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Locating Experience in Time and Place: A Look at Young Adult Fiction and Spiritual Intelligence

Spiritual intelligence describes self-awareness and intuition, with the development of creative thinking, compassion, and connectedness with others. Many researchers point to an awakening and development of spiritual intelligence that is enhanced through exploration of existential questions within the genre of young adult fiction. Such literature absorbs the adolescent reader so that they become transported into the narrative, exploring a sense of self and of others. This article discusses the ways in which young adult fiction, including comparison of a novel of older context (*An Episode of Sparrows*) with contemporary dystopian fiction (*The Maze Runner*), can foster young adults' exploration of self-awareness and cultivate the continued development of notions of connectedness, justice and responsibility. It describes current research on the relationship between spiritual intelligence in young adults and the narrative transportation effect of young adult fiction.

Keywords: literature; young adults; young adult fiction; spirituality; spiritual awareness; well-being; spirituality and well-being; narrative transportation

Introduction

Spiritual intelligence is defined as the ability to understand self and others through intuitively making connections between lived experiences and the awakening of inner spiritual qualities such as creativity, responsibility, justice and problem-solving (Sinetar, 2002, 9). Young adulthood is often patterned with such episodes of spiritual intelligence, small moments and whole seasons of experiences. An adolescent might remember that time the family went to the beach. Or the tangled memory of yet another fight between adults while the children huddled in the back room, waiting with fear on the outcome of the violence and dispute. Perhaps a young teen may recall a

birthday, one with cake and candles or one smeared with tears and forgetting. In young adult fiction, adolescents are often described as remembering their childhood with embarrassment, recalling moments of fear, painful images of peers, and the growing power of choice. This is represented in the young adult speculative fiction novel, *Divergent*:

‘Today you will choose your factions. Until this point you have followed your parents’ paths, your parents’ rules. Today you will find your own path, make your own rules’ (Roth, 2012, 41).

Such episodes of choice differ in the lives of children, for some must make choices early and are forced to be independent and self-reliant at a young age. Others grow more slowly into this self-reliance, with episodes of opportunity opening up in school, home, and within circles of friendship or, indeed, lack of friendship.

Literature for children and young adults often highlights such episodes. Many times, this literature writes vignettes of childhood and coming of age in dystopian settings, drawing readers into what has been called a ‘narrative transportation’ challenging and changing notions of self, justice and responsibility (van Laer, 2015). Narrative transportation occurs when a reader is involved in the story, being transported away from usual experiences. The reader becomes embroiled in the plot, and in the lives of the characters, and often considers questions concerning self and others. The narrative, in plot and themes, describes that which the young teen acknowledges as a search for self and for understanding.

The search for self and for understanding is highlighted in the plot of the young adult dystopian novel *The Maze Runner* (Dashner, 2009). Even when memories are forgotten within the narrative, as experienced by the protagonist Thomas and others in *The Maze Runner* (Dashner, 2009), the narrative’s theme emphasises the character’s quest for meaning. Though the worlds described in much of young adult fiction may be

considered dark, portrayed as being environmentally degraded (*The Maze Runner* series), controlled by a totalitarian government (*The Hunger Games* series), or set in contemporary times with adults who provoke distrust (Anderson, 2010, 2013), the themes transport the young adults into exploration of concepts of connection and choice (van Laer, 2014). This process has been called ‘cultivation’, with teens absorbing a story so that it shapes their understanding of self, society and spirituality with an effect on the teens’ life choices (Gierzynski, 2014). Gierzynski (2014) points out that the narrative transportation ability of young adult fiction further cultivates changed attitudes towards justice, responsibility and politics. As Larrick (1965) has noted, children and young adults can understand spiritual truths in literature in a realistic fashion, through identification with or rejection of characters within a narrative.

In this article, I use young adult novels, including *An Episode of Sparrows* (Godden, 1955), recently republished and an example of coming of age in an historical context (1950s in the UK), and popular contemporary young adult fiction, *The Maze Runner* (Dashner, 2009), to highlight literature as a vehicle for narrative transportation that cultivates change in the young adult’s comprehension of self, connectedness and society. Sinetar (2002, 9-28) describes such change and comprehension as marking a spiritual intelligence that is built on intuition and self-awareness with a clear vision and a ‘deep hunger’ for that vision. This paper represents the role of literature in awakening and developing spiritual intelligence through narrative transportation via reader identification with themes, the development of protagonists, the story of suffering, and the experience of hope (van Laer, 2015; Radway, 1997, 282; Barthes, 1975, 237; Anderson, 2014).

Young Adult Fiction and Spirituality

Though spirituality has been used in the past to describe morality, values or beliefs, especially in the discussion of narratives that are used for moral education (Doyle, 1997, 93-99), the definition of spiritual intelligence describes spirituality separate from such phraseology for, many times, the traditional definition carries connotations of denominationally specific notions that may not be of relevance to the lives of different teens. It is helpful to avoid the idea of moral actions in writing of spiritual intelligence because it is in children and young adults that educators note an intelligence that implies a sense of the spiritual not denoted by religious affiliation but by an awakening to self, others, and to an understanding of roles of responsibility with creative thinking and a certain pragmatism concerning solutions (Sinetar, 2002, 9). Morality thus implies good actions and integrity; spirituality denotes the principles that underlie these actions for, as Posey (2012, 327-328) has noted, in writing of the spiritual intelligence of children and teens, a sense of the spiritual speaks of a holistic relationship beyond self, with nature, and with others. Furthermore, Hebble (2006) defines this spirituality as a 'sense of inner worth and value for oneself and the world and beyond'; in noting such she further discusses the idea of spirituality as possibly being part of life for humanity. Young adults and teens, as portrayed in young adult fiction, exhibit such a sense of spiritual intelligence in their questioning of the world. The adolescent characters ask the big, existential questions, and the readers, through transportation in the narrative, often develop a response to such questions.

This is evident in *An Episode of Sparrows* when Lovejoy, the young protagonist, suffers at the loss of the garden in her life. Her existence, in post-World War II London, is described as bleak and lacking hope. Lovejoy's search for beauty is satisfied by the construction of a small garden; its destruction leaves her void of hope. Although the setting (in post war British context) and the older, colloquial language of the story does

not immediately allow a modern young reader to identify with Lovejoy's character, the strong language evident in the description of her despair can nevertheless invoke questions on social issues, including the marginalisation of groups of people within society (as, indeed, both Lovejoy and her friend Tip are marginalised). Such a theme can encourage a response of questioning the sense of value of self and others in the world and foster growth of spiritual intelligence in furthering ideas of connectivity, with questions on inclusion and exclusion. The suffering of the protagonist can provide a way for educators to provoke discussion on what is of import to young adults who, as de Souza and Hyde (2011) note, often hide behind a facade of mistrust or apathy. The narrative here can be a 'starting point' for young adults to 'articulate what has meaning and value to them' (de Souza and Hyde, 2011).

In contrast to *An Episode of Sparrows*, the young adult novel *The Maze Runner* (Dashner, 2009) is a dystopian narrative, set in a world after environmental degradation, with young adults involuntarily tested for resilience and intelligence in a survival situation. The story of contemporary youth fighting for existence may be of more relevance to young adults in Western society than the story of Lovejoy in *An Episode of Sparrows*, for youth today are aware of the danger of environmental damage and of the consequences of violent conflict in the world. The despair experienced by Chuck and Thomas, two important characters in the narrative, echoes, however, the despair and hopelessness felt by Lovejoy. Again, a developing spiritual intelligence can be aroused by transportation in the novel; such transportation is perhaps more easily achieved for adolescents in Western society today, given the contemporary language, with the predominance and description of youth culture. The novel, however, does not leave the reader in despair but cultivates an exploration of dilemmas faced by the teens living in 'the Glades'. As Thomas is forced to make ethical decisions concerning the value of

human life, for example, in choosing to save his fellow Glader Alby rather than run to preserve himself, the young adult reader can be drawn into an understanding of self and called to question their own responsibility for others, including both a quest to know justice and a search for what it means to be human. Thomas exudes creative thinking in response to his own questions concerning the value of human life and his need for connection with others; this creative thinking in the reality of difficult situations is a mark of spiritual intelligence and its awakening (Sinetar, 2002, 92-111).

Thus, young adult literature has a role in developing a spiritual awareness and spiritual intelligence in young adults. Sasso (2016) has noted, as a writer of literature for children and young adults, that good literature can give youth ‘the language, the tools, they need to reflect and explore their spiritual experiences’. Sasso furthermore believes that an awareness of spiritual intelligence, with a means to express it, must be encouraged lest it lie dormant under the demands of practical living. It is the stories, the episodes, of young adult fiction that can equip young adults with the tools to wrestle with their sense of the spiritual so that this sense does not lie dormant or become ignored.

In agreement with Sasso, McCreery (1996) discusses spirituality in terms of a need to reach beyond self, to that which is often sensed as being immaterial or mysterious. Young adult fiction can encourage teens to undertake such reaching out, using, for example, Chamber’s (2011) concept of simply talking about the literature they read. Chambers points also to the importance of listening, and highlights reader-response theory wherein individuals interpret stories differently, based on symbolic understanding and experience (Chambers, 2011). Reader-response theory describes how a sense of spiritual identity may permeate a response to, and understanding of, the narrative. As the narrative unfolds, so an awakened spiritual intelligence develops, with

the added acknowledgement that perceptions of the spiritual may differ according to experience. King and DiCicco (2007, 177-194) describe this development of spiritual intelligence as promoting the production of personal meaning for each adolescent, alongside the promulgation of a critical ability to ask existential questions. They note that young adulthood is characterised by the expansion of such spiritual intelligence. Similarly, Kessler (2000, 36-58), in her work with young adults in schools, writes of the 'soul' of education in denoting the spiritual growth of the young adults with whom she has worked, and promotes the use of storytelling as a means of further developing the adolescents' expansion of spiritual awareness and spiritual intelligence.

The story of Lovejoy, her independence and her burgeoning relationships with others, tells of a desire for relationship with an ability to make sense of life for each individual. Although the post-war context of Lovejoy's story is foreign to most young adults of today, the dialogue between Lovejoy and Tip, another important character in the novel, demonstrates the difficulty experienced by many adolescents in articulating inner needs, desires and questions. De Souza's research (2003) details the 'trivializing' present in young adults in contemporary Western culture, wherein concerns that adolescents feel are too difficult or awkward to discuss are made to seem unimportant or trivial. This tendency noted by de Souza, in young adults in contemporary Australia, to appear to cast off that which is felt deeply and is difficult to express, is echoed in the conversation between Tip and Lovejoy, where concern for the other is masked by gruffness. Though the culture and context differs for modern young adult readers, the awkwardness in conversing of deep emotions described in the novel between the characters may mirror the experience of adolescents today and serve as a tool for discussion on that which is relational (Hay and Nye, 2006, 108-131.).

The significance of the relational experience of young adults highlights the notion of relational consciousness. Relational consciousness is described as a level of perception and consciousness that allows a child or young adult to experience the ordinary moments of life as extraordinary, encouraging recognition of the relationship of self to others (Wills, 2012). The relevance of relational consciousness has been demonstrated in research with young adults that denotes the importance of a 'spiritual journey' that connects self to others (Hay & Nye, 2006; Fisher, 1999; de Souza, 2003). De Souza and Hyde (2011) further note that discussion after reading acts as a stimulus for an awareness of spiritual intelligence and is helpful in furthering a development of spiritual awareness with an ability to discuss relational concepts. This aligns with Kessler's (2000, 18-36) use of symbolism and discussion in classroom councils that promote spiritual intelligence through storytelling, and is evident in the description of the interaction between characters in *The Maze Runner*. The young adults, in the foreign world of the Glades, initially act awkwardly with each other, relying on rules and the stringent enforcement of such rules to promote 'right relationships'. The entrance of Thomas, with his willingness to question rules if the rules mean a loss of value of the life of another, paves the way for discussion that can transport young adult readers to situations requiring exploration of relationships and values. The colloquial language of the novel ('klunk' and 'skanks' being terms of both derision and endearment, for example, with a similarity to contemporary slang) can allow a familiarity with the text that allows the cultivation of attitudes towards important ideas of self, others, relationship and justice, to be explored and expressed. Young adult fiction here, in mirroring the struggle to understand and express notions of the spiritual in a dystopian world, can encourage a contemporary young adult reader to explore such ideas without necessarily evoking ideas of personal experience. Instead, attitudes can be explored,

shaped, and change effected in a gradual awareness (as, Gierzynski, 2014, argues, has happened with the influence of the *Harry Potter* novels on the political attitudes of the Millennial generation).

Young adult fiction, then, often describes the moments of life that can foster reflection on the meaning of life, including perspectives of how to face death and suffering. This power of the text to evoke responses is cited by Myers (2002, 18) who writes of intuition being developed through the gradual processing of ‘vast amounts of information’, textual and otherwise. This intuition is likened to creative thinking and may be ‘transformed’ to conscious thinking and decision making through material, such as young adult narratives, that engage the person (Hogarth, 2001; Klein, 2003). Lonergan (as cited by McCarthy, 2015) describes intuition as denoting a conceptual understanding of transcendence. Myers (1992) builds on this discussion to describe transcendence (in its root form) as signifying an ability to ‘climb over’, noting that adolescents ‘climb over’ and reach out into new experiences in their world every day. Myers (1992) believes that such climbing over in trustworthy and safe environments, even vicariously through the pages of a book, allows youth to develop a connectedness to the world that describes a sense of the spiritual alongside creative thinking. Creative thinking, awareness of self and others, intuition and change denote spiritual intelligence; as Zohar & Marshall (2000, 9) discuss, spiritual intelligence requires consideration of values, and discovery of ‘new values’. Understanding and creative thinking in this instance forms spiritual intelligence and represents its significance in the development of self-awareness in young adults. Such self-awareness as spiritual intelligence can be enhanced through narrative transportation into young adult fiction.

A growth of self-awareness as spiritual intelligence can cultivate changes in attitudes and beliefs in young adults through literature. Spiritual intelligence is linked to

wellbeing in young adults (Eckersly, 2009) and a lack of connectedness and wellbeing in adolescents may be linked to emotional and mental instability (de Souza, 2009). Cultivation of wellbeing can be aligned with cultivation of spirituality in attitudes towards, and understanding of, connectivity with others (Gierzynski, 2014,). Gierzynski (2014) and van Laer (2015), as noted earlier, both describe the role of young adult fiction in developing self-awareness, and cultivating understanding, meaning and connectedness to others in the reader, thus promoting wellbeing. Examples of young adult fiction that can foster narrative transportation and cultivation of self-awareness can include *An Episode of Sparrows*, with the protagonist's dawning realisation of self-need having the ability to draw adolescent readers to understand the same of themselves. Similarly, Thomas, in *The Maze Runner*, recognises his connection with Chuck and Teresa as imaging his own intuitive need for empathy. These examples highlight one function of young adult fiction, to be an impetus in awakening and developing spiritual intelligence in adolescents through a narrative transportation that fosters the expression of some of the marks of such spiritual awareness (Sinetar, 2009).

Conclusion

The development of spiritual intelligence through shared experiences of young adult fiction can promote absorption in the story, plot, characters and themes, with a cultivation of awareness of self and others. The comparison of novels in historical context (for example, *An Episode of Sparrows*) with contemporary dystopian young adult fiction (such as *The Hunger Games*, *The Maze Runner*, *Divergent*) can effect narrative transportation with positive outcomes for the exploration of ideas concerning responsibility, justice and self. Furthermore, supporting young adults in the expression of their reactions to such narratives can help avoid 'trivialising' concerns by providing

avenues for the difficult concepts to be examined in conversation. Affording young adults the time and space to become absorbed in narratives can develop skills of reflection and encourage an awareness of spiritual intelligence. The growth of spiritual intelligence may therefore be given priority in their lives, both in adolescence and on through to adulthood. Ultimately, spiritual intelligence, fostered through young adult fiction, effects mental and emotional well-being and cultivates exploration of attitudes towards social justice, social responsibility and self in many adolescents.

WORD COUNT: 2,994

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