Children's Literature, Culture, and Cognition 2

Literary Conceptualizations of Growth

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John Benjamins Publishing Company

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Metaphors and cognition in adolescent literature

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Amsterdam / Philadelphia

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Trites, Roberta Seelinger, 1962-
Literary Conceptualizations of Growth : Metaphors and cognition in adolescent literature / Roberta Seelinger Trites.
p. cm. (Children's Literature, Culture, and Cognition, ISSN 2212-9006 ; v. 2)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
1. Discourse analysis, Literary. 2. Literature--Psychology. 3. Psychology and literature. 4. Metaphor. 5. Cognition. I. Title.
P302.5.T75 2014
809'.89283--dc23 2014011669
ISBN 978 90 272 0156 0 (Hb ; alk. paper)
ISBN 978 90 272 6996 6 (Eb)

John Benjamins Publishing Co. · P.O. Box 36224 · 1020 ME Amsterdam · The Netherlands
John Benjamins North America · P.O. Box 27519 · Philadelphia PA 19118-0519 · USA

Table of contents

Introduction

Why is growth such a prevalent concept in adolescent literature? This project, *Literary Conceptualizations of Growth: Metaphor and Cognition in Adolescent Literature*, grew out of questions about adolescent maturation left unanswered in my earlier work on adolescent literature. In *Disturbing the Universe: Power and Repression in Adolescent Literature*, I argue that adolescent literature isn't as much about growth as it is about teaching adolescents either to conform to societal pressures or die (Trites 2000). That is, although characters like Holden Caulfield initially appear to be iconoclasts and rebels who refuse to conform, by the end of most novels about adolescents — including *Catcher in the Rye* — the rebellious protagonist has either "matured" into some level of conformity or has died. (Two characters in S.E. Hinton's *The Outsiders*, Johnny and Dallas, provide examples of the latter case.) In other words, adolescent literature initially appears to empower teenagers, but empowerment proves to be something of an illusion in many novels because so frequently, teenaged characters demonstrate to teen readers that the only true form of empowerment comes from growing up and leaving adolescence behind. It's certainly logical that we must all mature, but the message to young readers is a consistent one: "there is something wrong with your subject position as a teenager. Grow up and become someone else." In that sense, adolescent literature is the only genre written with the subversive ideological intent of undermining the reader's subject position. (As a counter-example, think of women's literature — which certainly is not written for the purpose of teaching women how to outgrow being women!)

But in *Disturbing the Universe*, I did not ask the question *why*? That is, why do authors focus stories so frequently on adolescent characters who grow? And why do literary critics spend so much time analyzing that growth — frequently relying themselves on metaphors of growth in their own analyses? *Literary Conceptualizations of Growth* posits that perhaps our own cognitive structures are responsible for the pervasiveness of growth as both a metaphor and a narrative pattern in adolescent literature. The purpose of this book is therefore not to define adolescent literature or examine the Young Adult (YA) novel as a genre; that work has been undertaken by, among others, Nikolajeva (1996, 2000), McCallum (1999), Cadden (2000), Trites (2000, 2007), Coats (2004), and Waller (2009). Rather, the purpose of this book is to examine *how* growth is conceptualized in literature and in literary criticism. In order to understand the cause(s) and effect(s)

of these conceptualizations, I rely on one of the disciplines that analyzes conceptualization as a cognitive process: cognitive linguistics.

Cognitive linguistics

Cognitive linguistics emerged from the broad interdisciplinary movement in cognitive science begun in the 1950s that involved scholars who employed methodologies from psychology, linguistics, computer science, anthropology, and philosophy as a way of better understanding cognition. The earliest cognitive scientists were reacting against behaviorists, who tended to dominate some fields of psychology in the 1950s with their assumptions that all behaviors are learned, but too much about unconscious thought, instinctive behaviors, and the nature of consciousness itself were left unanswered by behaviorism. Cognitive scientists strove to explore *all* aspects of thought, not just those that were influenced by learned behaviors. Initially, these early cognitive scientists argued that brains were like computers, so they believed that if they could understand the brain's coding, they could understand cognition; eventually, however, they acknowledged this analogy to be flawed. Brains are living, mutable, and infinitely complex; they are not coded in binary systems like computers are. Therefore, "today's cognitive scientists tend to concentrate instead on the more organic metaphor the 'embodiment' of mind, that is, of the mind's substantive indebtedness to its bodily, social and cultural contexts" (Hart 2001:315). Moreover, cognitive scientists, and especially those in the subdiscipline of cognitive linguistics, examine how language usage affects our thinking. Cognitive linguists focus, among other things, "on the figurative phenomena of metaphor, metonymy, image schemata, 'fields,' 'frames,' and other 'integrative mental spaces' (as they are called), and the gradient structures and prototypical bases of semantic categories, all of which contribute to recasting human reason into a set of highly imaginative — not logical but figural — processes" (Hart 2001:315). In other words, cognitive linguists acknowledge that language usages — even such rhetorical devices as metaphor and metonymy — shape, define, and limit how conceptualizations occur.

Furthermore, cognitive linguists acknowledge that categorization is fundamental to the cognitive process of conceptualization. Our concepts — and the processes by which we conceptualize — depend on the ability to categorize objects or ideas. Gregory Murphy, a cognitive psychologist who explores the relationship between cognition and language, explains it this way: "Our concepts embody much of our knowledge of the world, telling us what things are and what properties they have"; for example, we know the difference between "chair" and "not-chair" when we enter a new room, or when we meet a "bulldog" we know it is a member

of the category "dog" but not "cat" (Murphy 2002: 1). Murphy calls concepts "the glue that holds our mental world together.... in that they tie our past experiences to our present interactions with the world, and because the concepts themselves are connected to our larger knowledge structures" (1). We cannot think without categorizing, nor can we think without concepts.

Cognitive linguists, such as George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1980), have thus traced how conceptualization is affected by various linguistic phenomena, but especially metaphors. They argue that we conceptualize the world in ways that are influenced by our embodiment, and they maintain that the language we use shapes how we conceive ideas and process them:

> [M]etaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action. Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature.
>
> The concepts that govern our thought are not just matters of the intellect. They also govern our everyday functioning, down to the most mundane details. Our concepts structure what we perceive, how we get around in the world, and how we relate to other people. Our conceptual system thus plays a central role in defining our everyday realities. (1980: 3)

Lakoff and Johnson therefore argue that such cognitive structures as metaphors and their influence on conceptualization can and should be studied in terms of both language and thought.

For example, the concept of *growth* is defined first by categorization, but also second, in metaphorical terms. That which is growing exists in the category of "that which is animate" not in the category "that which is inanimate" or "that which is dead." Human growth also involves the embodied nature of the brain; brains are housed within organic bodies that grow, mature, and die, just as all organic beings gestate, grow, decline, and die. Indeed, both the English words "maturation" and "growth" have their origins in agricultural metaphors of plant growth: the verb "to mature" entered English via the influence of Middle French (and therefore Latin) on Middle English: *maturare* in its Latin transitive sense means "to ripen, finish in good time," while "to grow," in its oldest usage in English, emerged from Middle Dutch's *groeyen* or *groyen*, with the denotation "to manifest vigorous life; to put forth foliage, flourish" (Mature, v. 2012; Grow, v. 2012). Human conceptualizations of growth and maturation in England during the Middle Ages were thus clearly influenced by plant growth and its importance in sustaining human life through agriculture. Thus, it would seem that more than a millennia ago, speakers of English conceived of growth in metaphorical terms: people grow like plants grow.

Today, metaphors of growth surround us. We employ so many metaphors of growth in our daily lives that we don't even notice many of them. We say that a project grew out of another project when we mean one project developed from

another; we say that Americans have a growing sense of anxiety about the economy when we mean they have an increasing sense of anxiety; we say that we're growing bored when we mean we're getting bored or becoming bored. We tell school children to "grow their minds" when we want them to think in new and difficult ways, and we tell irritating people to "grow up" when they are acting immature, even if they are already adults — which we also refer to metaphorically as being a "grown-up." These metaphorical conceptualizations of growth may well be inescapable because we are neurologically wired to think in terms of our own growth. That is, after all, what our brains do for many years of our lives: grow — and then, if we live long enough, eventually decline.

Cognitive linguistics has influenced the study of metaphor in literature in a field sometimes referred to by the name "cognitive poetics" that often focuses on poetry. Narrative theorists have also been influenced by cognitive linguists (and its related subdiscipline, cognitive poetics) to pay attention to the ways that narratives, such as novels, intersect with cognition and language. Psycho-emotional growth, for example, provides an easily recognizable narrative pattern in the *Bildungsroman*, the novel of transition from youth to adulthood. But there is more to understanding literature than simply understanding metaphors or the patterns of narrative structure. How, for example, do the cognitive processes of memory and repetition figure in the creation and reception of narrative? How does the brain actually come to recognize and understand stock characters, narrative formulae, and narrative conventions? How does language-use limit and enhance narrative understanding? And how does narrative affect our cognitive ability to recognize larger cultural narratives at work in our lives? Cognitive literary theorists, including Mark Turner (1991), David Herman (2002), Alan Richardson (2004), Lisa Zunshine (2006), and Monika Fludernik (2010) explore these very ideas.

Within the field of children's and adolescent literature, cognitive literary theory is also gaining increased attention. For example, Margaret Mackey (2010, 2011, 2012) has explored the influence of embodiment and memory on the cognitive perception of children's literature in a series of essays that has appeared in *Children's Literature in Education*. Karen Coats (2011) also traces the relationship between embodiment and cognition in an elegant exploration of metaphors of the body as container. John Stephens (2011) investigates the relationship between cognition and narrative patterns called *scripts* in his article "Schemas and Scripts," work that is further explored in a specific multicultural context by Sung-Ae Lee (2011). Marek Oziewicz (2007, 2011) has also relied on cognitive literary theory to explore conceptualizations of justice, particularly in terms of scripts. Maria Nikolajeva (2012) examines the cognitive creation of empathy in multimedia texts in "Reading Other People's Minds through Word and Image," while Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer demonstrates this process at work in the YA novel

in her article "Emotional Connection" (2012). Kümmerling-Meibauer (2011) also explores the role of cognition in the emergent literacy of young children. Lydia Kokkola (2013) examines how competing cognitive conceptualizations of innocence and sexuality influence knowledge production in adolescent literature. Not only do these critics demonstrate the usefulness of cognitive literary theory (including cognitive poetics and cognitive narratology) to children's and adolescent literature, but — taken as a whole — they also show how influential the idea of embodied cognition is to literature written for youth.

Narrative cannot happen without cognition, so it seems inevitable that cognitive narratology would emerge as the intersection between cognitive linguistics and narrative theory. "Cognitive narratology can be defined as the study of mind-relevant aspects of storytelling practices, wherever — and by whatever means — those practices occur" (Herman 2011: 2). Thus, although narrative theory focuses largely on texts alone, cognitive narratology focuses on the interrelationship between cognition and textual structures. Although my work focuses more on the reception of text than on its creation, cognitive narratology offers insight into both how narrative structures involving growth emerge and are perceived. I should, however, offer a caveat: while this text is informed by cognitive literary theory, it is not intended to be a primer in how cognitive literary theory, particularly cognitive narratology, is meant to work. Rather, *Literary Conceptualizations of Growth* is an exploration of how literary conceptualizations of growth are enacted in novels about characters living through a phase of life that is typically associated with growth: adolescence. I rely on cognitive literary theory in this exploration because these theorizations are fundamental to my explanation of how and why adolescent literature is so invested in concepts of growth.

Brain science

We know that cognition changes during adolescence; indeed, the brain may well change more during adolescence than any other stage after our births except for the first six months of life.[1] According to Blakemore and Choudhury, two areas of the

1. Adolescence is a discursive and socially-situated construct; that is, it is a language-driven concept that changes based on context, including era. Various definitions offered by experts in contemporary Euro-American contexts emphasize biophysical age and puberty: adolescence is "post-pubertal youth" (Adams & Berzonsky 2006: xxi); "Adolescence, in modern industrial societies, is the transition from childhood to adulthood. It lasts from age 11 or 12 until the late teens or early twenties" (Papalia, Olds & Feldman 2006); "Adolescence is thus a modern — and even postmodern — concept that acknowledges the unique space between childhood and full adulthood" (Christenbury, Bomer & Smagorinsky 2009: 4). Perhaps the most practical and least

brain develop with particular rapidity following puberty: the parietal lobe, which is involved with integrating sensory data, and the frontal lobe, which is the center of executive functioning (2006: 296–297). Increases in both the white matter and the thickening of the neurons' protective layer of myelin in the prefrontal cortex make it possible for adolescents to process information more quickly than they did as children; the neural pruning that immediately follows the onset of puberty allows adolescents to process information more efficiently (Steinberg 2005: 70). Thus, the changes triggered by puberty include — among other brain functions — increased executive functioning skills, increased social cognition, increased processing efficiency, increased risk-taking, and decreased negative mood regulation.

The frontal lobe experiences perhaps more changes than other lobes of the brain during adolescence. The frontal lobe pertains to an understanding of narrative because it is involved in both social cognition and executive function. *Executive function* includes "selective attention, decision-making, voluntary response inhibition and working memory" (Blakemore & Choudhury 2006: 301). Understanding a narrative depends on selective attention, some degree of decision-making, and a good measure of memory. Social cognition, which also occurs in the frontal cortex, includes such issues as self-awareness, perspective-taking, emotion- and facial recognition, and a "theory of mind, that is the ability to understand other minds by attributing mental states such as beliefs, desires, and intentions to other people" (Blakemore & Choudhury 2006: 302). Premack and Woodruff argue that "[a]n individual has a theory of mind if he imputes mental states to himself and others" (1978: 515). Frith, Happé, and Simmons build on this definition to argue that in order to "mentalize," or understand and represent other people's thoughts, "we need to be able to represent mental states, such as belief and desire, if we are to understand and predict other people's behaviour. The term 'theory of mind' (Premack & Woodruff 1978) is often used to refer to the (quite unconscious) ability to attribute mental states, and to use these invisible postulates to explain behaviour in everyday life" (Frith et al. 1994: 109–110). Following the work of Frith and her colleagues, Blakemore and Choudhury argue that "The ability to take another's perspective is crucial for successful social communication" (2006: 302). That ability is also crucial for humans to understand narrative — and during adolescence, frontal lobe activities increase our ability to understand perspective complexly: "[P]uberty represents a period of synaptic reorganisation and as a consequence the brain might be more sensitive to experiential input at this period of time in

contextually-situated definition is offered by Lerner and Steinberg, which describes adolescence as nothing more or less than "the second decade of life" (2004: x). I must note, however, that all literary characters are discursive and are therefore not necessarily subject to the biophysical conditions that psychological definitions of adolescence imply.

the realm of executive function and social cognition" (Blakemore & Choudhury 2006:307). Thus, what we know about cognitive development of the adolescent brain provides us with information both about how adolescents process what they read and why they can read at a more complex level following puberty than they can prior to puberty.

Laurence Steinberg argues that it is essential that we understand adolescence as a stage of life that is vulnerable "specifically because of gaps between emotion, cognition and behavior" (2005:69). As he observes, many changes in the brain are central to "the regulation of behavior and emotion and to the perception and evaluation of risk and reward," and there is a disconnect "between the adolescent's affective experience and his or her ability to regulate arousal and motivation" (69–70). He emphasizes the significant changes (and increases) in adolescents' ability to reason, process information, and master particular cognitive skills that create a sense of expertise (70). In effect, the increases in information processing, executive functioning skills and social cognition have particular bearing on adolescent literature because literary concepts of growth are often implicated in the increased complexity of teenaged characters' thinking and their social relationships.

Growth

Literary Conceptualizations of Growth is an exploration of the processes by which maturation is represented specifically in adolescent literature. The study is inflected by cognitive literary theory and by cognitive linguistics and its influence on experiential philosophy; the history of ideas also proves to be germane to the examination of how critics, scholars, and philosophers have historically constructed the concept of growth. This study, then, has two interrelated goals: to examine how concepts of growth manifest themselves in adolescent literature and to interrogate how growth serves as a cognitive concept that structures our ability to think about adolescence as literary critics.

Chapter 1 introduces rudimentary concepts in cognitive linguistics (such as the idea of the *embodied metaphor*) as basic tools for exploring in Chapter 2 more complex embodied narrative concepts involved in patterns of growth (such as *schema*, *script*, and *sequence*). Chapter 3 investigates the cognitive locus of *cultural narratives* that affects maturation. Chapter 4 provides a specific case study of the cognitively embedded nature of cultural narratives. I turn in Chapter 5 to an exploration of how authors use these concepts in sophisticated explorations of growth as epistemologically and ontologically experienced. Cognitive linguistics situates itself as a mediated site between philosophical explorations of ontology and epistemology; Lakoff and Johnson refer to their philosophy as "experientialism,"

arguing that all epistemology and ontology are dependent on embodied experiences (1980:226). The conceptualization of growth — especially as it is depicted in adolescent literature — is thus implicated in the embodied metaphors, scripts, and cultural narratives that demonstrate the experiential nature of both *being* and *knowing*. The book concludes in Chapter 6 with an archaeology of the concept of growth, as Foucault (1994) uses the term archaeology, tracing the concept of growth both in terms of the history of ideas and in terms of how critics of literature for the young themselves rely on emplotments that are informed by cognitive concepts of growth. In sum, *Literary Conceptualizations of Growth* argues that maturation, as it is conceptualized within adolescent literature, links cognition inviolably to embodiment with significant epistemological, ontological, disciplinary, and cultural implications.

In all cases, the youth novels and films I examine are English-language texts for one very practical reason: metaphors are used uniquely within each language. Some languages allow for metaphors to be translated with precision; others require a shift in metaphor that could well alter the original meaning and/or the cognitive effect of the reading process. Because so much of what I am doing here requires me to analyze closely the relationship between metaphor and conceptualization, I think it prudent to base my analyses in the language I know best. I have, however, tried to select novels that represent a broader range than just those written in the U.S., so I have also included narratives written by authors from Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the U.K. These novels are not discussed in chronological order; rather, they have been selected to represent various ideas at work in the cognitive narratology of growth. While I have chosen those novels — and in Chapter 4, films — that I think best support my effort to interrogate growth as a concept, all of the texts are necessarily limited by the context in which they were created.

Growth is a powerful and fundamental concept within adolescent literature and children's literature. Although I limit my study to adolescent literature because I seek to interrogate, among other things, how traditions of the *Bildungsroman* influence our field, much of the work here can also be extrapolated to children's literature. How we think about growth influences how we experience growth — and what we tell adolescents about their own growth, in turn, has significant ramifications for their own conceptualizations of maturation. As historian Robert Nisbet once noted, "No occupation or discipline can make do without its metaphors.... Even so, metaphors must be watched; they can be treacherous" (1970:351).[2]

2. Material on pages 28–31 is reprinted by permission of the Publishers from "Images of Growth: Embodied Metaphors in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*," forthcoming in *Representing Children in Chinese and U.S. Children's Literature*, edited by Claudia Nelson and Rebecca Morris (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014). Copyright © 2014

Acknowledgements

My first acknowledgements must go to the scholars whose intellectual interests have stimulated me to explore conceptualizations of growth: Susan L. Stewart and Melissa Sara Smith. Their dissertations and our subsequent conversations have shaped my interests for the better part of a decade now.

I am also grateful to Margaret Mackey, John Stephens, Karen Coats, Michelle H. Martin, and Bruce Hawkins, who all encouraged me, in different and significant ways, to explore cognitive linguistics and literary theory. Each of the members of ISU's 2012 seminar on cognitive narratology in children's literature also influenced this project, so I thank Ayla Goetsch, Melanie Goss, Karly Grice, Jordana Hall, Amy Hicks, Meghann Meeusen, Miranda Mills, Niall Nance-Carroll, Susana Rodriguez, Christine Stewart, and Elizabeth Williams. Emily Woster, Beth Pearce, Mpale Mwansasu-Silkiluwasha (my sister!), and Hari Adhikari also provided me with interesting and fruitful lines of thought. Laura Berk and Sam Catanzaro guided me toward various studies in the field of psychology, for which I am grateful.

I would like to thank those members of the Children's Literature Association who have created professional opportunities that have allowed me the space in which to expand this project. Jonathan Klassen of Soochow University in Taiwan, Claudia Nelson of Texas A & M University, and Rosemary Ross Johnston of University of Technology, Sydney, have been particularly supportive in this regard. I also thank Betsy Hearne, Mike Cadden, Claudia Mills, Jan Susina, Mary Moran, Lynne Vallone, Kenneth Kidd, Yoshida Junko, Jean Webb, Jackie Stallcup, Annette Wannamaker, Paula Connolly, Kate Capshaw, Mark West, Lissa Paul, Leona Fisher, Beth Marshall, Teya Rosenberg, Marilynn Olson, Lisa Rowe Fraustino, Annette Wannamaker, Jackie Stallcup, Jennie Miskec, Gwen Tarbox, Kathy Kiessling, and Carly Armstrong. Special thanks to Kara Keeling and Scott Pollard for always being available for a good meal and an even better glass of wine. Joseph W. Campbell and Billie Jarvis-Freeman deserve special recognition for both their friendship and for working with me in a life-changing independent study one lovely summer.

The editors of Benjamins Children's Literature, Culture, and Cognition series include Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer, Maria Nikolajeva, Nina Christensen, and Elina Druker. I am especially grateful to Professor Kümmerling-Meibauer for inspiring me to draft the manuscript and submit it to this series.

Various dear friends have also been willing to offer both intellectual advice and emotional support, so I thank Pam Riney-Kehrberg and Susan Burt for their almost daily support in the development of this project over the last three years. The friends who have kept me going with coffee and walks and music and beer include April Schultz, Kass Fleisher, Karen Khusro, Rick Martin, Tak Cheung, Jim Stanlaw, Scott Jordan, Sally Parry, Bob McLaughlin, Sue Sprecher, Barb Heyl, Judi

Sevel, and Pat and Dick Witzig. Becky and Jim Skibo have sustained my faith in more than one institution, and because of Jim, I will always think of this as the book that grew by "magic." Illinois State University staff members Diane Smith and Peggy Haycraft have provided both efficient and loving support. Without ISU librarians Julie Derden, Jean MacDonald, and Maureen Brunsdale, nothing would be possible. And two ISU deans also deserve special mention: Greg Simpson, Dean of Arts and Sciences, and Dane Ward, Dean of Libraries.

Most of all, I am indebted to my wonderful and intellectually invigorating family: my husband, George F. Seelinger, and our delightfully engaging children, George H., John, and Katharine. These three Seelinger children were all teenagers when I both began and finished the first draft of this project, so it is to be noted that their adolescences very likely had a great deal to do with stimulating my scholarly interest in adolescent growth.

CHAPTER 1

Growth, cognitive linguistics, and embodied metaphors

As a literary term, *adolescent literature* refers to both creative works, such as fiction or drama or poetry, and the critical study or literary criticism of those creative works. Additionally, in both senses of the term, adolescent literature is closely linked to children's literature, particularly around issues of growth. Because growth is arguably one of the most salient features of fiction for young people, the idea of growth gains much consideration in the criticism that attempts to define literature written for youth.

In this chapter, I will first provide some background information for my argument, including a review of the literary theory dealing with growth and basic definitions of the *Bildungsroman* and terms related to that pivotal concept. My goal in this section is to establish the pervasiveness of the concept of *growth* within adolescent literature. Next, I give the reader a brief overview of important concepts in cognitive linguistics that help explain the prevalence of growth as a concept in fiction about adolescence. This section is a general introduction to basic ideas from the field of cognitive linguistics and is not necessarily specific only to adolescent literature, although L.M. Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables* (1908) supplies examples that are particularly germane. In the third section, I examine the metaphors literary critics themselves use to describe growth in adolescent literature to demonstrate that literary critics are as influenced by embodied conceptualizations of growth as literary artists are. Finally, as an example of how to employ a cognitive reading of adolescent literature, I conclude this chapter by analyzing the embodied metaphors at work in a canonical American novel about adolescence, Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885). Ultimately, I hope to demonstrate that cognitive conceptualizations of growth are a major factor in the genre of adolescent literature (literature about adolescence) and its subgenre, the Young Adult (YA) novel, which is written for and marketed directly to adolescents.

Background and review of the literature

Critics of both adolescent literature and children's literature frequently observe how a protagonist's growth shapes the plot of novels about young people. It should

be noted that most of the critics I include in the following literature review adhere to a standard convention of the field in considering adolescent protagonists to be residing within the broader scope of a general category of literary study called "children's literature" — a convention to which I have also adhered, as in my book, *Waking Sleeping Beauty* (Trites 1997). Thus, many observations about "children's literature" in what follows can also be considered to apply to adolescent literature. For example, like me, Vandergrift (1980), Lukens (1982), Wolf (1985), Stephens (1992), Russell (2001), Nikolajeva (2002), and Natov (2003) also do not distinguish children's literature from adolescent literature when they are evaluating the tendency of protagonists to grow in fiction for the young. That said, this chronological review of the literature reveals how prevalent the concept of growth is within the study of adolescent (and children's) literature.

Rebecca Lukens believes growth figures prominently in novels for the young because it is fundamental to the human condition: "In life the development of a person's character or personality is a matter of growth and change" — so, "character development means showing the character ... with the complexity of the human being"; ergo, well-developed characters *must* grow (1982: 30, italics in the original). Lukens is participating in a bias that assumes literary characters written for a young audience "must" grow as inevitably as preadolescent and adolescent readers themselves do. In a similar vein, Kay Vandergrift argues: "Main characters ... are three-dimensional complex individuals who *grow*, change, and develop as a result of the events of story" (1980: 110, italics added). Also writing in the 1980s, Virginia Wolf concludes that "[a]ll great children's literature [is] about *growing* up" (1985: 299, italics added).

John Stephens considers "the most pervasive theme in children's fiction" to be "the transition within the individual from infantile solipsism to maturing social awareness" (1992: 3), while Robyn McCallum also assumes that growth is a defining factor of adolescence. She argues that adolescent fiction invariably interrogates subject-formation because "ideas about and representations of subjectivity are always inherent in the central concerns of this fiction: that is in the concerns with personal *growth* and *maturation*, and with relationships between the self and others, and between individuals and the world, society or the past" (1999: 256, italics added). According to McCallum, literary adolescence is inflected by the conventional wisdom that adolescence marks a time of growth that includes changing self-perception: "Concepts of personal identity and selfhood are formed in dialogue with society, with language, and with other people, and while this dialogue is ongoing, modern adolescence — that transition stage between childhood and adulthood — is usually thought of as a period during which notions of selfhood undergo rapid and radical transformation" (1999: 3). Thus, both Stephens and McCallum write about adolescence as a time of transition that involves growth.