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## The Feminist YA Novel

YA fiction has cultural power. When *Publisher's Weekly* released its 2022 report on book sales in 2021, sales of print YA fiction rose 30.7%, as compared to a 25.5% increase in adult fiction and a 9.6% increase in children's literature. In this course, we will examine what YA is and what it can do (formally and culturally) by attending to a genre for young adults that literary scholars tend to ignore, and critics often denigrate: the feminist YA novel. We'll start with a YA icon—*Alice's Adventures*—and work our way forwards and backwards in time to wrap our minds around the edges of this genre category. Our primary readings will include *Little Women*, *Seraphina*, *The Little Female Academy*, *Anne of Green Gables*, *Akata Witch*, *Jane Eyre*, *Cinderella is Dead*, and *To All the Boys I've Loved Before*. To organize our transperiodizing thought, we'll group these primary source texts thematically, focusing first on adventure stories, then school stories, and finally on love stories.

Our first unit will focus on the intellectual adventure and daring involved in carving out “young adult” identity—both for literary genres and for individual readers. In every unit, we'll explore how the authors of our primary sources make adolescence into a space for progressive education, radical self-making, and transgression. We'll turn to novel studies, queer theory, critical race theory, and historical texts to better understand how each primary source is exploring what it means to be an adolescent girl in its historical context—and what we can still learn from these texts about teaching feminist modes of thought to tweens and teens today. By the end of this course, you'll have a rigorous understanding of the issues at stake in some groundbreaking YA novels, where this genre came from, and how YA novels can inspire feminist modes of thought. You also might have a new favorite book.

## Tutorial Learning Goals

### Subject-Area Expertise

- Identify some features that define “YA” novels and literature for/about adolescence.
- Consider what makes a novel “feminist.”
- Understand the different kinds of stories that can play out in a single YA novel.
- Reflect on how YA novels help (some of) their readers think through and experiment with the development of their adult identities.
- Ask how feminist YA novels can remake and update what it means to be feminist.
- Take a stance about who YA novels are for and what they can do: in literary / formal and political contexts.

### Critical Writing Skills

- Design a research question.
- Develop a critical bibliography around that question, including diverse methods and viewpoints.
- Put secondary criticism in conversation with your own ideas and with other criticism.

- Write with greater clarity and precision.
- Learn to budget your time and ultimately write a 20-25 page paper.

## Methodologies & Critical Readings

Please find PDFs of all the following readings on Canvas. Note: there is a significant overlap between the “Novel Theory” and “Feminist & Gender Theory” categories below.

**Novel Studies** – “‘For the Benefit of Young Women Going into Service’: Late Eighteenth-Century Proto-Young Adult Novels for Labouring-Class Girls,” Kitteridge; “Sarah Fielding’s Feminist Literary Pedagogy, in Which Nasty Women Become Novel Writers,” Etskovitz; “Growing Up Empowered by Jane: An Examination of *Jane Eyre* in Twenty-First Century Children’s and Young Adult Literature,” Anah-Jayne Markland; “Haunted Heroines: The Gothic Imagination and the Female *Bildungsroman* of Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë, and L. M. Montgomery,” Kathleen Ann Miller; “Actors, Puppets, *Girls*: Little Women and the Collective Bildungsroman,” Katie Trumpener.

**Feminist & Gender Theory** – “What Feminism Did to Novel Studies,” Nancy Armstrong; “‘Women’ as the Subject of Feminism” in Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990); *Twenty-First-Century Feminisms in Children’s and Adolescent Literature*, Roberta Seelinger Trites; excerpts about identity formation in *The Feminine Mystique*, Betty Friedan (1963)

**Historicist Texts on Childhood & Adolescence** – *Transforming Girls: The Work of Nineteenth-Century Adolescence*, Julie Pfeiffer; *The Forms of Youth: Twentieth-Century Poetry and Adolescence*, Stephanie Burt; *Books for Children, Books for Adults: Age and the Novel from Defoe to James*, Teresa Michals; *The Bloomsbury Introduction to Children’s and Young Adult Literature*, Karen Coats.

**Queer Theory** – “Liminality, Transgression, and Lesbian Erotics in Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*,” Deborah Denenholz Morse; “From Homoplot to Progressive Novel: Lesbian Experience and Identity in Contemporary Young Adult Novels,” Caroline E. Jones.

**Critical Race Studies** – “On Common Ground?: Feminist Theory and Critical Race Studies,” Rashmi Varma; “Notes toward a Black Fantastic: Black Atlantic Flights beyond Afrofuturism in Young Adult Literature,” Ebony Elizabeth Thomas; “Enchanting the Masses: Allegorical Diversity in Fairy-Tale Dystopias,” Jill Coste; “Popular Genres and New Media,” Betsy Huang.

**A bit of our discipline’s history** – “The Child as Swain,” William Empson.

### Unit 1

#### Adventure Stories: Towards YA Identity

1. *Adventures* for whom?

Primary Reading:

- *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), Lewis Carroll, Through Ch. VII, "A Mad Tea-Party"
- Excerpts from "Books and the teen-age reader; a guide for teachers, librarians, and parents" (1967), The National Book Committee

Critical Reading:

- Intro to Coats, Karen. *The Bloomsbury Introduction to Children's and Young Adult Literature*. London ; New York: Bloomsbury Academic. 2017.
- "Against YA" (featuring a picture of Alice!)  
<https://slate.com/culture/2014/06/against-ya-adults-should-be-embarrassed-to-read-childrens-books.html>

2. What are Alice's "Adventures"?

Primary Reading: Please finish reading *Alice's Adventures*.

Critical Reading: Excerpts from...

- Empson, William. "The Child as Swain." In *Some Versions of Pastoral: And Related Writings*, First edition. Oxford: University Press, 2020.
- Excerpts from introduction to Michals, Teresa. *Books for Children, Books for Adults: Age and the Novel from Defoe to James*. Cambridge, United Kingdom ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014.

Canvas Post: As you read *Alice* this week, think about the novel's formal adventures, or experiments with different genres and modes of storytelling. Just as Alice resists the Caterpillar's question, "Who are you?", refusing to pin down her identity, the novel dodges readers' attempts to shove it into one genre category or another—or to identify itself as catering only to one age-group of readers. Since *Alice's Adventures* was published, there has been a lively debate about who ought to read it and why. More broadly, as the *Slate* article suggests, *Alice* has become a case-study for the larger debate about who ought to read YA. This week, please use your Canvas post to intervene in that debate. Pick a scene from *Alice* and analyze what a child versus a young adult versus an older adult might get out of it. You may engage with Empson's interpretation if you'd like, but please stick close to the primary text, quoting and close reading it.

3. *Seraphina* & "Allegorical Diversity" in YA Adventures

Primary Reading: *Seraphina* (2012), Rachel Hartman

Critical Reading:

- "Women as the Subject of Feminism" in Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. 10th Anniversary ed., Repr. Routledge Classics. Florence: Routledge, 2006. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203824979>.
- Excerpts from: Coste, Jill. "Enchanting the Masses: Allegorical Diversity in Fairy-Tale Dystopias." In *Race in Young Adult Speculative Fiction*, by Jill Coste,

54–72. University Press of Mississippi, 2021.  
<https://doi.org/10.14325/mississippi/9781496833815.003.0004>.

Canvas Post: *Alice* and *Seraphina* both use anthropomorphism and “Allegorical Diversity” to consider how girls may confront intersectional questions of gender, sexuality, race, and belonging as they near adulthood. This phenomenon—of approaching controversial questions about identity via allegory—is common in fantasy YA. In this post, please choose any scene in which you see the fantasy genre allowing *Seraphina* to work out questions about her identity that might get a work of realistic fiction banned from a school library. Close read that scene to identify how the fantasy elements of *Seraphina* act as a vehicle to allow readers a glimpse into more realistic or relatable aspects of her self-reflection.

4. Are Alcott’s *Little Women* on adventures towards “feminist” identities?

Primary Reading: *Little Women* (1869-1869), Louisa May Alcott, Vol. 2.

Critical Reading:

- Armstrong, Nancy. “What Feminism Did to Novel Studies.” In *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Literary Theory*, edited by Ellen Rooney, 1<sup>st</sup> ed., 99–118. Cambridge University Press, 2006.  
<https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL0521807069.005>.
- Handout: Excerpts about “Little Women” and Identity from *The Feminine Mystique*, Betty Friedan (1963).

Canvas Post: There is no Canvas post for this week, since your close reading essays are due. However, you should think about the question above as your read.

**WEEK 4. Due Date:** Please remember to submit your close reading paper to Canvas by 5 PM on Friday.

5. Girls vs. *Little Women*, Bildungsroman vs. YA

Primary Reading: *Little Women* (1869-1869), Louisa May Alcott, Vol. 1.

Critical Reading: Trumpener, Katie. “Actors, Puppets, *Girls*: Little Women and the Collective Bildungsroman.” *Textual Practice* 34, no. 12 (December 1, 2020): 1911–31.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/0950236X.2020.1834709>.

Canvas Post: *Little Women* is, as Trumpener’s article suggests, a novel about female community and their collective development—not about a single, titular protagonist. This sets *Little Women* apart from most of the other novels on our syllabus. In your post for today, think about how Alcott sends her family of girls and women on local adventures together. Once they’re on those adventures, how does Alcott manage to tease the characters apart, to explore their unique experiences and internal development? What changes when

these characters must develop together, as part of a narrative community in a local setting, before going off on their own to the city and abroad?

6. Library Adventures: Houghton Exploration with Kristine Greive & Research Training with Odile Harter.

Assignment:

- There is no assigned novel or critical reading for this week, so consider reading ahead if you'd like to write your Junior Paper on a text from the second half of our course.
- Read my comments on your close reading paper before class.
- Write a rough draft of **a potential research question for your Junior Paper**, a list of potential questions, or a specific area of interest.

Class Activities:

We will spend the first half of class in the Houghton Library, exploring editions of YA novels and YA novelists' manuscripts with Kristine Grieve and Zoe Hill, who direct and coordinate the library's fantastic teaching & learning opportunities. We'll also get a book historical preview of the texts that we'll be reading between now and the end of the semester: texts that you might want to write your Junior Papers about!

In the second half of class, we'll meet up with Odile Harter (our fabulous English Librarian) to learn about research methods for your Junior Paper. Near the end of class, we will discuss your next major assignment: the prospectus and bibliography for your Junior Paper. We'll schedule individual meetings to discuss your close reading papers and Junior Paper ideas. Please feel free to use any archival, primary, or secondary sources that we encounter in class today in your Junior Papers.

## Unit 2: School Stories

7. The Little Female Academy

Primary Reading:

- Excerpts from *The Little Female Academy* (1749), Sarah Fielding

Critical Reading:

- Excerpts from:
  - "Sarah Fielding's Feminist Literary Pedagogy, in Which Nasty Women Become Novel Writers" (*ELH* 90.1)
  - Hill. (2014). *The critical merits of young adult literature : coming of age*. Routledge.
- Kittredge, Katharine. "“For the Benefit of Young Women Going into Service’: Late Eighteenth-Century Proto-Young Adult Novels for Labouring-Class Girls.”

*Women's Writing* 23, no. 1 (January 2, 2016): 106–26.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/09699082.2015.1105985>.

**WEEK 7 Due Date:** Please remember to submit your prospectus and annotated bibliography by 5 PM on Friday. You should also sign up for a draft conference with me by this time.

8. Anne Enrolls at Green Gables

Primary Reading: *Anne of Green Gables* (1908), Ch. 1 through the end of 20, L.M. Montgomery.

Critical Reading:

- Excerpts from Pfeiffer, Julie. *Transforming Girls: The Work of Nineteenth-Century Adolescence*. Children's Literature Association Series. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2021. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv20hcrp1>.
- Introduction to Burt, Stephanie. *The Forms of Youth: Twentieth-Century Poetry and Adolescence*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2007.

Canvas Post: Chapter 20 of *Anne of Green Gables* is titled “A Good Imagination Gone Wrong,” playing on Anne’s consistent calls for more “scope for imagination.” This week, we’ll be thinking about what is at stake—what is risky, feminist, and potentially radical—about Anne’s sense of wonder and her forms of imaginative play with her classmates (not to mention her adult friends). Professor Burt’s chapter will help us consider how, in 20<sup>th</sup>-century literature, considerations of literary form and the shape of literary imagination become increasingly central to conversations about adolescence. Pfeiffer’s introduction, meanwhile, will provide one hypothesis about how we got from the mid-nineteenth century to this point. In your Canvas post, pick an article to engage with (Pfeiffer’s or Burt’s), and use Anne’s imagination to take a stance on that article. Does the article help you understand some aspect of Anne’s perspective or way of learning? Or, on the other hand, does any facet of Anne’s story make you question or complicate what you are reading in Pfeiffer’s or Burt’s chapters? For this Canvas post, practice using your close reading skills to show why you agree with, disagree with, or want to complicate some specific aspect of our critical readings. Two paragraphs.

9. A Good Imagination Gone to College

Primary Reading: Please finish reading *Anne of Green Gables*.

Critical Reading:

- Kathleen Ann Miller. “Haunted Heroines: The Gothic Imagination and the Female *Bildungsroman* of Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë, and L. M. Montgomery.” *The Lion and the Unicorn* 34, no. 2 (2010): 125–47. <https://doi.org/10.1353/uni.0.0502>.

**WEEK 9 Draft Conferences:** I will be meeting with each of you individually this week, outside of class time, to discuss your prospectus and bibliography.

## 10. Education & Magic in *Akata Witch*

Primary Reading: *Akata Witch* (2011), Nnedi Okorafor

Critical Reading:

- Varma, Rashmi. "On Common Ground?: Feminist Theory and Critical Race Studies." In *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Literary Theory*, edited by Ellen Rooney, 232–60. Cambridge Companions to Literature. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL0521807069.012>.
- Thomas, Ebony Elizabeth. "Notes toward a Black Fantastic: Black Atlantic Flights beyond Afrofuturism in Young Adult Literature." *The Lion and the Unicorn* 43, no. 2 (2019): 282–301. <https://doi.org/10.1353/uni.2019.0023>.

Canvas Post: *Akata Witch* offers readers a couple versions of the "school story." The novel opens with an all-too-familiar classroom scene in which Sunny's classmates mock her new haircut and her teacher makes her into an unwilling center of attention. However, as Sunny's story progresses, she encounters new, magical modes of learning. In *The Little Female Academy* and *Anne of Green Gables*, we saw some of the ways in which wonder and curiosity about fantasy stories and apparently supernatural events can give young, female characters a sense of imaginative possibility about other versions of reality, alternative sets of rules, and new (perhaps transgressive) ways of relating to their communities. While reading *Akata Witch* and Thomas's article this week, close read a scene in the novel in which you see Nnedi Okorafor using magical education as a premise to envision new kinds of learning communities for girls and young women who face discrimination and bullying at school.

### Unit 3: Love Stories

Scheduling Note: In this final unit, we will dedicate at least 30 minutes of every class to workshopping your essay drafts. You can choose to work in pairs (with one of you partnering with me) or in one pair and one group of three. In any case, you'll work with the same partner[s] every week, working bit by bit through your essays, and I'll distribute a "workshopping adventures" handout to guide your discussions. I will also ask you to schedule a draft conference with me in office hours at least once in week 11 or 12.

## 11. Jane Eyre at School

Primary Reading: *Jane Eyre* (1847), Ch. 1-10, Charlotte Brontë

Critical Reading:

- Morse, Deborah Denenholz. “*Brontë Violations* : Liminality, Transgression, and Lesbian Erotics in Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*.” *Literature Compass* 14, no. 12 (December 2017): e12427. <https://doi.org/10.1111/lic3.12427>.
- “Growing Up Empowered by Jane: An Examination of *Jane Eyre* in Twenty-First Century Children’s and Young Adult Literature” by Anah-Jayne Markland in Day, & Sawyer Fritz, S. (2018). *The Victorian Era in Twenty-First Century Children’s and Adolescent Literature and Culture* (1<sup>st</sup> ed.). Routledge.

Canvas Post:

*Jane Eyre* starts out as a school story and quickly turns into an adaptation of *Cinderella*, which has since become a template for YA novelists working on joint school / love stories. For this week, we’ll focus on the love story that plays out in the Lowood chapters of *Jane Eyre*, before Jane graduates from school. We, like many contemporary YA novelists, can think of these chapters as an embedded YA novel, full of female friendship, rebellion, and drama. For your Canvas post, please close reading a scene from the first ten chapters of *Jane Eyre*, focusing on Jane’s female friendships and the ways in which feminist YA novelists are creating queer, inclusive versions of Jane’s school story. As you explore the kinds of love that unfold in these chapters, you don’t have to focus on erotic love (although you’re welcome to, if you want). This post could also reflect on friendship, mentor/student relationships.

## 12. *Cinderella is Dead*

Primary Reading: *Cinderella is Dead* (2020), Kalyn Baryron

Critical Reading: Excerpts from...

- Trites, Roberta Seelinger. *Twenty-First-Century Feminisms in Children’s and Adolescent Literature*. Children’s Literature Association Series. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2019.
- Jones, Caroline E. “From Homoplot to Progressive Novel: Lesbian Experience and Identity in Contemporary Young Adult Novels.” *The Lion and the Unicorn* 37, no. 1 (2013): 74–93. <https://doi.org/10.1353/uni.2013.0003>.

Canvas Post: As the title of this week’s novel suggests, contemporary feminist YA novels are concerned about where they came from (formally speaking) and what they can do to renovate their genre, to support adolescents’ exploration of their identities. This concern is particularly urgent for feminist YA novels that focus on love, sexuality, and gender. Should feminist YA novelists throw out the playbook and stop adapting *Jane Eyre*, Jane Austen, and fairy-tale premises? Or can they remake these and other iconic stories to be more inclusive? For this week’s post, take a stance, using *Cinderella is Dead* as a case study. Does the novel succeed in using the death of Cinderella as a starting point from which to transform her love story? If so, how? Take the class to a successful scene and close read it. Alternatively, is this novel unsuccessful in some ways? If so, close read a scene in the novel and show how Cinderella’s old story limits it.

### 13. “I’ve Loved Before”

Primary Reading: *To All the Boys I’ve Loved Before* (2014), Jenny Han

Critical Reading: Huang, Betsy. “Popular Genres and New Media.” In *The Cambridge Companion to Asian American Literature*, edited by Crystal Parikh and Daniel Y. Kim, 1st ed., 142–54. Cambridge University Press, 2015.  
<https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781316155011.013>.

Canvas Post: Our final three novels in this class all featured women readers who were eager to reinterpret the texts around them. Our final novel features a young Asian American woman who is writing her own love stories in letters that she never meant to send. What is at stake for Lara Jean (and for Jenny Han) in writing about having loved before? Feel free to draw on Betsy Huang’s article in your (short!) post.

## Junior Tutorial Conference

All Junior Tutorial students are required to attend a joint conference to present your final papers on December 7, 2022, in the Lamont Forum Room. Time TBA.

## Assignments & Grading

Participation: 25% of final grade.

This seminar will only succeed if you bring your energy to it, so please come to class having completed all the required readings, with questions and interests to share. Your draft conference, workshop, and Junior Tutorial Conference participation all count towards this grade—as do your Canvas posts. Please remember to complete your Canvas post assignments by 5 PM the day before class.

Close Reading Paper: 10%, due 5 PM on Friday Class 4.

Write a close reading (5-7 pages) of a scene from one of the books that we have encountered thus far. Please do not cite secondary sources to inform your interpretation—this is all about your literary critical take, and we will practice close reading together in class.

Junior Paper: 40%, due 4 PM, **INSERT DEPT DEADLINE HERE**

Your Junior Paper will be a 20-25 page research project on a major literary work that we read in this class. If you wish to write about a film or show (even if only in comparison to a literary work) please schedule a meeting with me by Class 7 to discuss your idea. Your final paper must include at least two methodological perspectives and ten secondary sources. Ideally, it will also feature a primary source from the nineteenth century. We will discuss this project at length in class, beginning in Class 6; there will be two assignments and two in-class workshops to help you plan in advance and succeed on this paper.

Prospectus and Annotated Bibliography: 10%, due 5 PM on Friday, Class 8.

I will ask you to submit a prospectus and annotated bibliography to me by Class 8. These documents should identify your research question, propose a thesis, and outline the scope of your argument. They should also identify your two methodologies of interest and at least ten potential secondary sources.

Junior Paper Draft: 15%, due 5 PM on **INSERT DEPT DEADLINE HERE** (the week of Class 11).

Your Junior Paper Draft is your chance to debut your ideas and receive thoughtful feedback from your peers and instructor, so please give it your all. This draft should be at least 20 pages long, including your bibliography. Ultimately, your Junior Paper revision will be graded in part upon how well you have adapted and grown as a writer in reply to my and your peers' comments on this work. If you submit an incomplete or careworn draft, that will make your revision process more challenging. On the other hand, if you put thought and effort into this work, then you'll be in a fabulous place for your revision process.

### Required Texts

**Primary Texts**: The following primary texts are on reserve in the Child Library. I advise you to purchase your own copies of the editions below as e-books or paperbacks, but you are welcome to select comparable texts from the library. I have chosen these editions with attention to their introductions, source editions, cost, and availability as e-texts.

*Insert full list of EDITIONS here, once the list of texts is approved.*

**Critical Texts**: All the required critical readings for this course will be posted to Canvas. If you are interested in reading additional chapters from any of the books on our syllabus, they will be on reserve for you in the Child Library.

**Financial Support**: If you need financial support in order to purchase your course materials, please contact me, and I will do my best to help you find funding for your books through Harvard.

### University Policies

**Academic Honesty**: Plagiarism is the use of another person's ideas or writing without giving them proper credit. Consequences of plagiarism can range from failure on the paper to dismissal from the course to even more serious actions. You are responsible for familiarizing yourself with Harvard FAS's Honor Code: "*Members of the Harvard College community commit themselves to producing academic work of integrity – that is, work that adheres to the scholarly and intellectual standards of accurate attribution of sources, appropriate collection and use of data, and transparent acknowledgement of the contribution of others to their ideas, discoveries, interpretations, and conclusions. Cheating on exams or problem sets, plagiarizing or misrepresenting the ideas or language of someone else as one's own, falsifying data, or any other*

*instance of academic dishonesty violates the standards of our community, as well as the standards of the wider world of learning and affairs.”*

**Collaboration:** I encourage you to talk with other students about the course and its readings. In individual assignments (e.g., short writing assignments, homework or reading questions and responses, your final paper, your prospectus), academic collaboration and external sources should be always cited.

**Attendance:** Your attendance in tutorial is vital to your own success as well as to the success of the class as a whole. If you need to miss a class for a reason other than illness, please email me a week in advance. In the event of a medical emergency, simply send me an email—you will, of course, be excused. Any unexcused absences will decrease your participation grade, and excessive absence could result in failing the course. Also, being late disrupts the work we’re doing together: Two lates = one absence. If you have extenuating circumstances, please communicate with me in a timely manner so that we can ensure that you are fully supported.

**Due Dates & Late Grades:** Late assignments will be docked 1/3 letter grade per day late, except for the final paper, which must be turned in before the due date. Students failing to turn in a final paper, or turning it in late without an official excuse, will fail the tutorial. If, well in advance of an assignment, you expect you will need an extension, please talk with me.

**Email:** You are responsible for checking your email on a daily basis. If you have a question that you need to ask me by email, be sure to give me at least 24 hours, or you may not get a response until it's too late. Also, please let me know if you’d like to use a non-Harvard email address.

**Accommodations for students with disabilities:** *“Students needing academic adjustments or accommodations because of a documented disability must present their Faculty Letter from the [Accessible Education Office](#) (AEO) and speak with the professor by the end of the second week of the term. Failure to do so may result in the Course Head's inability to respond in a timely manner. All discussions will remain confidential, although Faculty are invited to contact AEO to discuss appropriate implementation.”*