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ABSTRACT

The significance of adolescent literature has been judged on the basis of the developmental tasks encountered by the main character. One writer has identified eight developmental tasks that teenagers must undertake as they move toward adulthood: discovering one's sex role in our culture, developing relationships with peers, achieving an easy relationship with members of the opposite sex, accepting one's physical body, changing relationship with parents, working for pay, finding a vocation, and becoming aware of one's value patterns. A number of adolescent novels recently published include a ninth developmental task exposure to and acceptance of someone's death. Some novels show successful coming to terms with death, others show less successful adaptation. A few novels that include this task are "Confessions of a Teenage Baboon" and "Pardon Me, You're Stepping on My Eyeball" both by Paul Zindel, "A Figure of Speech" by Norma Fox Mazer, "Cinnamon Cane" by Melinda Pollowitz, and "I Am the Cheese" by Robert Cormier. In each instance, acceptance of the death of another is the key to maturity for the main character. (TJ)

THE ULTIMATE DEVELOPMENTAL TASK IN ADOLESCENT LITERATURE

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A young graduate student of mine tells the story of the first job her teenage husband took after they were married. He began a job working for the railroad and was part of a work crew on a train that travelled throughout the state. The crew nicknamed her husband "The Kid." For a solid ten months, he was referred to by the older men only as "The Kid." During that tenth month, her husband witnessed his first death on the rails as a friend and fellow crewman slipped underneath the wheels of that fast moving train.

For days her husband mourned and went through his day's work in a state of despondency. One day he went to work singing. He had somehow grappled with and was able to come to grips with his friends death. When "The Kid" started singing, the crewmen on the train realized that the young man had now witnessed and accepted his first death on the rails. Immediately the nickname of "The Kid" disappeared from the vocabulary of the older men. On the railroad, that brush with and acceptance of death became the ultimate developmental task that moved one young man from adolescence to manhood in the eyes of his fellow workers.

Developmental tasks and adolescent fiction have often gone hand in hand. In an effort to answer the question of whether or not a particular novel aimed at the adolescent will have any meaning to that teenage audience, the novel is often critically looked at to see what developmental tasks are encountered by the main character throughout the book. These tasks, originally described by

Robert Havighurst, can be considered a set of teenage passages. They are a series of new situations that must be confronted and surmounted if the youngster is to mature from teenager into adult.

In the world of literature for the adolescent, the application of these developmental tasks to teenage books gained its greatest popularity when it was included in G. Robert Carlsen's 1967 text Books and the Teen-Age Reader. In that soon-to-be-revised classic, Carlsen says, "If books are to have any meaning, they must relate to the young person's personal and social needs." [1] Carlsen goes on to list the following eight developmental tasks that the teenager must undertake as he moves toward adulthood:

1. Discovering his sex role in our culture.
2. Developing new relationships with people his own age.
3. Achieving an easy relationship with members of the opposite sex.
4. Accepting his physical body.
5. Changing his relationship with his parents.
6. Working for pay.
7. Finding a vocation.
8. Becoming aware of his value patterns. [2]

Almost every collection of articles on adolescent literature contains at least one article that examines the teenage novel in terms of the developmental tasks that the hero undertakes and surmounts. These articles appear in the April 1976 Arizona English Bulletin, the April 1972 Arizona English Bulletin, and the 1977 winter issue of Teaching English Language Arts just to name a few excellent collections.

During the last four or five years, as I continue to read and evaluate new offerings for adolescents, I have become aware of the fact that many of the new novels contain a ninth developmental task—

an ultimate developmental task that once surmounted, unquestionably marks the teenager's passage into adulthood. That ultimate task is the adolescent's exposure to and acceptance of someome's death. Let us look at some of today's adolescent novels to see how this ultimate task is handled.

Paul Zindel's most recent novel, Confessions of a Teenage Baboon (1977), tells the story of sixteen year old Chris who is the product of an overbearing mother and a father who walked out on them and went to Mexico where he died, leaving his son, Chris, with nothing but an oversized chesterfield coat.

When Chris' mother takes a job as a live-in nurse for a dying Mrs. Dipardi, Chris comes under the influence of a strange perverted father fugure who is Mrs. Dipardi's son, Lloyd. Lloyd takes on the task of turning Chris, the misfit, into a man. In several mean and heated confrontations, Lloyd teaches Chris to value himself as a person, to take pride in his physical body, and to speak up to his overbearing mother. Lloyd says to Chris, "'Chris, the reason I was so mean to you was because you remind me of me.'" [3] He goes on to say:

> 'What I'm saying is that maybe the reason I'm so demanding of you is because you remind me of me when I was your age. Half developed. Half conscious. And half a man.' (p. 108)

In many ways, Lloyd helps Chris face and overcome many of the developmental tasks referred to earlier, but even with these lessons, when situations get tehse, Chris wraps himself up in the security blanket of his father's chesterfield coat. Lloyd helps Chris toward

adulthood but the reader knows he'll never quite make it until he leaves his security blanket, gives up the idea that someday he'd "wake up and find his father at the breakfast table" (p. 131), and accepts his father's death. Not surprisingly, it is Lloyd Dipardi who helps Chris with this final task.

As in several of the other Zindel novels, a wild bizarre party brings about the book's climax. Chris and his mother leave the Dipardi home as Lloyd becomes meaner and wilder than ever. In the hurry of leaving, Chris forgets the chesterfield coat. He returns to Llyod's. By now the police have been called and the evidence indicates that Lloyd has done some perverted things with the youngsters he surrounds himself with. Chris views the police as they beat Lloyd and suggest a pay-off so that Lloyd might continue to keep his job and the police would not leak the scandal to the papers. Chris runs from his mother and the police only to return to his room to pick up his coat and view Lloyd through a crack in the floor. It is with sympathetic eyes that Chris watched the beaten man who tried to help him. As Lloyd cried so did Chris. Chris watched as Lloyd quickly turned up his stereo, picked up a gun, pointed it at his head, and killed himself. Chris walked from the house in a daze. Zindel describes Chris' thoughts as he walked blindly through the moonlit night.

> I suddenly realized that what seemed like an illusion was really true. I was only half a shadow and only half of what I could be. And it was at this instant that something momentous happened to me. I remembered I had left my father's coat behind but this time it didn't matter. I felt as though I was unfolding

> under the moonlight. I was opening up like a seed that had been thurst painfully and deeply--even ruthlessly--into the ground and been given a merciless warning and command to grow. The cloud that had been hanging over me for so many years of my life on earth was suddenly lifting thanks to an anguished, tormented man who now lay lifeless on a bed not far away. (p. 154)

Chris had met and come to grips with the ultimate developmental task. In witnessing Lloyd's death, he had come to accept his father's death. With the security blanket gone, Chris was ready to begin a new set of adult passages.

The same kind of confrontation with an acceptance of a parent's death is found in Zindel's Pardon Me, You're Stepping on My Eyeball. In this book, named an Outstanding Children's Book of the Year for 1976, a lonely boy named "Marsh" Mellow teams up with a girl in his therapy class named Edna Shinglebox and the two set out on a series of bizarre happenings that culminate when Marsh throws an urn with his father's ashes over a bridge. That physical act along with the contact of two people sharing with each other and caring for each other rids Marsh of his own type of chesterfield coat and, like Chris, places him on a new adult road. But the fact that this acceptance of death can be seen in two recent novels by the same author is not enough to argue that this death theme is to be found in much of adolescent fiction today.

In 1973, Norma Fox Mazer published a beautiful story about the relationship between a grandfather and a granddaughter.

The book was A Figure of Speech. The bond between Grandpa and Jenny is a result of similar roles that each one was playing in the family. When Grandpa Carl's wife died, he reluctantly moves in with Jenny's family. He feels alienated — an extra. Jenny feels unwanted also for she was born — the product of a birth control malfunction. The two create in each other a sense of their own personal worth. Throughout the novel, Grandpa helps Jenny surmount the developmental tasks that range from developing new relationships with people her own age to declaring her independence from her parents.

When Jenny finds out that her parents are going to place Grandpa in a nursing home, she warns him and the two misfits run away as Carl tries to hang on to his dignity and Jenny becomes even more disillusioned with her parents. At an old dilapidated farm, Carl and Jenny begin to start a new life. Both know that this new life is their final dream together. One morning Jenny wakes to find her grandfather has died.

> For a long time she sat next to him on the wet ground, brushing away the flies that tried to settle on his lips. The sun moved higher in the sky, pale and partially obscured by clouds. She smoothed his hair, stroked his hands, and, bending over him put her cheek against his. [4]

Alone, Jenny tried to bury her grandfather but gave up and reluctantly went for help. When Jenny returned home she was treated differently. She seemed to receive more respect from her family and she thought often about that final dream that she and her grandfather shared.

> Neither of them had said it to the other, but they both had known they couldn't make it at the farm. Living there had been a fine, beautiful, and impossible dream. There had been too much decay and destruction, and Grandpa had not the strength left to cope with years of ruin. But rather than go back and let himself be put into a home, to sit all day in a numbered chair and look at pictures blinking across a TV screen, had gone outside and gone to sleep. No, she musn't say that. He had died. He had hated it when people didn't say what they meant, covering up a true word with a phony one. She seemed to hear him say in his harsh voice, I haven't gone to my final rest, I'm dead. (p. 157)

At the end of the story, Jenny listens to her parents' conversation with some guests. They are talking about Grandpa Carl calling him a tough old bird, a clean man, a man who didn't suffer and went so easily. Jenny runs from the house and runs from the hypocritical voices. In the end, Grandpa had helped Jenny with her developmental tasks and with his death, he had made her not just an adult but an adult who is somehow more truthful, more courageous, more noble than the hypocritical cliche dropping parents from whom she has declared her independence.

Another more recent book that continues the granddaughter and grandfather relationship is Melinda Pollowitz's Cinnamon Cane (1977). This book was named by adolescents as one of the "Classroom Choices" books for 1978. In many ways, it is a cross between Are You There, God? It's Me, Margaret and A Figure of Speech.

Like Grandpa Carl, Cassie's grandfather helps to see her through tasks that involve a crush on an English teacher and being tapped as a member of an exclusive sorority. Cassie's hardest lesson to learn is that she cannot hold back time and as

she grows up, her grandfather gets older. His age is symbolized by the cinnamon cane he uses to help him walk.

Cassie manages to overcome her developmental tasks, but she needs to muster up everything her grandfather taught her to accept his death. When he dies, she quickly clings to what they shared together. Like Jenny who remembered the dream she shared with her Grandpa Carl, Cassie rips off a piece of cinnamon bark from her grandfather's cane, mixes up some lemonade as she and her grandfather had done so many times before and runs out the back door.

> The sun had nearly set, glittering gold light streaked the black clouds that wound across the winter sky. The cold bite on her cheek promised new snow. She found the deepest snowdrift and sank down in the middle of it. She tilted the blender to her mouth and drank. The icy lemonade melted the cinnamon pulp on her tongue and she swallowed. A sudden gust of wind whipped icy crystals from the drift into her face. From somewhere, some old, old yesterday, she heard Grampa's voice coaxing her to smile.
>
> She jumped up, carefully balancing the lemonade and rushed inside the house to tell him she was going to be all right. And to say good-bye.[5]

In his death, Grampa has taught Cassie her final lesson. She accepts her inability to hold back time and she accepts his death. With Cassie's acceptance comes her maturity.

Not every adolescent novel contains a hero or heroine who is lucky enough to accept death as Cassie, Jenny, Marsh, and Chris do. The real question to consider is what happens to the adolescent who cannot accept a death? Does he remain a child?

Does he move on to adulthood by a different route? Robert Cormier's highly praised I Am the Cheese (1978) provides us with an example of an adolescent who cannot accept death.

I Am the Cheese is the frightening story of Adam Farmer. Like Cormier's The Chocolate War (1974), this new book deals with someone who "dared to disturb the universe" and paid dearly. Slowly we learn that Adam's father testified against someone or some organization and in exchange was given a new identity and a new life for his family. The story begins with Adam starting out on a bike trip to visit his father. Only as the novel progresses, does the reader get to piece taped transcripts and events together in order to find that Adam is not actually on a bike trip to see his father, but is the prisoner of a government or group of people who fear the youngster may know or remember something about how his parents were killed.

Cormier makes it very clear that Adam saw a car smash into his family. In what seemed like slow motion, he sees his mother die.

> Instantly. Death without any doubt, and he regarded her almost curiously, numb, without feeling. One moment, she was spinning the way he was spinning, like a top released from its string, and suddenly she was actually on the hood of the car, sliding, sliding toward the windshield in that terrible kind of slow motion, and then she was sliding back toward the front of the car, as if someone had reversed the film projector, and she fell to the pavement, not sliding off but plunging to the pavement strangely, awkwardly, her head at an odd angle, almost at a right angle to her body. She stared at him with startled eyes but she was not really staring at him because Adam knew the eyes were sightless, vacant. She was dead, irrevocably dead.[6]

Now Adam must face his father's death. Adam speaks to the doctor:

> 'My poor father,' I say. 'He is dead, isn't he? He didn't get away, did he?'
>
> The doctor's face is sad; his face is always sad when we talk about my father and I find out again that he is dead.
>
> The doctor takes the package from my hand and I begin to sing:
>
> The farmer in the dell,
> The farmer in the dell, ... (p. 215)

Adam clings to the song that he and his father used to sing. It is Chris' chesterfield coat. The difference is that Adam cannot let go of it as Chris did. Instead of going forward towards adulthood, Adam reverts back to childhood. He says he realizes his father is dead and yet he cannot accept that.

> I rock Pokey in my arms and I'm wearing my father's jacket and I have on his old cap and now I'm not so sad anymore although I know he's dead and my mother's dead, too.
>
> I keep singing, I keep singing.
>
> The cheese stands alone,
> The cheese stands alone,
> Heigh-ho, the merry-o,
> The cheese stands alone. (p. 216)

In conclusion, each one of these recent novels for adolescents is part of an ever increasing number of books that goes a step beyond the eight developmental tasks that move a youngster from adolescence into adulthood. It seems necessary in light of these novels to consider the ultimate developmental task to be an experience that deals with death and the acceptance of that death.

Lloyd Dipardi helps to teach Chris the final task and in the end Chris leaves the chesterfield coat behind. Edna Shinglebox helps Marsh accept his father's death and grow up. Jenny is helped by Grandpa Carl and the woman she becomes after his death is a stronger and more noble creature than either of her parents. Cassie goes through her ritual of eating cinnamon cane and drinking lemonade one last time before she bids good-bye to her dead grandfather and good-bye to her growing up tasks as well. Finally, Adam tried to accept his father's death, but cannot. In the face of reality, he turns away and seems destined to be forever a child. The train accident that turned the young husband from "The Kid" to a man is the ultimate developmental task portrayed in so much of today's teen-age fiction. The acceptance of death appears to be the ultimate developmental task in literature for the adolescents.

Notes

[1]G. Robert Carlsen, Books and the Teen-Age Reader (New York: Bantam, 1971), p. 10.

[2]Carlsen, pp. 10-12.

[3]Paul Zindel, Confessions of a Teenage Baboon (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), p. 108. All quotations from Confessions are taken from this edition and are documented internally.

[4]Norma Fox Mazer, A Figure of Speech (New York: Dell, 1975), p. 154. All quotations from A Figure are taken from this edition and are documented internally.

[5]Melinda Pollowitz, Cinnamon Cane (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), p. 154.

[6]Robert Cormier, I Am the Cheese (New York: Dell, 1978), p. 207. All quotations from Cheese are taken from this edition and are documented internally.

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