

The Literary Experience of Young Adults with Narratives: Towards Becoming a Person

Yalda Amir Kiaei

Florida International University, USA

Abstract: The literary experience allows for subjectivities of individuals to flourish, a characteristic which makes this experience essential to readers' self-concept development. This paper gives an overview of the empirical and theoretical literature that relates the literary experience (including both narrative literature and narratives of the self) to readers' personal growth.

The literary discourse, narratives, and storytelling are discussed in the literature as acts of personal emancipation because it allows subjectivities of individuals to flourish. For instance, Alsup (2010) highlighted effects of the literary discourse on personal growth stating that "how one communicates determines the person one becomes" (p. 2). In his work, "From 'Psychology *in* Literature' to 'Psychology *is* Literature'," Moghaddam (2004) underlined the often overlooked link between psychology and literature. "Both psychology and literature adopt as one of their goals the better understanding of overt behavior and the mental life of individuals, and how these are related" (p. 505). Although Moghaddam (2004) views this relationship as literature and narrative selves serving the field of psychology and psychoanalysis, the shared theme of psychology and literature has the potential to serve individuals in their everyday-journey of life. The effect of literary experience in the process of personal growth is rarely investigated by either literary researchers (Rosenblatt, 1968) or psychologists (Jones, 2010). The purpose of this paper is to shed light on the possible contributions of literary experiences, both narrative literature and narratives of the self, to the processes of personal growth and identity exploration.

Rosenblatt (1968) emphasizes that the context of the literary experience is formed by human nature, human experience, and social influences. This characteristic makes the literary experience essential to readers' self-concept development at both individual and societal levels. This understanding of the relationship between literacy and identity development suggests the need to broaden the scope of education, especially language arts, from focusing merely on academic development to nurturing personal growth and human psychological development.

Alsup (2010) discusses the emotional, psychological, and intellectual impacts of the literary experience on adolescents as it relates to *identity* development. Erikson (1968), the first developmental psychoanalyst that looked at individuals' wellness as opposed to their illnesses, considers identity development for individuals as being composed of making sense of the world and making sense of themselves and who they are. In line with Erikson (1968), Alsup (2010) uses identity development to refer to development of selfhood and becoming a person.

The current paper gives an overview of the literature that discussed and researched individuals' personal growth in the context of narrative discourse guided by reading and discussing novels and stories. The focus of the literature is on adolescents and young adults, identified as being in the period of self-definition and identity-exploration by both developmental psychologists (e.g., Erikson, 1968) and narrative theorists (e.g., McAdams, Josselson, & Lieblich, 2006). Review of the literature revealed that there has been a focus on female identity development in English literature research as a result of an effort to counter the male-centered

view of identity development in psychology. For example, Erikson's (1968) theory of identity development was based on generalizations made from male-dominant samples. Therefore, research studies presented in this paper are limited to studies that mainly explored identity-exploration of adolescent female readers in their responses to the texts.

Narratives of the Self, Narrative Literature, and Identity-Exploration

The importance of narratives in identity-formation and identity-transformation is highlighted by several literary and narrative theorists (Alsup, 2010; Giddens, 1991; Jones, 2010; Mead, 1934). Philosophies which suggest that *talking brings one into being* (Mead, 1934) or *the way a person communicates defines the person* (Alsup, 2010) imply that "having a self requires belonging in a community of speakers" (Jones, 2010, p. 549). That is, for self-realization one needs to be a speaker, a narrator of his or her life—past, present, future—and for personal growth, he or she needs to keep these narratives alive (Giddens, 1991).

Bruner (2002) equalizes the narrative with *telling* by stating that "self is a product of our telling" (p. 86) and "it is through narrative that we create and re-create selfhood" (p. 85). That is, stories of personal experiences define the person. Alsup (2010) argues that constructing narratives of the self is essential for identity development of young adults because it provides them with the potential to transform and guide their beliefs, attitudes, and behavior towards becoming better individuals.

While some theorists emphasize telling personal stories for developing self-realization, some other scholars focus on the effect of reading and interacting with narrative literature (e.g., novels, fictions, or short stories) on the process of developing self-realization. For instance, Jones (2010) argues that "the 'meaningful' engagement with fiction opens up spaces for the reflexivity of selfhood in different ways than does autobiographical telling" (p. 552). It is noteworthy that she considers all literary works "fictive impositions" (p. 550), distanced from the reality of the individual self. She argues that feelings evoked by narrative fictions could be different from feelings evoked by autobiographical story. The narrative fictions may stimulate the feeling of sorrow while the autobiographical story may raise the feelings of pride, guilt, and shame which are never evoked by a narrative fiction.

On the other hand, Rosenblatt's (1968) transactional theory conceptualizes the literary experience embedded transactions with both kinds of narratives (i.e., narrative literature and narratives of the self). She, however, argues this in different terms. She discusses literary experience as involving *aesthetic* reading of a literary work and reflecting on it by creating personal responses (i.e., narratives of the self). Literature is considered "a medium of exploration" (p. x) for individual readers, through which the readers explore their own nature with its potentialities for intellects and emotions, modify their perspectives, and find their direction in life. Research supports this speculation (Cherland & Edelsky, 1993; Stutler, 2011)

For instance, from the ethnography of seven 11- and 12-year-old girls, Cherland and Edelsky (1993) interpreted that reading fiction is a cultural experience and a social practice for the readers as they relate it to their individual lives and try to understand their place in the world. In another study (Stutler, 2011), ethnographic field methods were used with eight verbally gifted preadolescent girls to uncover the essences of the reading experience in the contexts of daily lives. The primary question that guided the research was: What meanings does the reading of fiction hold for eight verbally gifted sixth-grade girls? There were several sources of data including the researcher's theoretical and observational field notes, the girls' taped book discussions, parent interviews, and the girls' reading journals. The study indicated that the girls actually built intellectual and emotional awareness as they became engaged in challenging and

critical readings. More importantly, as the girls read and made meaning, they were involved in constructing their lives' purpose, a process that Stutler (2011) considered self-actualizing.

How May the Literary Experience Help Personal Growth?

An effective transaction between the individual and narratives of any kind is more probable when the individual is involved first in an aesthetic reading or aesthetic experience with a narrative literature (i.e., becoming a *reader*) and later in a reflective discussion of narratives of the self, others, and literature (i.e., becoming a *speaker*). Aesthetic reading, according to Rosenblatt (1968), is to serve the present status of mind as it evokes emotions, intellects, and sensations along the way in the literary experience. The reader's focus is on the present aesthetic experience with the text. The interactive and dynamic nature of the aesthetic reading may have long-lasting influences on the reader's perspective, and it may eventually manifest itself as a change or growth in the manner and character of the person.

Such a literary experience engages the readers in "the self-questionings and self-realizations" (Rosenblatt, 1968, p. 6), while navigating through different lives, feelings, and insights, in other words, different identities. A study (Smith, 2001) of six 6th-grade girls participating in a 17-session book club showed that in their reading discussion, the girls demonstrated "the enticing sense of discovering new possibilities and qualities about themselves" (p. 13). They also illustrated the girls' navigation of contradictory identities throughout their responses. The emergence of several recurring identities, when responding to a literary experience, is addressed by Gee (2000), a psycholinguistic researcher. Gee (2000) underlined the importance of exploring *multiple* identities and reflecting on one's narratives of such explorations to constitute a never-fully-formed and ever-changing, but unique core identity.

Another study (Kuiken, et al., 2004) investigated the emergence of self-modifying feelings during literary reading. The readers made a narrative of their experience of three haunting passages in a short story. Their level of engagement with the text was measured by the Tellegen Absorption Scale (Tellegen, 1982). The readers who were highly involved in reading experience expressed more emotional fluctuations during reading and reported more perceptual shifts compared to other readers. The level of absorption in the reading experience that was correspondent with self-perceptual shifts, as reported, was the signifier of the emergence of self-modifying feelings.

One explanation for these findings is that high emotional engagement with the text makes the vicarious learning possible. Vicarious learning and experiences are the main contributions of literature to the life of young adults. Literary theorists such as Nell (1988) and Rosenblatt (1968) argue that the reader adds to her or his experiences by living through the text with its characters and with developmental and personal challenges they are involved in. The reader feels like she or he is the character in the text, grows while living through the text, and experiences new thoughts and emotions. Therefore, in addition to deriving some meanings from the text and projecting meanings from within onto the text, the reader is altered by reception of what is being read (Jones, 2010). This alternation could be in a positive or negative direction in terms of growth (Alsup, 2010). The argument is that alteration, if it is brought to consciousness, can be directed towards positive growth. The next section of the paper discusses how transaction with the text becomes a conscious experience when the literary experience evokes identification with the text and critical reflection on the text and on personal responses to the text.

Identification and Critical Reflection

Kuiken and colleagues (2004) found that the emergence of self-modifying feelings from the literary experience was affected by personal identification with the literary work. If identity

is assumed to be a mixture of narratives of the self (Bruner, 2002), perceptual shifts in identity can be captured by witnessing the change in narratives of the self. The literary experience would alter narratives of the self only when eliciting *personal* meanings from it (Jones, 2010), or in other words, when identifying with it.

Relying on the premise that a *relevant* literary experience provides an inspiration for personal growth, Alsup (2010) views reading young adult literature for adolescents and young adults as “an opportunity for self-actualization” (p. 9). Identity theorists such as Kroger (1996) introduced adolescence as an age one is confronted with “the task of self-definition” (p. 18). Narrative theorists such as McAdams and colleagues (2006) argue that the self-definition process takes place in adolescents and young adults as individuals who gradually perceive their life experiences as definitive of their personal self. By the adolescent period, “we are able and motivated to conceive of our lives as full-fledged, integrative narratives of the self” (p. 3). Adolescents are willing to improve their life experiences to enhance their identities. Thus, any experience, including the literary experience, is an opportunity for self-enhancement.

In explaining the concept of identification, Woodward (2003) considers it a conscious process in which the reader aligns the self with thoughts, ideas, emotions, and experiences of others. Identification, in Woodward’s (2003) view, is not only about similarities but also about differences. The reader who identifies with a character in a novel can find out or choose to be similar to or differ from the character in one aspect or the other. That is, he or she critically explores and reflects upon himself or herself as related to the character and to the situation with which the character is faced. The idea that identification is a conscious process and that it involves a realization of similarities and differences expands the process of identification to include the concept of reflection.

Similarly, Bogdan (1992) views “identification [with the literature] as a form of psychological projection” (p. 94) which is developed through emotional involvement with the literary work and is crucial to understand literature. Bogdan (1992), however, argues that besides attachment and identification with the text, there is another essential component to the literary experience that makes it a meaningful practice. It is “critical detachment” (p. 94) from the literary work. Critical detachment allows the reader to step back from the aesthetic personal experience with the text and to explore artistic structure and meaning of the text, as well as its history and the ideology it is conveying. Critical reflection, or reflective response to the literature, is what makes a literacy experience an opportunity for personal growth. An example of reflective responses to the literature is witnessed in a one-year ethnography of five female readers from sixth-grade to seventh-grade (Finder, 1997). The study showed that adolescent girls used literacy to estimate, to control, and to moderate their growth towards adulthood or what they perceived as being a mature person.

Curricular and Instructional Environment That Foster Self-Expression of Identity

The *if* that Alsup (2010) raised in her debate about the constructive or destructive effect of fiction on changing readers’ behavior—“. . . if the reader is properly educated” (p. 6)—is an important *if* to be considered in literacy experiences in all genres in all settings. English education today, facing the pressure of standardization and high-stake testing, results in teaching of literature only to transfer its factual and technical knowledge. To transform the atmosphere of English education to *properly* educate our youth, Wissman (2011) suggests constructing a counter-pedagogy in the literacy curriculum. She defines counter-pedagogy as creating an *other space*, a space different from the dominant, official space in schools—a “space created without the constraints of a mandated curriculum or standardized test and . . . informed by an

understanding of the connections among literacies, lived-experiences, and identities” (p. 405). Although Wissman’s (2011) work focused on women’s identity exploration, and especially on African Americans’ urgent need for an *other space* to express their lives and their identities, creating other spaces has implications for all students, even in regular classrooms.

In order to fulfill the developmental needs of the adolescents and young adults, these other spaces that are not constrained by scripted standards should meet certain instructional requirements. One of the requirements is the freedom of students’ thoughts and feelings. This freedom can be fostered by providing a psychologically safe environment for students (Rogers, 1951; Rosenblatt, 1968), an environment that make them feel respected and accepted. Providing a safe environment encourages freedom of self-expression.

Self-expressiveness also requires freedom of choice in the ways students may express themselves. Rosenblatt (1968) argues that imposing any form of stereotyped routines (e.g., summarizing or rephrasing) for self-expressive responses inhibits the spontaneous reaction to the text. Forcing one single style of response over the others (whether it is a summary essay or creative painting) interferes with students’ self-exploration, because it constrains their thoughts and emotions in a pre-specified format, which is disruptive to an aesthetic and authentic experience with the text.

The first impression taken from the text is critical, but not sufficient, for a meaningful literary experience. It only prepares the ground to start a meaningful literary experience that leads to intellectual and emotional personal growth. The teacher should follow students’ personal expressions with a critical discussion that is reflective and enlightening. Critical reflection through group discussion allows students to listen to alternative views and analyze things from different perspectives. Students realize how their predispositions judge the text as well as the world. Through critical reflection, students eventually understand where their assumptions come from and how their presumptions affect their thinking and may hinder their ability to see other possibilities (Rosenblatt, 1968). The literary experience that has met all of these requirements is a process of self-realization and self-exploration and can lead to positive growth.

Group Discussions

Research found that book discussion groups that allow for peer interaction (Raphael, Kehus & Damphousse, 2001), building relationship with teachers (Chandler, 1997), and readers’ physical movement by an artistic representation of what is read (Raphael, et al., 2001) are promising in meeting developmental needs of adolescents. Book discussion groups make reading a social experience that is being pursued through a meaningful discourse. With a consideration of these criteria, Atkins (2011) studied the identity exploration of five adolescent girls within the literacy experience. She used different sources of data, including semi-structured interviews prior to and after the 8-week literary experience, the readers’ weekly response journals, field notes and transcripts of the weekly book discussions, and the researcher’s reflective journal. The study involved participants in an experience of identity exploration through critical responses to literature while narrating their self-identities and exploring others’ identities.

Considering identity exploration as the core of reading discussions, Atkins (2011) characterized successful reading discussions as being rich in opportunities for engagement, for making connection with students, for eliciting personal meanings, and for exploring and expressing self-identities. Such successful discussions happen only if teachers manage the attitudinal environment of the discussions appropriately (Atkins, 2011)—including their own

attitude and that of their students—to be constructive, not destructive, for individuals’ self-expressions and self-reflections. That is, teachers need to be good listeners whom the student readers can trust. The student readers should feel secure that their self-expressions will not be received wrongly by their teachers and they will not be blamed or judged upon expressing themselves. In addition, teachers need to help students find a way to discuss their perspectives in an effective and conducive manner in which they respect others’ opinions and give room to everybody to express and explore their self-identities and identities. Defining and managing their environment gives student readers a sense of autonomy and control that is essential for a meaningful self-exploration of their identities.

Conclusion

Personal identity is a collection of different narratives of the self (Bruner, 2002), created by the person but influenced by other people and the individual’s experiences, including the literary experience. The creation of narratives of the self can be evoked through the experience of aesthetic reading when we face new emotions, new insights, new worlds, and different identities. Both reading narrative literature and telling one’s own story have the potential to alter the narratives of the self. In fact, becoming a *reader* and a *speaker* are both important roles to play in completing the process of self-realization and self-transformation in a literary experience.

The more the reader identifies with the character in terms of age, race and ethnicity, and the more the reader resonates with the culture presented within the literature, the more she or he is able to make use of the literary experience to enhance her or his personal life. Young adult literature, literature which is written specifically for and about adolescents and young adults, provides a great opportunity for the positive vicarious learning for our youth. Yet, in order for learning to occur in the direction of growth, adults need to nurture and guide the readers’ personal responses to the text. Encouraging young readers of literature to respond personally and aesthetically to the text is the first step in the learning experience. The next step is guiding these responses appropriately for students to become critical rather than merely empathetic.

Our schools need to be transformed to be places for personal growth. One step towards this goal is to create *other spaces* by incorporating meaningful literary practices in the language arts curriculum, practices that meet the requirements of an *other* space. Good literary practices have the power to interrupt, appropriate, and transform the already existing, ineffective and non-conducive spaces (hooks, 1990) to spaces for personal flourishing for women, people of colors, and all human beings. The literacy experience that allows for discussion and reflection on both narrative literature and narratives of the self in a psychologically safe and professionally guided environment is a personally transformative experience.

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