



The Tortoise's Tale

"... we went to school in the sea. The Master was an old turtle-we used to call him Tortoise-"

"Why did you call him Tortoise, if he wasn't one?" Alice asked.

"We called him Tortoise, because he taught us," said the Mock Turtle

From *The Outsiders*, Looking In: Using Found Poetry to Explore Genre Conventions in Young Adult Literature

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Beginning with the 1938 publication of Rosenblatt's *Literature of Exploration*, and since emerging as a distinct school of literary criticism in the 1970s (Murfin & Supryia 425-429), reader-response theory has offered an integral means of examining the manners through which readers engage with texts. As an increasingly practical element of this theory, Bleeker and Bleeker (1996) note that responding to literature through writing found poetry, in particular, "helps young readers appreciate an author's style and encourages them to focus on an aspect of a book which fascinates or appeals to them" (39).

The Academy of American Poets defines found poetry as "the literary equivalent of a collage" (<https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/text/found-poem-poetic-form>) insofar as its cultivation relies on the "refashioning and reordering of existing texts" (Wiggins 6) in order to connect the reader with the material in "different and sometimes unusual ways that can yield new and important insights" (Prendergast 235). Among other things, this aesthetic method of fostering readers' transactional relationships with all kinds of literacies has been found to support novice poets, as well as prospective teachers of poetry (Patrick); promote arts-based inquiry in teacher-education programs (McLaren & Arnold; Wiggins), and even increase student-understanding of key geographical concepts and vocabulary (Foster).

In the spirit of contributing to the already robust and compelling discourse surrounding found poetry and its applications/implications to education, this essay recounts how found poetry was used to explore the various genre conventions of Young Adult Literature. While found poetry is often employed as a means of promoting the reflective or reactionary component of the transactional reading process (Patrick), we discuss how crafting found poems from across several Young Adult texts helped shape the interpretive and analytical element of reader-response in a college English class. By viewing these texts not through a lens of self-, but rather *genre*-exploration, the material became its own expansive dataset, ripe for a unique qualitative inquiry that ushered in "a new way of conceiving analysis and a new way of seeing" (Wiggins 1).

The voices and perspectives that appear below come from a single college seminar on Young Adult Literature that was offered in the spring semester of 2018. What began as one student's idea for her final creative project evolved into a sustained, critical dialogue between student and teacher about the



potential functions of found poetry as a viable writing *and* reading device, as well as an innovative methodological tool. As an exercise in creative writing, found poetry has already demonstrated its ability to connect readers with texts in reflective and responsive ways; yet we hope that our singular experience sheds at least a little further light on how found poetry can also be used as a viable qualitative research methodology in itself.

When Author 2 first came to me for help on her final project, she knew she wanted to do something a little outside the box. As a creative writing major at our mid-sized, Midwestern American university, of course it made sense that she'd use my suggestion for nontraditional and exploratory projects to her advantage; and, of course, having grown tired of reading the same trite, overly-cited tributes to Ponyboy and his Greasers over the years, I not only applauded but also encouraged her endeavor. As I explain to my students every semester, as long as their projects engage with the genre of Young Adult Literature on some critical, intellectually rigorous level—and that the level grounds itself in some sort of broader scholarly discussion—I always support pursuits that push, destroy, or otherwise disrupt boundaries. This was (Author 2)'s project after all...

So when she mentioned that she'd like to creatively conduct some sort of genre exploration, I was immediately intrigued. Indeed, one of the goals of the course was, as a class, to arrive at some consensus or operational definition of our genre and its focus. What *is* Young Adult Literature, anyway? How and why does it work, and who reads it, and how and when and why does it matter? Is it merely a genre about kids that's written mostly by adults? Can YA exist *without* young adults? Why not? Do any non-YA books feature young adult characters, and if so, why aren't they YA? Are these stories merely a function of writing style or simplicity? Is it more of a theme issue? What purpose do these books serve and for whom do they serve it? Are there subgenres of YA, and if so, where do they fall into the discussion? Is YA uniquely American? Or modern? Is there a YA canon? How does that even work?

As our conversations developed, Author 2 seemed consistently drawn to the notion of a thematic inquiry: some aesthetic project that sought to frame the genre according to a series of recurring tropes or conventions. Throughout our semester, Author 2 seemed consistently perplexed by the genre of YA itself. As a society, for example, we *know* and accept that it exists, and for the most part, we seem to have a working knowledge of how it works and who it attracts. But on the intellectual level, Author 2 was always dissatisfied with how "outsiders" (i.e. Adults) discussed and processed and stigmatized YA as somehow artificial or less-than. It was almost as if YA existed as some untenable tribe of Others that "society" accommodates but doesn't really understand. Barnes & Noble may have a YA section, for instance, but it's always awkwardly and conspicuously wedged between the baby books and the real books that grown-ups read. The Good Stuff. Thus, for her project, Author 2 endeavored to legitimize the genre of YA, perhaps if only to give credence not only to its readers and writers, but also to the millions of people around the world who find themselves represented in, by, and through its multimodal reach.

As such, like a qualitative researcher trained to mine for any themes that may emerge from a dataset, Author 2 became a sort of critical YA inquirer—an ethnographer, of sorts—refocusing her creative lens away from pursuits of self and her reactions to the material, and instead setting her sights on an academic study of a subjective phenomenon. In the same way traditional ethnographers immerse themselves in a distinct culture to better understand their traditions, beliefs, and unique ways of living, Author 2 strove to engage with the genre/culture of Young Adult literature with the hopes of better understanding its nuanced inner-workings and ethically report those findings to an audience comprised not of her peers, but primarily of those who disparage the artistic and intellectual merit of the culture by way of privileging their own stories.

Through our ensuing discussions, Author 2 and I used our class's admittedly limited twelve-novel curriculum [See Table 1] to create our first round of grounded themes or theories. *What united these books, in all their characters, conflicts, covers, and cultures?* What issues, ideas, dilemmas, and



narratives do we see popping up among the pages? What common lived-experiences or existential questions keep surfacing in our readings?

Table 1: Texts used in the Young Adult Literature Seminar

- Anderson, L.H. (1999). *Speak*.
- Anderson, M. T. (2002). *Feed*.
- Alexie, S. (2007). *The absolutely true diary of a part-time Indian*.
- Bick, I (2015). *Sin Eaters Confession*.
- Erskine, K. (2010). *Mockingbird*.
- Gilbert, K. L. (2015). *Conviction*.
- Hinton, S. E. (1967). *The Outsiders*.
- McNeal, T. (2014). *Far, far away*.
- Myers, W.D. (2001). *Monster*.
- Myracle, L. (2011). *Shine*.
- Reynolds, J., and Kiely, B. (2015). *All American Boys*.
- Sepeyts, R. (2011). *Between shades of gray*.

This initial process of arriving at (or determining for ourselves) a working set of prevalent themes in Young Adult literature marked the first step towards Author 2’s eventual enlightenment. Through our critical, sustained dialogues and transactional engagement with our course material, Author 2 began to make connections between the texts in unique and profound ways. Otherwise disjointed or competing intra-textual narratives soon evolved into cohesive themes or lines of inquiry; characters that existed in different times, spaces, and places now marbled together into one inclusive series of adolescent trials and experiences. In other words, as Author 2 cultivated a finer understanding of how these distinct texts conversed with one another through characters, setting, plot, and even mechanical structure, she in turn fostered a firmer recognition of how YA, as a genre in itself, may systemically operate. If YA existed as its own unique culture, then as an ethnographer, Author 2 was learning its story: the story of a genre. Over the course of her project, Author 2 would ultimately transition from critical consumer of this published material, to an agentic producer of original content, tethered, in some capacity, to the source material, but unique in terms of composition, structure, and rhetorical purpose.

Despite having initially devised a list of roughly a dozen pervasive themes, ultimately we decided on seven. As Table 2 exhibits, each of these seven themes was then coded for subthemes that Author 2 and I agreed—first independently then collectively—were each prevalent throughout the novels we read in class. With our themes “discovered,” and the scope and breadth of the project fairly conceptualized, Author 2 then began the artful practice of using these themes as a foundation for the found poetry and corresponding analyses that she would eventually submit as her capstone project for the course.

Table 2: Dominant Themes in Young Adult Literature, with Sub-Themes

Relationships	Membership	Identity	Fear
Family	Team	Closeted vs. Open	Racism
Friends	Gang	Institutional	Homophobia
Community	Church/Faith	Familial	Xenophobia
Romantic	School	Social	Maturation
Institutional	Family	Cultural	Loss
	Social Circles	Gender	Mental Health
			Authority



Loss	Growth	School	
Innocence	Physical		
Youth	Mental	Physical Place	
Power	Spiritual	Function	
Love	Emotional	Transition	
Dignity	Social	Character	
Identity	Maturation		

What we’ve included below is a series of excerpts from Author 2’s final seminar portfolio, the creation of which marked the second step in her subsequent scholarly enlightenment. As she continually shifted from reader to writer (and back again), Author 2 claimed a unique ownership not only of the published writings now at her creative disposal, but also of the personalized poetry for which she would become the sole progenitor. It was in the process of generating her own material that Author 2 distinguished herself from simply being the *receiver* of other peoples’ messages, to the creator of her own. For her actual project, Author 2 composed a cogent and concise explication of each YA theme, which she coupled with her corresponding insights regarding the themes’ relevance to and prevalence in Young Adult Literature. It’s important to note that for her actual submission, Author 2 also assembled her work in a tangible collection that she personally crafted and bound and that served as a wonderfully aesthetic and original complement to her already critical insights. The material complements to her already keen and compelling revelations—that she actually *made a real book from scratch*—only further highlighted the extent to which Author 2 assumed an authorial presence throughout the process. Every writer borrows *something*, she realized; no one creates new letters, after all. The fact that she had “found” her words and phrases buried within the prose of other authors never dissuaded her from claiming her poetry and analyses as her own. For our purposes here, though, we’ve included only portions of the original text, maintaining the integrity of Author 2’s found poems, while omitting her respective analyses in light of our concluding discussion.

Excerpts from Author 2’s Project—Her Introduction:

Young Adult literature acts as a stepping stone for students in their education, their literacy, and I’d argue, some of their primary views of the world. As such, it is important for young adult books to portray (realistically or otherwise) tenets of growing up both into and as a young adult. Children don’t learn to read and appreciate reading by picking up Junie B. Jones and moving on to Moby Dick or Shakespeare. Rather, books like The Outsiders, Between Shades of Gray, Feed, and Conviction all teach their readers something about life or expand their views of someone different than themselves.

On the surface, these books reflect different themes of young adult literature and spark unique conversations among readers. Strip away the context clues to focus solely on the language at the sentence level, though, and each book can represent even more universal and valuable life lessons of adolescents/ce. Some of the tenets are easier to negotiate than others, but one could argue that every book, at least in one way or another, shows each of the themes within this project. Together, the books used in this course illustrate tenets such as the relationships of family and friends, closeted vs open identities, the fear of racism (as well as the fears that lead to racism), loss, and more.

As the project progressed, as images and words were compiled for the poems in this set, I found that they become increasingly negative. That says something about my own interpretation of the texts but also something about the books themselves. A good portion of the books we read deal with heavy subjects which render their characters forced to grow up and face those problems head on. Maturing into an adulthood, sometimes by one’s self, is often traumatizing and can lead to developmental problems, social issues, or insecurities later in life. No one, not even adults, can or should have to “go it alone.” Family and friends are important (and hopefully positive) for a student’s development, but even those close relationships can have negative consequences or function as negative influences in children’s lives.



RELATIONSHIPS

I have a friend.
We laughed like crazy.
I'd made a promise—and I was going
to keep it

Hey—are you okay?
I miss my friends

A lot

If we don't have each other,
we don't
have anything.

She smiled at me for
the first time.
It was a good day.

Thank you for your friendship.

MEMBERSHIP

It is my first morning of high school

I hate this place.

I just want to go home.
Who has hope?

You really are stupid,

everything was not always going well.

It's nothing.

It's no good getting pissy about it

It is important to study.
Goodness is rewarded

You can't just betray your tribe.

Have a nice life.

It is my first morning of high school

I'm fine.

I nodded, smiling.

It's a big deal.
I hated it when she got like this,

because then she wasn't like herself,

I just want to go home.
Who has hope?

I just want to go home.
Who has hope?

I just want to go home.
Who has hope?

IDENTITY

That kid looks like a fairy.
Those monsters
were going to kill me
and I don't know why. (he turned out to be gay...)



Sexual brokenness.

I pretended I belonged.

A ghost instead of a girl

I feel sick, kind of.

We are nobody.

This closet is abandoned.

I tried to keep my head down.

We are a hive.

A community
of everyday life.

We are the Hornets!

FEAR

My ribs are shrinking around my lungs.

Beaten and left for dead

Soon, it'll be your turn

Hurt so bad,

the house keys tucked between
their knuckles

A human life is worth

two cents

a bullet.

Well, that is how it is

No matter

the time,

the place.

He was unstoppable

We may go on like this forever.

Panic and terror swelled in my chest.

I guess making you live is part of the punishment

because racism was alive and real as shit.

LOSS

They took me

In my nightgown

empty and vulnerable.

I felt helpless and stupid.

I had never seen



Young girl attacked.

I didn't speak
A whimper? A peep?
Absolutely no way
to get
home.

everything was "fine"
Salvation in the darkness.
Safe in the arms of Hell.

I don't like anyone to touch me.
I closed my eyes.
I was about to
hyperventilate,
I can't see or feel
or hear anything
except for some screaming
far
away.

He turned and walked away.

MATURATION/GROWTH

I am blessed with
Maybe good behavior.
I couldn't quite find the right words for it
That's a habit I have.

you can be super smart
I wanted to say
something to
cheer her up.

He turned and walked away.
Anything
To keep the devil at bay
I was a warrior!

I wanted life. I wanted to survive.
He says that all that happens
when you go far, far away
is that you discover you've
brought
yourself
along.



SCHOOL

It was my first day of high school.
It scared me,
to tell the truth, we were supposed to
give up.
You can't let buffoons rule your life.

Nearly four hours passed.
You're just trying to make this difficult.

Nothing is real
around me except
the panic.
Nothing in life prepares
you for something like that
not the things you want to learn.
It's not good to be weak in here.
We aren't scheduled to learn about that until
eleventh grade.

Author 2's Conclusion:

Author 2 concluded her project with an insightful reflection that detailed the illuminating role that found poetry played not only for a creative writer like herself, but perhaps also for anyone who ever struggles with the complex and transactional process of making meaning from texts. In an excerpt of her formal reflection, Author 2 writes:

Found poetry can play a central role in a student's individualized understanding of a text and its underlying themes and significance. As a creative writing student who did not always understand what I read right away, Found Poetry offered me another way to examine, consider, and retain the material.

The poetic text itself promotes classroom discussion through a variety of topics—theme, character development, symbolism and so on. I think creating Found Poetry helps showcase one student's unique literary experience and represents how they see, conceive, and process their critical interpretation of a book.

In our classroom exercise that introduced Found Poetry, my poetry was different from the students sitting on either side of me. Not only does the production of the poem reveal what I found important about the text, but it reveals how we all process the material itself. What elements of the text do students pay more attention to and find most appropriate for the poetry? One student notices repeating phrases that create poetry with a strong refrain, while another may pick up on the textual imagery that manifests in a poem free from rhyme or meter.

Found Poetry is a powerful tool that strips a story down to its basic literary and mechanical tenets while eliminating the threat of "wrong answers" or "missing the point." There are traditional methods to analyzing theme and character development, but I don't think they accomplish what Found Poetry does. With Found Poetry, the student has the power to make the connections and create meaning.



Granted, Author 2 is just one student, and her seemingly enlightening tryst with found poetry and Young Adult Literature cannot and should not be construed as a universally transferable experience. While certainly several of my students every semester—a large percentage, in fact—not only appreciate working with found poetry during our in-class sessions, but also appropriate the exercise, in some fashion, for their final project, an equally large percentage chooses to go in different directions with their academic pursuits. And, sadly, no one but Author 2 wished to continue discussing found poetry's applications to education once the semester concluded.

Thus, I'm working with a sample size of one.

We also concede that found poetry has, for years, enjoyed a welcome place in the curriculum designs of countless language arts courses, whether their focus rests on creative writing or simply perhaps literature in the broader sense. In other words, we're not claiming to have discovered anything new here.

But as a proud graduate of the American public school system, I confess that I'm presently at a loss for any memory of using anything even remotely similar to found poetry in the literature classes I took as a student. And as a former high school teacher and current college English professor, I admit that when I reflect upon how generally well-received it's always been with my college students, and how easy and painless and rewarding and unpredictably yet consistently powerful it is to hear otherwise reluctant young adults showcase their scholarly engagement with complex material, I smack my head and wonder what took me so long to hear about this stuff and why more teachers don't use it. Especially since my experience working with Author 2 has confirmed (or rather, reaffirmed) for me that found poetry offers an invaluable pedagogical tool for virtually all aspects of language arts education.

As the singular focus of this case study, Author 2 found herself almost instantly drawn to found poetry's emphasis (and reliance) on discovery solely through student agency. For purposes of our project, the only criteria for selection was that the no words could be added or redacted from the original source; the selected phrases must be between 4-10 words long; and the found poems themselves needed to exceed 5 lines. Thus, Author 2 found herself in the unique position—as evidenced by her written reflections—of being in charge of her own educative pursuits. The fact that she chose to investigate themes and genre conventions of Young Adult literature was arbitrary. She could have chosen to examine anything she wanted. In the past, some students have looked at the role of race in YA, or unpacked the representations of queer youth, disabilities, classism, or parental relations. In each case, though, students have always seemed to find a welcome but odd solace in the process of creating something new from material that already existed.

As a teacher, this has always demonstrated for me the circular and reciprocal possibilities of student enlightenment; for Author 2 in particular, it began with the articulation of themes that derived from close readings and ethnographic examinations of text. It proceeded through her determination to use found poetry as a means of presenting those themes, and it continued through the organic and deeply personal process of selecting phrases to highlight her findings. Her enlightenment grew in the generation of her innovative, creative work, and perhaps culminated in her literal binding of that word into a book of her own design. Her final reflective essays and analyses perhaps then serve not as the end of the enlightenment process, but maybe merely as the springboard for future intellectual pursuits. After all, as Author 2 and I discussed several times throughout her project, how we define an experience is often a function of what comes later. Time changes meaning. Which is why Author 2 took such pride in the meanings she embedded in her work.

Indeed, study after study supports the conclusion that found poetry aids in the development of novice poets and helps future poetry teachers hone their crafts. As a vital component of arts-based inquiry, found poetry provides an aesthetic means to, as Eisner (1997) champions, "transcend the limits of language and evoke what cannot be understood" (5). And as with any research methodology worth its intellectual salt, all poetry functions as, what Cahnmann (2003) dubs, a "method of discovery" (29) that "requires a keen sense of knowing" (32; quoted in Wiggins 6).



In Author 2's case, through writing found poetry, she became a better reader. She'd never found comfort in the analytical and interpretive techniques she'd been taught; but something about the process of composing art from preexisting texts allowed her to engage with vast amounts of complex and contradictory material in nuanced and profound ways. As her project highlights—both in form and function—the themes and insights prevalent in YA are not unique to adolescents/ce. Thus, her project serves as a Call to Arms, of sorts, against anyone who insists on belittling the intrinsic value of the YA culture, the genre, or anyone who claims membership in either. The writing itself may not be as sophisticated and complex as its more "adult" counterparts, but the themes and meanings are as universal as the human experience itself. And the manners by which Author 2 derived these themes and meanings from this synthesized material should serve as an inspiration to any teacher who's ever endeavored to help develop their students' literacy skills but was never quite sure how. Maybe the answers can be found in poetry.

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