

CONSIDERING YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE AS A LITERARY GENRE

Tri Pramesti

Abstrak. Istilah “*young adult literature*” (sastra remaja) relatif masih baru di Indonesia. Istilah “young adult” dan “literature” bersifat dinamis, berubah sejalan dengan perubahan masyarakat dan budaya. Di Amerika Serikat, para kritikus sastra dan praktisi pendidikan telah tiba pada kesepakatan tentang definisinya dan beberapa peneliti telah mencoba mendeskripsikan *genre* ini. Makalah ini membahas karakteristik dari “young adult literature” dengan penekanan khusus pada keberadaannya saat ini bagi pembaca targetnya. Disimpulkan bahwa dengan memasukkan sastra remaja sebagai satu genre karya sastra, konsep tentang karya sastra tampaknya sedang berubah dan berevolusi.

Keywords: *literary genre, postmodern literature, young adult literature*

INTRODUCTION

Genre, meaning "kind" or "sort", from Latin: genus, is the term for any category of literature or other forms of art or culture, e.g. music, and in general, any type of discourse, whether written or spoken, audial or visual, based on some set of stylistic criteria. Genres in fiction include science fiction, romance, the Gothic, or crime fiction. The major classical genres, in descending order of their perceived literary value, were epic, tragedy, lyric, comedy, and satire. Genres are formed by conventions that change over time as new genres are invented and the uses of old ones are discontinued. Often, works fit into multiple genres by way of borrowing and recombining these conventions. The definition of literary genres has been almost entirely dependent on society and its institutions, as Alastair Fowler puts it, “The concept of a literary work is dependent upon there being human institutions (of which indeed critics have become an integral part), governing its production, and guaranteeing its relationship to human purposes” (1985:50).

Traditionally, literary genres tend to be regarded as fixed forms, but contemporary theory emphasizes that both their forms and functions are dynamic. Gunther Kress defines a genre as “a kind of text that derives its form

from the structure of a (frequently repeated) social occasion, with its characteristic participants and their purposes” (1983). Jacques Derrida proposed that “a text cannot belong to no genre, it cannot be without... a genre. Every text participates in one or several genres, there is no genre-less text” (Derrida 1981:61), while David Buckingham argues that “genre is not... simply "given" by the culture: rather, it is in a constant process of negotiation and change” (quoted in Daniel Chandler p.3). Nicholas Abercrombie suggests that “the boundaries between genres are shifting and becoming more permeable” (p. 45).

According to Chandler, genres need to be studied as historical phenomena (p. 4); a popular focus in young adult fictions, for instance, has been the evolution of conventions within a genre. Current genres go through phases or cycles of popularity (such as novels with vampire character). On-going genres and their conventions themselves change over time. (p.4) He stated further that redefining a genre should “focus more broadly on the relationship between the makers and the audiences of text (p. 5). He added that Economic factors may account for the perpetuation of a profitable genre. As genres and the relationships between them change over time; the conventions of each

* Dr. Tri Pramesti, M.S. adalah dosen Prodi Sastra Inggris, Fakultas Sastra, Universitas 17 Agustus 1945 Surabaya

genre shift, new genres and sub-genres emerge and others are 'discontinued' (though note that certain genres seem particularly long-lasting (p. 5).

What makes a literary work a genre? Tzvetan Todorov argued that 'a new genre is always the transformation of one or several old genres' (cited in Swales 1990:36). Each new work within a genre has the potential to influence changes within the genre or perhaps the emergence of new sub-genres (which may later blossom into fully-fledged genres). He (in Bawarshi and Reiff. 2010) once said that genre is resulted "from an observation of literary reality." That means genres are literary institutions that make certain literary activities possible and meaningful, both in terms of the subjects who participate within them and in terms of the writers and readers who produce and interpret them (2010:15). In this way, according to Fredric Jameson, "genres are essentially literary institutions, or social contracts between a writer and a specific public, whose function is to specify the proper use of a particular cultural artifact"(quoted in Bawarshi and Reiff : 2010:18).

Furthermore literary genre is a manifestation of the interplay between different human institutions as Briggs and Bauman stated that

"Genres have strong historical associations— proverbs and fairy tales have the ring of the traditional past, whereas electronic mail (E-mail) is associated with the ultramodern. Genres also bear social, ideological, and political-economic connections; genres may thus be associated with distinct groups as defined by gender, age, social class, occupation, and the like" (1992:147).

From the discussion above, it can be said that Young Adult (YA hereafter) literature qualifies as a literary genre because it reflects the changes in society as well as induces a

certain range of reactions among adolescent readers.

WHAT IS YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE?

The term of YA Literature is relatively new in Indonesia. In USA, literary critics and educational practitioners have arrived at an unanimous agreement on a definition. Some researchers have attempted to describe this genre. From the perspective of reading interest, Reid (1999) regards YA Literature as "books that adolescents would probably like and be able to relate to" (1999:3).

Other researchers have identified YA Literature from the perspective of writing craft. Regarding style, Herz and Gallo (1996) mention the quick-paced style in young adult texts, where "the first page or two demand readers' attention, enticing them to read on" (1996:xvi). With respect to characterization, Reid (1999) observes that "the teenage main character is usually perceptive, sensitive, intelligent, mature, and independent" and "the actions and decisions of the main characters are major factors in the outcome of the conflict" (quoted in Nilsen and Donelson, 2001:4). Bushman and Haas (2002) identify some "common characteristics" of YA Literature: "Conflicts are often consistent with the young adult's experience, themes are often of interest to young people, protagonists and most characters are young adults, and the language parallels that of young people" (2002:2). These statements provide insight into the distinguishing features of YA Literature, even though they are partial, not comprehensive. Nilsen and Donelson (2001) offer the term "YA Literature" as an umbrella term that includes various literary works written for young adults instead of such terms as "teenage books," "teen fiction," "juvenile fiction," or "adolescent literature." Furthermore they list the characteristics of YA Literature:

1. “Young adult authors write from the view point of young people”: YA books are written through the eyes of adolescents.
2. In YA stories, the protagonists get rid of their parents or an elder to accomplish their own goals.
3. YA plots develop speedily through a restricted number of events and characters.
4. “YA Literature includes a variety of genres and subjects”: YA books are abundant in a remarkable diversity of subjects, themes, and genres.
5. “The body of work includes stories about characters from many different ethnic and cultural groups”: YA Literature reflects social, economic, and ethnic multiplicity.
6. “Young adult books are basically optimistic, with characters making worthy accomplishments”: YA works inspire adolescent readers by showing them how to successfully mature from childhood to adulthood, even in the face of cruel realities.
7. “Successful young adult novels deal with emotions that are important to young adults”: YA fiction addresses issues of physical growth and mental maturity in adolescents’ developmental tasks. (2001:25-33)

This set of characteristics helps us to formulate a definition that leads to a complete conception of YA Literature.

In terms of its content, YA Literature is broad and diverse in scope, as Aronson (1995) observes:

Up for grabs for the modern YA novel are matters of ethnicity and race, issues of faith and religion, markers of gender and sexuality, problems of home and society, choices of politics and belief, concerns about money and the future. In short, the YA genre now engages the most profound, deepest, and richest issues that we face as a nation (1995:36).

Moreover, Purves, Rogers, and Soter (1995) claim that the theme and subject

matter of YA Literature match issues in adolescents’ personal, social, intellectual, and cognitive development, saying that “we can, through YA Literature, connect them with issues that are contemporary, such as gender bias or orientation” (1995:32).

CONTEMPORARY YOUNG ADULT FICTION

Young adult fiction becomes more and more popular after the publication of J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* and Stephanie Meyer’s *Twilight* saga. The year 2011 has seen an explosion of books catering to this ever-expanding bimodal audience, not only in novels for young adults but increasingly in titles for middle-grade readers, elementary school readers, even the preschool set,¹ whether they are written by best-selling authors who are now writing for a younger audience, or first-time novelists. Carpenter further stated that Young adult continues to be the topic of discussion due to Suzanne Collins’ hugely popular *Hunger Games* trilogy, which has triggered an avalanche of dystopian fiction set in barely recognizable, post-Apocalyptic American.

The history of contemporary YA fiction can be traced during the 1950s and 1960s, especially after the publication of S.E. Hinton’s *The Outsiders*. It focused on a group of teens not yet represented in works of fiction. Instead of having the nostalgic tone, which was typical in young adult books written by adults, it displayed a truer, darker side of adolescent life.

As the decades moved on, the stormy 1960s became the era “when the ‘under 30’ generation became a subject of popular concern, and that research on adolescence began to emerge. It would also be the decade

¹ Susan Carpenter Des 4, 2011 . *LA Times* “Young adult continues to be the literary world’s fastest-growing genre”

when literature for adolescents could be said to have come into its own" (Cart, 1996:43). For this reason, others adopt *The Outsiders*, published in 1967 by S. E. Hinton, who at the time was only a teenager, as the initiator of the YA literature genre. This catapulted discussions about adolescent experiences and the new idea of YA fiction authors; 1967 sparked the production in growth of this now thriving genre. In the 1970s, as Cart states to be known as the "fab five" were published. the fab five are: *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* by Maya Angelou; *The Friends* by Rosa Guy; *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath; *Bless the Beasts and Children* by Glendon Swarthout; and *Deathwatch* by Robb White" (*Ibid.*,77).

As publishers began to focus on the emerging adolescent market, booksellers and libraries began creating YA sections distinct from either children's literature or novels written for adults. The 1970s to the mid-1980s have been described as the golden age of young-adult fiction—when challenging novels began speaking directly to the interests of the identified adolescent market (Owen, 2003:11).

The 1980s contained a large amount of Young Adult publications with topics that adolescents faced such as rape, suicide, parental death, and murder." Also in the 1980s, "teenagers seemed to want to read about something closer to their daily lives—romance novels were revived" (Cart, 1996:99). In the 1990s, YA Literature pushed adolescent issues even further by including topics such as "drinking, sexuality, drug use, identity, beauty, and even teen pregnancy" (Lubar). Also in the 1990s, it seemed as though the era of YA Literature was going to lose steam but "due in part to an increase in the number of teenagers in the 1990s the field matured, blossomed, and came into its own with the better written, more serious, and more varied young adult books published during the last two decades" (Tomlinson and Lynch-Brown 2007:5). In 2000s the themes

appearing in young adult fictions vary. Fantasy's success on store bookshelves and at the box office has led to its domination in the young-adult genre, but realistic fiction is also thriving, such as in Going's *Fat kid Ruled the world*, and Laury Anderson's *Winter Girls*, that discuss the body image, the question of God's existence in Holt's *Keeper of the Night* and closed community in Judy Brown's *Hush*.

Some of the more emotionally resonant titles this decade lifted a rock on lesser-seen aspects of war, including *Words in the Dust* based on author Trent Reedy's real-life experience as an American soldier in Afghanistan, and *Between Shades of Gray*, from debut novelist Ruta Sepetys, about a Lithuanian teenager forced into a Siberian labor camp during World War II. Sarah Darer Littman's *Want to go Private?* about an Internet chat that escalates to a child abduction, and Chris Beam's *I Am J*, which tells the story of a transgender teenage girl who identifies as male, are some of the more compelling, and topical, issues addressed this year.²

Themes in YA fiction are varied. Themes of love, friendship, and adventure, to name a few popular ones, are approached by some writers with humor and playfulness and by others with anxiety and a serious writing tone. Some of the most common themes in YA novels are about coming of age, self-discovery, and first love. They often also touch on typical teen aspects of being quick to love or hate someone or to have emotions that run rampant. Insecurities relating to body image and popularity such as in *Winter Girls* by Laurie H. Anderson are written in as well as immature behavior and a tendency towards the over dramatization of events.³

²See Mulhall MB in her blog "Young Adult Fiction : the Genre is more than teen Character and Love Triangles" retrieved 17 August 2013

³ Susan Carpenter Des 4, 2011 . *LA Times* "Young adult continues to be the literary world's fastest-growing genre"

Another common theme is taken from the classic. Contemporary retellings prove their lasting relevance for readers. The novelist may heighten the psychological realism of the tale by fleshing out its briefly sketched characters such as in *Thousands Acres* or put the story into a contemporary setting like in *Prom and Prejudice*, or reinterpret the theme of the conventional story such as *Prada and Prejudice*, or tell the story from the perspective of a character not usually considered the protagonist as in *Dating Hamlet*. In addition, several young adult novels also take the story and characters from the famous young adult novel *Twilight* such as *Companion of the Night* by Vivian Vande Velde, and *Vampire Kisses* by Ellen Schreiber.

According to Latrobe and Drury, contemporary realistic fiction for young adult is “a category of imaginative literature that accurately portrays young protagonist’s life as it is lived now or in the recent past” (Latrobe & Drury, 2004:70), while Muller showed the result of his research in 1975 that “YA contemporary novels, seeking to identify whether then–contemporary novels that increasingly addressed more sophisticated subjects” (quoted in Latrobe, 2010:71). He stated further that the genre “was moving away from plot-driven stories, linear plots, an omniscient point of view, and generic style toward a unity of action and character and the use of interior monologue, multiple points of view, sophisticated imagery, flashback and time shift” (*Ibid.*, 71).

Latrobe and Drury summarize contemporary YA literature as follows:

- The story set in the present
- The story is told from the perspective of a YA protagonist
- The protagonist is a multidimensional, dynamic character
- The protagonist interacts realistically with the events of the plot

- The protagonist realistically experiences major development tasks
- Protagonists come to significant, universal human truth(s) as he or she progresses toward adulthood (2004:72).

It is commonly acknowledged that the issues involving moral dilemmas and other subject matters such as body image are the main consideration for YA writers, they also transform the YA readers from passive recipients to active respondents (Cart, 2000:89).

CONSIDERING YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE AS A LITERARY GENRE

YA Literature has become a genre which covers various types of text including: novels, graphic novels, blog, short stories, and poetry. Much of the literature published consists of young adult fiction which in itself contains several different types of text. The genre also contains other various types of non-fiction such as biographies, autobiographies, journal entries/diaries, and letters. Although many genres exist in YA Literature, the problem novel tends to be the most popular among young readers. Problem novel refers to young adult novels in the realistic-fiction category that “addresses personal and social issues across socioeconomic boundaries and within both traditional and non-traditional family structures” (Cole, 1998). Memoirs are also popular forms of YA Literature. Another common genre within young adult fiction is *Bildungsroman*, a coming of age story that shows the process of “growing up”. The genre itself has been challenged due to its seemingly mature content by critics of YA Literature, but “other converted critics have embraced Young Adult so dearly that they have scoured the canon for any classics they could adopt into the YA family” (Stephens, 2007).

J. D. Salinger's novel *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951), often considered one of the progenitors of modern YA Literature, is

sometimes considered a problem novel, because it is popular with adolescent readers for its themes of teenage confusion, angst, alienation, and rebellion. The term, problem novel, was first used this way in the late 1960s with reference to contemporary works like *The Outsiders*, a coming-of-age novel by S. E. Hinton, first published in 1967. Paul Zindel's *The Pigman* (1968) is also a problem novel written specifically for teenagers and a more recent example is Adam Rapp's *The Buffalo Tree* (1997). The adolescent problem novel is rather loosely defined. Rose Mary Honnold in *The Teen Reader's Advisor* defines them as dealing more with characters from lower-class families and their problems and as using "grittier", more realistic language, including dialects, profanity, and poor grammar, when it fits the character and setting.

Additionally, some of the works discussed may have originally been published for an adult audience but, because of their themes or age of the protagonist, may be widely read by young adults or selected for classroom use. Robert Cormier wrote *The Chocolate War* (1974) without a specifically young adult audience in mind, but his publisher suggested a marketing decision that placed this modern classic squarely in the YA category. Mandy Hubbard's *Prada and Prejudice*, Rudolfo Anaya's *Bless Me, Ultima* (1972) and Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street* (1984) are widely used in high school or middle school curricula.⁴

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this genre is growing from the unsophisticated toward the complex and significant, and its overall quality is attested to by literary critics and scholars. Christenbury (2000) believes that an excellent young adult novel has the same attributes as

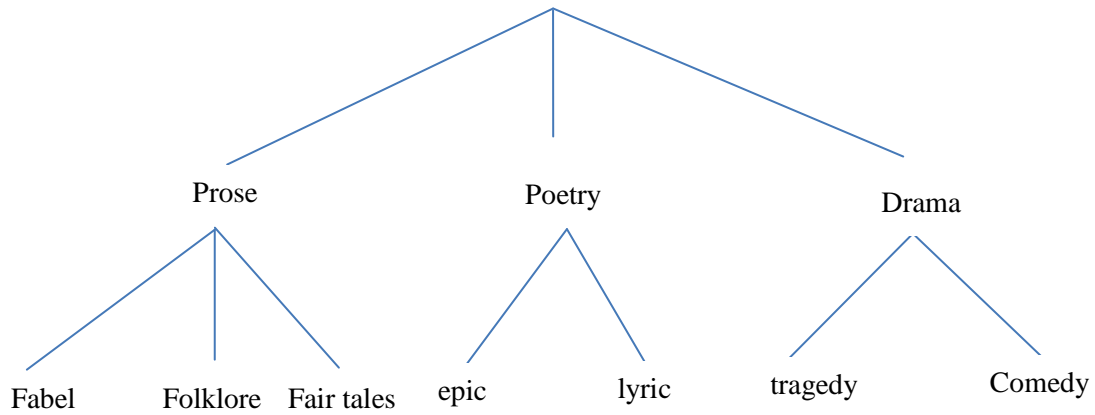
those found in an adult novel, despite the fact that young adult fiction is "stripped down in complexity regarding plot, number of characters, breadth of setting, and sheer length of prose" (2000:17). Likewise, Zitlow (2000) claims that quality YA Literature can "reinforce all the aspects of literary analysis, personal response, and introspection that are a part of even the most advanced reading and writing curriculum" (2000:21). In a particularly strong view, Crowe (2001) even places YA novels on the same scale with the classics, saying that "we have a handful of classics, followed by a good bunch of brilliant novels, followed by an impressive collection of readable and entertaining books" (2001:146). This makes YA Literature worthy of study because of its potentially outstanding literary quality.

Taking into account of the readers (their age), it can be said that by including YA Literature as a literary genre, the notion of literature is also changing and evolving as Cart points out that "Literature," which traditionally meant fiction, has also expanded to include new forms of literary – or narrative — nonfiction and new forms of poetry, including novels and book-length works of nonfiction in verse. The increasing importance of visual communication has begun to expand this definition to include the pictorial, as well, especially when offered in combination with text as in the case of picture books, comics, and graphic novels and nonfiction" Stephens added by saying "the term Young Adult serves as both an age demographic and a genre. Sure, it might be a tool used by marketers to put more books in the hands of readers, but that tool is grounded in the reality of the writing itself" (2007:41).

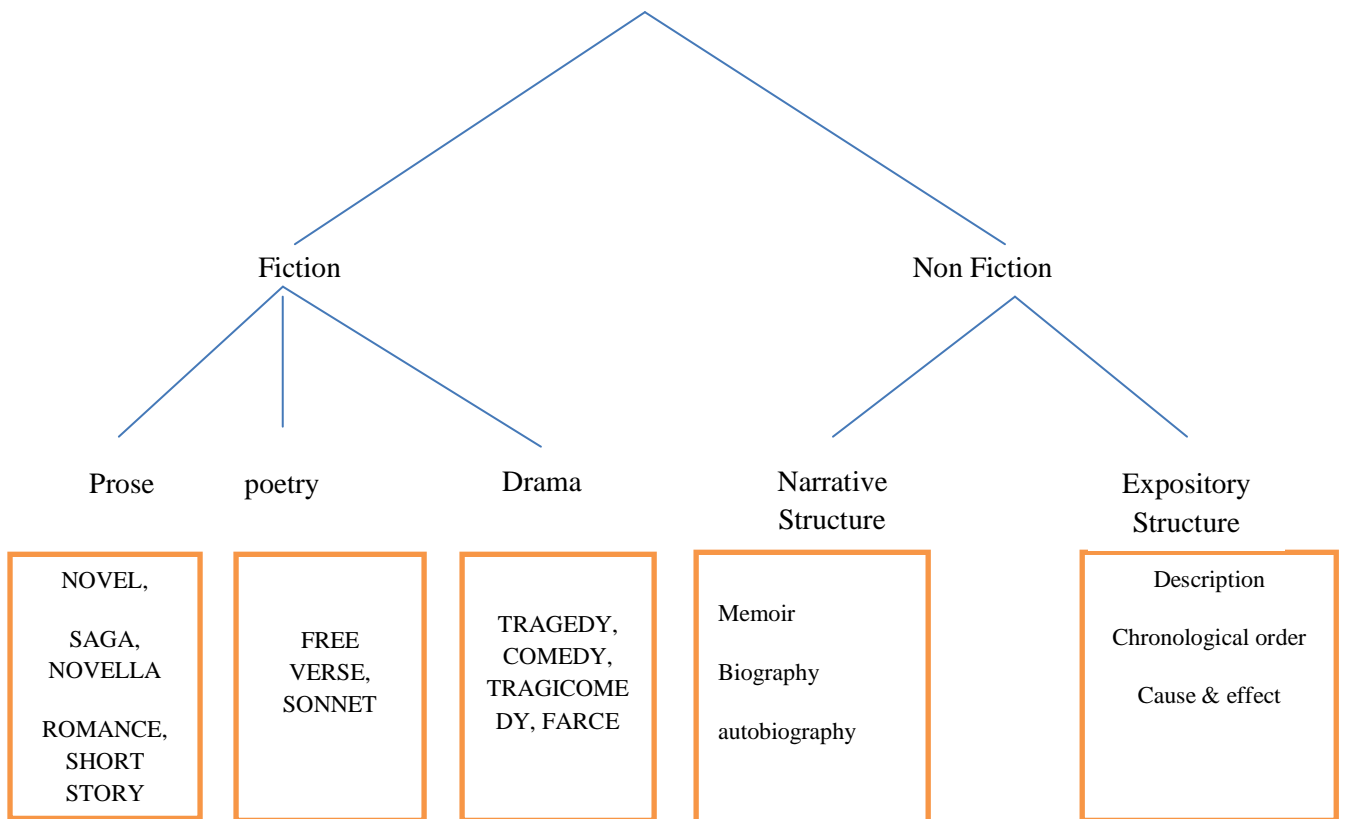
From the discussion a chart can be drawn as follow:

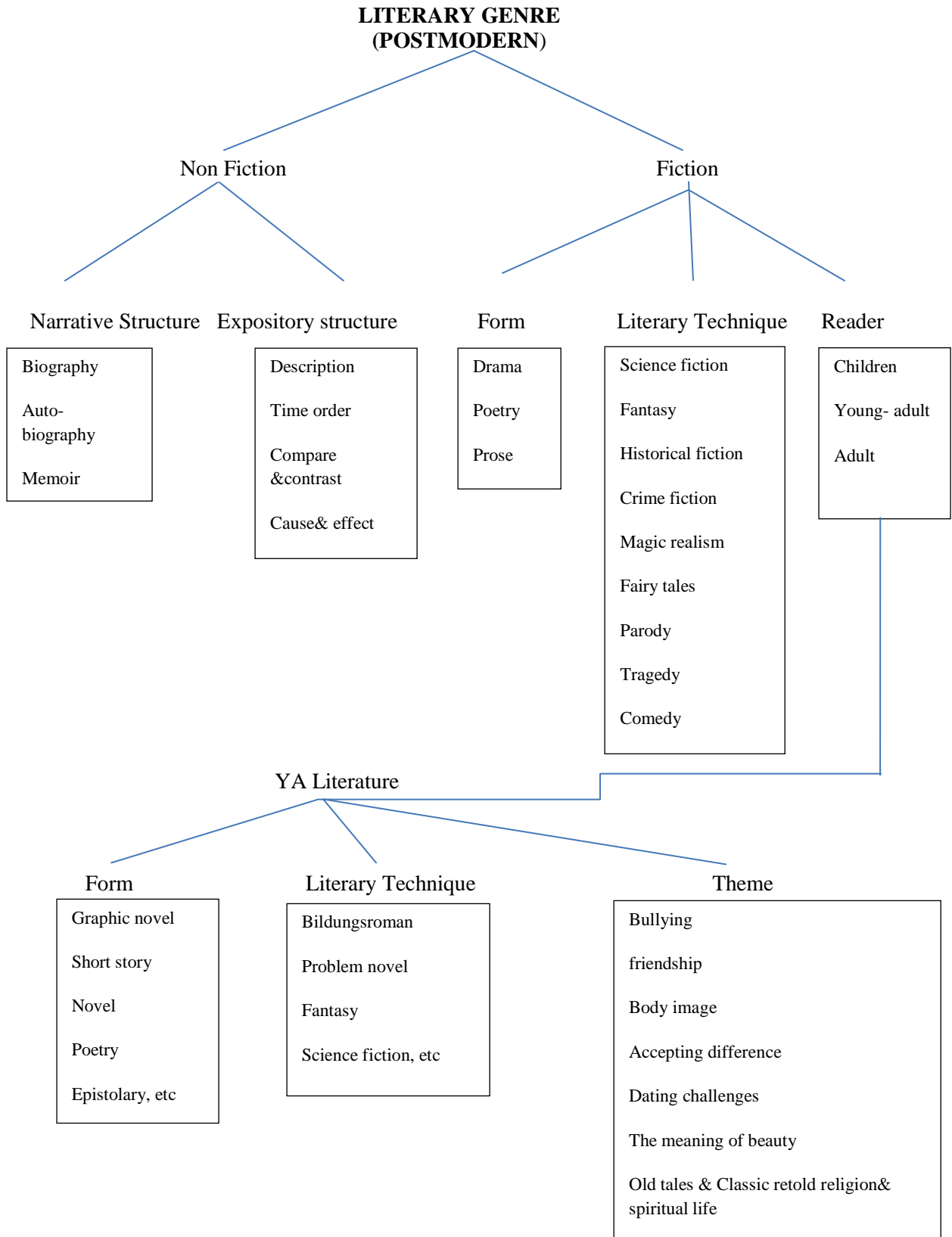
⁴ See MB Mulhall in her blog Keystrokes and Word Counts. Retrieved 17 August 2013

LITERARY GENRE (Traditional)



LITERARY GENRE (Modern)





REFERENCES

- Aronson, M. 1995. "The YA novel is dead," and other fairy stupid tales. *School Library Journal*, 41(1), 36-37.
- Bawarshi, Anis S. And Reiff, Mary Jo. 2010. *Genre : An introduction to history, theory, research, and pedagogy* Parlor Press LLC, West Lafayette, Indiana
- Briggs, Charles L. & Bautnan, Richard. 1992. Genre, Intertextuality and Social Power in *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 2(2):131-172. American Anthropological Association
- Brown, J. E., & Stephens, E. C. (1985). *Teaching YA Literature: Sharing the connection*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- Bushman, J. H., & Hass, K. P. (2001). *Using YA Literature in the English classroom*. New York: Merrill Prentice Hall.
- Cart, M. 1996. *From romance to realism: Fifty years of growth and change in YA Literature*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Cart, M. 2000. A modern master. *Booklist*, 97(8), 807
- Christenbury, Leila. 2000. *Making the Journey: Being and Becoming a Teacher of English Language Arts*. Heinemann.
- Derrida, Jacques (1981): 'The law of genre'. In W J T Mitchell (Ed.): *On Narrative*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press
- Fowler, Alastair . 1985. *Kinds of Literature: An Introduction to the Theory of Genres and Modes* . Oxford University Press
- Herz, S. K., & Gallo, D. R. 1996. *From Hinton to Hamlet: Building bridges between YA Literature and the classics*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.
- Kress, Gunther (1988): *Communication and Culture: An Introduction*. Kensington, NSW: New South Wales University Press
- Latrobe, K and Drury, J. 2004. *Critical Approaches to YA Literature* . New York : Neal-Schuman.
- Nilsen, A. P., & Donelson, K. L. 2001. *Literature for today's young adults* (8th ed.). New York: Longman
- Owen, Mary. 2003. *Orana* "Developing a Love of Reading: Why YA Literature is Important". EBSCO Publishing.
- Purves, A. C., Rogers, T., & Soter, A. O. (1995). *How porcupines make love III: Readers, texts, cultures in the response-based literature classroom*. New York: Longman.
- Reid, Suzanne, and Sharon Stringer. "Ethical Dilemmas in Teaching Problem Novel: the Psychological Impact of Troubling YA Literature and Adolescent Readers in the Classroom" in Nilsen and Donaldson. 2001. *Literature for Today's Young Adult* . New York: Longman
- Soter, A. O. 1999. *YA Literature and the new literary theory*. New York: Columbia University Teachers College Press.
- Stephens, Jonathan. Fall 2007. *ALAN REVIEW* , "Young Adult : A book by Other Name...: Defining a Genre"
- Swales, John M (1990): *Genre Analysis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Thomlinson, Carl M., Lynch-Brown, Carol. 2007. *Essentials of YA Literature*. Boston: Pearson Education, Inc.
- Tchudi, S., & Mitchell, D. 1989. *Explorations in the teaching of English* (3rd ed.). New York: HarperCollins.
- Todorov, T. 1981. *Introduction to Poetics* (R. Howard, Trans.). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Trupe, Alice. 2006. *Thematic Guide to YA Literature C USA*: Greenwood Press

Electronic resources:

- Chandler, Daniel. *An Introduction to Genre Theory*. Aber.ac.uk. (accessed 12 August 2013)
- Crowe, C. 2001. The problem with YA literature. *English Journal*, 90(3), 146-150.
- Glenn and friends in "Finding Space and Place for YA Literature" *ALAN journal* Volume 36, Number 2
- Kaplan, Jeffrey S. *New Perspectives in YA Literature The Research Connection THE ALAN REVIEW FALL 2003*

- Lubar, David. "The History of Young Adult Novel". *The Alan Review* Spring 2003. Web. 12 Dec 2012.
- Stephens, Jonathan. 2007 "Young Adult: A Book by Any Other Name....:Defining the Genre". *The Alan Review* Fall 2007. Web. 12 Dec 2012.
- Wilder, A., & Teasley, A. B. 2000. YA: FAQ (We're glad you asked). *The ALAN Review*, 28(1), 55-57
- Ziltow, C. S. 2000. Sounds and pictures in words: Images in literature for young adult. *The ALAN Review*, 27(2), 20-26.