

The Significance of the Coming-of-Age Tale in YA High Fantasy By Marilla Word

Abstract: *Coming-of-age stories help teens while they are coming-of-age themselves. These stories can help guide teens as they are forming their own identity. This article discusses the ways High Fantasy, specifically, can be beneficial to teens during this developmental stage.*

The coming-of-age tale, or the *Bildungsroman*, focuses on the protagonist's journey from adolescence, through exploration of self and a development of self-identity, into a more formed adult, or almost adult. In addition to being entertaining, these stories also exist as something for readers who are also coming-of-age to relate to. In YA high fantasy readers are given imaginary worlds where they can find not just fun and magic, but also ideas and inspiration for how to navigate the real world. Lots of books from lots of genres can make significant impacts in the lives of teens, but as Shana E. Hadi (2019) explains to her readers:

“there was a book you read in high school that altered your worldview so significantly, it shifted the angle of your future trajectory by several degrees. It might've been a Shakespearean play or an illustrated novel, but even then, you probably were most affected by the coming-of-age story, which composes a significant proportion of most high school curriculums.” (para. 3)

Coming-of-age, high fantasy offers unique ways to look at the relationship we have to our bodies, especially in formative years, like the teen years. In addition, these imagined realms can emphasize the forces of good and evil, or power relations between the oppressed and oppressor. In this way these stories offer guidance to teens who are witnessing these very real forces in the real world. Teachers, the media, and parents can all try to mentor youth, but sometimes using a fun medium, like YA high fantasy, can make a strong impact, that teens gravitate towards on their own.

Critical to an adolescent's development is forming a (hopefully) strong self-identity. Coming-of-age stories of all genres can help with this because, simply put, the more characters there are out there growing into their own, the more examples there are for real youth to relate to. However, a tricky part of developing identity, for some people, is the pressure society can put on a person to be synonymous with their body. It is in this regard that YA high fantasy can offer storylines, characters, and settings that push back against this idea. In her article regarding female bodies in YA fantasy, Leah Philips (2015) explains that in the 21st century, the evermore popular digital spaces and social media continue to push the concept of an ideal body. Through these visual representations of bodies and people, Philips (2015) argues that "this obsession with appearance has coalesced into a representational economy that equates her self with her body, while also eroding visible (bodily) difference" (p. 41). It is worth mentioning that while her article focuses on those who identify as female, it is arguably the same for all people. In high fantasy novels there is a creation of another world, or realm. Within these settings there are separations from the real world through things like magic, time travel, and mythical creatures. These things can exist because of the rules of a created and imagined setting. In these settings there is space for shapeshifting, and otherness that logically occur and allow for different representations of body and self (Philips, 2015). This is important because many teens who are forming an identity do not necessarily have a physical body that is representative of who they are. High fantasy may be magical, and make-believe, but in reading the genre it can allow the reader's mind to expand on narrow ideas of body and identity. Philips (2015) eloquently explains: "these texts explore the possibilities of living and being a body when appearance is not the only means of identifying a self, when self is not confined to a single, whole appearance – or, even, body – and when the very

nature of appearing is, itself, ambiguous” (p.51). The freedom that high fantasy lends to forming ideas of what comprises an individual can be very relatable to people that are grappling with their own identity.

Teens are living in a world where there is injustice, oppression, an environmental crisis, discrimination, and general unrest. It is scary for everyone, but youth especially are at an age in which making sense of, and understanding the world they live in is important, and taking form. Through watching characters in books and media go through the process of making sense of their world they, too, can make strides in making sense of their own. It is popular in fantasy, including YA high fantasy, for there to be characters who are coming-of-age while simultaneously rejecting and revolting against the powers that be, and the oppression they see. Witches are often used in fantasy to represent women’s empowerment (Simon, 2020). Characters such as Sarah Calhoun, of D.J. Butler’s *Serpent Daughter*, who goes from tobacco farmer and witch to taking over her father’s empire, uses her witchcraft to fight back against an oppressive system (Simon, 2020). Teen readers who witness injustice in their own world can turn to characters in fantasy novels that are coming to terms with their magical powers to find strength in overcoming evil. It can act as inspiration for readers to find their own power and strength in a tumultuous world.

Coming-of-age novels are important, relatable content that teens can consume. There are certain characteristics of high fantasy that make the genre very compatible with these types of stories. Although high fantasy is magical, and fantastical by definition, it should not be discounted as a means to helping youth develop their own identity in their own ‘coming-of-age’.

References

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