DESIRE AND DISCOURSE IN INNOVATIVE YOUNG ADULT FICTION

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Jessica Darling, the protagonist in Megan McCafferty's *Sloppy Firsts*, scribbles

the song lyrics, "Please, please, please. . .let me, let me, let me. . .Let me get what I

want this time" on her book cover; they are from, Jessica states, "The Smiths' ode to

yearning" (19). Fiction focused on middle and high school students features, if not an

ode to desire, at least a lengthy and various litany of desire. Lee Fiora of Curtis

Sittenfeld's *Prep* expresses desire in the self-conscious, idealistic, and yearning tones of

a teenager: "I thought how that was what I wanted, that if I could just have that—just

Cross next to me, not flowers, not poems, not the approval of other students, not rich

parents or good grades or a prettier face—I would be happy" (65). The cool and

careless Archie Costello in Robert Cormier's *The Chocolate War* creates desire, to the

detriment of protagonist Jerry Renault: "We make selling chocolates popular. We

make it cool to sell things. . .before the sale is over, Renault will be wishing with all his

heart that he had sold the chocolates" (176-77). And at the center of Laurie Halse

Anderson's, *Catalyst*, lies the focused desire of determined and ambitious Kate Malone:

"Let me in. Let me in MIT. You all know I belong there, I need to be there, it's all I've

ever wanted, it's what I've worked for my entire life" (125). As this litany suggests,

adolescents do not harbor one single desire, though they will often share similar desires.

Adolescence is a time of intensity and possibility: the changing nature of a

myriad of relationships, the expectations one holds for school and life after school, and

the liminality of no longer being a child but not quite being an adult all occupy the minds and hearts of adolescents. Perhaps more than anything else, desire and yearning define adolescence. Author Curtis Sittenfeld revels in the possibilities of the adolescent world and, with these possibilities, in characters that are driven by their desires. For her, adolescence and, more specifically, high school represent a time and a place in which desires feel most palpable. In a 2005 interview with The Atlantic Online she says, in regards to the intensity and drama of high school, "But you can sort of feel that your happiness exists somewhere in the air. Maybe that's what it is: that in high school you can feel the potential of your happiness, whereas when you're an adult, your life is what it is" (qtd. in "A Conversation with Curtis Sittenfeld" 413). Indeed, in Sittenfeld's *Prep*, protagonist Lee Fiora embodies female adolescent desire. Her yearnings may seem desperate at times, but Sittenfeld's achingly honest and unflinching portrayal of such desire makes Lee an attractive character and, more importantly, one whom we empathize with. I would disagree with Sittenfeld when she says that "life is what it is" when one is an adult, for we all desire and are driven by such desire no matter what age. But adolescence does fuel particularly intense and often shifting forms of desire.

Desire, then, underpins much of young adult fiction. My work seeks to examine young adult fiction through the lens of desire. Using Jacques Lacan's theories of desire as my primary theoretical framework, I analyze how desire constructs and shapes the subjectivities of the young adult protagonists. By subjectivities I mean the ways in

2

which an individual perceives and reflects on her self and her positions in the world. Subjectivity is a nuanced term; it implies fluidity and process: the process of becoming and of occupying different subject positions, rather than indicating a more "essential"[1] and fixed identity. Robyn McCallum, in *Ideologies of Identity in Adolescent Fiction,* offers an excellent definition: "Subjectivity is an individual's sense of personal identity as a subject—in the sense of being subject to some measure of external coercion—and as an agent—that is, being capable of conscious and deliberate thought and action" (4). To possess subjectivity or multiple and various subjectivities, then, means to position oneself in relation to social institutions and discourses ("external coercion") and to engage with these institutions and discourses as an agent. The extent to which individuals possess agency depends on their ability to discern and resist ideological pressures, rather than be dominated by them.

The texts I focus on are also all set in school because of my belief that social institutions and social discourses create and shape an individual's subjectivity. School is one of these social institutions. It is an integral and significant facet of young adult

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[1] The "essential self" refers to the concept of the self as one that is free from the influences of society and social discourse. In other words, an individual possesses an "essence" that cannot be changed or influenced by external forces but rather, is unique to that individual. If we think of the character of Oliver Twist in Charles Dickens's *Oliver* Twist, for example, one can argue that Oliver is an "essential" being as he remains wholly good despite his immersion in the London crime scene at a young age. I contend that young adult fiction disrupts the idea of the "essential self" by focusing on characters that, while in possession of particular characteristics, are constructed and influenced by the social discourses that surround them and the relationships they are involved in.

lives, the place in which one learns to socialize and navigate various relationships, as much as grow academically, and in which desire is constructed and intensified by the discourses of school. An adolescent's relationship with the institution and culture of school thus plays a central role in constructing and shaping her desire and therefore, subjectivity.

THE GENRE OF ADOLESCENT LITERATURE

Adolescence did not become a distinct period of an individual's life until the late nineteenth century and did not capture widespread attention in America until 1905, when G. Stanley Hall published his book, *Adolescence*[2] (Trites, *Disturbing the Universe* 8). But the genre of adolescent literature emerged only around World War II, when America's change in economy led to the "increased economic resources and social autonomy" of teenagers and books were marketed specifically to this demographic. Three dates are cited as significant moments for young adult literature: 1942, when *Seventeenth Summer* by Maureen Daly was published; 1951, when *The Catcher in the Rye* by J.D. Salinger appeared; and 1967, the publication of S.E. Hinton's *The Outsiders*. Whichever of these dates critics prefer, adolescent fiction defined itself as a

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[2] G. Stanley Hall, a psychologist at Clark University, published *Adolescence: Its Psychology, and Its Relations to Physiology, Anthropology, Sociology, Sex, Crime, Religion, and Education* in 1905. His study examines the different stages of the "human life cycle," arguing that the period of adolescence is "so dramatically different from childhood that it might be considered a period of rebirth" (White 9). Hall also claims that adolescence is a time of conflict and possibility for growth.

4

genre "in English-speaking countries in the two decades following World War II and was understood to be a distinct literary genre by the end of the 1960s" (Trites, *Disturbing* 9). Since these seminal books have appeared, the latter part of the twentieth century and the early part of the twenty-first century has been replete with young adult literature. *The Chocolate War* (1974) by Robert Cormier is considered to be one of the best young adult novels of all time, while young adult series such as Francine Pascal's *Sweet Valley High* (first published in 1983), Meg Cabot's *The Princess Diaries* (first published in 2000), and Eoin Colfer's *Artemis Fowl* (first published in 2001) have been fundamental reading material for adolescents, especially adolescent girls. The enormous popularity of the *Harry Potter* series (first appearing in 1998) by J.K. Rowling, which straddles the line between children's literature and young adult literature, demonstrates that young adult literature can appeal to people of all ages.

Barbara A. White contends that young adult novels are "characterized by conflict. . .whether it be antagonism between the youth and society or inner ambivalence about the value of the adult order" (11, 12). In contrast to the *bildungsroman* or the initiation novel, the novel of adolescence concerns itself less with development and instead emphasizes "conflict rather than its resolution" (White 14). The novels featured in this work consider, especially, the relationship between a young adult and society. The development of the protagonists does occur in these novels, though it can be thwarted (for instance, in *The Chocolate War*) or left open and

ambiguous (in Laurie Halse Anderson's *Catalyst* or McCafferty's *Sloppy Firsts*). The underpinnings of conflict make the issue of subjectivity an important one to examine in young adult fiction. Rather than focusing on the "essential self" as much of children's literature does, young adult literature underscores subjectivity as constructed and influenced by various discourses and relationships with others.

DESIRE

     If conflict characterizes the young adult novel, desire can be considered a crucial site of conflict. What does it mean to desire as an adolescent as opposed to as an adult or even, as a young child? Desire is a slippery concept. It "resists definition" (Goodheart 2). When we think of desire we often have a litany of things we want, from anything as simple as wanting food to something more complex and elusive, such as wanting someone or wanting to *be* someone. Each instance, though varying in degrees, indicates an absence. Such an absence—and the efforts to fill it—partially define desire and determine, in many ways, an individual's subjectivity. For Lacan, desire and subjectivity are inseparable; it is not about the subject creating desire but rather, the other way around. He claims that signifiers produce an individual's subjectivity and by entering into, and existing within, the Symbolic—the world of language and culture—the individual desires to possess the signifiers that determine subjectivity. The inability to possess these signifiers leads to uncertainty, unfulfilled desire, and

6

alienation, which merely fuels desire, drives the subject, and shapes her subjectivity

(Fuery 16). The processes of subjectivity, then, are motivated through desire. During

adolescence, subjectivity is especially significant. Again, the uncertain and liminal

position adolescents occupy and the changing nature of relationships mean that one

constantly shapes, constructs, and reconstructs her subjectivity, often by and through

what she wants. Eugene Goodheart, in *Desire and Its Discontents*, claims that desire

"moves, floats, negates, shatters, [and] aspires" (2). In other words, desire is the driving

force, the impetus for our behavior, as well as the site within which we locate our

subjectivity.

And yet desire itself does not exist in a vacuum. For as much as desire bears on

subjectivity and fashions subjectivity, external forces fashion desire as well. It is not

necessarily located in, and confined to, the unconscious as psychoanalysts might argue.

Rather, language creates and shapes desire; it is socially constructed. In *Prep*, school

seems to be the epicenter of wanting something or someone. Lee Fiora underscores the

intensity of her high school experience by way of desire:

> My present world was always, in its mildness, a little disappointing. I've
> never since Ault been in a place where everyone wants the same things;
> minus a universal currency, it's not always clear to me what I myself
> want. And anyway, no one's watching to see whether or not you get
> what you're after—if at Ault I'd felt mostly unnoticed, I'd also, at certain
> moments, felt scrutinized. After Ault, I was unaccounted for. (Sittenfeld
> 400)

Lee's observations bring to the fore several pertinent implications: Everyone at Ault wants the same things, though Lee does not explain how this comes to be or even why they all do. She felt "scrutinized" at Ault, which plays into the development of desire. Her desires are not entirely her own, but determined by the prevailing "discourse of desire" (Goodheart 2). Outside of Ault and away from the inundation of others' desires, it is "not always clear" what Lee wants. The insularity of school means that the already existing social discourses and cultures of school often form desires. Through teachers' expectations, organized clubs and sports, and the type of cliques that exist and, especially, hold power, the discourse of desire is constructed. They help determine the "coolness" and acceptability of what to wear, what to eat, and whom to date. The powerful discourses of race, gender, sexuality, and class influence and uphold patterns of desire, patterns that adolescents can adhere to, resist, or blatantly transgress. In whichever case, a young adult's subjectivity, her perceptions of identity and positions in society, is being shaped and formed, in part, by desire. We can understand, then, desire as a social discourse, created by and tied to other dominant social discourses and institutions.

My first chapter focuses on my close reading of various young adult novels through the lens of Lacan's theory of desire. The texts are all contemporary novels: *Prep* by Curtis Sittenfeld (2005), *Catalyst* by Laurie Halse Anderson (2002), *Sloppy Firsts* by Megan McCafferty (2001), *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* by J.K.

8

Rowling (1998) and *The Chocolate War* by Robert Cormier (1974). I analyze the ways in which two main facets of Lacan's theory of desire, desire for the Other and desire as lack, construct and shape subjectivities. I maintain that the subjectivities of the characters in these novels are contingent upon their relationships with others as well as their unfulfilled desires. I also underscore the fact that young adult novels concern themselves with characters that do not so much possess an essential, fixed self as construct their identities and navigate their positions through various relationships.

Chapter Two examines the relationship between the culture and institution of school, and desire as a social discourse and constructor of subjectivity. School cliques, organizations, and that intangible yet powerful element known as popularity determine what types of desire are acceptable or not. Implicit in this issue of the discourse of desire are issues of power. If we understand language to be the primary factor in forming our subjectivity and our desires, we must determine who controls the prevailing and hegemonic discourse. Adolescents must contend with power and authority in their daily lives at school, from the blatant authority imposed by teachers and guidance counselors to the more insidious (and perhaps more perilous) criticisms and judgments of their peers. This chapter examines the patterns of desire constructed by those in power through language, analyzing in particular the ways in which characters relate to these constructed patterns of desire. I also closely analyze the power that *objects* of desire possess. The word "object" would itself imply a subordinate position, but when

it comes to desire, the object of desire often possesses power over the subject, the one who desires.

Chapter Three focuses on the relationship between narrative and desire. Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément claim in *The Newly Born Woman*[3] that women, as they exist within a patriarchal society, do not know where to place their desires or if they even possess desires (82). In other words, spaces do not exist for the expression and diffusion of feminine desires. In the novels I examine in this chapter—*Prep*, *Sloppy Firsts*, and *Catalyst*—narrative gives desire power and creates a space for young female desire to flourish. The narrative voices of the female protagonists foreground the fact of female desire, as well as the complexities of the desires young women possess. Through first-person narration and the acts of writing and reflecting, these young women unabashedly express and examine their various desires, a process which leads to a more profound understanding of their subjectivities. This chapter also examines the ways in which young adult novels—*The Chocolate War* and *Catalyst* in particular—disrupt readers' own desires and expectations. By subverting certain traditional and expected narrative structures and ideologies, the novels interrogate the relationship between reader and text and what it means to desire as a reader.

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[3] French feminist theorists Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément examine "woman's place," the space where society and language has situated women. They explore the relationship between sexuality and writing, and attempt to reveal the constructs that have repressed and elided women. *The Newly Born Woman* was published in France as *La jeune née* in 1975.

It is important to think critically about what young adults are reading since what they read will, in many ways, shape how they approach and perceive the world. Again, adolescence is a time when subjectivities are constantly being created and recreated, and multiple discourses—from desire to school—as well as the very act of reading will play significant roles in a young adult's understanding of herself and place in the world. Will her own experiences be reflected back to her in these texts? Will what she reads open up new ways of being and relating?

CHAPTER ONE: DESIRE AND SUBJECTIVITY

A young adult's perception of her personal identity will often be located in what

she desires and moreover, be determined by whether or not that desire is fulfilled. As I

stated in the Introduction, Jacques Lacan sees the inextricable connection between

desire and subjectivity, that desire creates and shapes identity and subject positions.

This chapter attempts to foreground the implications that desire has on young adult

subjectivity by focusing on two aspects of Lacan's theory of desire: desire for the Other

and desire as lack. I use these two lenses to close read several texts and to underscore

the ways in which these young adult novels complicate the idea of the essential and

fixed self.

SUBJECTIVITY AND DESIRE FOR THE Other

Lacan states that the "true aim of desire is the Other," that is, desire for

something or someone outside of one's self (Fuery 22).   Because what we desire often

determines our subjectivity, we can understand our subjectivity as being constructed

through an other. Such an idea emphasizes the significance of the self's relationship

with external forces (people, institutions, language) in the development of subject

positions. Robyn McCallum writes, "Lacan. . .see[s] subjectivity as dependent on the

recognition of the position of the other and of the distance between self and other" (70).

Jessica in *Sloppy Firsts* is a perfect example of perceiving oneself through the other. In

her case, the "other" is her best friend, Hope, since moved away. Jessica's letters to

Hope interweave throughout the novel, underscoring her yearning for her best friend as

well as revealing that she sees herself through Hope and in Hope. Early in the novel,

Jessica escapes from the "Clueless Crew" and into the bathroom. In an expression of

Lacan's concept of the mirror stage, Jessica perceives her reflection in the mirror and

experiences a sense of otherness and loss:

> I stood alone in the bathroom until the bell rang. I pressed my forehead
> against the cool mirror, fogging it up with bursts of hot breath. I drew a
> smiley face on the mirror with my finger, then wiped it away. Finally, I
> looked at my reflection and thought, *If Hope had been there, I wouldn't
> be here*. (12)

According to Lacan's theory of the mirror stage, a child arrives at an initial perception

of self through the mirror. The perception "is induced through a culturally mediated

image which remains irreducibly external" (the reflected image in the mirror) and

"which consequently implants in the child a sense of otherness at the very moment that

identity is glimpsed" (Silverman 7). The mirror stage, then, is one of "identification,"

of "the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image"

(Lacan 2). In this scene from *Sloppy Firsts*, identification is rooted in otherness and

subsequently, loss. Jessica looks at her reflection and immediately thinks of Hope, the

other in whom she identifies her sense of self. Just as the child during the mirror stage

identifies itself "through a process of subtraction" (Silverman 7) so too does Jessica.

Jessica perceives herself in the mirror, yet her perception hinges on Hope's absence,

13

which places her in a lonely and uncertain position. Jessica says, "If Hope had been there, I wouldn't be here." Her "if, then" statement underscores how much of her own position depends on Hope and her yearning for Hope's presence. Jessica's subjectivity is not only validated through her relationship with Hope and Hope's understanding of her, but Hope also affects much of Jessica's sense of personal identity, their friendship, and Jessica's desires. With Hope's moving, Jessica experiences, as McCallum says, "the unavoidable loss of self entailed in the loss of the other" (84).

Yet the loss Jessica experiences and the uncertainty she feels throughout much of the novel does not mean her relationship with Hope should be viewed as a detrimental one that has a negative impact on her subjectivity. In fact, the Jessica-Hope relationship represents intersubjectivity, that is, "the idea that subjectivity exists within interrelationships with others and with the world" (McCallum 25). Intersubjectivity points to an ability to engage with the world, to move beyond a solipsistic worldview and possess the ability to perceive and understand the other. Moreover, Hope, as her name suggests, embodies possibility: the possibility of recognition, of understanding, and of connection. She provides a safe and supportive means for Jessica to construct her subjectivity. Jessica feels lost without Hope's tangible presence, it is true; but through the very nature of their friendship—and more importantly, through their communication with each other—Jessica can better navigate the anxieties of her life. The two are connected through, and in many ways defined by, common understanding

of the other and through common language that, at one point, Jessica says sounds like "*blah-diddy-blah-blah*" to everyone except her and Hope (McCafferty 6).

In *Waking Sleeping Beauty*, Roberta Seelinger Trites argues that female protagonists strengthen their subjectivities through interdependence, through relationships that stress mutual dependency and equality. In a culture that emphasizes and even promotes the cruel and destructive nature of female relationships, McCafferty's emphasis on a strong and intimate female bond is welcome. Young readers, particularly female readers, can identify with this type of a relationship because they often possess such a relationship themselves. The best friend is often the cornerstone of an adolescent's life, her primary means of navigating her position in the world and developing nuanced and intuitive relationships.

Robert Cormier's *The Chocolate War* takes a decidedly more negative view towards interpersonal relationships. In *The Chocolate War* friendship and intimacy do not exist and "intersubjectivity is an impossibility" (McCallum 46). McCallum examines the ways in which Cormier's use of focalization (the focalization jumps from boy to boy) and limited narrative point of view underscore the isolated world the Trinity boys inhabit. She argues that the characters "are ultimately unable to engage in dialogue with each other" and instead exist "in isolation from each other" (46).

While McCallum analyzes subjectivity (and the failure of intersubjectivity) through Cormier's narrative strategies, we can also examine the ways in which desire

15

affects subjectivity and leads to solipsism and isolation. Desire for the other both

influences the characters' subjectivities and reinforces the sense of isolation that

pervades Cormier's novel. Unlike Jessica's desire for the other, which embeds itself in

love for, and trust in, her best friend, the desire for the other in *The Chocolate War* is

entrenched in envy and loathing, which leads to isolation and a failure of connection

and intimacy. Obie, Archie's "yes" man, desires to understand Archie and his power.

Archie simultaneously disgusts and frightens Obie, yet he continues to "look at Archie

in admiration" and recognize the way he can dazzle people with his brilliance (Cormier

10). The combination of fear and a strange desire to demystify Archie, as well as the

desire to remain on his good side and within the power structure of the Vigils, lead Obie

to participate in the cruel tactics of the Vigils. While McCafferty highlights

interdependency and intersubjectivity in *Sloppy Firsts*, Cormier instead highlights

dependency. The relationships that exist in *The Chocolate War* largely depend on

inequality and the ways in which characters are subject to others and to the institutional

power structure as a whole. The prevalence of inequality, fear, and envy, then, only

serve to reinforce the isolation each boy feels and the failure of constructing empowered

subject positions and exerting agency.

DESIRE AS LACK

16

For Lacan, the concept of lack primarily defines desire. Desire means to want

what one does not have; if such desire is fulfilled it ceases to be desire. Indeed, the verb

"to want" means to be "lacking or missing; to be deficient in quantity or degree"

(OED). If we understand subjectivity as being constructed through the Other and

through desire for the Other, a gap results between the self and the Other and

consequently, a split within the self. McCallum writes, "For Lacan, this distance

[between the self and other] is the site of an ontological split in the subject and of an

irremediable loss and alienation: the subject is defined by lack and imperfection" (71).

According to Lacan, desire is a site of pain and "a person's experience of subjectivity

[is grounded] in loss, lack and absence, and as always oriented by an unrealizable desire

for completion or presence" (McCallum 74). In other words, because desire cannot be

fulfilled or satisfied, incompleteness, fragmentation, and loss mark one's subjectivity.

Such is the case for Harry in J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's

Stone*. A significant plot point in the first book of the series is the "Mirror of Erised"

(of course, "desire" spelt backwards). Again, we can think of Lacan's concept of the

mirror stage here, as the sense of otherness and loss is made even more literal by

Harry's perceiving of his long-dead parents instead of his own specular image:

> He looked in the mirror again. A woman standing right behind his
> reflection was smiling at him and waving. He reached out a hand and
> felt the air behind him. If she was really there, he'd touch her, their
> reflections were so close together, but he felt only air—she and the
> others existed only in the mirror. . ."Mom?" he whispered. "Dad?". .
> .The Potters smiled and waved at Harry and he stared hungrily back at

17

them, his hands pressed flat against the glass as though he was hoping to
fall right through it and reach them. He had a powerful kind of ache
inside him, half joy, half terrible sadness. How long he stood there, he
didn't know. The reflections did not fade and he looked and looked until
a distant noise brought him back to his senses. He couldn't stay here, he
had to find his way back to bed. He tore his eyes away from his
mother's face, whispered, "I'll be back," and hurried from the room.
(208-09)

In this scene, Harry experiences that awful pain of "unrealizable desire." All his life

until this moment and certainly, for the rest of the *Harry Potter* series, Harry has

desired the real and tangible presence of his parents in his life. This desire will never be

realized, of course, because even in a magical world, they cannot come back from the

dead (and indeed, the consequences of thwarting death is a major theme in the books).

Yet such a desire—and its inability to be fulfilled—determines much of Harry's

subjectivity: he becomes angry and depressed because of his lack of a family; he often

resents and feels envious of those who do have a whole family; and he finds courage

and hope in moments of anxiety because he understands his own parents' courage and

sacrifice. In the confrontation with Voldemort, Voldemort's taunts of the Potters'

deaths only cause Harry to exert his bravery. This painful desire of wanting his parents

proves to be a site of loss in Harry. In this first book he feels incomplete and

fragmented without his parents to guide him through a foreign and literally enchanted

world. His desire to fulfill such a lack constructs and shapes his subjectivity. Harry's

determination to defeat Voldemort stems not simply from the fact that he is the "Boy

Who Lived," or even from his desire to "do the right thing," but from his own emotional

attachment. His attachment to his parents, his mother especially, resonates throughout all seven books of the series. As often as people tell Harry that he looks like his father, he is, in many ways, more Lily's son. Harry's understanding of his mother's love and sacrifice, and his desire for that love to exist in a tangible and substantial sense in his everyday life lead Harry to both demonstrate to and seek love from those around him. His knowledge of his parents' love, the loss he feels, and the desire to recreate such love ground Harry in the desire for interpersonal relationships. Rowling may have a tendency to fall into flat characterizations with some of the more peripheral characters, but Harry is not simply a "good" character. His loss, even as it leaves him feeling incomplete, determines, at least in part, Harry's subjectivity and the ways in which he cultivates relationships.

In Curtis Sittenfeld's *Prep*, the first-person narration and Lee's own highly sensitive and observant personality allow the reader to be privy to her most intense desires. Her desires consist of a reflective quality, owing to the fact that an older, twenty-something year old Lee narrates the story. This is not to say, though, that Lee's desires are less visceral. In fact, Lee desires so palpably at times that it can be discomfiting to read her narrative. Such raw displays of desire can be awkward for an outsider to see and fully understand despite the fact that we *all* desire. Concerning her relationship with Cross, Lee yearns to tell him she loves him, "knowing that other people would not consider what went on between [them] to be love" (Sittenfeld 309).

19

As readers, we are put into the position of wondering, perhaps even questioning, Lee's

perception of her relationship with Cross and the fact that, even as an adult, she still

compares other men to him. We might believe that Cross is simply an immature high

school boy whom Lee should move beyond. But to do that would mean to step outside

of the mind and heart of a teenager. Sittenfeld, even with the retrospective quality of

her narrative, very much wants her readers entrenched in the adolescent experience;

and, unsurprisingly, so much of the adolescent experience revolves around

awkwardness, insecurity, and inadequacy.

The insecurities that anchor many of Lee's desires lead her to constantly

compare herself to her classmates at Ault and fixate on what she is not, on what she

lacks. In one scene in particular, Lee meets with her English teacher, Ms. Moray. The

two have a difficult relationship, given Ms. Moray's frustration with what she perceives

to be Lee's passivity and Lee's resentment of Ms. Moray's lack of understanding of

teenage life. As Lee describes her response to her teacher, her cynical and frustrated

tone comes through and feelings of lack come to the fore:

> I felt the corners of my lips twitch. To smile at this moment would be
> the worst thing I could do; it would enrage her. But she was so *wrong*.
> She was wrong about everything, and her wrongness was, if absurd, also
> flattering. I was not disengaged, I was not disinterested, Aspeth certainly
> did not want to be my friend, and I was one of the least cool people I
> knew—all I ever did was watch other students and feel curious about
> them and feel dazzled by their breeziness and wracked by the impossible
> gaping space between us, my horrible lack of ease, my inability to be
> casual. (Sittenfeld 162)

20

Lee defines herself in negative terms—she is "one of the least cool people" she knows. She also identifies herself in terms of other people, desiring their "breeziness" but being unable to be "casual." Her desire for the other, which is her means of identifying herself, leads to "the impossible gaping space" between herself and the rest of the world. As Lacan maintains, imperfection and fragmentation grounds Lee's subjectivity.

As Lee's insecurity and feelings of incompleteness inform so much of her perception of self, she becomes used to the idea of lack despite her intense yearning. She says at one point, "Sometimes I found myself narrating such success, at least in my own head, in order to convince myself of its reality. And not just with major triumphs. . .but with tiny ones, with everything I'd been waiting for and anticipating. . .I did this because it struck me as so hard to believe I was really getting what I wanted; it was always easier to feel the lack of the thing than the thing itself" (Sittenfeld 98-9). Here, we begin to understand how lack is so intrinsic to desire. When desire is fulfilled, when lack no longer exists, desire ceases to be desire; and because, for Lacan and other theorists, desire can never be fulfilled or satisfied, subjectivity is rooted in, at least, insecurity and doubt and, at most, alienation and fragmentation. In this passage, the realized desire unnerves Lee because she expects lack; she can reconcile herself to it even as she continues to yearn. That we reconcile ourselves to lack and incompleteness means, then, that one's subjectivity is perpetually incomplete and, perhaps, even tragic.

In *Catalyst*, Laurie Halse Anderson's novel about a type-A high school senior determined to be accepted to MIT, Kate Malone is so driven by her desire for MIT that it is the only school she applies to. Fairly early in the novel MIT rejects Kate and the rest of the novel shows how Kate deals with her unfulfilled desire, as well as the "real life" tragedies that encroach on such desire. Of course, Kate perceives MIT's rejection as a very real tragedy as she has grounded her subjectivity in the school's acceptance of her. MIT has been her anchor: it has been "all I've ever wanted" and "what I've worked for my entire life" (Anderson 125). That her desire remains unfulfilled merely causes her to be more determined. She plans elaborate schemes that involve driving to campus and speaking directly with the Admissions office; she convinces herself that MIT made a mistake and accidentally accepted another Kate Malone—"the wrong Kate Malone"—instead (Anderson 86); she even calls the Admissions office pretending to be her dead mother, a MIT alumnus herself. In its inability to be fulfilled, Kate's desire for MIT continues to provide her with a strong sense of identity. She "would rather fall down a bottomless hole" than accept her situation because her MIT identity has been fixed in her mind as her *only* identity (Anderson 81). Her yearning for MIT has constructed this particular aspect of her subjectivity and in such a deliberate, conscious, and rigid way that her subjectivity is rooted in this one hope.

The accidental death of Mikey Litch changes Kate's life, forcing her to examine what she really wants and to reconstruct her subjectivity. Such an undertaking proves

to be difficult, however, considering how much of Kate's life has centered on an acceptance to MIT. At one point, Kate draws up a list of alternative life choices (for even after the horrible occurrence of Mikey's death, Kate still must organize her life according to lists): "I have a new slant to my Quantum Futures options. I could work in a coal mine. I could move to Australia, learn how to shear sheep. I could donate my body and brain to science. I could volunteer at a Third World orphanage. I could work on a cutter in the Arctic" (Anderson 213). The clipped and conciliatory tone of this passage, specifically the repetition of "I could" throughout the passage, underscores how deflated and apathetic Kate feels after Mikey's death. These emotions directly oppose the exhilaration she felt at the prospect of matriculating at MIT or the desperation she experienced after being rejected from her one and only school. MIT becomes a distant memory and the Kate that we knew at the beginning of the novel no longer exists because the desire, what constructed her subjectivity, no longer matters. At the end of the novel, Kate defers college to stay in town and help Teri rebuild her house. We do not know what Kate desires now and neither does she. Because the desire that propelled her through life no longer drives her, because that desire remains unfulfilled, and because it essentially ceases to matter, one could argue that the novel ends tragically, and Kate remains a fractured and fragmented character. She has, after all, lost a significant facet of her subjectivity. Such a reading of the ending leads us to

23

the following question: If desire cannot be fulfilled and realized, is an adolescent's

subjectivity never fully complete and instead always grounded in tragedy and loss?

By posing this question we underscore the "darker side of subjectivity" implicit

in Lacan's theory of desire as lack, as well as wonder at the implications of producing

young adult fiction for a largely young adult audience in which the protagonists can be

considered fragmented (McCallum 72). Indeed, Lacan's theory of the perpetually

fragmented and lacking subject seems to undermine the expectations we hold for the

genre of young adult fiction. Readers have expectations for young adult fiction that,

though different from children's fiction, the stories will offer some measure of hope and

triumph, especially for the protagonist. Anita Tarr even calls Robert Cormier

"irresponsible" because of Jerry Renault's apparent lack of moral agency, his defeat at

the end of *The Chocolate War*, and the novel's overall bleak and depressing worldview

(119). But the genre of young adult fiction complicates issues of subjectivity in ways

that much of children's literature does not by emphasizing the shifting subjectivities of

an adolescent and her relationships with others and with social institutions. McCallum

argues that children's literature "offers young readers a worldview which for many is

simply idealistic and unattainable" because of its reliance on the, in McCallum's terms,

"essential self" who is free from social influence and restraint (7). Adolescent fiction,

particularly these novels I am focusing on, does not offer worldviews and experiences

that are idealistic and ultimately, unattainable. Rather, they reflect, in many ways, the

24

vulnerable, thrilling, and difficult experiences of being a teenager. Young adult readers

would be able to relate to these stories because in adolescence, there are no easy

answers, and relationships, situations, and subsequently, one's subjectivity are

constantly shifting and changing. Moreover, it is true that MIT, Hope, Harry's dead

parents, and Lee's myriad insecurities are all sites of loss, uncertainty, and tragedy that

affect these characters' subjectivities and leave them feeling incomplete. But there is

also openness implicit in that incompleteness. These characters may not always get

what they want, but the gap that exists because of unrealizable desire allows for fluidity.

Again, subjectivity concerns *process*: the process of becoming, of allowing

relationships to shape one's identity while simultaneously gaining agency. In *Catalyst*,

by relinquishing the desire for MIT and instead staying to help Teri rebuild her house

and essentially, mourn, Kate moves beyond a solipsistic worldview—one focused and

driven by a single desire—to perceiving and understanding something and someone

outside of herself. Anderson has Kate describe the process: "We're standing eye to

eye. I never think of Teri as my height. In my mind, she's at least six foot five. But in

real life, we're the same size, except for her fifty pounds of muscle…'You promised

that you would teach me how to hammer,' I say" (230, 231). Kate finally recognizes

and accepts Teri as a friend, as someone who is not the other, but one Kate can perceive

herself through and learn from.

This chapter has attempted to underscore the significance of desire in the construction of a young adult's subjectivity. Desire places individuals in relation to others and influences the ways in which they approach the world. These adolescents perceive and construct themselves through their relations with, and their desires for, the world around them. This does not mean, however, that they lack agency and power. As we will see in the following chapters, the characters I focus on possess certain degrees of agency through again, their relationship with others, through transgression, narrative, and their very own desires. Power is implicit in desire, both in its ability to render a subject powerless and to give her agency. Though this chapter has focused on the ways in which desire influences subjectivity, one question remains unasked: "Where does desire come from?" Psychoanalysts would argue that it is located in the unconscious but if, as I argue in my Introduction, it is not necessarily located in or confined to the unconscious, where can we locate it? Chapter 2 will examine the ways in which desire is a social discourse, created and sustained by language.

CHAPTER TWO: SCHOOL AND THE DISCOURSE OF DESIRE

As a social institution, school has an enormous influence on the subjectivities of young adults. Outside of family, school becomes the place in which children first learn to socialize with the larger world. In adolescent literature, it often "serves as the metaphorical representation of the many institutions that will influence adolescents throughout their lives" (Trites, *Disturbing the Universe* 33). Adolescent literature often portrays school life as particularly intense because young adult protagonists experience their world in an especially intense manner. Their lives are full of insecurities and uncertainties as they attempt to construct their identities while being inundated by the expectations of parents, teachers, and perhaps most dangerously, their peers. Indeed, representations of school often begin with the protagonist contending with the "in" crowd, the seemingly perfect and beautiful teenagers who dominate the social scene and determine what is cool, acceptable, and ultimately, desirable. Language constructs and propagates patterns of desire within the culture of school so that many young adults shape their subjectivities around that which is popular in order to fit in, though in the process their sense of agency may be hindered and even lost. Other young adults transgress, even if transgressing the socially prescribed boundaries of "coolness" could lead to alienation and to the status of "outsider." In any case, adolescents must negotiate their subjectivities and their positions within society through their interactions with various discourses of desire.

27

Though *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone,* as a more traditional children's

novel, may not seem to fit in with the other texts examined in this work, one of the

prevailing themes is Harry's school life. Hogwarts and its culture play a significant role

in Harry's construction of his subjectivity, particularly because it opens up an entirely

new world of possibilities to him at the same time that his subjectivity has already been

constructed for him. Harry is "The Boy Who Lived" before he even knows or

understands what that means. Language precedes him; in Lacanian terms, he enters into

the Symbolic—the space of culture and language that constructs one's

subjectivity—and is inundated with, and influenced by, the various discourses that

surround him, discourses that are rooted in Hogwarts and the new world of witchcraft,

and which often elude Harry. The discourses of desire greet him immediately, however,

as Draco Malfoy confronts Harry for the first time on the train. He tells Harry, "You'll

soon find out some wizarding families are much better than others, Potter. You don't

want to go making friends with the wrong sort. I can help you there" (Rowling 108).

Malfoy speaks of the privilege that underlies the wizarding world, privilege based on

the discourses of class and blood.[4] Harry's response to Draco ("I think I can tell who

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[4] In the wizarding world, blood stands in for the discourses of race and ethnicity.
Wizards are often judged by their "blood status" (the amount of "wizarding blood" they
possess): to be a "pureblood" wizard means to come from a long line of wizards and to
be "half blood" means to have a Muggle (non-wizard) parent or ancestor. Some
wizards have Muggle parents yet possess magical abilities. The epithet for Muggle-
born wizards is "mudblood" (literally, "dirty blood"). The discourse of class is implicit
in the discourse of blood, as many pureblood wizards come from old money families.

the wrong sort are for myself") suggests that he resists one of the discourses of desire that surrounds him (109). But he still adheres to other, competing discourses that he hears from Ron and Hermione. He wishes to belong to Gryffindor House because of its reputation as a "noble" and "brave" house, as opposed to the more unseemly reputation Slytherin House holds. He makes the choice during the Sorting Hat ceremony to reject Slytherin, demonstrating his agency despite not knowing the language. Harry speaks his desire, at once rejecting the discourse rooted in prejudice and class and blood elitism, and adhering to the one that upholds acceptance of all kinds of peoples. Harry's rejection of one discourse for the other is, in part, the reason for his rivalry with Draco. Harry embraces the "wrong sort" that Draco obviously despises. The Harry-Draco rivalry is rooted in the diverging and competing discourses of desire that each boy adheres to. Draco has been inculcated with the desire to uphold the bigoted ways of the wizarding world while Harry, new to the discursive practices of the wizarding world and in possession of a more open and tolerant worldview, resists.

While Draco perpetuates and upholds the discourse of privilege that operates in *Harry Potter*, in Robert Cormier's *The Chocolate War*, easily one of the bleakest novels for young adults, Archie Costello actually "creates [the] improbable worlds that others can believe in" (Tarr 101). He manipulates the other members of the Vigils and consequently, the rest of the student body in order to defeat the ostensible protagonist, Jerry Renault. Archie plays on the malleable subjectivities of the Vigils and the boys at

Trinity, and uses the language of desire in order to provoke the students into questioning Jerry's motives for resistance and his status as a "rebel hero" (Cormier 175):

> Murmurs of assent came from the members, but Carter [president of the Vigils] appeared doubtful. "And how do we get everybody in the school to start selling the chocolates, Archie?" Archie allowed himself the indulgence of a quiet, confident laugh, but closed his fists to hide his moist palms. "Simple, Carter. Like all great schemes and plans, it has the beauty of simplicity. . .We make selling chocolates popular. We make it cool to sell things. We spread the word. We organize. We bring in the class officers, the homeroom officers, the student council, the kids with influence. Do or die for good old Trinity! Everybody sells!. . .Before the sale is over, Renault will be wishing with all his heart that he had sold the chocolates." (Cormier 176, 177)

Here, as elsewhere throughout the novel, Archie both creates and institutionalizes desire. He couches his scheme in language—the Vigils must "spread the word"—and he even has a motto at the ready: "Do or die for good old Trinity!" Archie also exploits the very power desire has in affecting one's actions. He assumes that Jerry will not be able to continue his rebellion amidst the popularity and coolness of the chocolate selling, implicitly trusting in Jerry's own desires for acceptance.

In his scheme to defeat Jerry—and his institutionalizing of desire—Archie calls on the power structure of Trinity. In order to "spread the word" of desire, Archie depends on the "kids with influence." Implicit in the discourse of desire, then, are issues of power. With any social discourse, those in power construct and shape the prevailing discourse, which then affects the subjectivities of those living within the

30

power structure. In *The Chocolate War*, Cormier underscores the ways in which language can be used and manipulated by those in power. The selling of chocolates—with desire at its heart—becomes a contentious site for authority, control, and agency. Jerry desires (though he is not entirely sure why) to "disturb the universe," which leads him to rebel against the menacing power structure of the Vigils. Archie, Brother Leon, and the rest of the Vigils, in turn, use the discourse of desire in an effort to regain authority. Though Jerry exerts a sense of agency through his rebellion, we still see the ways in which he is vulnerable and subject to "external coercion" (McCallum 4).

Language, desire, and power converge in the boxing match at the end of the novel. Indeed, Archie's threats are never physical; rather, they possess an insidious and more powerful influence because they are rooted in language and desire. Archie, always resistant to physically dirtying his hands in order to exert authority, once again uses the collective desires of the student body in order to defeat and humiliate Jerry. Through the raffle tickets that are scrawled with what each boy at Trinity wants, desire becomes inscribed and subsequently, enacted:

> Scrawled there, the words
>> *Janza*
>> *Right To Jaw*
>> *Jimmy Demers* (Cormier 230)

As Cormier writes, Jerry and Janza are "at the mercy of the school," of what the other students want, their desires made known through language (230). In *The Chocolate*

War, desire—created and sustained by those who are corrupt and powerful—operates as a means for controlling one's subjectivity and position in the social order, and it ultimately overcomes and conquers Jerry. In the end, Jerry, broken and defeated both physically and psychologically, believes that Goober must adhere to the desires of others in order to survive: "They tell you to do your thing but they don't mean it," Jerry thinks but cannot actually articulate. "They don't want you to do your thing, not unless it happens to be their thing, too" (Cormier 248). While the language of the powerful can affect, and destroy, others, language can also fail those who lack power. Jerry wants to warn Goober—to speak his desires in order to "save" Goober from defeat—but he cannot. Instead, "he kept his eyes shut, as if he could keep a lid on the pain that way" (Cormier 247). Pain forces language out of Jerry, rendering him inarticulate. Cormier depicts a bleak and ultimately tragic world in which an adolescent is, both literally and figuratively, at the mercy of the social discourse of desire.

Trites maintains that while *The Chocolate War* might not end hopefully, there is still redemption. Examining the novel's religious imagery Trites claims, "If Jerry has been crucified, it has been to expiate someone's sins. Goober, at least, has *seen* what has happened. Whether Goober will gain anything by that recognition is a matter open to debate, but at least one character in this novel has been given the opportunity to grow" (*Disturbing the Universe* 15). Though Goober sees and is devastated by Jerry's defeat, Jerry cannot actually *tell* him not "to disturb the universe." Trites is correct

32

when she says that Goober sees what has happened to Jerry, and Jerry, in turn, sees "the concern, the worry" on Goober's face (Cormier 248); but the text gives no indication that Goober will be able to act to end the corruption that has overpowered Jerry and consequently, vindicate Jerry. The narrative leaves Goober and Cormier refuses to focalize this last scene with Jerry through Goober. Cormier refuses, also, to end his novel on a triumphant note. Instead, the boys remain isolated in their own spheres and helpless to the powers that control them. Only Archie, the "true artist" of "improbable worlds" is triumphant (Tarr 101).

As I will examine more closely in Chapter Three, the whole of *The Chocolate War*, and especially its ending, are contentious. Anita Tarr calls Cormier "irresponsible" and seems quite betrayed by *The Chocolate War* and Cormier himself in her essay "The Absence of Moral Agency in Robert Cormier's *The Chocolate War*" (119). She maintains that the novel fails to offer any "guidance" to readers (112). There is no doubt that *The Chocolate War* is a bleak novel; but in its bleakness, the novel offers, if not guidance (and *The Chocolate War* does not seem to propose that "guidance" is what it sets out to do), an understanding and recognition of the cruelties of adolescence. Cormier does not, as McCallum says, present a worldview that is "simply idealistic and unattainable" (7). There is nothing idealistic about *The Chocolate War*, but its very desolation could prompt resistance.

33

The Chocolate War is also, quite obviously, a male dominated novel. Women exist in the narrative, but only as the objects of desire for the hormonally charged boys. Tubs Casper, a boy at Trinity, is in love with a beautiful girl, "not beautiful the way his mother thought a girl was beautiful but beautiful in a ripe wild way" (Cormier 90). For Jerry, "desire weaken[s] his stomach" when he stares at the "heart-wrenchingly, impossibly beautiful" girl in a magazine (Cormier 17). His "one devastating sorrow" is "the fear that he would die before holding a girl's breast in his hand" (Cormier 18). These boys, Jerry included, exist within a world in which heterosexual desire for women is the norm: they buy, circulate, and even resell issues of *Playboy* and other pornographic magazines. The discourse of gender connects with the discourse of desire so that in order to represent their masculinity, the boys must lust after the women in the "girlie" magazines. Tarr argues that "if Jerry really is the hero" then he "would challenge the prevailing misogyny of the novel; but he doesn't" (104). Jerry is a teenager who exists within a masculine discourse in which he participates and who even perpetuates certain ideologies. Again, *The Chocolate War* does not present an idealistic worldview or an idealized hero. Jerry does not even know why he wants to "disturb the universe"; he just does. The pervasiveness of the "male gaze" is problematic, to be sure. But Cormier underscores how powerful discourse and ideology can be, to the point where even the ostensible hero of the novel is embedded within and shaped by them.

34

The boxing match, too, reinforces the prescribed pattern of male desire. While Archie's scheme to make selling the chocolates popular is a constructed pattern of desire that can cross gender lines—he exploits the desire to be accepted—the boxing match at the end of *The Chocolate War* emphasizes a male constructed pattern of desire. In his plans for the fight, Archie underscores violence and pushes for an obvious show of masculinity. That each boy eagerly desires "to be involved in the fight. . .with no danger of getting hurt" by writing down what they each want, reinforces Archie's assumption of what the boys *should* want (Cormier 230). Carter, despite feeling disgusted with himself and with Archie, buys two tickets to the fight and has to admit to himself that he is looking forward to it. Archie creates a perverse attraction for the boys of Trinity, fueling their masculine desire for violence. Brother Leon reinforces such desire when he simply tells Brother Jacques, "Boys will be boys, Jacques. They have high spirits" (Cormier 250). The text itself does not seem to be saying that violence and an obvious display of masculinity are what boys should want. Indeed, the tone of the boxing match scene and Jerry's defeat is so miserable, Archie and Brother Leon portrayed as so callous and sinister, that the reader cannot help but *not* want to be part of such a violent, corrupt, and masculine world. Goober may not fully understand the extent of the corruption that permeates Trinity, but the reader, as Trites says, is given the opportunity to (15).

35

Trites claims that the ending of Cormier's novel is "made more menacing by the implied homophobia: the reader is meant to despise these two males [Archie and Brother Leon] who are so corrupt that they have reached the ostensible pinnacle of debauchery, homosexuality" (*Disturbing the Universe* 37-38). Certainly, the novel implies homoeroticism, especially between Archie and Brother Leon, with the chocolate sale and Jerry as the objects of exchange between the two characters (Trites, *Disturbing the Universe* 37). I am not sure that the text considers homosexuality to be the "ostensible pinnacle of debauchery," but the disturbing tone that exists in the scenes between Brother Leon and Archie and in the boxing match scene (Janza taunts Jerry with the epithet "fairy" [Cormier 238]), along with the emphasis on heterosexual desire, certainly underscores socially constructed and prescribed heterosexual male desires.

In Curtis Sittenfeld's *Prep*, Lee adheres to many of the socially prescribed patterns of desire. Both her insecurities and her continual awe of Ault lead her to desperately want many of the same things her peers want or even to *be* her peers. Lee seems fully aware of her own timidity and anxieties, to the extent that she knows they hold her back from fully engaging with many of her peers at Ault and with Ault itself; yet she still relies on circumstances beyond her control to somehow secure a desirable position for herself within the social world of Ault: "I remained perpetually hopeful that circumstances would conspire to make me beloved. . .Just as rooming with Aspeth would secure Dede's status as a bona fide popular person, rooming with Sin-Jun and

Clara would signify, if only to me, that I really was one of the mild, boring, peripheral girls" (Sittenfeld 83). Lee's emphasis on circumstances in determining one's popularity and, essentially, one's desirable status, points to the social nature of desire. Something as simple as a roommate can determine someone's popularity, while something as vague as "circumstances" can make her "beloved." The discourse of desire permeates the world of Ault; its prestige and insularity make it a place of "decorum and restraint" but at the same time, Lee loves it for its "sense of possibility," for being "the place with the greatest density of people to fall in love with" (Sittenfeld 42). There is no single constructor or manipulator of desire in *Prep* as there is in *The Chocolate War,* but the very institution of Ault certainly shapes the ways in which Lee desires and constructs her subjectivity. Ault, as a prestigious boarding school on the East Coast, possesses a language all its own that reinforces certain discourses—especially the discourses of race and class—that influence the desires and subjectivities of its students. Those who live within the culture of Ault are embedded within its language. Lee says at one point, "Though I personally did not always get what I wanted, I still was part of Ault's universe of privilege; I spoke its language now, I knew its secret handshake" (Sittenfeld 175). This passage underscores the connection between desire and language. Living within the social structure of Ault, Lee learns and takes up its language, though that very language has the ability to deny—as well as fuel—her desires. Implicit in Ault's institutional discourse is, once again, power. The language that marks and constructs

Ault is one of privilege and exclusivity that both intimidates and fascinates Lee. The incident with Angela Varizi and *The New York Times* article, and the subsequent fallout, emphasizes Ault's privilege. Varizi, a reporter for *The New York Times*, arrives at Ault to interview students for a feature on prep schools. In her naïveté, Lee divulges information that points to the elitism of Ault. Varizi, with her own agenda in mind, takes up Lee's experiences and portrays Ault as a world of elitism, privilege and class disparity. Mr. Byden, Ault's headmaster, tells Lee that he is looking for "students who can provide a view of the school that's balanced as well as truthful," though he implicitly asks for a truth that would be advantageous to Ault, while Angela Varizi's article depicts Ault as an elitist institution (Sittenfeld 354). Both adults, in possession of power that Lee does not yet understand how to resist, uphold Ault as an institution of privilege, though obviously the language they each use attempts to underscore either the positive or negative aspects of privilege. In either case, language is used and manipulated to promote certain desires.

Lee's desires are very much that of a young female. She concerns herself with her love for Cross Sugarman, while desiring to be girls like Gates Medkowski or Aspeth Montgomery; all are cool, confident, and beautiful, especially within the confines of Ault. Their presence within Ault seems to magnify, at least to Lee, their desirability. Cross especially, as a handsome, white athlete, possesses a certain social cachet at Ault. He is Lee's ultimate desire but the fact that they both exist within the world of Ault, a

38

world that induces meekness, insecurities, and a sense of hyper awareness in Lee,

makes it difficult for her to be completely comfortable around him. Only in certain

moments when Cross and Lee are alone and particularly, outside of Ault, can Lee feel

hopeful without feeling agonized as well: "We grinned at each other. He was so

handsome, I thought, and as soon as I thought it, the moment began to crack. Thinking

of him as Cross, as part of Ault, was where I ran into problems" (Sittenfeld 60). At the

local mall where they first encounter each other, Lee's perception of Cross is different

and she relates to him differently, more actively. Although still very much the

handsome and cool boy she likes, he seems more accessible outside of Ault. Within

Ault, though, Cross's popularity, the scrutiny and gossip of the student body, and Lee's

insecurities become entangled with each other to the point where Cross is rendered a

more elusive object of desire and Lee's yearning for him intensifies. Sittenfeld writes,

"We would get back to school, and then what? It was hard to imagine that I could go

from having no friends to being friends with Cross Sugarman" (61). So long as Cross

exists within the discourses of Ault that make him "*the* Cross Sugarman," he remains a

mystifying and complex object of desire for Lee (Sittenfeld 150). Even when they

become physically intimate, Lee fears seeing him naked and thinks at one point that

"there was almost nothing about Cross or Cross with me that I knew for sure"

(Sittenfeld 313).

Lee's overwhelming desire for Cross as her object of desire gives him power.

Though not manipulative in the way that Archie is (Cross does not have the capacity for

cruelty that Archie does, nor is he even entirely aware of the power he has over Lee), he

does influence much of Lee's subjectivity. Cross embodies much hope and possibility

for Lee, even as that hope tortures her, that she relinquishes much of her (potential)

agency to him, especially when their relationship turns sexual. The oral sex scene in the

classroom, in particular, represents both Lee's lack of agency when it comes to Cross

and a turning point in Lee's life when she also allows herself to be irritated and annoyed

by him. She hovers beside him, "waiting to be directed" and hating her "own giggling

passivity" (Sittenfeld 348). When Lee immediately kneels in front of Cross and places

his comfort and enjoyment above her own, it is a moment of ultimate submissiveness,

both physically and emotionally. The reader, who has come to know Lee so intimately,

feels disappointed, though perhaps not surprised. Yet Lee recognizes, or at least begins

to recognize, the weight of what has just occurred between her and Cross, the

unpleasant position that he has put her in and which she has allowed: "I stood and

stepped away, wanting to leave—in my dorm, he was always the one who made us part,

and I was the one who would have let him stay forever—and the unpleasantness of the

moment felt like something to hold on to; if I could keep it, I would never again be at

his mercy" (348). Tension arises between Lee's desire for Cross, and his subsequent

power over her, and her recognition of her diminished agency. Here, she begins to

refuse that power. Later, when the two confront each other in the gym she tells him, "No one in my life has ever made me feel worse about myself than you" (Sittenfeld 383). Though unsure of whether or not what she says is true, Lee allows herself to feel angry and to express that anger to him, rather than letting her meekness and concern for what he may think keep her silent. However, these two moments of agency do not mean that Lee can easily get over Cross. Indeed, he remains a specter in her life for the rest of her time at Ault and arguably, the rest of her life. She looks for him in his room after their confrontation, even imagining the perfect scenario in which Cross would be waiting for her and things would become sexual again (such a scenario does not happen, of course; Cross is not even there). With *The Chocolate War*, we recognize immediately the capacity one person has to manipulate desires and the ways in which that power damages an adolescent's subjectivity; the text implicitly asks us to interrogate such power. In *Prep*, however, Sittenfeld paints a more complex picture of desire. Even when one is distanced from her object of desire, s/he can still continue to hold power, if only in one's own mind. But *Prep* emphasizes this kind of power as not necessarily a bad thing or even a dangerous thing, only a very realistic occurrence in life. Sittenfeld does not condemn either Lee or Cross for their actions in the relationship, though we are made to see how Lee shapes herself in relation to her love for Cross. Instead, Sittenfeld underscores the ways in which an object of desire can be a wistful, bittersweet, and significant part of one's life as Lee tells the reader, "when I

dared to glance at him, he was looking at me in a way that was both predatory and tender (I do not think it's an exaggeration to say that my life since then has been spent in pursuit of that look, and that I have yet to find it a second time in just that balance; perhaps it doesn't, after high school, exist in that balance)" (381). Cross's power over Lee diminishes as the two part and life after high school becomes less intense and melodramatic; but, for better or for worse, he continues to bear on Lee's life because he contributed so significantly to her subjectivity as a young adult. His role in Lee's life, even as they grow older, is a matter of fact for her and something that she does not deny or repress.

Whereas Lee's insecurities, hyper awareness of Ault, and desperation to fit into the discourse of desire sometimes paralyze her, Jessica from Megan McCafferty's *Sloppy Firsts* actively rebels against the prevailing discourse of desire. Her focus on Hope and, as the novel progresses, Marcus Flutie, as well as her disdain for the Clueless Crew make issues of popularity and acceptance by the larger world of Pineville High School irrelevant. Much more critical and disparaging than Lee's attitude, Jessica's attitude towards the dominant social discourses is a mix of frustration and weariness:

> Prom fever has already hit PHS with a vengeance. . .As a sophomore, I shouldn't be forced to listen to this talk about the junior-senior prom. I certainly shouldn't be forced to feel bad about it. But enough girls in honors are going with upperclassmen that I feel like a loser because no junior or senior boy wants to get me drunk off Boone's Strawberry Hill so he can cop easy sex off me in the backseat of his parents' SUV.
> Jesus Christ. What's wrong with me? (McCafferty 79)

42

McCafferty imbues Jessica with wit and sarcasm so that her skepticism towards

something like the prom—often the highlight of high school in real life and in

fiction—is humorous rather than pathetic. Though she recognizes that she should want

to go to the prom, and the fact that she is not excited about it should make her "feel

bad," her incredulity throughout the passage demonstrates her resistance to such

inscribed desire. She asks, "Is this what promaganda does to people? Makes them

think it's perfectly normal to wear a corsage or *crinoline*?" (McCafferty 80). With the

satirical use of the word "promaganda," the social event of prom becomes rooted in

language. Language promotes the excitement of the prom and the desire to participate

in the social event.

In her relationship with Scotty, Jessica must once again contend with the

dominant discourse of desire. She *should* want Scotty because he is, like Cross,

handsome, popular, and an athlete. To be with him would not only satisfy the desires of

Jessica's mother and sister, but would also place her at the top of Pineville High's social

hierarchy:

> It made perfect sense. Scotty is normal. Scotty has fun. Scotty can
> sleep at night. I've been in public school too long to totally buy into
> Hy's theory of revolution, but maybe she's partly right. If I hang with
> him, some of his positive vibes might rub off on me. Maybe I can be
> normal—perhaps even *popular*—without losing myself in the process.
> (McCafferty 84)

Just as Lee believes the right roommate would secure a more "beloved" social position

within Ault, so too does Jessica think that her dating Scotty would make her popular.

However, while Lee longs for such popularity, Jessica resists it, believing that she would lose herself instead. Jessica demonstrates a greater sense of agency by refusing the discourse of desire that surround her—discourses that come from people who hold power: her mother, her older sister, and the opinions and judgments of her peers. Her attraction to Marcus Flutie solidifies her transgression of the dominant discourse, though it is true that Marcus possesses power over Jessica as her object of desire. She even acknowledges that she gives their "whatever relationship way too much power" (McCafferty 233). She drives herself to frustration and confusion as she tries to "demystify" Marcus only to find that she still cannot pin him down (187). But Marcus exists outside the popular discourse and through her relationship with him, Jessica is able to step outside of the popular discourse as well. Their late night conversations allow her to perceive a larger world beyond a "narrow, PHS-obsessed worldview" and she realizes that she has "opinions about things that [she] didn't even know [she] had opinions on" (220, 219).

In Jessica's resistance to the prom and to Scotty, she resists not only the pull of the dominant discourse, but also typically female desires. Again, the discourse of gender bears on the construction of desire. The excitement for the prom comes primarily from the female student body and it is Jessica's mother and older sister who do not understand Jessica's lack of enthrallment with the prom. Indeed, Jessica does not seem particularly excited by any of the social events typically prescribed to females.

44

Bethany devotes all her time to planning her wedding, in contrast to Jessica's indifference to both the wedding and the prom. Jessica also likens Scotty's declaration near the end of the novel to a scene from a movie; but instead of viewing it as romantic and thereby adhering to the gendered discourse, she merely sees it "as cinematically sweet" and "contrived." She recognizes that dating Scotty is something that "everyone else wanted" her to do, rather than what she really wants (McCafferty 124). Through Jessica, the text subtly subverts the prevailing feminine discourse of desire.

Finally, in Laurie Halse Anderson's *Catalyst*, Anderson subverts the prevailing feminine desire for romance by having the main character, Kate Malone, stay in town with her former antagonist, Teri Litch. The relationship between the two is not a romantic relationship, but it does prove to be the most important and intimate one in the novel. Indeed, Mitch essentially falls away by the end of the novel after Kate detaches herself from him. He seems, in the way that Scotty did, perfect for Kate; he makes sense. Their relationship is as much of a social construction as the prom is or the Jessica-Scotty relationship would be had it happened in *Sloppy Firsts*. Kate says that her relationship with Mitch "was a Clash of the Titans for years," their weapons "report cards, GPAs, SATs, and AP scores" (Anderson 30). Their love of academia and their type-A personalities serve to make them a kind of "golden couple" and emphasize the security of Kate's life. Her romantic and academic life adhere to, and are solidified by,

45

the discourses her school life promotes. They are the discourses that make the most

sense to Kate's life.

After Mikey's death, though, what once made sense in her life is overturned.

Though Kate's yearning for MIT is not completely determined by the social discourses

of her school—her expectations for MIT are self-imposed as much as her peers and

school impress them upon her—she still adheres to the desire that she has held for most

of her life. With Mikey's death Kate must create "new possible patterns of desire"

(Davies 159), and by focusing Kate's desire away from MIT and Mitch and towards

Teri, the text itself explores "new possible patterns." *Catalyst* opens up the possibilities

of moving away from those desires that simply "make the most sense" and which have

been impressed on us by the discourses around us, which we adhere to. Certainly, the

moment when Kate goes to the room in which Mikey died and finds Teri opens up for

Kate a new way of engaging with someone who has been regarded as the "other" and

who is outside the dominant discourses of femininity and popularity:

> [Teri] settles back with a grunt and leans against me. The ridge of her backbone is thick, like she has hunks of granite instead of vertebrae. When we are balanced back-to-back, covered by the blanket and encircled by toys, her gray hand appears again, slipping blindly toward mine. Our fingers weave together. Her hand is so hot, I can feel blisters forming. It's like holding on to a kerosene heater, hearing the sizzle and pop of burning flesh. Paint peels off my skin and drops to the floor, drops between the cracks. But I don't let go. (Anderson 167)

The language here is erotic. The intimacy of Kate and Teri's relationship, which

culminates in this moment, takes precedence over Kate's anxiety about school and her

relationship with Mitch. With this scene, and with the ending of the novel, Anderson subverts the typical, gender driven narrative of heterosexual romance.

Desire becomes a powerful and effective discourse for young adults, particularly if they are enmeshed in the world of school and inundated by the desires of others. Through their relationship with the discourse of desire, young adults negotiate their subjectivities. The power implicit in the discourse of desire can be used to manipulate and even overwhelm an adolescent, at the same time that she can gain or exert agency by resisting the prevailing discourse. Novels such as *Sloppy Firsts* and, especially, *Catalyst* also subvert the prevailing discourse of female desire by focusing away from what adolescent females are typically told to desire. Chapter Three will delve more into this issue of subversion by focusing on the relationship between narrative and desire, and the ways in which narrative gives power to desire and creates spaces for feminine desires to be known.

CHAPTER THREE: DESIRE AND NARRATIVE

Eugene Goodheart in *Desire and Its Discontents* claims, "desire is the source of

narrative" (6). Desire underpins the narrative itself: the author expresses her desires

through the act of writing and the creation of particular characters (characters that

presumably want things) and storylines, and the propagation of certain ideologies; and it

underpins the process of reading as well. As readers, we read because we have a

yearning to understand the characters, know the outcome, or simply escape into a

different world. Yet, narrative gives power to desire as well. Just as various discourses

create and sustain desire, narrative allows desire to be known and to flourish. Again,

language becomes important to desire, particularly female desire. In *Growing Up*

Female, Barbara A. White delineates how female adolescence was largely ignored

before 1920 and, unlike the male adolescent experience, was not represented in

literature. Indeed, in many novels of the nineteenth-and early-twentieth-centuries, the

female protagonist would first appear as a child then later as an adult, the adolescent

period elided. Novels such as *Little Women* or *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm* also

tended to be didactic or romance novels. The narrative would culminate in marriage or

a reinforcement of traditional feminine ideology, which, in effect, would render the

female a subordinate. White writes, "The novelists' main concern is the girl's 'moral

education,' her development of Good Good traits. This development turns out to be an

education in submission. . .[I]n novel after novel young heroines must learn to conquer

their pride and become humble, docile, and obedient" (26). Certainly if these novels

seek to teach young women to be docile and ultimately submissive, they also do not

dwell much on a young woman's desires. The only desires that are emphasized are

domestic desires.

But even novels written within the last twenty years still depict female

characters as more interested in romance and traditional feminine ideals than not. This

is especially the case for novels written for young adults. Young adult series such as

Sweet Valley High, the *Twilight Saga* series by Stephanie Meyer, or the *Clique* series by

Lisi Harrison portray their female characters as shallow or wanting romance and/or

domesticity, their desires circumscribed by prevailing ideologies of femininity. In her

essay "Gender and Desire in Teen Romance Novels" Linda K. Christian-Smith writes,

"The 'Cinderella' and 'Sleeping Beauty' metaphors endlessly repeat themselves as boys

give girls completeness at the moment of the first kiss. Girls are constructed as objects

of other's desires with few desires of their own" (46). This is certainly the case in the

male-dominated *The Chocolate War*: most of the different male focalizations position

women as objects to be lusted after. But with novels such as *Catalyst*, *Sloppy Firsts*,

and *Prep*, the authors foreground the desires of their female protagonists, and their

desires are not always traditionally "feminine." These novels celebrate the voices of

young adult women and their multifaceted and complex desires, thereby underscoring

the complexities of their shifting subjectivities.

Catalyst, *Prep*, and *Sloppy Firsts* all feature first-person narration by the female protagonist. In her discussion of nineteenth and early twentieth century novels featuring female protagonists White notes that a "lack of emphasis on the heroine's inner thoughts and feelings is characteristic" (42). The inner thoughts and feelings of the protagonist are important to Anderson, Sittenfeld, and McCafferty, however; indeed, they propel the narratives forward. The protagonists of these novels are not simply "mannequin[s] with sawdust insides" (White 42). Rather, the most interesting aspects of the narrative often take place within the psyche of the protagonist, her observations and her subsequent analysis, and the ways in which she positions herself in relation to the "outside" world. The first-person narration also provides a sense of intimacy between the reader and the narrator. We understand her motivations, her perceptions of herself and others, and most of all, her desires.

In *Prep* we have a double perspective of Lee as her narrative is a retrospective one: we see her as a teenager at Ault and as an adult telling her story. By looking back at her time at Ault, Lee's narrative proves to be highly analytical, reflective, and wistful. Yet the intensity that Lee surely felt at Ault as a teenager still lingers in her narrative, to the point where we understand even the twenty-something-year-old Lee as still wrapped up in her high school experiences. The intensity of Lee's narrative, as she both lives it and retells it, underscores her yearning. From the outside she might very well be one of

the "mild, boring, peripheral girls" she fears to be, but because we have access to her interiority, to her voice, her desires become real and palpable to us (Sittenfeld 83). Moreover, as much as Lee follows typically female patterns of desire—she dreams of romance with Cross and other boys at Ault—she also yearns for her life to be "sorrowful and complicated and unwholesome, at least a little unwholesome" (Sittenfeld 90). Her desires, made known through her narrative, tell of an unwillingness to be a submissive and obedient girl, though her insecurities may sometimes lead her to be that way in reality, especially in her relationship with Cross. Sometimes Lee even wishes she were not a girl, but something else entirely: "The interest I felt in certain guys then confused me, because it wasn't romantic, but I wasn't sure what else it might be. But now I know: I wanted to take up people's time making jokes, to tease the dean in front of the entire school, to call him by a nickname. What I wanted was to be a cocky high-school boy, so fucking sure of my place in the world" (Sittenfeld 74). As a teenager, Lee was not able to articulate her interest in boys that did not fall under the category of romantic. Only when she is older does she recognize her desire as one about wanting to *be* a "cocky high-school boy." The reflective quality of Lee's narrative demonstrates her growth from her young adult self to her adult self. Despite the intensity she still seems to feel when recounting her high school experiences, Lee's narrative indicates that there is enough distance that she is able to acknowledge what she did not understand as a young adult.

Lee's desire to be "so fucking sure of [her] place in the world," which she equates with being male, does privilege a male experience over a female one, at least in Lee's understanding. But that she expresses such a desire so vividly and unabashedly points to a restlessness with her own insecurities and position in the world, and a refusal to be completely content. Even in her tendency to be solipsistic, Lee's desires—and the voicing of her desires through her narrative—allow her to step outside of herself and perceive the others around her; she examines and dreams of different ways of being.

Sloppy Firsts takes narrative a step further as Jessica writes to Hope, and to an unknown reader, throughout the novel. Especially through her letters, Jessica can voice her desires in a safe and supportive space and to someone she trusts. The act of "writing and re-visioning" (Trites, *Waking Sleeping Beauty* 63) allows Jessica to exert and understand her agency. She inscribes her desires at the same time that by writing, she desires to *know*. In *The Newly Born Woman*, feminist theorists Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément claim, "Writing is woman's. . .it means that woman admits there is an other. . .Writing is the passageway, the entrance, the exit, the dwelling place of the other in me,. . .which is indeed what gives me the desire to know and from which all life soars" (85-86). As I discussed in Chapter One, Jessica constructs her subjectivity through an other. Her writing to Hope not only reinforces this, but it also demonstrates Jessica's desire to understand the confusion in her life. The letters perform several roles: as a connection between Jessica and Hope; as the reader's "way in" to Jessica's

52

psyche and the Jessica-Hope relationship; and as a space for Jessica to analyze, examine, and know her subjectivity. In her last letter to Hope Jessica writes, "I can't wait until you're here and I can hand-deliver this letter. Until then, I'm writing. Waiting" (McCafferty 279). The act of writing comforts Jessica and gives her the means to articulate her feelings.

With their use of first-person narration *Prep* and *Sloppy Firsts* create space for a young woman's desires to be known. In a society in which patriarchal ideology is the hegemonic ideology, female desires are often not acknowledged or considered; when they are, the dominant ideology circumscribes them to domestic spheres. Cixous and Clément write, "It is precisely because there is so little room for her desire in society that, because of not knowing what to do with it, she ends up not knowing where to put it or if she even has it" (82). By using narrative to foreground a young woman's desires—not only what she desires but also the *fact* that she desires—Sittenfeld and McCafferty construct spaces in which female desire, and thereby female subjectivity, can be known.

Anderson's *Catalyst* reconstructs new spaces for desire. For Anderson, these new spaces must come from the deconstruction (or even, destruction) of the old ways of desiring. Kate's desires have been largely constructed for her, both by herself and by exterior forces. The expectations of her school and her peers, Kate's history with MIT (her mother is an alumna), and her own ambition set up MIT as the perfect expectation

for her. As much as Kate wants MIT, at times, it seems less a desire and more an

assumption or a given. MIT makes sense for Kate's academically-driven personality.

Mitch seems to make sense for Kate as well. Harvard-bound and just as academically

driven, Mitch helps Kate fulfill the expectations and typical desires of high school. But

these expectations are completely overturned by the imposition of the "real world," of

the tragic occurrence of Mikey's death. By his death, Kate relinquishes her previous

desires—desires constructed and in place seemingly since birth—and must reconstruct

new ones. Just as Jerry does not know exactly why he wants to disturb the universe, so

too is Kate unsure of what prompts her to stay and help Teri rebuild her house. One

might argue that it is simply out of guilt that she stays. But Anderson underscores the

newfound intimacy that exists between Kate and Teri, as well as Kate's new perspective

on life. Kate *must* change; the world that exists outside her own insular school world

forces her to change and she must deconstruct who she is and whom she has always

perceived herself to be: "Our essence is in this room, the atomic products of breaking

down two girls to their elemental selves; frightened, defiant, lonely. I can hear the glass

breaking over and over again, piercing the frozen tissue around my heart" (Anderson

229). We no longer see the old, confident, and focused Kate; instead, she is

"frightened" and "lonely," but also, "defiant." Anderson stresses that, though

navigating new desires and new subjectivities can be difficult and sad, it does not have

to be hopeless. New ways of constructing the self and its desires can be a means of

opening oneself up to the world, an idea especially important when one is an adolescent. Kate moves out of her solipsistic worldview to one that enables her to know and understand another who has existed outside her middle-class, academic centered worldview.

By focusing on the unexpected—Mikey's death, Kate's deferment of college, her staying in town, and her relationship with Teri—Anderson subverts old patterns of what a female adolescent reader should desire. The heterosexual romantic discourse typically embedded within young adult fiction does not exist in *Catalyst*, nor does *Catalyst* ask its young adult, largely female, readers to position themselves within that discourse. Indeed, the romantic relationship in the novel is an empty one. Mitch, especially as the novel progresses, does not shape Kate's subjectivity nor validate her worth (Christian-Smith, "Constituting" 6). The romantic storylines in *Prep* and *Sloppy Firsts* are more significant to the narrative, and both Lee and Jessica certainly valorize their romantic relationships over other aspects of their lives much more than Kate does; but the endings of the two novels demonstrate that desires outside of romance and marriage do exist. In *Prep*, the novel ends with Lee in a subway station the day after graduation and awed by the bustling world around her:

> It's true that I was hung over for the first time, and still naïve enough not
> to understand what a hangover was. But these people, making their way
> through the morning, all their meetings and errands and obligations.
> And this was only here, in this station at this moment. The world was so
> big! The sharpness of that knowledge went away almost as soon as I'd
> boarded the T, but it has returned over the years, and even now

> sometimes—I am older, and my life is very different—I can feel again
> how amazed I was that morning. (Sittenfeld 403)

At the novel's end, Lee is surrounded by people whose "lives had nothing to do with Ault" (Sittenfeld 403). For as much as Ault itself has been a character in the novel and for as much as Lee's subjectivity has been determined and influenced by her relationship with Ault, the novel culminates with Lee's feeling exhilarated and excited—not by a romance with Cross or a final, triumphant acceptance by her peers at school—but by the world beyond the confines of Ault, high school, and adolescence. Sittenfeld underscores the possibilities and openness available for someone still navigating her place in the world and her different subject positions. McCafferty, meanwhile, privileges the relationship between Jessica and Hope over the romantic relationship between Jessica and Marcus. As Trites discusses in *Waking Sleeping Beauty* and I examine in Chapter One, healthy interrelationships strengthen agency and understanding of the self and others; they sustain all people (82). McCafferty embraces the positive aspects of stereotypically feminine traits—communication, sensitivity, and interdependency—and celebrates them through the Jessica-Hope relationship, while still maintaining the difficult realities of interrelationships (Trites 80). Even with the Marcus-Jessica relationship, Marcus proves to be a kind of "second Hope." At times he may be considered the quintessential bad boy, which certainly upholds certain gender stereotypes of masculinity. But Marcus' subversion is subtler and more ironic; it is rooted in intellect and curiosity about the world. Marcus connects with Jessica on

56

intellectual and emotional levels, and he refuses to make their relationship a sexual one because of their emotional connection. McCafferty dismantles traditional expectations of masculinity, as well as readers' expectations, even further by the revelation that Paul Parlipiano—Jessica's alpha male crush—is actually gay. Again, McCafferty upends the traditional romantic narrative: as much as *Sloppy Firsts* mirrors the John Hughes-Molly Ringwald teen movies of the 1980s, and celebrates them, McCafferty also demonstrates her understanding of the complexities of adolescent subjectivity and adolescent relationships. Adolescence does not end with the girl getting the boy she has dreamed about at the prom, her life complete; instead, it is a continual process of negotiating multiple subjectivities and understandings of the self and its relationship to others.

READERS' DESIRES AND THE YOUNG ADULT NOVEL

The authors of the young adult novels examined in this work often disrupt readers' expectation and desires, particularly by subverting traditional narrative structures. The endings of the narratives, especially, can be perceived as a means of subversion. The unexpected, even unsatisfactory, ending is not unusual for postmodern novels but it can be unusual for fiction written for a young audience. *Catalyst* and *Sloppy Firsts*, especially, have ambiguous endings: Kate stays in town but is uncertain about what will happen next; Hope finally arrives back in town to Jessica's relief and excitement, but we never see the culmination of Jessica's last letter. Cormier's *The*

Chocolate War has an unexpectedly bleak ending with its lack of triumph for the protagonist and even *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, which is a much more traditional children's novel, has a certain level of openness to its ending. Harry has triumphed over Voldemort and gained a network of friends and mentors, but one has the sense that Harry has a lot of growing up left to do and his story is not yet finished. These novels complicate readers' expectations and desires for the narrative: we want to finally see Hope and know her; we wish for Jerry to triumph in his rebellion and for Archie, Brother Leon, and the rest of the Vigils to be defeated and left powerless. These things do not happen, however. Moments of culmination and triumph are instead deferred. McCallum and Trites discuss the ways in which children's novels concentrate on the "essential self," which often means the triumph and growth of the protagonist despite circumstances. By the end of the novel, we, as readers, feel that the protagonist fulfills her journey and consequently, becomes "whole," and that we have come to the end of the journey with her. But with much of young adult literature, the novels discussed here in particular, the protagonist is never fully "whole," their desires never fully met, and their journeys not quite finished. At the end of their narratives, Lee, Jessica, Kate, and Harry are still in the process of figuring out who they are and the relationships they have with the people and the world around them; and unfortunately for Jerry, the forces that control the structures and discourses of his school ultimately overwhelm him. In each instance, the author demonstrates the complicated nature of

58

adolescence. We can see, also, Lacan's worldview weaving throughout these narratives: nothing, particularly one's subjectivity and desires, is finished and in some cases, simply being in the world and trying to navigate it proves to be extremely difficult and leaves one feeling fragmented and alienated.

Such a worldview can be perceived as quite depressing or at least, unfocused and ambiguous, especially if it is embedded in literature written for young adults. As I briefly discussed in Chapter Two, Anita Tarr takes issue with Robert Cormier's treatment of adolescence in her essay "The Absence of Moral Agency in Robert Cormier's *The Chocolate War*." Tarr looks for moral guidance in the novel and when denied, feels quite betrayed by the narrative. She claims that the first chapter, which depicts Jerry being beaten but getting back up, is the "proper" end for the novel rather than the actual end in which Jerry does not get back up at all (99). Tarr writes, "Cormier. . .creates and then deflates the expectation that Jerry will rise one last time in his lonely defiance. Jerry is not victorious. Only Cormier is. In *The Chocolate War*, Cormier collapses conventional narrative structure to make readers see it is a fragile construction that was held together by our minds" (99). Tarr is completely correct when she says that Cormier collapses conventional narrative structure, though I would extend her argument to say that conventional narrative structure is held together, specifically, by our desires and expectations that have themselves been created and shaped by language (and those very conventional narratives and narrative structures).

But her use of the word "proper" in regards to the ending suggests that *The Chocolate War* somehow has a "right" way of ending that Cormier refused to choose. Furthermore, Tarr argues that Cormier "employs none of the filmmaker's traditional forms of directing an audience's reactions—such as swelling of music or voice-over narration" (120). Tarr seems to be looking for the novel to tell her what to do or what to feel, to "direct" readers' reactions. This is, perhaps, a legitimate attitude to have in regards to young adult fiction. But it is also a passive attitude to have. As Trites discusses in *Disturbing the Universe* and which I touch on in Chapter Two, Cormier may not offer a triumphant—and expected—ending, but the ending he does offer allows the reader to recognize the pervasive corruption of Trinity. Moreover, Cormier jars readers out of their complacency, lulled there by conventional narrative structures, and into a more active mode of reading in which we can interrogate the text for ourselves rather than being told what to feel or think.

Tarr's criticism highlights the expectations—and standards—we hold for authors, particularly authors who write for a young audience. At the end of her essay she asks, "Why hasn't Cormier offered a kinder, gentler version of himself in his novels for young adults? Why is the world he maintained for his own biological children so much happier, so much more secure than the worlds he creates for his fictional children?" In asking these questions, Tarr underscores the desires we hold for narrative as well as the betrayal we can feel if these desires are not met. These desires stem from

narrative conventions and the dominant and normalized discourses of desire, both of which shape and influence our reading experiences. We desire and expect, especially from children's and young adult fiction, happy and neat endings in which the protagonist triumphs in some way. We desire security and reassurance that the protagonist has grown and reached her potential. *The Chocolate War*, *Prep*, *Sloppy Firsts*, *Catalyst*, and, to a much lesser degree, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, challenge readers' desires and expectations for narrative and in doing so, highlight adolescents who must (re)negotiate their subjectivities in relation to others around them and the discourses that surround them.

By subverting our reading expectations, these novels seek to shift our own reading patterns and to interrogate both our desires for the text and the dominant discourses of desire that often sustain race, class, sexual, and/or gender stereotypes and assumptions. Bronwyn Davies examines the "coercive power of texts to shape desire" in her essay "Beyond Dualism and Towards Multiple Subjectivities" (148). She argues that readers must develop the skills to read critically and question the discourses that surround us and shape our desires and our subjectivities. Davies speaks, of course, of the power of language. Language is not innocent or transparent but rather, contains "a rich mosaic of meaning and structure through which we speak ourselves and are spoken into existence" (148). Just as the discourse of desire shapes us, so too does the act of reading. Authors embed particular ideologies into their writing and readers, especially

61

young readers who may not have the critical skills to question language and ideology, can take up these ideologies without questioning them. By dislocating our expectations, the novels featured in this work prompt us to read actively and to think critically about our desires for the text and why we might possess these desires, and subsequently, to question the discourses of desire that construct and influence our own subject positions.

The genre of adolescent fiction is wide and varied. The novels examined in this work can hardly represent all of adolescent fiction, particularly as more and more novels feature protagonists of color, queer protagonists, and adolescent experiences that are rich, multiple, and diverse. In examining the novels of Cormier, Rowling, Sittenfeld, McCafferty, and Anderson through the lens of desire I sought to underscore the significance of desire in constructing and influencing a young adult's subjectivity and desire itself as social discourse, created and sustained by language. It is no secret that we, as humans, desire and it is certainly no secret that adolescents desire so palpably and intensely. But children's and adolescent fiction can sometimes skirt around the issue of desire and the ways in which it, and other discourses, greatly influence subjectivity. This work is premised on the concept that desire motivates and influences the self and that this concept underpins much of adolescent literature. *The Chocolate War*, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, *Prep*, *Sloppy Firsts*, and *Catalyst* all foreground desire and complicate young adult subjectivity. They interrogate the idea of the "essential, unique, and individualized self" and examine a young adult's relationship with the institutions that she is embedded in and the relationships she cultivates and holds with others (McCallum 255).

Though Lacan's theory of desire represents only one way of exploring desire and subjectivity, Lacan's work, entrenched in language's influence on subjectivity,

provides a significant framework for studying young adult fiction. His theories on

desire for the other and desire as lack reveal not only the ways in which a subject is

"made up," so to speak, of discourses and relationships rather than being an "essential

self," but also the ways in which a subject can be fragmented. Lacan's theory may

seem to offer a stark worldview, which some may find jarring and contradictory to the

ethos of literature written for a young audience. But much of adolescent fiction

concerns itself with conflict, with the difficult questions and the difficult experiences of

how adolescents grow and position themselves in the world. Their liminal positions

prompt tension between uncertainty and a yearning to be certain, between feeling

powerful and powerless. Young adult subjectivity can be so rooted in loss and

alienation that we must consider the difficulties and conflicts inherent in an adolescent's

quest for identity.

The multivalent concept of desire also allows a way into examining and

interrogating the ways in which female subjectivity and female desire are represented in

young adult fiction. *Prep*, *Sloppy Firsts*, and *Catalyst* do not shy away from depicting

female desire in its various forms. Through narrative, Sittenfeld, McCafferty, and

Anderson foreground female desire and create spaces in which it can flourish. The

desires they foreground do not simply uphold the traditional ideology of femininity,

however. Rather, Sittenfeld, McCafferty, and Anderson insist on the multifaceted ways

in which young women desire. Romance remains a large part of Sittenfeld and

McCafferty's narratives, but the romantic plots help Lee and Jessica explore their

subjectivities and their sexualities without simply being validated by the men. The

novels do not end with marriage or the prospect of marriage, nor are they didactic in

tone. Indeed, Sittenfeld, McCafferty, and Anderson do not want to circumscribe their

young female protagonists to a romantic relationship or to "teach them a lesson," but to

position them in a place in which they can be free to explore their shifting subjectivities

and desires.

As readers, we are also placed in a position of openness, of conjecturing what

may or may not happen with the protagonist after the narrative ends. The subversion of

conventional narrative structures disrupts our expectations and our desires for the text,

forcing us to question the discourses that influence us and reconstruct previously held

expectations. We become, then, more active and critical readers.

As I discussed in the Introduction, the concept of adolescence and adolescent

fiction are modern phenomena. Children and adolescent's literature has grown in the

last twenty years, both as a source of entertainment in popular culture and a legitimate

field of academic study. Roberta Seelinger Trites cites the "burgeoning acceptance of

all marginalized literatures within literary criticism as a whole" and "the push from the

whole language movement…to integrate children's and adolescent literary texts into

elementary and secondary classrooms" as reasons for their growth in the field of literary

studies (*Waking Sleeping Beauty* 137). Because there is a push to integrate young adult

literature into the classrooms, it is important to view it with a critical eye and to teach our students the skills that would enable them to view it with a critical eye as well. Even if young adults are not reading young adult literature in the classroom it is still crucial, if not even more imperative, to teach young adults the power that language possesses in propagating certain ideologies, shaping their subjectivities, and influencing their desires. Trites speaks of possessing a "feminist pedagogy" when teaching, a pedagogy aimed at breaking down gender stereotypes and promoting equality. She writes, "I encourage my students to think of feminism as existing in the positive as well as in the negative. For every stereotype I show them, I try to demonstrate a stereotype being broken. After every immersion in masculinist ideology, I offer them an immersion in feminist ideology. Whenever we talk about how socialization creates gender-linked weaknesses, we also talk about gender-linked and non-gender-specific strengths" (138). Trites's approach is worthwhile and should be implemented in, but not confined to, the classroom. Her approach also, implicitly, extends beyond gender ideologies to promoting all forms of equality and questioning the ideologies that propagate inequality. Too often fiction geared towards a young audience goes without being critically examined, which only serves to reinforce the discourses that uphold bigotry and prejudice. We must interrogate, and teach young readers the skills to interrogate, the discourses that promote destructive ideologies; we must desire a world of openness and inclusivity, a world that allows for the processes of becoming.

66

<p style="text-align:center">**BIBLIOGRAPHY**</p>

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