

Young Adult Literature:

Rite of Passage or Rite of Its Own

“I studied a minute, sort of holding my breath, and then says to myself: ‘All right, then, I’ll go to hell’ and tore it up”
—*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Mark Twain, 1339.

“My name is Jerry Renault and I am not going to sell the chocolates”
—*The Chocolate War*, Robert Cormier, 129.

Rahib-sahib will reach out to me for the rest of his life and never unlock the secrets of my heart”
—*Shabanu: Daughter of the Wind*, Suzann Fisher Staples, 240.

Myths swirl about young adult (YA) literature, from *Huckleberry Finn* to *Harry Potter*: It’s literature for teenagers; it’s literature about teenagers; it’s stylistic and simplified literature; it’s overly didactic and, of course, shorter than a real novel. It is a rite of passage.

But it is much more. It is about life, its histories and potentialities, transformations and choices; it is about conflicts between the claim of the individual and the claims of culture (Freud); it is about life’s fantastic flux of being. It is about new beginnings and other directions; of young heroes who wind up threads and carry wisdom, of the child-one who sees, clearly, that the emperor has no clothes. It is not only about rites of passage, but is also a rite of its own, an archetypal icon-bearer of the monomyths that re-create us, as an examination of *Huckleberry Finn*, *The Chocolate War* and *Shabanu: Daughter of the Wind*, three very different novels spread out over time, illustrate.

Monomyths, or what Kerenyi named the great mythologems in his essay, “Prolegomena” (2-3), are

the immortal plays of primordial history that act like themes of music in the collective consciousness of women and men. They are the “dramas of Providence” (Burke); we know them, but we are not sure of how we know them. They reside in the heritage of imagination that is ours as humans and they carry meanings for us that arrive in our conscious imagination in holistic thematic apprehensions. They are the bridge between earned knowledge and contemplative wisdom. These great myths, the mythologems, re-create us because they connect us to the wealth and beauty of the past and provide the lens through which we may contemplate the future from the conscious present.

One of the most common and significant archetypes within these mythologems is the child archetype (Jung, 70). It is this archetype that young adult literature preserves in the “world history of literature for women and men of all ages. Young protagonists are not young because their intended readership is young. They are young protagonists because it is necessary. The choice of a young protagonist in a

literary work allows the author to stake claim to the archetypal function the motif provides, to awaken within the collective unconscious of readers the wonder of the potentialities and prophetic warnings the conscious mind has slept away, forgotten or failed to dream. YA literature is a genre of the possibilities of returning to begin again, an empowerment of the hero child within and the archetypal message bearer of wisdom in the remembering of youth.

The separation from childhood is a complex trial, begun in adolescence and symbolic of all transformations of consciousness, particularly from one state of understanding to a higher or clearer one: A reason why adolescence is worthy, according to Joseph Campbell, of the elaborate rites of primordial societies, who celebrated it. These rites forced the child, he says, “to give up its childhood and become an adult—to die, you might say, to its infantile personality and psyche and come back as a responsible adult. This is a fundamental psychological transformation that everyone has to undergo” (124). Because everyone can identify with the transformational ‘call’ of adolescence and its demands, it is a universal link to its mythological association with the hero’s call, its tests and wisdom-based rewards, as well as to psychological associations with transformations of knowing.

Carl Jung in his essay, “The Psychology of the Child Archetype” from *Essays on a Science of Mythology*, which he co-authored with C. Kerényi, states that “One of the essential features of the child motif is its futurity. The child is potential future” (83). Furthermore, within the construct of youth there is also a symbol-tradition of mediation, “it is a symbol-tradition which unites opposites; a mediator, a bringer of healing, that is one who makes whole” (83). The child god brings about a *cyclic* resolution of past, present and future direction, a unification. The powerful futurity images evoked by the archetype of the youth in the collective unconscious, allow us to fully appreciate YA literature as a rite of its own within literary tradition celebrating both fresh directions and recoveries.

The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn

YA literature in the United States has been a rite of its own for 135 years. As a genre of singular merit, its roots extend at least as far back as 1869 and Louisa

May Alcott’s *Little Women*. Yet, as an icon of the potentialities of transformation and regeneration, it is in Mark Twain’s 1885 work, *Huckleberry Finn*, that American YA literature has one of its most defining moments. Like many of the great forerunners of the genre, *Huckleberry Finn* had immediate trouble with the censors and ranks fifth on the American Library Association’s 100 Most Frequently Challenged Books of 1990-2000 (ALA).

Chapter 31 of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* begins the climax of the novel, the capture of Jim, and the beginning of the resolution of the adventures. It could be called the thinking chapter; language denoting cognition occurs over 30 times in the first third of the chapter, before Huck sets out for the Phelps’s place. Huck’s interior struggles from this point forward in the novel finally lead him to the conviction that all men are more alike than they are different, and a belief that knowledge of moral good must be held interiorly, born of convictions claimed for one’s self. In this chapter, Huck breaks out of the constraints of dependency on the language of others, the formulas and social rubrics that have confused and mystified him, in order to claim responsibility for his own soul, to claim his own destiny by his own hand.

It is at this point that Huck discovers Jim missing and thinks deeply about the significant experiences he has endured in the preceding chapters of the novel. His reflection leads him to ask himself if his acts of either omission or commission have led to the situa-

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tion in which he finds himself. Eventually he arrives, by self examination and careful reflection, at a decision about his sin and his culpability. Taking full liability for the decision to continue to support Jim in his quest for freedom, Huck finally absolves himself, in truth, although condemning himself by the standard conventions of the religious and political hierarchies of his world and destroys the treacherous letter he had written to Miss Watson informing on Jim. By supporting the natural right of Jim to be free and defying the religious convention of his day that condoned slavery in the long passage that ends with “All right, then I’ll go to hell” (1339), Huck frees himself from the unnatural imposition of civilization as defined by the few that has enslaved him and Jim for its own purposes and prevented both of them from defining their own life directions. This freedom from interference in the statement of life purpose and individual path is the ideal of the Enlightenment and foundational to the American independent spirit. The uneducated, un-“sivilized” Huck becomes an icon of the principles of the Enlightenment, the wisdom of inherent natural laws that do not depend on either the academy or the church for explanations, but are available to each individual and proper to him/her by natural right.

Fascinating parallels exist between the character, Huck, and standard bearer of the Enlightenment, Jean Jacques Rousseau. Rousseau’s mother died in child-birth and his father, “a dissipated and violent man,” showed little regard for him, finally leaving him to fend for himself. Rousseau often ran away from caretakers to escape their discipline. Sometimes staying with neighbors in exchange for service and in at least one case charged with theft, Rousseau, like Huck, wandered from place to place (“Rousseau”). Clemens, in modeling Huck on the personal history of Rousseau and imbuing him with his spirit, conjures up two powerful images, a return to the ideals of the

Huck is not another *Peck’s Bad Boy* (1883). Huck and Tom are closely crafted spirit-selves, each reflecting the other; for Huck, the self alone and the self-with-Tom; Huck seeking his true self, the self in truth, and then seeking a place in a society worthy of the gift of such a self, worthy of the hero’s gift to something bigger than oneself.

Enlightenment for an America looking for a new direction after the horror of the civil war and the ancient monomyth, “the child god [who] is usually an abandoned foundling” (Kerenyi,) 21; both images, one political, one mythical, so powerful that Huck remains imbedded in the American consciousness, despite the outrages of censorship.

Clemens’ novel was not another nostalgic, bad boy tale, popular with young people in his day, a rite of passage. Huck is not another *Peck’s Bad Boy* (1883). Huck and Tom are closely crafted spirit-selves, each reflecting the other; for Huck, the self alone and the self-with-Tom; Huck seeking his true self, the self in truth, and then seeking a place in a society worthy of the gift of such a self, worthy of the hero’s gift to something bigger than oneself. With the publication of *Finn*, Clemens gave America the

birth of a fully developed genre, American YA literature, vehicle of the hero myth and the salvific child archetype, icon of renewal, speaking both to history and futurity with the power of the “primordial realm of mythology where the most marvelous creations grow and flourish” (Kerenyi, 27).

The Chocolate War

The youth who points out with clarity a situation that separates us from our illusions and constructed innocence is emblematic of the archetypal child that leads. This archetype is skillfully employed by Robert Cormier to point out the banality and deceitfulness of contemporary cultural institutions. In *The Chocolate War*, the protagonist, Jerry Renault, voices a shocking revelation.

Jerry Renault is compelled to take a singular stand against robotic routines of obeisance to institutional priorities and humiliating submissions to self-serving hierarchies at his institutional system, Trinity High. Renault resists with a defiance to die for, inspired by a

poster imprinted with the quote from “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” “Do I Dare Disturb the Universe?”

From the moment that Renault gives himself completely over to his own truth that, “My name is Jerry Renault and I’m not going to sell the chocolates,” (Cormier, 129) he takes the road that wants for wear, the heroic journey. The narrator relates that “The words and his voice sounded strong and noble” (129). His destiny is fixed. His act of civil disobedience, an investment of self in principle, follows the classic course and expectations of the mythical heroic paradigm. Until, at the end of his trials, his revelation, his message, brought back from the near-dead, is announced.

From Jerry’s gift of self in civil disobedience come—nothing. The heroic life given to an idea bigger than oneself isn’t “worth it. It changes nothing. Renault’s message is: don’t follow me.

To his friend, Goober, Jerry says, “They tell you to do your own thing, but they don’t mean it. They don’t want you to do your thing, not unless it happens to be their thing, too. It’s a laugh, Goober, a fake. Don’t disturb the universe, Goober, no matter what the posters say.” He continues, “It’s important. Otherwise they murder you” (187). And there is no resurrection.

Robert Cormier disturbed our universe. Destroying the safe distance of the reader by unplugging the set of assumptions his imagery had foreshadowed, he forced his readers to take and confront their own idyllic innocence and denial of the deceptions inherent in contemporary institutional life. Our institutions, religious institutions not excluded, create and empower characters like Brother Leon, Obie and Carter and, of course, Archie, silent heroes without heroic messages, simply examples of exploitation. In giving us the ending of *Chocolate War*, Cormier flung the challenge out of the novel and prophetically back onto his readership. Pub-

lished in 1974, it has been a visionary treatise on the implacability of institutional evil. Like *Huck*, the book has had trouble with censorship and raised issues concerning its appropriateness for youth by the keepers of formulas for the protection of idyllic innocence and inertia. They are wrong.

In uniting the message of social responsibility and the importance of the singular value of the individual with the image of mythological child god, who returns from the realms of the dead with a message of life, Cormier has armored a novel of social and cultural importance with the force of the monomyth to challenge *our* lives in a way meant to disturb *our* universe as he gave us a literary work important for our times, worthy of a rite of its own.

Shabanu: Daughter of the Wind

Suzanne Fisher Staples’ novel about a young woman facing a (re)arranged marriage, set in the Cholistan Desert near Pakistan’s border with India, illustrates another rite of its own/rite of passage, through a feminist perspective. Within monotheistic religions, the feminine principle has been seen as an

other-ness antithetical to the principle of integrity. Therefore other-ness has been defined as complementary and the tradition has been that the complement is less than the complemented, though necessary.

Dr. Jenny Yates, Jungian Analyst, speaking at the Fifteenth Triannual Congress of the International Association for Analytical Psychology at St. John’s College in Cambridge, England, August 2001, suggested that in the Christian tradition, if Christ is the anthropos Self model, then Sophia, Divine Wisdom may be the archetypical feminine Self (236). Of course neither Self model is exclusively male or female, but bears qualities that are to be integrated into the personalities of both genders. Located in a gynocentric presentation of the demoralizing and

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dehumanizing effects of disenfranchising woman, *Shabanu* celebrates the ultimate power of nature to attain fulfillment as well as the ultimate futility of its restraint.

The eponymous, *Shabanu*, in many ways an Athena-figure, must navigate an ambivalent paternal relationship as her father's favorite daughter, a relationship that allows her unusual freedom and growth, with he who is both proud father and agent of death-dealing patriarchal power. After many early difficulties, *Shabanu* finds herself in an extraordinary one. She has been given in marriage by her father to *Rahim-sahib*, a wealthy man, old enough to be her grandfather, with three wives her senior. This arrangement is the centerpiece of another bargain to find a husband for Phulan, her elder sister, whose

intended husband was slain in a complicated tribal neighborhood dispute—a dispute the *sahib* was instrumental in settling. The settlement included *Shabanu* for the *sahib's* wife.

In the proposal, Phulan, now lacking a betrothal, will marry *Shabanu's* intended groom, Murad, and *Shabanu* will marry the *sahib* in a convenient rearrangement. The new marriages pacify both the disputers and the suitors, as well as significantly increase the family's wealth and status. But *Shabanu* is devastated. She refuses and attempts to rebel, but is reminded by her mother that the arrangement is final—she has no choice.

Unable to come to terms with a future so repugnant to her, feeling trapped and betrayed, *Shabanu* seeks out her mentor, her favorite aunt, Sharma. The sense of ensnarement and intensity with which she envisions an imprisoning future enclose *Shabanu*. Mournfully she exclaims to Sharma, "But there isn't any choice! [. . .] Even if I am desperately unhappy, I can never leave him." To which Sharma replies, "No matter what happens, you have you. That is the

important thing. And as long as you have you, there is a choice" (225). Although Sharma never attempts to solve *Shabanu's* problems, Sharma's relationship with her niece serves only to empower *Shabanu*. Sharma's independence, her lack of both fear and attachment becomes a fulcrum for *Shabanu's* emerging self possession.

On the night before Phulan's newly arranged wedding to *Shabanu's* former love, Murad, Sharma offers advice that is immediately claimed by *Shabanu* as meant for her. Sharma says:

You can lavish love and praise on him and work hard by his side. Yes, and have your sons. That will help. But the secret is keeping your innermost beauty, the secrets of your soul, locked in your heart so that he must always reach out to you for it.

Phulan looks confused, but she smiles sweetly and thanks Sharma for the advice.

Sharma's words lift my heart, and it soars like a partridge taking flight from the desert floor. I see myself in a new light, with value I'd never attached to myself before. There are secrets that will lie deep in my heart, for me alone. I repeat Sharma's exact words, committing them to memory, and know they are the perfect gift of wisdom (217).

Shabanu's thoughts beat rhythmically across her mindscape:

I keep waiting for the enormity of my flight to frighten me or to make me sorry—knowing that I'm letting Mama and Dadi down, that Murad could lose his farm, that I could be caught and beaten. But nobody felt sorry or frightened for me when they offered me to *Rahib-sahib*. (236-237)

Riding swiftly on the great camel *Xhush Dil*, *Shabanu* could have reached Sharma's house if *Mithoo*, her young camel, had not followed her, fallen and broken a leg. She chose to remain and not to leave him to the jackals, just as she had chosen to flee. And subsequently, she chose to wait for her father, praying that he would forgive her "one hope for freedom" (239), that he would help her get *Mithoo* back to camp, that the young camel would survive, that she would survive. Her father could "beat me to death if he likes" (240):

Dadi's face shows no expression when he sees us, just as the sun rises. It's as if he'd expected us to be here in this exact spot all along. Without speaking he lifts me to my feet and brings his stout stick down across my shoulders. I stand straight and let the stick fall against my ribs and shoulders. I am silent. 'Keep your reserves hidden.' I repeat

"But there isn't any choice! [. . .] Even if I am desperately unhappy, I can never leave him." To which Sharma replies, "No matter what happens, you have you. That is the important thing. And as long as you have you, there is a choice" (225).

Sharma's words over and over, drawing on the strength of my will [. . .] . I hear sobbing, as if from a great distance, and my knees crumple. Dadi catches me in his arms and buries his face against my bloody tunic. He holds me against him, and through a haze of pain, I realize it is Dadi sobbing, not me." (240)

Her final statement, spoken to herself, ends the novel:

The secret is keeping your innermost beauty, the secrets of your soul, locked in your heart', Sharma's voice whispers in my ear, so that he must always reach out to you for it. *Rahib-sahib* will reach out to me for the rest of his life and never unlock the secrets of my heart (240).

Shabanu gave birth to the most important self of all, her Self: whatever her choice, it was undeniably hers and in making it she discovered and claimed a part of her that was inviolable. The reader recognizes Shabanu's increasing ability to analyze her problems and her reactions, to arrive at new attitudes that produce self-empowering adaptations to her situations. Each negotiation moves her forward toward a greater command of her Self. Set against the backdrop of her physical maturation, the external transformations she experiences as a girl transforming into a woman, these multiple transformations evoke the archetypal image of the feminine principle, a transcendent and teleological Wisdom that gives life and moves it toward fulfillment.

Jamake Highwater, Native American philosopher, reduces this situation to a formula, "the same paradoxical Western position: one plus one equals One" (Highwater, 66). The principled-complement has been the feminine, a necessary but other-than-not-half of "a tormented dualism [that] has steadily nagged at the consciousness of Western intellectuals" (66). "Amorphous sensibilities, such as intuition, imagination, passivity, sensuality, ambiguity, and holisticity have long been dissociated from the oneness of the West and attributed to the non-rational and the feminine," (66) and considered as other. Highwater suggests that otherness could imply a multiverse of possibilities within a concept of "sympathy" experienced as a kinship, a "solidarity of life" (69).

Kerenyi opens his study of the Kore, the mythologem of the Divine Maiden, the girl, a dominant Greek myth, with the words of an Abyssinian noble woman: "How can a man know what a woman's life is?" (101) and continues "Maiden-goddesses are far more typical of Greek religion than

boy-gods or even, perhaps, divine youths

[. . .] . It is as though the Olympian order had thrust the great Mother Goddesses of olden time into the background for the sole purpose of throwing the divine Korai into sharper relief (106). The primordial maiden is the "Protogonos Kore" (103), a monomyth of transformational discipline, the trials and losses inherent in gaining Wisdom, the force of life and its fulfillment, a feminine principle.

Central to the Kore persona is its "budlike capacity to unfold and yet to contain a whole compact world in itself" (106). The image is one of reflective promise, the girl as image of girl-woman-mother-in-journey, transformation. "Persephone is above all her *mother's* Kore: without her, Demeter would not be a Meter" (109). According to Kerenyi, the Kore is always a three-sided myth: birth, death and transformation, Mother and Daughter and Moon. The daughter is the mother's Kore, passed in becoming Mother, a double figure that is moving and transforming. "The idea of the original Mother-Daughter [or Daughter-Mother] goddess, at root a single entity, is at the same time the idea of *rebirth*" (123). The moon is symbol of rebirth in its dying and returning, its waning and waxing (131).

Many Kore myths across cultures are associated with moon symbolism and with life principles of transformation enshrined in the feminine:

A woman's life is quite different from a man's . . . God has ordered it so . . . The man is the same after his first love as he was before. The woman is from the day of her first love another. That continues so all through life . . . The woman conceives. As a mother she is another person than the "woman without child . . . Something grows into her life that never again departs from it . . . She is and remains a mother even though her child dies, though all her children die. For at one time she carried the child under her heart. And it does not go out of her heart ever again. All this the man does not know . . . Only a woman can know that and speak of that. That is why we won't be told "what to do by our husbands (Abyssinian noble woman qtd. in Kerenyi, 101).

Shabanu gave birth to the most important self of all, her Self: whatever her choice, it was undeniably hers and in making it she discovered and claimed a part of her that was inviolable.

Unlike Cormier in *The Chocolate War*, Staples chooses but one tense, the present, and one voice, Shabanu's, to create a distinctive use of the first person narrative as the solitary *internal reflective voice* of her protagonist. The reader becomes a listening-witness to events in time but ever present to the character's mind. Shabanu's psychic journey, with its trials and revelations, appears in the moments and the ways she wove them into her life. Her transcendent functioning: how she recognizes and solves her problems, how she adapts to swift changing circumstances and most importantly how she speaks to herself is apparent.

YA Literature: A Rite of its Own

In the introduction to *Interpreting Young Adult Literature: literary Theory in the Secondary Classroom* by John Noell Moore, Moore makes the argument that for young adult literature to come of age, and "lose its stepchild status" it must be able to be treated as serious literary work (Moore, 2). As a rite of its own, young adult literature is capable of and indeed perfectly suited to examination using all forms of literary criticism. Moore's work defends the complexity and richness of YA Literature and its right to be placed alongside "the classical canonical texts" (Moore 6). Young Adult Literature, carrying and carried by the Divine Child as a rite of its own, delivers its message, not only on the wings of the mythologems, but with a unique voice despite the wide variety of settings and stories— both fantastic and realistic—of current contemporary young adult novels.

Unabashedly unmastered and unfinished, the voice of the archetype of the Divine Child is fashioned by more humble perceptions and speaks with a graciousness that elicits the wealth of nature's providence as surely as it tests the mettle of its own self-reliance. Employing vulnerability, the Child is open to help from the spiritual realities beyond and above its control. Never exclusively of its own making, the Child's reality is a playful participation in-and-with the world; his solutions—her conquests conversationally mannered.

Perhaps the extraordinary success of the Harry Potter series and the recent growing interest and popularity of YA literature in general demonstrate the

value of this disposition. For YA literature presents the world of imagination as real not hallucinatory, feelings as reliable not deceitful, nature as essential not expendable, danger as challenging not demoralizing, enemies as teachers as well as adversaries, and life as a surprising process neither exactly fair nor completely capricious. Young Adult Literature, as a rite of its own, has its own prophetic role.

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As a book publishing phenomenon, young adult literature entered the decade like a lion. At the beginning of the 2010s, a generation that had grown up obsessed with Harry Potter and other middle-grade fantasy series decided it wasn't that interested in adult literary fiction, with its often lackadaisical plotting and downbeat endings. YA stood ready to supply them with plenty of action, cliffhangers, supernatural beings, mustache-twirling bad guys, and true love.