how they resolve disagreements and how well they each picked up on the son's (father's

feelings) and to also describe what they talked about with their fathers (sons).

Summary of interrelated studies.

It was found that “adolescents did not perceive a single relationship with their parents but described two relationships—one with fathers, the other with mothers (p.89). Their perception of their fathers stayed the same from childhood into adolescence. They still seek their fathers’ approval “and believe that fathers have insights into the society that they are about to enter” (p.89). Fathers set expectations of what their children are supposed to do and be as adults. They may also introduce them into society. Mothers also tend to have these same characteristics but there seems to be additional influences from mothers.

First, mothers maintain regular contact with their sons and daughters. Second, their contact is not focused primarily on the children’s future. Third, mothers engage themselves in adolescents’ interests—whatever they might be. Fourth, mothers closely monitor their sons and daughters by acting both as disciplinarians and as advisors. Fifth, in their involvement in adolescents’ daily experiential lives, mothers do not solely take the role as authorities, but serve as confidants who share experiences—with the end result being empathy. To this end, mutuality enters the relationship and the two parties come to be more like persons who see each other as they are, rather than as either is supposed to be.

The data give no evidence that there is a lack of commitment to their relationship or that they want it to be as it was during childhood (p.90, 91, 93).

As far as close friendships are concerned, the data suggest that these are based on shared activities; mutual intimacy; mutual understanding; acceptance of and respect for differences of opinions; a wide range of topics for discussion; and a perception of self as

relaxed, open, natural, outgoing, accepted, and accepting (p.109).

Adolescent Relationships

In 1988, Almeida and Galambos conducted a longitudinal study of the changes in father and adolescent relationships over a two and a half year span. Subjects were from two-parent families in which both parents were employed. Subjects were primarily of white working- and middle-class families. Sons were in sixth grade. Fathers were, on average, 40 years old with 13.8 years of education. In terms of marriage and employment, the families were highly stable. Letters and questionnaires were mailed to each parent and child individually and family members were instructed not to discuss the questionnaires and were sent individual return envelopes. It was found that over the two and one-half years, “father-adolescent relations remained relatively stable in rank-order, but mean levels of child care, acceptance and conflict decreased” (Almeida & Galambos, 1988, p.27)

In 1990 Lempers and Clark-Lempers conducted a study comparing the perceptions of young, middle, and late adolescents and the functional importance of relationships between them, their mother, their father, their most important sibling, their best same-sex friend, and their teacher. Lempers and Clark-Lempers asked 1110 11- to 19-year olds in several different rural Midwestern towns to complete the inventory. Subjects were separated into three different age groups and were given a standard inventory which allows subjects to rate eleven relational attributes: admiration, affection, companionship, conflict, instrumental aid, intimacy, nurturance, relative power, reliable alliance, punishment, and satisfaction (Lempers and Clark-Lempers, 1990). It was found that, in the majority of areas inventoried, both mothers and fathers were ranked as significantly important to the adolescents.

Roles of Parents During Adolescence

Shmuel Shulman and Moshe Klein examined the role of fathers and mothers during adolescence to learn to what extent mothers' and fathers' roles are similar and to identify possible differences of the fathers' role during the adolescent stage of development.

Subjects were from intact families and were predominantly middle-class. There were 28 seventh graders (18 males and ten females), 29 ninth graders (13 males and 16 females, and 21 eleventh graders (eight males and 13 females). Subjects ranged in age from 12 years through 16 years (Shulman & Klein, 1993, p.45). Each subject was interviewed individually for about 90 minutes and was asked to describe the activities he/she had been involved in with each parent in the previous week and to rate on a 1-5 scale his/her perceptions in response to the following questions: 1) To what extent do you discuss the following topics with your father or mother: politics, studies, friends, sex, personal problems, family matters, and going out? 2) To what extent is your father or mother involved and an active participant in the following daily matters : how to dress, neatness, studies, what to eat, discipline, friends, and going out? 3) To what extent do your father or mother listen to and respect your ideas and wishes in the following domains: politics, what to study, what to do in the future, friends, sex, going out, how to dress, family matters, and problems that bother you? (Shulman & Klein, 1993, p.45).

They were also asked what time each parent arrived home from work, how available each parent is, whether they would like to spend more time with father or mother, what difference it would make, if there was something they did or did not do that they would like to do, and whether they would like their mother or father to be more involved with them.

In addition, adolescents were asked to rate (on a 1-to-5 scale) the extent to which

the father or mother conveys the feeling that the adolescent can be relied on to act independently, and the extent to which the father or mother behaves and acts as if the adolescent is still dependent on the parent. Finally the adolescents were asked to describe their view of a good father and a good mother. “What is the difference between a good father and a good mother” (Shulman & Klein, 1993, p.45)?

Frequency and type of interaction with fathers and mothers.

It was found that fathers tended to be involved with adolescents on a playful basis. Mothers were more involved in care giving with younger adolescents and discussions with older adolescents, particularly girls. And although both mothers and fathers had discussions with their adolescents, mothers tended to discuss a variety of topics and at different ages. They discussed personal problems and family matters as well as issues related to peers. Fathers tended to discuss politics with their adolescents more than mothers did.

Level of parental involvement and availability.

Generally, mothers were more involved in daily matters such as what to wear and what to eat. In regard to discipline and studies, there was no difference in the level of mothers’ and fathers’ involvement with their adolescent. Overall, fathers tended to spend less time with their adolescents. And when asked if they wanted to spend more time with either parent, younger boys did not need more time with their mothers but wished to spend more time with their fathers doing outdoor activities. Younger girls expressed no desire for more time with either parent, but almost half of the 16-year-old girls wanted to be more engaged with both parents.

Parental respect and support for adolescent independence.

On the whole most adolescents felt that their parents listened to them and respected them. However when asked whether parents supported independence, it was found that fathers tended to rely on their adolescents more and described them as independent. Mothers felt they were less independent and did not rely upon them as much. When describing a “good mother” and a “good father,” both were said to be involved, loving, helpful, does things for the child, and engages in discussions.

Summary

Although research was found that studied the portrayal of mothers in young adult literature, very little was found that was concerned with the portrayal of both parents. It was found that, in reality, parents are significant to the lives of adolescents. Galbo (1981) concluded that, when given the choice, adolescents chose their parents as the adults with whom they would most likely associate. Youniss and Smollar (1983) and Lempers and Clark-Lempers (1990) found that both mothers and fathers are important and significantly influence their adolescents. Based upon these findings, it would stand to reason that books that young adults read should accurately represent both the positive and negative of parents and the parent-adolescent relationship. If an adolescent girl has become pregnant and is debating between having an abortion or giving the baby up for adoption, there should be books available to her that address both issues and the consequences of both, including the responses of both parents and peers to her situation.

Chapter 3

Methodology

Research Design

The purpose of this study was to examine the ways in which parents are portrayed in contemporary young adult literature by conducting qualitative research using textual analysis. This type of research assisted the researcher in identifying the ways in which parents are portrayed in contemporary young adult literature or whether they are portrayed at all.

Methodology “refers to the way in which we approach problems and seek answers” (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984, p.3). Based on the concept of grounded theory the researcher intended to seek the answers to this problem by allowing them to rise out of the text. First written about in 1967 by Glaser and Strauss, grounded theory refers to the process of exploring whatever patterns emerge from the text and can be directly related to the texts.

Using a qualitative methodology, the researcher was able to approach the data with no presumptions in mind about the role of parents in young adult literature. As Pauly states, “The topic of all qualitative research is the making of meaning” (Pauly, 1991, p.11). Since qualitative researchers attempt to understand a phenomenon rather than to make predictions, their hypotheses or theories “must grow naturally from the data analysis rather than standing to the side as a priori statement that the data will find to be accurate or wanting” (Westbrook, 1994, p.245). Taylor and Bogdan describe qualitative research as “research that produces descriptive data—people’s own written or spoken words and observable behavior” (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998, p.7). Hence, categories and sub-categories developed as the researcher sorted and coded the data during a sorting

process.

Procedures

With the research questions as stated in chapter one in mind, the researcher read each book for the first time, making notes in a reflection journal. These notes would later direct the sorting and coding of patterns. During the second reading, observations and patterns were put on note cards that were sorted into various piles. According to Coffey and Atkinson, “coding need not be viewed simply as reducing data to some general, common denominators. Rather, it can be used to expand, transform, and reconceptualize data, opening up more diverse analytical possibilities” (1996, p.29). It is also described by Taylor and Bogdan as a systematic way of developing and refining the interpretation of data (1984, p.136). Since analysis and coding occur at the same time (Glaser and Strauss, 1967, p. 101), the researcher is constantly reworking categories, hypotheses, and findings. As the sorting process progresses, definitions were broadened in order to reduce the number of categories, clarify the hypotheses, and remove irrelevant material (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 110). Sorting is complete when new properties of the categories are no longer discovered. This is referred to by Glaser and Strauss as “theoretical saturation” (1967, p.61).

Population

Several criteria were considered in selecting books to be analyzed. First, only books classified as young adult problem novels were included. Because the role of both parents was to be analyzed, only those books with families comprised of two-parents, married, with biological children were included in the study. And because the problem novel was not identified and acknowledged until the 1960s, (Donelson and Nilsen, 1997, p.77) only books written within the last decade and published in the United States were

included. The researcher also desired to analyze only quality literature. To accomplish this, the researcher consulted the annual lists from *Best Books for Young Adults* 1998-2001 and working backward beginning with the most recent year, selected the first 24 books that met the criterion.

Books were available to the researcher from the Hubbard-Radcliffe middle school or high school libraries in Radcliffe and Hubbard, Iowa, the Radcliffe Public Library in Radcliffe, Iowa, the Hubbard Public Library in Hubbard, Iowa, or through the inter library loan process. Books selected for the study are Appendix A.

Chapter 4

Analysis of Data

Historically, authors wrote books that set an example for adolescents to follow. Within the past 30 years, however, there has been a gradual shift in the themes of young adult novels. Authors now portray young adults realistically. They address the issues that adolescents face on a daily basis. With this shift towards realism, the portrayal of parents may have become distorted.

By conducting qualitative research using textual analysis of 24 books selected from *Best Books for Young Adults* lists, the researcher examined the portrayal of parents in contemporary young adult fiction. Are parents realistically portrayed? Are they positively or negatively portrayed? And do they play a major or minor role in the plot of the story? If so, is the mother or father more actively involved or are they involved to the same degree?

The process of collecting data, specifically identifying the books to be used in the study, turned out to be somewhat of a challenge. The researcher began several books in which she thought divorce or adoption were not involved only to find out later in the plot that they were indeed involved. Because these themes were identified as limitations, these books were eliminated from this study.

Wanting to use quality literature, the researcher began by consulting annual lists from *Best Books for Young Adults*. Beginning with the 2001 list, the researcher eliminated all titles that were nonfiction, fantasy, story collections, historical fiction, or whose characters and plot did not fit other criteria. This list yielded four books. Continuing with this pattern, the 2000 list yielded six books; and the 1999 list yielded eight books. Left with the 1998 list, the researcher used the first six books that met all of the criteria

completing the proposed list of 24 books. Some authors had more than one contribution. There was a good mix between both male and female protagonists.

The researcher attempted to maintain an open mind and began the process of taking notes and making observations. At times, the researcher tried to read the story from an adolescent point of view to see if any themes would emerge from that perspective. Some of the themes were obvious, while others were subtle and became evident only after several sorts.

Upon rereading the reflection journal, the researcher noted that in many of the books, parents were referred to very little if at all. Based upon this observation, the researcher chose first to sort the books based upon the presence of parents in the novel.

The Roles of Parents

The first sort addressed research question one, whether parents were present in the story at all and, if they were, whether they played a major or minor role. During this sort it was found that in the majority of books, there were references to parents, but they played a more minor role. Typically, it was a case of the child telling his/her parents where he/she was going and that was the extent of the parents' involvement. In *Someone Like You* (Dessen, 1998), Halley's parents have always trusted her to make wise decisions, allowing her to date whomever she chooses. She tells them where she is going (usually to her best friend's house across the street) and when she'll be home. When she begins dating Macon, her parents become concerned and eventually forbid her to see him. When Macon takes her to a party and gets her drunk then tries to force her to have sex, she realizes that her parents were right about him.

Most of the stories tended to be set at ballgames, at school, at church, or away from the home. In *Leaving Fishers* (Haddix, 1997) Dorry is the new girl at school. She

becomes involved with the Fishers of Men Church and meets with them at school or at their group activities. When Dorry's mother has a heart attack, she talks to her dad very briefly about going to heaven and being baptized "right," but her father very pointedly tells her he has enough to think about and she is once again left on her own.

When evenings or weekends were addressed, the adolescents were either in their rooms away from parents, at parties, or at a friend's house. Stephanie, in *Dancer* (Hewitt, 1999) spends her weekends at Miss Winnie's house. Miss Winnie is a former dancer who understands Stephanie's dedication to dance to the exclusion of all else. If she stays at home in the evening or on the weekends, she says very little to her parents feeling that they will never understand since they were never dancers.

In six of the 24 books read the parents played a major role. In these books, the parents were involved in the daily lives of their child. At the beginning of *Life in the Fat Lane* (Bennett, 1998), both Lara and her mother are shallow beauty queens who determine the value of others based on appearances. Both are constantly exercising, obsessing about what they eat, what they wear and how they look to others. This attitude changes drastically for Lara when she begins to gain weight no matter how little she eats or how much she exercises. Her mother nags her to exercise more and eat less whenever she is home, admonishing her that she needs to try harder. After visits to several doctors, it is found that Lara has a physical disorder that causes her to gain massive amounts of weight. There is very little that can be done and it may eventually run its course, allowing her to return to her normal size. Lara eventually realizes that a person should not be judged by his or her appearance. In *Tangerine* (Bloor, 1997) Paul's mother must drive him to soccer matches and anywhere else he might need to go because he is in middle school. They have daily discussions about school, their family, and the new

community into which they have moved.

In only one of the 24 books read, parents were not involved in the plot at all. After killing a girl in a car accident, Brent Bishop, in *Whirligig* (Fleishman, 1998) is given the opportunity to make restitution to the girl's family by going to the four corners of the United States to build whirligigs in her memory. After the accident and the trial, Brent travels by bus making the journey alone. He sends postcards to his parents but there is no mention of them beyond that.

Mothers versus Fathers

In the second sort, which addressed the second research question, the researcher attempted to determine which parent was more involved, mother or father. In three books, the father seemed to be more involved. In *Jungle Dogs* (Salisbury, 2000), Boy is trying to navigate through adolescence with a brother who is involved with a gang and repeatedly intervenes on Boy's behalf even when Boy doesn't want him to. Being of a more peaceful nature, Boy feels that there is a better way to solve conflict than with violence. Damon, his brother, would rather fight and prove his toughness so that no one will mess with them. Unfortunately, Damon does not consider the fact the he may lose. When Damon's gang slashes tires in retaliation against another gang, Boy calls on his father to intercede when a gang fight is about to erupt. Boy's father also takes him on his paper route several times and encourages him to face the jungle dogs of which he is frightened. The only time we hear from Boy's mother is when she tells Boy that his father loves all of his children and works hard for them even though he may a bit harsh at times.

In a somewhat unusual twist, Taylor and her father, in *Summer Hawk* (Savage, 1999), move to Hunter's Gap and her mother commutes from the city on weekends. Her

father is the primary caregiver and they seem to have a very good relationship until Taylor realizes that her father is having an affair with her employer. Taylor's mother eventually finds out about the affair but her father ends the affair and they remain married although no more involved in Taylor's life than before.

Of the remaining 21 books, eight had both parents involved to the same degree, seven had the mother more involved and six had neither mother nor father involved very much, if at all.

Positive or Negative Portrayal of Parents

With the third sort, the researcher attempted to determine whether parents were being positively or negatively portrayed based on research question three. It was found that in only four of the 24 were the parents negatively portrayed.

In *Sons of Liberty* (Griffin, 1997) Rock's dad is psychologically abusive. He awakens Rock and his brother in the middle of the night to fix leaks or have family discussions. He cares little that they are tired in the morning and has no concern for their school work. When Rock's little sister wets the bed, the father becomes very angry and takes her favorite doll away until she can learn not to wet the bed. Eventually, Rock, his mom, brother and sister make their way to his aunt's house leaving their dad until he can realize that he needs help. Although the father is portrayed in a cruel manner, the researcher feels that this is one of the realistic books some young adults may need in order to cope with their own situation or to understand others.

In *Crossing Jordan* (Fogelin, 2002), both Jemmie's mother and Cass's father are racially prejudiced. Unsure of how to act toward each other, Jemmie, who is black, and Cass, who is white, form a bond through their love of running. When Cass's baby sister is overcome by heat stroke, it is Jemmie's mother who overcomes her racist views and saves

the baby. The researcher found it interesting that the author chose to address the fact that racism can go both ways. Traditionally, books address the white racist and the angry black. Jemmie's mother wasn't angry, she just didn't want Jemmie to associate with a white girl. *Kissing Doorknobs* (Spencer-Hesser, 1998) is yet another example of the same realistic portrayal of parents and adolescents dealing with a difficult situation. Tara is controlled by an obsessive-compulsive disorder. Although she realizes she is doing things such as washing her hands compulsively, crossing herself, and not wanting to touch doorknobs, she is unable to stop herself and cannot explain why she does it. Her mother is also very aware of the behaviors but does not realize that it is a psychological disorder and demands that Tara stop. She is particularly bothered by Tara crossing herself, at times screaming at her and threatening her. Again, although negative, the portrayal seemed accurate.

Another negative portrayal that the researcher found was that of neglect. In *Split Image* (Glenn, 2002) Laura Li is a bright student who is perceived by some as a snob and by others as the friendliest girl in school. Laura has an older brother who is disabled. Her mother forces her to care for him and Laura's father, whom she feels could and should change the situation, is gone frequently and for long periods of time, on business. Laura Li feels neglected by her father and abused by her mother. She copes with her unhappiness by going out, getting drunk, and sleeping with different guys each night. Again, although heartbreaking, the researcher felt that this was a realistic portrayal of some parents.

For the most part, it was found that parents are positively portrayed in problem novels. If there are negative portrayals, they seem realistic considering some of the problems that young adults currently face.

Life Changing Events

During the first three sorts the researcher observed that there was a recurring theme of life changing events. This observation led to a fourth sort. It was found that in 17 of the 24 books, a life changing event such as teen pregnancy, blindness from an accident, and even murder contributed to the development of the plot. In *Making up Megaboy* (Walter, 1998), Robbie shoots an unarmed man for no apparent reason. The book is a series of interviews with friends, parents, acquaintances and witnesses all commenting on Robbie's personality and possible motives. In each of *The Falcon* (Koller, 1998) and *Safe at Second* (Johnson, 1999), the primary character is a high school boy who has been blinded in one eye by an accident. In *The Falcon*, Luke is plagued by guilt over a lie he told his parents about the cause of the accident that blinded him. Trying subconsciously to assuage this guilt, he takes risks only to get hurt again in what he believes is "God spanking him" (p.45). His parents are overly protective always telling him to be careful and wanting him to stay home. Todd's parents, in *Safe at Second* are the same way.

In the books where a life changing event was not an element, parents were, for the most part, positively portrayed. There were, of course, disagreements about curfews, choice of friends, and other issues but the parents reactions, when faced with day-to-day parenting situations, seemed accurate to the researcher.

This final sort seemed to produce all the data that were going to be found in these books. The sorting process helped the researcher answer the questions posed in chapter one. Research question one was do parents play a major role in young adult literature? It was found that parents do indeed play a major role in young adult literature.

Question two pertained to the involvement of mother versus father. It was found

that out of the 24, the largest number was those in which both parents were equally involved. Those that portrayed the father as the most visible parent were in the minority at only three of the 24.

Question three involved the positive or negative portrayal of parents. For the most part, parents were positively portrayed. This directly related to question four and the realistic portrayal of parents. Based upon the researcher's own experience as a parent and what is published in various forms of media, the researcher felt that parents were realistically portrayed whether it was a positive or negative portrayal.

Chapter 5

Summary, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Summary

This research examined the way in which parents are portrayed in young adult literature. First it was necessary to define clearly what young adult literature would be used for this research. Then books classified as young adult novels were assessed as to whether or not parents were indeed portrayed. The final step in the research process was to sort and code the 24 books that met the researcher's criteria, which were that books had to be published within the last decade and characters had to be from two-parent, intact families. Once the books had been read, the researcher started sorting them, looking for themes that emerged from each sort. This involved keeping a journal and notes, tallying as themes were repeated. By looking at the themes, the researcher attempted to interpret the information and draw inferences. The research yielded some surprising results as to how parents are portrayed.

Parents of an Only Child

During the process of sorting, the researcher noticed two themes that crossed over; those of the protagonist being an only child and the attitudes of parents toward that child. This led to a fifth sort. It was found that in seven of the 24 books, the primary character was either an only child or became an only child due to twists of the plot. It was found that in three of the seven books, the parents became overly involved in the life of the remaining or only child. When Caitlyn's older sister Cassandra in *Dreamland* (Dessen, 2000), runs away and doesn't come back Caitlyn is left as an only child. Being the only child, Caitlyn becomes the focus of her mother's life. When Caitlyn goes out for cheerleading, her mother attends every game, has her uniform dry cleaned every time it is

worn, and has her schedule of practices and games memorized.

In *Safe at Second*, (Johnson, 1999), Todd is an only child and is the focus of his parents' lives although there are not many references to them. They are primarily involved when Todd is talking to college recruiters or considering future plans.

In four of the seven books where the protagonist was an only child, the parents were only involved in certain aspects of the adolescent's life. *Painting the Black* (Deuker, 1997) is about Ryan. Ryan is an only child who has always been a loner and considers himself mediocre as a student. As a child he injured a knee which, to his way of thinking, has left him unable to do anything physically challenging. When Josh moves in across the street, he and Ryan become friends of a sort. Ryan feels that Josh is the star. He excels at both football and baseball. As they play catch, Josh teaches Ryan how to be a catcher. When Josh attacks a girl, almost raping her, Ryan has to make the choice between reporting him and covering for him. Ryan's parents are quite focused on his life as he is their only child, but oddly enough, do not attend his baseball games which are a large part of the story.

Summer Hawk (Savage, 1999) and *Dancer* (Hewitt, 1999) are similar in that the protagonists are both only children, but their parents are rarely involved in their daily lives. In *Dancer*, Stephanie's life revolves around dancing. Her parents do not understand her love of the art and therefore do not always support her the way she would like them to. Miss Winnie, who herself was a dancer, becomes her sole supporter and sometimes is overly involved in her life. Taylor, in *Summer Hawk*, also is an only child. She lives primarily with her father in Hunter's Gap. Her mother comes from the city on weekends but not necessarily every weekend. With her mother gone during the week and her father caught up in his own life, Taylor is left on her own a lot. Although her parents are

portrayed as loving her, they are not involved much in her life.

Conclusions

First, the issue of selection must be addressed. Wanting to use quality literature, the researcher selected titles from *Best Books for Young Adults (BBYA)*, an annual publication of the American Library Association (ALA). Although a reliable source and a good beginning point, this publication most certainly does not include all of the quality literature written for young adults within the designated time frame. And because ALA attempts to recommend a variety of genres, not just fiction, the number of novels that fit the requirements was limited. Because a variety of lifestyles exist in society today, the nominating committee for *BBYA* includes books with novels that cover the entire spectrum: from intact families with biological children to divorce to adoption and everything in between. The researcher was somewhat surprised by the variety of family relationships available just in the few novels recommended each year in *BBYA*.

The researcher's results confirmed the majority of the related research. Despite what society may think, parents play an important role in young adult literature. In the books that were used for this research, the authors did indeed accurately portray parents and the relationships with their adolescent children. Ironically enough, when reading *The Falcon* and *Safe at Second*, the researcher felt that perhaps the parents were portrayed as too over-protective. This feeling changed, however, when the researcher's son got hit in the eye with a baseball and the possibility of a detached retina became a possibility. The researcher realized that when the safety of a child is in question, the authors were very realistic in their portrayal of those parents.

Recommendations

Young adults are affected and may make life choices based upon what they read.

Books that are classified as problem novels, those perhaps written to help adolescents cope, should realistically portray all characters involved. Further studies need to be done to expand upon this research. Another study using more recently published books is suggested. Another study of books that are popular with adolescents, as opposed to those used in this research which were selected because of their literary quality, may also derive useful data. An analysis of picture books may yield data related to this research as well.

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Appendix A

Young Adult Literature Used in the Study

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