2011-05

Reading Between the Lines: The Potential of Popular Young Adult Fiction in Adolescent Spiritual Formation

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http://hdl.handle.net/2144/1448

Boston University
BOSTON UNIVERSITY
SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY

Dissertation

READING BETWEEN THE LINES: THE POTENTIAL OF POPULAR YOUNG ADULT FICTION IN ADOLESCENT SPIRITUAL FORMATION

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the Requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

2011
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank a number of people who helped me through the lengthy (but worthwhile) process of my doctoral degree. First, to my wonderfully supportive husband Peter—without you I never would have made it to the end, and I most assuredly would have thrown my computer out the window when trying to format my dissertation. Also, to Katherine and Charles—mommy is very sorry that you don’t have baby books, but know that you are and always will be the crowning creative achievements of my life and this dissertation is dedicated to you.

I would like to thank my family and friends for their encouragement and support, especially my mother Patricia Mitchell, Jeanne Walker, Mary and Frances Kisner, Stacie Galang, Rolanda Ward, Michele Shin, and Brian Sirman. In addition, I would like to thank Melissa Cataldo, who really should have been paid for her efforts as my dissertation coach and psychologist. Likewise, I would like to thank Dr. Janice Van Buren for actually being my dissertation coach. Thanks must also go to all of the wonderful people who lovingly cared for my children during this process, especially Maggie, Kathie, Katherine, Laura, and Frances.

I would also like to acknowledge the lasting impression left by my wonderful professors at Albright College: Dr. William King, Dr. Guillaume de Syon, Dr. John Pankratz, the Rev. Paul Clark, and all of the other professors that encouraged me in my honors thesis about children’s literature. Finally, I want to thank Dr. Bryan Stone, Dr. Donna Freitas, and Dr. Courtney Goto for their kind, tireless, and patient efforts to help me research and revise this dissertation until I got it right.
READING BETWEEN THE LINES: THE POTENTIAL OF POPULAR YOUNG ADULT FICTION IN ADOLESCENT SPIRITUAL FORMATION

(Order No.            )

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ABSTRACT

Popular culture is a powerful, shaping force in the lives of teenagers between the ages of fourteen through eighteen in the United States today. This dissertation argues the importance of popular fiction for adolescent spiritual formation and it investigates that importance by exploring the significance of narrative for theology and moral formation. The dissertation employs mythic and archetypal criticism as a tool for informing the selection and critique of narratives for use in adolescent spiritual development and it also incorporates insights gained from developmental psychology to lay the groundwork for the development of a curriculum that uses young adult fiction in a program of spiritual formation for teenagers in a local church setting.

The dissertation defends the power of narrative in Christian theology and concludes that narrative shapes the imagination in ways that alter perception and are important for the faith life of teenagers in particular. I go on to argue that not all
narratives are created equal. In using literary myth criticism in concert with theology, I use the two disciplines’ different aims and methods to fully flesh out the potential of theologies intrinsic to works meant for a largely secular audience.

The dissertation compares various works of young adult fiction (M.T. Anderson’s *Feed* and Terry Pratchett’s *Nation* in dialogue with a theology of creation; Marcus Zusak’s *I am the Messenger* and Jerry Spinelli’s *Stargirl* in dialogue with salvation and saviors; and the four novels of Stephanie Meyer’s *Twilight* saga in dialogue with a theology of hope (eschatology). The dissertation explores how each theme surfaces (even if only implicitly) from both literary and theological standpoints.

The dissertation concludes with a sample four-week lesson plan that demonstrates one way the theological and literary critique can be formed into a practical curriculum for use in an adolescent spiritual development setting. Ultimately, this dissertation provides a framework for how practitioners of young adult formation can select, analyze, and develop materials for their teenagers using new works of popular young adult fiction. The dissertation comes to the conclusion that popular fiction contains a wealth of material that can challenge and shape young readers’ own emerging theology.
CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Life as Story

Somewhere in this world stands a curving stone wall with ivy snaking out of cracks in the mortar. The wall curves in a neat, sloping circle, cutting off the treasures within from outside intruders. Inside that wall waits ... who knows what? Another dimension? Talking animals? Flowers that bloom too brightly for human eyes? It does not matter. What is important is that the wall exists, that the enchanted world it holds exists, and that one day I am going to find it.

My quest for this wall started when I first read Frances Hodgson Burnett’s *The Secret Garden* in fourth grade. I was enthralled with Mary Lennox and the gloomy secrets of Misselthwaite Manor. Mary found a magic garden that changed her life; I found Mary and she changed my life. Through that book I first realized the power and place of narrative, though of course I would not define my experience in that way until much later. Stories then were as real as the world around me; I lost myself in them, and they, in turn, shaped how I experienced the reality of my everyday life.

Narrative has the potential to influence almost every imagination and human experience. It takes a life lived moment by moment and connects present fragments of time to the past and future. As such, it gives recorded time a linear quality. Narrative experience, individual and corporate, has a beginning, middle, and end. Memory can travel backwards on this line, contemplation can dance around the middle, and
imagination carries the past and present into the future. In this way, story is itself an experience, and history becomes a series of interconnected stories. To understand where humanity has been, what it is doing now, and where it is going, we must be willing to tell and retell its stories.

“Narrative,” the term often applied to this notion of the storied world, can serve as a useful category for a host of different scholarly fields, including history, the liberal arts, the social sciences, and even the so-called “hard sciences.” In this project, I show how narrative is particularly suited to theological work; how narrative can shape experience (both sacred and secular), as well as how religious faith intrinsically colors what one reads; and how narrative inspires or shapes the imagination (and vice versa). I also argue that narrative, imagination, and faith play essential, interrelated roles in the lives of teenagers specifically.

Statement of the Problem

Through narrative we seek to understand the world and construct our individual identities within it. We document the present, we interpret and challenge records from the past, and we write texts that imagine the future. We tell stories to teach, to inform, to entertain, and to make sense of an infinitely complicated universe. With the ever-increasing accessibility of narratives through media, individuals (and teenagers in particular) can immerse themselves in a vast sea of narratives that compete for their intellectual and spiritual loyalties.
This project will explore the interaction between the Christian faith, the ecclesial embodiment of that faith, and one form of popular culture: literature. The project seeks to answer the following questions: What are the narrative coordinates in which characters of popular young adult fiction make moral choices? As these narratives are entertained or adopted by teenage readers, how do they shape and reflect the way in which teenagers make their own moral choices and develop as moral beings? How, in particular, do these coordinates relate to the Christian story (whether, for example, as complementary or as rivals)? And what might the church gain from a deeper cognizance of the effect of popular narratives on young adult moral formation?

The relationship between the church and popular media has often been rocky at best. The church struggles between over-accommodating itself to popular culture in order to receive a wider acceptance in the world, on the one hand, and the alternative of maintaining its own, separate cultural forms in an effort to remain distinct from popular culture. Meanwhile, influence travels in the other direction too; that is, even if Christianity no longer has a privileged position in culture with regard to truth and morality, the church’s most sacred stories and images still influence popular culture, which often borrows from or co-opted them. Thus, I will reflect theologically on the narratives at work in popular young adult fiction today while assessing their potential effect on the moral formation of young people.

1 Throughout this study, the term “young adult” is used just as it is in the field of literature, as referring to persons in the age range of 12 to 18 years (in other words, “teenagers”). This is important to note at the outset, because in moral and spiritual development literature, “young adult” often refers to people in their late teens or even into the early thirties, a range that is well beyond the scope of this project.
**Importance of the Study**

Children today have access to more kinds of media than ever before. Before they even enter middle school, they may have been exposed to myriad movies, television shows, Web sites, or other types of digital media on their own “smart” cell phones and personal digital assistants (PDAs). In this high-tech age, typed words on paper would seem to be less appealing to young audiences. However, this form of popular media nonetheless endures and shows no sign of diminishing. Children flock to the shelves for books ranging from J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series to classics like J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*. Even after these stories have been turned into movies and other forms of media, the books themselves remain viable, marketable commodities.

Books are a market force in popular culture; people are willing to spend money on them. Books shape the imaginations of young and old alike. Faith traditions have long sought to do the same thing—using stories to shape and mold people’s imaginations, grafting them into the larger communal body of their particular group. As John Cobb and Joseph Hough remark, for Christians to become participants in the Christian story is a particularly important task of practical theological research.²

To pursue the central questions of this project, we need to understand why narrative is important to theological understanding, how narrative plays a role within a teenager’s moral formation, and how this relationship impacts the corporate body of

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Christ. While there is growing scholarship on the impact of other forms of popular culture (such as movies, digital media, music, and the Internet) on teenagers, research is lacking on the impact of popular young adult fiction on teenage moral formation. Much has been written about narrative in relationship to theology and the church (e.g., its place in preaching or liturgy), but seldom is narrative specifically linked to its potential in working with young adults. Likewise, whereas educators and researchers explore many aspects of children’s and young adult literature (such as its usefulness in expanding knowledge of grammar, literary theory, or particular subject areas), there is very little exploration of the role of faith in fiction, or of the role fiction plays in faith and moral development. This absence is all the more striking since so many works that children’s literature experts consider “classic” incorporate Christian themes (like *The Chronicles of Narnia* or *Lord of the Rings*).

At its heart, narrative is not just “story.” One could argue, rather, that it is the articulation of a person’s (or a people’s) ontology, that there is no self apart from narrative. Narrative is the self, or the experience of the self in a larger context, put into words. Other individuals or peoples then take these works and interpret, incorporate, expand upon, or sometimes reject them. This is why storytelling is so important in identity formation for both individuals and larger groups. One could argue that Christianity (or any religion, for that matter) would not exist if not for narratives. It is

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essential, then, that the Christian story be told to each younger generation for the church not only to continue but to do so with vitality and imagination.

However, popular culture produces its own narratives, ones that are often contrary to and in competition with the Christian story. While Christians must remain accountable to their traditions’ memory, culture is free to borrow and create and meld whatever it wants to by constructing narratives that vie for our loyalties. According to these sources, one need not believe in God (or in anything!) to live a “good” life. Culture can say, “There is no good at all.” For every one blockbuster movie incorporating the message that “those who live by the sword die by the sword,” four more may say, “Violence is redemptive, and the only way to conquer evil is through brute force.” Or, for every one book that challenges the reader to love another as she loves herself, there are many, often selling millions of copies, that champion greed, lust, and stopping at nothing to get what one wants. Christians may ask, “What Would Jesus Do?” Works in popular culture answer, “Who cares?” Nonetheless, American popular culture remains infused with Christian narratives, images, and symbols, and popular culture does indeed create texts that are worth investigating with regard to the challenges or insights they bring to faith.

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Limitations

Given the number of books written per year for the young adult market, it would be impossible to analyze in a few hundred pages a significant percentage of these books published. Also, there are myriad types of literary criticism, many of which have value in representing a book’s literary quality or in analyzing its themes; only one such methodology is incorporated into this study. Also, this project does not attempt to examine the actual impact of popular fiction on teenagers; the research did not include interviews of teenage subjects. However, the project will incorporate research that works extensively with and for older children in advancing practical suggestions for the church’s actual practice.

By way of specific illustration, this study did not engage children directly to find out how they acquire morality in the course of their cognitive development or ability. Nor is it the purpose of this project to demonstrate how narrative can influence children’s imagination, moral or otherwise. Others, such as Robert Coles, James Fowler, and Carol Gilligan, have considered these subjects extensively. The present work will rely on other scholars’ findings, theories, and direct fieldwork with children to build the informational framework with which it will engage each work of fiction. As such, I hope to add another useful voice to the emerging discussion about young adult fiction, theology, and moral formation.
CHAPTER TWO
THE ROLE OF NARRATIVE AND THEOLOGY
IN SPIRITUAL FORMATION

Narrative and Theology

Investigating theology’s use of narrative is not simply the study of religious stories. Rather, it is an intellectual development that arose in the late 20th century, building on the notion that human experience itself has a narrative quality and arguing that Christian faith is something like a culture unto itself. It has its own language, practices, and worldview generated by Scripture and tradition. Reflection on religious claims rooted in stories is one threshold that an individual can cross to gain access to this culture. Here, I show how narrative theology is a uniquely suited framework for exploring theological themes in young adult fiction by demonstrating that the language and “grammar” of faith are unique and that texts influence moral development.

The Yale school of thought in approaching theology and narrative is represented by Hans Frei and loosely includes George Lindbeck, Paul Holmer, Brevard Childs, David Kelsey, and Ronald Thiemann. These theologists focus on biblical narratives. They “try not to root their emphasis on narrative in universal anthropological structures but

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rather to describe the nature and importance of narrative in the Scriptures.”

Important to this school of thought is the idea that history in the Christian tradition has the dual narrative quality of both purporting to be an historical account of the one God’s interaction with a chosen holy people (Israel) and telling a story that extends beyond corporeal experience into the infinite. An example of this dual purpose occurs in the book of Exodus from the Bible. Exodus is the account of the Israelites’ flight from slavery at the hands of the Egyptians. Moses, who led the Israelites, purportedly wrote this book as well as the rest of the first five books of the Hebrew Bible, the Pentateuch.

What allows for the possibility of people having faith in an historical record that seems to defy logic? H. Richard Niebuhr talks about the historical difficulty of treating biblical narrative as “revelation,” that is, narrative derived directly from God. Niebuhr posits that there are two kinds of history—external and internal. External history is a record of facts, observed and recorded by a neutral party; internal history is recorded by people who have participated in the experience or been deeply affected by it. When Abraham Lincoln, in his Gettysburg Address, said that “Fourscore and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal,” his words were colored with emotion and intimacy, spoken by one deeply committed to the world-changing effect of

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11 Ibid.

the Declaration of Independence—as opposed to a dispassionate historian’s recount that this document was written.\(^{13}\)

These two narratives are examples of internal and external history respectively. Internal history is written by a person “on the inside,” with a stake in the way the story is told. It takes into account not only what happened, but what events meant and how they may continue to influence individuals. External history, on the other hand, is impersonal. It measures the importance of an event based on the effect it has on other events. Internal history can find intrinsic importance in seemingly inconsequential details. Likewise, while external history records everything it can for the sake of record, internal history can drop from memory that which is not deemed as valuable.\(^{14}\)

Internal history is (for the believer within the Christian faith) the most valuable form of narrative. Narrative becomes both the record of meaningful time and God revealed in history. As Niebuhr argued:

It may be said that to speak of history in this fashion is to try to think with poets rather than with scientists. That is what we mean, for poets think of persons, purposes, and destinies. It is just their Jobs and Hamlets that are not dreamt of in philosophies which rule out from the company of true being whatever cannot be numbered or included in an impersonal pattern. Drama and epic set forth pattern too, but it is one of personal relations. Hence we may call internal history dramatic and its truth dramatic truth, though drama in this case does not mean fiction.\(^{15}\)


\(^{14}\) Ibid.

\(^{15}\) Ibid.
Biblical narrative is internal history; its writers describe what happened to them, and those in the Christian community (or interested readers from outside the Christian community) need always bear that in mind. In this way, when one asks, “Did Jonah really get swallowed by that whale when he ignored God?” or “Did Joshua really get the sun to stand still?” or “Was Jesus really born in a manger to a virgin?” the narrative honestly answers, “Yes.” Those outside the community that created the texts may push for outside empirical confirmation. However, most of those inside, reading the internal history of it, know that it is the story that is important, not its referential accuracy to events in time. Put another way, Christians believe that it was God who “happened” in history, whether through prophets, miracles, or through the only begotten Son. The biblical narrative recounts the examples of this memory.

The University of Chicago school of thought on theology and narrative is represented by David Tracy, Paul Ricoeur, and Sally McFague, who agree that “stories are a critical and neglected genre in which important religious truths and practices are communicated” in the Bible. However, they do not believe that theology is derived exclusively from biblical texts. Rather, they feel narrative is a “privileged mode” for understanding the “grammatical rules and concepts” of Christian texts and practices. Excessive use of abstract reason (and of prose that is disconnected from how humans actually speak and think), say these scholars, does not communicate the way in which

16 Comstock, 688.
17 Ibid.
faith is lived. The Chicago school acknowledges that narrative is the form in which people recount events from the past (documenting history), and that it can convey deeper meaning to the Christian faith even if the narratives are not explicitly Christian *per se*.

Cultures produce a variety of narrative genres. Even in the Bible, there are numerous literary genres including historical lists (such as genealogies and census data), foundational myths (the story of creation, or humanity’s fall from grace), poetry, wisdom sayings, and more. Such use of genre is employed to empower meaning making.\(^{18}\) Within the last few hundred years especially, narrative culture (either oral or written) has been transformed, and stories have moved from being solely utilitarian (communicating necessary communal knowledge) to having a more speculative or entertaining value.\(^ {19}\) The present project will focus on this entertaining type of modern fiction.

For this project, both the Yale and Chicago schools of narrative theology are particularly useful. From the Yale methodology, we can gain the perspective of internal versus external history. That is, a reader can understand biblical narrative whether he or she is a Christian or not, as long as the perspective he or she is bringing to the text and its inherent implications are kept in mind. The Chicago school, on which I rely more heavily, demonstrates the importance of looking at the world of the text as a world unto itself. Its relevance for a particular reader comes from what the text offers on its own, not

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necessarily from “hidden” meanings or agendas that need be teased out through layers of interpretation.

Theology’s Interaction with Fiction

So how does theology treat fictional narratives, then? Or, rather, why does fiction matter to theology? The answer is twofold. First, fictional narratives matter to theology because they can shape the human mind and thinking. Stories mold and change the way in which both individuals and communities view the world. This is not to say that they impart knowledge. Rather, stories affect and in some way actually form cognitive patterns, perception, and, as an extension of those developments, moral decision making.

Christian theology has much at stake with regard to how people reach moral and ethical conclusions (informed by their faith) as well as the outcomes of such conclusions (their actions in the world). To ignore stories’ power at the most intrinsic level of human development would be folly for the Christian community. Second, apart from formational strengths, narrative can also inform, persuade, entertain, comfort, and ask critical questions of a person’s faith.\textsuperscript{20} Moral development is a lifelong process, and narratives play different roles depending on a person’s age and life experience. Even though early exposure to narratives can form faith, later exposure can enhance, change, or undermine moral convictions. Such appeals to the imagination are not only powerful in childhood; the narratives we encounter in adulthood can have a profound impact on

\hspace{1cm} \textsuperscript{20} David S. Cunningham, \textit{Reading Is Believing} (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2002), 23.
strengthening or changing our worldview as well. Understanding the nature and function of “story” is essential for any theology that cares about how people live their lives.

Stories not only help children learn to make good choices or reason through problems; they also reveal what actions and values the larger society deems most important, and they teach empathy as well. Stories contribute to a child’s “emotional intelligence,” for socialization goes hand in hand with identity formation. Children can be shy or outgoing, artistic or athletic, quiet or full of energy by their very natures. What they do with these inherent characteristics, however, is guided by external forces. Exposure to narratives shapes the ways in which children think about problems and, more importantly, how they answer them. On the other hand, fiction is not necessarily a reliable source of information about reality. It is, by its very nature, a representation of reality, and sometimes a very purposeful misrepresentation of the way things really are. Relying on fiction to create an entire worldview would be like trying to understand a landscape by looking at a painting of it. One can get a feel for the colors and scenery, and even the peaks and valleys, given a skilled artist. Yet we would not really know what a place was like if we had never been there. Obviously, then, art should not replace the actual experience of living; the unpredictability of the universe makes the single perspective found in each work unsuited for identity formation and socialization by itself.

21 Ibid, 11.
22 Ibid.
23 Ibid., 50.
However, fiction does affect socialization and identity formation in its power to answer questions and raise new ones. In addition to forming patterns of thought and reaction, narratives’ greater strength is in their power to transform and expand existing ideas and behaviors. Without narratives, faith would become vague and its content “reserved only in ritual and dogmatic language.”

The component parts of story can make for a sacred whole. Story is more than a reflection; it is a form that bears witness to a deeper truth. Awe, hope, and inspiration become powerful once again each time the event that inspired them is recounted.

In his book of Hasidic stories, Martin Buber cites an example from a rabbi whose grandfather had been a pupil of Baal Shem Tov: “‘A Story ought to be told,’ he said, ‘so that it is itself a help,’ and his story was this. ‘My grandfather was paralyzed. Once he was asked to tell a story about his teacher and how the holy Baal Shem Tov used to jump and dance when he was praying. My grandfather stood up while he was telling the story and the story carried him away so much that he had to jump and dance to show how the master had done it. From that moment he was healed. This is how stories ought to be told.’”

Stories have the power to make people believe what is in them, to make what is in them truth. Stories that communicate truth are the best kind, even if the plots, characters, or settings are the product of imagination. In this way, story is a kind of ritual, as theologically dense as a sacrament. Narrative points to the divine; it is a

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24 Hauerwas and Jones, 252.

25 Ibid., 253.
window to the holy, not unlike a painted icon. It also ignites the imagination, propelling it along innovative cognitive pathways.\textsuperscript{26}

“The stories people hear and tell, the dramas they see performed, not to speak of the sacred stories that are absorbed without being directly heard or seen, shape in the most profound way the inner story of experience.”\textsuperscript{27} Cultural forms link humans’ inner lives and situate them in a larger society. The imagination of cultural forms enlivens tales told to lend them higher significance. Without the imagination, people would be half-formed, untethered to each other and lacking the ability to define themselves on their own.\textsuperscript{28}

**Narrative, Theology, and Their Interaction in Adolescence**

Paul Ricoeur once argued that, to change people’s behavior, you must change their imagination.\textsuperscript{29} Similarly, to graft children into the Christian faith, it is best to capture their imagination early and to engage it often. Parental modeling is perhaps the strongest means to do this and has been shown to have far-reaching effects on children’s perception and worldview.\textsuperscript{30} However, many other influences in modern culture, including other narratives, compete with, compromise, or complement the sacred texts of

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{26} Patrick Colm Hogan, *Cognitive Science, Literature, and the Arts* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 210-211.
  \item \textsuperscript{27} Hauerwas and Jones, 79.
  \item \textsuperscript{28} Ibid.
  \item \textsuperscript{30} Joyce Ann Mercer, *Welcoming Children* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2005), 164-165.
\end{itemize}
Christianity. As such, modeling can go only so far; parents will most likely not be with their children every moment of the day. Most parents want their children to grow into independent thinkers and problem solvers, forming their own opinions and making good choices. Sacred texts like the Bible and other religious material can aid in this endeavor. However, the wider society contributes to thinking about moral and ethical questions, as well as “big picture” questions that children could face, even at an early age: Who am I? Does my life matter? Why should I care about anyone other than myself? Why do people suffer? Why do I suffer? Is there anything other than this life?”

Walter Wangerin said, “A story, when it is told, is first and foremost a world, a little cosmos, a place in which the listening child may dwell.” If Wangerin is right, narratives are not merely illustrations (though they are useful in this regard). Instead, narratives do several kinds of work for religious communities. First, stories possess an immediacy that connects persuasively with human experience. They offer connection when there may be none in a person’s lived experience. As Wangerin points out, a story is not a passive experience for a young person; it is a mode of active engagement. Characters are real people within a “little cosmos” to whom a teenager can relate. They can have the same struggles and model emotions; they can be friends or enemies. They are people whom a teenager may relate to, take comfort in, and learn from, even if they

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31 Hauerwas and Willimon, 53-60.


33 Ibid.

are fictional and do not exist outside the story. Thus, stories also create a sort of mini-community that can be brought into conversation with a faith community.

In earlier times, children and young adults may have experienced primarily fictional works written for older readers. Fiction aimed intentionally at a teenage audience is a relatively recent development. A few books, like Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women*, are often considered to be young adult fiction, making the history of the genre span close to 150 years. However, only as recently as the 1960s or 1970s did young adult fiction become more widely seen in the marketplace.\(^{35}\) Thus, for a long time teenagers could read fiction about people in situations similar to their own (such as people coming to terms with their own homosexuality), but only in books meant for an adult audience. The narrative might be relevant to a teenager, but a teenage reader still might not be able to relate to what the author was trying to communicate. Today, young people have the advantage of being able to read stories specifically written for people their own age, making the narratives more relevant to their “inner story.”\(^{36}\)

**Why Narrative: Story’s Potential in Teenage Spiritual Formation**

Now that I have explored the general reasons why narrative is important to theology, I will move from theory to practice by asking why narratives (particularly young adult fiction) are important to the spiritual formation of teenagers. Or, more to the point, I will investigate *how* fiction is uniquely suited to form, shape, rearrange, and

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\(^{35}\) Kenneth L. Donelson and Alleen Pace Nilsen, *Literature for Today’s Young Adults* (Boston: Pearson, 2005), 5.

\(^{36}\) Coles, *The Call of Stories*, 204-205.
change teenagers’ spiritual growth, based on where they are in terms of cognitive and social development. To begin, I will present an overview of the distinctions between “spiritual development,” religious or spiritual “formation,” and “religious education.” I will also review the timeline of psychological developmental milestones that an individual typically has achieved by the time he or she has reached the teenage years. This review will set the stage for investigating key points where literary criticism and theological analysis may practically inform young adult spiritual formation: refining teenagers’ image of God (discussed in chapter 4), establishing identity and developing independence (chapter 5), and expanding their religious imaginations (chapter 6). Ultimately, this discussion will shape the sample curricula for young adult spiritual formation that are included at the end of each chapter.

Defining Formation

To begin, “moral formation” is the discipline of guiding a person through the lifecycle, using age-appropriate topics and pedagogical methods. The aim of moral formation is to integrate the learner’s life within a community of faith and with integrity to the self-transcendent ultimate value that he or she perceives. Moral formation happens on several different levels and in many different arenas, most of which are not actually within a faith tradition’s classrooms. While formation is most often and most directly cultivated within a given faith community, development takes place within the

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context of all the social groups and institutions in which one takes part (the family, peer
groups, schools, other social institutions, etc.). Thus, the definition of “moral
formation” presented here is twofold. It first includes the directed efforts of a faith
tradition, while at the same time allowing for the essential incremental increases in the
integration (or lack thereof) of an ultimate value in daily life. One is continually
“formed.”

The term “religious development,” on the other hand, generally refers to an
individual’s developing cognitive abilities and the way in which the individual
incorporates more complex thinking into his or her faith worldview. To put it another
way, religious formation is the process by which a faith tradition shapes the way in which
one chooses to lives his or her life. This formation changes throughout life, with
practices building on practices. It involves, but is not the same as, moral development. Those seeking to carry out moral formation can use insights gained from the study of
moral or religious development to find age-appropriate material, however.

Another term that differs from moral formation is “religious education.”
Religious education teaches people about the faith structures of which they are a part. In the Methodist tradition, for example, youth are taught about founder John Wesley, the
history of the Methodist movement, what Methodists believe today, what it means to be a

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38 Kenda Creasy Dean, Chap Clark, and Dave Rahn. *Starting Right* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 63-64.

39 Ibid., 378.

40 Ibid., chapter 4.
part of the church, and their unique sacramental theology. At a minimum, religious education might teach the theology of a given faith or denomination and ask a person what he or she thinks about it. In any case, the primary task of religious education is to communicate the framework of belief of a given tradition. Religious education gives people a unique, particular language with which to talk about the transcendent, and it communicates ways in which people in the tradition have incorporated that transcendence into their daily lives.\textsuperscript{41} Usually Christian education programs combine religious education and moral formation, with the former occurring in “Sunday school” while moral formation is the primary task of youth group meetings or service projects and subsequent debriefing time.

**Development Theory and Its Importance to Moral Formation**

Both moral formation and religious education rely on moral or religious development theory as they seek to incorporate the most beneficial and age-appropriate material in their curricula. It is useful to have a general overview of the several recognized stages of religious development even when one is working with an older age group like teenagers, as experiences and traumas from earlier stages can have a dramatic effect in later life.\textsuperscript{42} Many researchers and scholars have studied children’s cognitive

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\textsuperscript{41} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{42} Coles, *The Call of Stories*, 7-8.
development, and still more have integrated the results of this research into the exploration of religious or moral understanding in particular.\textsuperscript{43}

Jean Piaget, one of the first well-known researchers in this area, divided childhood and early young adulthood into three stages. The first is the “preoperational stage,” covering approximately ages two to seven years.\textsuperscript{44} Young people of this age are mostly focused on themselves and lack the ability to see things from another’s perspective.\textsuperscript{45} Piaget’s second stage encompasses children who are seven to eleven years old. Boys and girls in this stage are better able to grasp nuances and can group objects and concepts into different categories. This capacity extends to more complicated issues such as behaviors and principles, allowing the child to begin to form opinions about good and evil, or about what is fair or unjust.\textsuperscript{46} The third stage, which begins around age 12 and is fully developed around age 15, shows an exponential increase in both logic and reasoning. Teenagers of this age are able to more fully grasp abstract concepts, make connections, and form high-level conclusions about ambiguous situations.\textsuperscript{47} From age 15 into early adulthood, a teenager’s ability to make such high-level conclusions continues to develop and solidify, and his or her personality becomes more codified. Cognitively, Piaget viewed the older youth (age 15 and above) as one moving out of egocentrism and

\textsuperscript{43} James Gollnick, \textit{Religion and Spirituality in the Life Cycle} (New York: Peter Lang, 2005), 50.

\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., 67.

\textsuperscript{45} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{46} Ibid., 68.

\textsuperscript{47} Ibid.
as broadening “his experience in the world of work and social relationships.” After the age 15, these changes do not alter in structure of thought, but only in content and stability.\textsuperscript{48}

Many other psychologists have formed similar theories. Erik Erikson also posited a multi-stage structure through which children pass in development.\textsuperscript{49} His first four stages are characterized by essential conflicts that are either resolved or carried over into subsequent stages. During the first year of life, for instance, a child develops either trust or mistrust through interactions with his or her caregiver. A toddler then either develops autonomy or shame/guilt in trying to learn to do things for himself or herself (like using the toilet). Around the ages of four to six, a child develops either initiative or guilt, depending on whether the young person is allowed freedom to mistakes when learning new skills. From age six through the preteen years, the child learns either industry or inferiority; that is, the child either becomes able to make decisions independently or fails to develop the self-esteem needed in order to trust in one’s own decisions.\textsuperscript{50}

The basic structure of both Piaget’s and Erikson’s schema remains generally intact in light of subsequent work in developmental psychology. The stages of any theory of human development remain somewhat fluid, however. That is, not all children reach the same milestones at the same time, and the extent of development at each stage

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\textsuperscript{48} Patricia H. Miller, \textit{Theories of Developmental Psychology} (New York: Worth, 2002), 59.

\textsuperscript{49} Ibid., 66.

\textsuperscript{50} Ibid.
can vary from child to child. However, Piaget and Erikson’s frameworks are useful in that they allow for a basic understanding of the development of a child’s thought processes.

But, we must ask, how does all this relate to a child’s moral development? How do these stages form the basis from which other theorists talk specifically about moral and moral development of teenagers? This first question, on how cognitive stages relate to morality, has been addressed in research. Here is one example of a connection:

If children are approached with religious conceptualizations or moral reasoning at a lower level than they are functioning at in that area of thinking, they will consider the reasoning to be foolish. If they are approached at a higher level, either they will not comprehend it at all, or they will reconceptualize the ideas according to their present level. Thus, talk about God will be translated into ideas like Santa Claus or Casper the friendly ghost by children in the preoperational stage [Piaget’s first stage], and into ideas like an old man in the sky or a big father by children in the concrete operational stage [Piaget’s second stage]. If a concept is presented only at the preoperational or concrete operational stage and not reintroduced at the formal-operational state [stage three], the person’s conceptualization may remain rather primitive.

In other words, a child’s stage of cognitive development is directly correlated to what that child will “learn” morally. If children do not receive age-appropriate instruction, they will be unable or unwilling to integrate the doctrine or beliefs of their faith tradition into their daily lives and practices.

Communities of faith have a vested interest in narratives written specifically for adolescent audiences (often called “young adult fiction” or simply “YA”). While

\[51\] Ibid.

\[52\] Ibid., 69.
communities of faith cannot necessarily control what narratives children seek, they might be able to influence their choices. It is even less likely that the church can control the stories with which a teen connects. Again, though, the church can help make children and teens informed consumers of the quality of the messages being asserted in texts.\textsuperscript{53}

\textsuperscript{53} Ford and Wong, 316.
CHAPTER THREE
THE POWER OF MYTHIC CRITICISM

Determining the Literary Value of a Text through Use of Myth

All narratives are not created equal. Some popular stories might have little to offer beyond their entertainment value. Others may have lush, deep meanings, but are so hard to read that few people stay with them long enough to figure out what they are about. Apart from individual taste, how does one determine one work to be more interesting, valuable, or of a higher overall quality than the next? The field of literary criticism employs literary theory to evaluate and interpret the merits of works of literature. Literary criticism and theory are not the same thing, though their aims overlap and the two terms are often used synonymously.\(^\text{54}\) While one cannot critically analyze a text without theory, there is nowhere for theory to go if it is left unapplied to any sort of text. By looking briefly at the history of movements within the field of literary criticism, I will demonstrate the particular value of myth archetypal criticism for the present project.

Why Myth? Determining the Benefits of One Genre of Literary Criticism

Before the 1930s, critics who studied literature focused on history and, more specifically, the writer’s biography.\(^\text{55}\) An author’s body of work was viewed with an eye


\(^{55}\) Ibid, 9.
toward the social context and life experiences that led the writer to write that work at that time. Prior to the 1930s, works of literature were often judged on the basis of what moral value they had or what life lessons they could teach.\(^{56}\) However, between the 1930s and the 1950s, a “new criticism” called for a more rigorous and systematic approach.\(^{57}\) The “old” criticism noted authors’ similarities or departures from those who came before them, or sometimes waxed on about the text from an emotional standpoint (“Austen’s heroines make the reader cheerful!”). The “new” critics scoffed at this approach, as it seemed more sentimental than intellectual. Instead of working from the standpoint of extrinsic criticism (that is, looking at the history of the author and the cultural milieu contextualizing a work), they preferred to focus on intrinsic criticism, relying solely on the text itself for interpretable material.\(^{58}\)

Several general concepts of “new” critical interpretation are applied by particular schools of thought (e.g., feminist literary theory, Marxist theory, mythic theory, etc.). An author’s use of paradox, ambiguity, tension, irony, patterns, and symbols can figure heavily in determining the artistic aims and values of a particular work.\(^{59}\) From new criticism came other movements, each building on the last great phase of interpretation, each picking new aspects of texts on which to focus.


\(^{58}\) Parker, 14.

\(^{59}\) Ibid., 16-18.
After the new criticism (which is now considered rather old), structuralism materialized in the 1970s, seeking to pursue a less intrinsic criticism and a more holistic understanding of how ideas in a text related to other ideas. Interpretation relied more on comparing and contrasting, not just a close reading of a single work, with the ultimate goal of finding a single meaning. After structuralism came a deconstructionist movement, as critics rejected the quest for any one authoritative meaning, structure, or intent within the text, but rather sought many meanings constructed by the readers or critics themselves.

In concert with structuralism (and later the deconstructionist movement), formalism (which focuses on literary composition and language), psychoanalytic and Jungian criticism (relying most heavily on how archetypes and symbols in literature connect to an individual’s own experience), Marxist criticism (which uses the economic and social theories of Karl Marx to critique a narrative’s created world), and reader-response criticism (which focuses on the reader’s reaction to a text rather than the form or art of a text itself) arose, adding to the chorus of voices analyzing authors’ creations. Each of these borrowed from older methods, accepting parts of one, rejecting aspects of another. Still later, feminist criticism, gender and queer studies, new historicism/cultural studies, and post-colonial criticism entered the mix. These theories had the bones of the previous approaches (relying on symbols, responses of the reader, cultural background,

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61 Guerin et al., 377.
etc.), but also paid particular attention to marginalized groups such as women and the homosexual community. New historicism and cultural studies rediscovered the power of context and a given cultural time frame from their earlier predecessors; post-colonial criticism relies heavily on this approach, while looking more carefully at texts produced in cultures that have been colonized by larger imperial powers.

Applying the approach of mythic criticism to young adult fiction is useful in several ways. First, mythic structures reveal universal themes that appear in works for adults and children alike. Writers for young people are often asked, “Why don’t you write for adults?” Or, similarly, critics often imply that writing for teenagers is not as difficult or “literary” writing, i.e., creating works for adult audiences. Myth criticism demonstrates that those writing for young adults face as much if not more of a challenge, in that they are recreating universal, ancient themes for a more skeptical, critical, observant crowd. That is, young people might have more open imaginations, but are no more likely to suspend their disbelief in the face of poorly constructed characters and plots. Second, mythic criticism takes a more holistic approach to stories, allowing one to analyze individual signs and symbols as well as the whole picture. Mythic criticism teases out the authors’ appeal to the forming of identity and imagination, two important aspects in moral formation.

**Defining Myth Criticism and Its Relevance to Contemporary Fiction**

Myths are narratives that speak to common psychological and moral conditions and activities. The mythic critical approach believes that “Myth is fundamental, the
dramatic representation of our deepest instinctual life, or a primary awareness of [humans] in the universe, capable of many configurations, upon which all particular opinions and attitudes depend. Myth, so defined, is not just the stuff of Roman and Greek tales about promiscuous gods and jealous goddesses. It is the “dynamic factor in human society” that transcends time, unites the past with the present, and reaches toward the future by articulating the “spiritual and cultural aspirations” of a people. This is very similar to the function of narrative itself; indeed, myth, understood in this sense, and narrative are nearly synonymous.

Mythic and archetypal analysis has as its first step a cursory reading of a text. At this point, the critic identifies seven elements of a narrative (plot, character, structure, point of view, atmosphere, style, and theme). After these initial details are noted, a second reading of the text takes a more careful look at recurring images and themes throughout the whole work. One text may make frequent references to water (the setting may be by the ocean or lake; a character’s name may allude to water, some of the plot’s action might involve the presence of water, such as a drowning or a woman giving birth). Certain colors, shapes, creatures, numbers, or character types (like a “wild woman” or “wise old man”) may figure prominently. Finally, themes like creation, the emergence of a “hero’s journey,” or Armageddon may form the basis of the plot. Subsequent readings of a text, then, seek to uncover exactly what a text is saying by using these figures or

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63 Guerin et al., 184.
themes. Is the text trying to appeal to universal symbols, or is it trying to get the reader to question his or her assumptions taken for granted in society? Multiple readings are the scholarly method by which scholars of fiction create a “thick description” (to borrow a term from Clifford Geertz) of the world of the text.

The theory of literature analysis by way of myth has at its heart the idea that myths are not fictions but, instead, representations of reality. They are lifelike in theme and emotion, if not in plot.64 In terms of narrative, “myth is the imitation of actions near or at the conceivable limits of desire.”65 It is in the creation of such visions that one can see certain elements recur. It is no accident that certain themes appeal to both authors and readers alike. As Northrop Frye notes, “This affinity between the mythical and the abstractly literary illuminates many aspects of fiction, especially the more popular fiction which is realistic enough to be plausible in its incidents and yet romantic enough to be a ‘good story,’ which means a clearly designed one.”66

Frye goes on to delineate myth into three categories. First is the “undisplaced myth,” which generally has to do with supernatural forces—gods, demons, and angels. There are two worlds, one physical and one existential, the intersection of which forms the basis of the plot. This classification can be further divided into the “apocalyptic” and “demonic” genres, respectively, noting the specific point around which the action

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65 Ibid., 136.

66 Ibid., 139.
revolves. The second kind of myth is the “romance,” where mythic patterns are evident in the setting, as it mirrors the everyday realm of human experience. The third type of pattern is realism or irony, containing elements that lean toward one of the other two mythic narrative forms.

Within the three types of mythic form, scholars have devised patterns for analysis incorporating the work of several academic approaches, most often citing anthropology and psychoanalysis. Several notable anthropological scholars (like the Cambridge Hellenists and Sir James G. Frazer) determined from studies using their field’s methodologies that narratives from far-flung places, peoples, and even times demonstrated an “essential similarity of man’s chief wants everywhere and at all times.” Psychoanalysis picks up on these insights, asking why there are such commonalities, given the disparity in experience, and how personality (either individual or communal) affects or is affected by universal themes and representations. This tendency is most notable in the case of Sigmund Freud; many literary critics following Freud have used the schema of id, ego, and superego to analyze motivations of characters, and they look for representations of Oedipal complexes amidst human

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67 Ibid.
68 Ibid, 140.
69 Ibid.
71 Guerin et al., 192.
72 Ibid., 180.
conflict. It should be noted, though, that Freud (and the literary critics who use Freud) took a more nuanced approach even to fictional human psyches. In other words, not every motivation is Oedipal in nature; sometimes, in literature as it is in dreams, a “cigar is just a cigar”

Another important contribution to psychoanalytic criticism came from Freud’s disciple Carl Jung. Jung’s emphasis on the human mind’s creative capacity for symbolism, and on the importance of those symbols even if a person is not consciously aware of them, heavily influenced the idea of myth as universal language. Mythic criticism uses all of these insights in considering how stories are informed by shared common narratives.

Why does it matter if cultures share certain narrative traits? One answer is that the intention with which myths are told is to convey something essential for life through fiction. Almost all forms of religion incorporate myths, which carry a particular air of significance within the textual framework of a given faith. There is some disagreement about the place and function of myths between those scholars who concentrate on the historical reconstruction of similar narratives found in myriad cultures and those more concerned with the individual functions of myth in very specific times and places.

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76 Ibid.
Overall, it seems as though the studies of myth have followed a path similar to the development of literary theory as a whole. Groups of scholars embrace a specific aspect of myth (such as the language of their stories) and it catches on in wider scholarship. Then, a reaction forms to that movement, and another group takes its place as more fashionable and useful (such as those who see language as redundant and prefer to look at a myth’s cultural context instead).\footnote{Ibid., 3.} In a similar move, I intend to take what mythic literary criticism has to offer in the way of defining specific symbols or archetypes, offering interpretations for those symbols, and positing the moral “value” of archetypes, symbols, motifs, and themes in determining aspects of a story with which I might engage theologically.

Many archetypes and symbols recur throughout widely varying cultures, thereby demonstrating the unifying force of myth. However, it is generally only secular scholars (such as literary critics) who undertake the search for such similarities. They look at recurring symbols with an eye for their poetic and philosophical uses within a text, not to try to build bridges between cultures and faiths. Even so, such literary criticism often values the more positive virtues of a text. That is, sometimes literary critics find inherent beauty and worth in certain themes and tropes 	extit{because} they are universally visible in varied time frames and locations. Martha Nussbaum writes:

> What we really want is an account of ethical inquiry that will capture what we actually do when we ask ourselves the most pressing ethical questions. For the activity of comparison I describe is a real practical activity, one that we undertake in countless ways when we ask ourselves how to live, what to be; one that we
perform together with others, in search of ways of living together in a community, country, or planet. To bring novels into moral philosophy is not—as I understand this proposal—to bring them to some academic discipline which happens to ask ethical questions. It is to bring them into connection with our deepest practical searching, for ourselves and others, the searching for connections with which the influential philosophical conceptions of the ethical we originally developed, the searching we pursue as we compare these conceptions, both with one another and with our active sense of life. Or rather, it is to recognize that the novels are in this search already.⁷⁸

Here Nussbaum describes the relevance of the relationship between recurring universal themes and analyzing fiction. Literary criticism in this sense is the “deepest practical searching” that both endeavors encounter; novels’ plots echo these searches, encourage speculation by the seeking reader, and articulate potential moral viewpoints. Though the novel itself is not an echo of the reader’s world, as Nussbaum also points out here, it is an independent world, unlike our own.⁷⁹ Novels, like myths themselves, are islands apart, viewable through a spy glass and unable to be changed. The world they make visible is complete in and of itself. Whatever conclusions or lessons a reader gains from the text originate in his or her imagination. Novels catalyze thought and demonstrate intentions of the writer, but all further moral extrapolation is an aside, not generally an expansion of the world inside the text.

The use of mythic interpretation in connection with any work is value-laden and relative, as is any literary criticism. As Robert Crane argues, when looking at a text, “surely we ought to have at our command, collectively at least, as many different critical

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⁷⁹ Ibid.
methods as there are distinguishable major aspects in the construction, appreciation, and use of literary works.⁸⁰ In reading criticism, one must always keep in mind the social context and intentions of the critic in order to appreciate the contributions such perspectives have to offer. In doing mythic literary criticism, critics themselves should seek self-awareness, noting the starting point for making connections between communal myths and the specific novel at hand.

For this dissertation, the “mythic” quality of texts reviewed will be judged against that of the Christian story. Though the “Christian story” is actually many stories woven together to form one overarching (albeit always contested) meta-narrative, particular, readily identifiable literary coordinates from the faith will be used as examples in this dissertation.⁸¹ The first is the story of creation, including that of the natural world and the creatures in it, and how humans treat the world in light of the fact that God named them stewards of it. The second, the story of salvation, asks what or where is humanity in its relationship to the divine. That is, is humanity fallen? How did we fall? Who can save men and women from this state that Christians have often called sin? What is sin in the first place? The third Christian narrative to be considered is the theme of hope and life everlasting, embodied in stories that promise reconciliation and propose solutions in the face of fear of existential estrangement. These three stories can be traced in many of the

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narratives that Christians tell about themselves within their own communities and to the world.\textsuperscript{82}

\textbf{Myth and Themes from the Christian Story}

Creation is an overarching and mythic theme in the history of literature; throughout time, creation myths have had many specific values and purposes. One can usefully start with myths told about the beginning of all life (or of how the universe came to be in the first place) to demonstrate commonalities between cultures, and to see how mythic themes likewise appear in modern texts. Take for example the Mayan account of creation. The \textit{Popol Vuh}, a Mayan manuscript that contains one of the few examples of pre-Columbian myth, asserts that in the beginning the Hurakan (whose name means “Heart of Heaven”) passed over “a universe of water which lay in darkness. When he called out the first land appeared.”\textsuperscript{83} Hurakan and the other high gods agreed that animals should be made, then human beings. Human men were carved from wood and life was breathed into them to animate them, but these men were faithless and cruel to creation. Hurakan destroyed them in a great flood and powerful bird creatures devoured human flesh. Hurakan tried once more and made men from maize, creating four pairs of men and women; from these ancestors the Mayan people came.\textsuperscript{84}

\textsuperscript{82} Ibid., chapters 1-2, 4, 6.

\textsuperscript{83} Alexander Eliot, \textit{The Universal Myths} (Markham, Ontario: Penguin, 1976), 77.

\textsuperscript{84} Ibid.
In the above myth from the *Popover*, it is easy to see several similarities to many different creation myths from around the world. The myth of creation from the Book of Genesis is remarkably similar. God hovered over the formless void, moving over the “waters.” God formed the land, and then animals, and then Adam and Eve to be stewards of God’s creation. The stewards multiplied, but fell into wicked ways. God took one righteous man, Noah, and his family and told him to build an ark so that animals and humans may live after God smote the wicked with a flood. It was then from Noah that life flourished once again.

Both the Mayan and biblical myths hail from ancient pre-literate cultures and are very, very old stories. They come from disparate geographic locations, and the cultures that produced them had no contact with one another. Even so, there are important parallels between the stories: water imagery, the idea of a powerful deity who was the catalyst for the forming of the land and the first spark of life, humanity’s fall into wickedness and subsequent punishment, and the deity “trying again” to fill a “good” creation. This is a powerful example of creation-as-theme; the stories surrounding the beginning of things generally have one or more of these aspects in them, which are shared between unlike cultures and are repeated again and again in many others. Critics trace a pattern from the use of such tropes and can use them as guides to analyze what a text is trying to communicate.

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86 Ibid.
In order to critically engage symbols that constitute recurring archetypal imagery, critics observe and list the instances of a particular symbol and speculate as to its meaning. Stories of the origin of creation are not the only type of myth concerning the natural world, though they are frequently the place where common symbols are first encountered. The “fallenness” of humanity is another good example of a recurring myth (seen in Genesis with Adam and Eve, or in the Popover with the flood and its parallels to the biblical Noah). God creates a good world and then humanity falls from perfection. Men and women are alienated from both themselves and the natural world. The “goodness” of creation is often represented using images of a garden—the color green, growing things, a special tree, a fertile bloom, etc. When people fall prey to vices such as greed, sloth, or pride, they are forced to leave the “good” creation, or the garden. Thus, a myth critic looking at a children’s book like Frances Hodgson Burnett’s *The Secret Garden* could argue from just the title that the author is contributing to the creative retelling of an archetypal myth. Mary Lennox, the main character, is “fallen” by her own sin and that of her parents. She comes to a place that contains a secret garden, shut off from all people. She searches for and finds the garden, becomes its steward, brings it back to life, and brings redemption to her own brokenness, the ill health of the Manor’s heir Colin, and that of the natural world surrounding her new home, Misselthwaite Manor.

The myth critic sees here the natural decay, the girl fallen from the “good,” and the redemption as echoes of a sacred narrative found time and time again. There could even be a tree of good and evil in *The Secret Garden*, as Colin’s mother died after
climbing up to a high branch in the garden to read. Mythic criticism probes into the meaning of such symbols, seeking what lies beneath the surface of these universal images. In the case of *The Secret Garden*, mythic criticism would want to explore the way Frances Hodgson Burnett is asserting her Christian Science faith. The archetypal fall from (or of) the natural and the eventual return to nature for redemption (and, for some characters, physical relief), demonstrates Christian Science’s belief that healing power is found in God’s natural creation and the self’s immersion in it.

Along with creation, another theme often encountered in mythic literary criticism is that of the archetypal hero. Often in young adult fiction, a character who tries to tackle issues relating to faith, good, and evil is depicted in the form of a messiah or savior. The development of a messianic figure generally follows a coherent pattern that has been repeated time and time again across cultures. While the details of the character vary, the plot also follows a general map. The hero’s journey begins when he or she is carried away from everyday life, either willingly or unwillingly. In another location the hero encounters a “shadow presence” that guards the “threshold of adventure,” marking the beginning of the central plot conflict. Here the hero either triumphs and enters a quest in a new land, or dies and then seeks to defeat death. After encountering trial after trial, the hero ultimately triumphs and returns to everyday life transformed; the world is also changed, having been made safer or somehow different through the hero’s efforts.

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88 Ibid., 228.

89 Ibid.
The form of the hero’s journey, while universally repeated, is not without nuance. In *The Secret Garden*, Mary Lennox follows a similar path, though her heroism is far more subtle. She is forced away from her childhood home and family and suffers psychological trauma. Mary really goes out of her world only in her own mind; the garden she finds would probably not appear magical to most readers. However, it is a new world to her, and provides her an outlet for her energies. More like a hero’s quest, then, is Mary’s midnight sneak around the manor, during which she encounters Colin, who is at first her nemesis but later becomes her friend. Together they go to the garden and both are made whole. At the end of the story readers are left to assume that the two have gone their separate ways—Mary to a girls’ boarding school, Colin to a similar institution for young men. However, their respective internal “journeys” have allowed them to go into their new lives better adjusted and believing that there is “magic” in this world to guide them.

A more explicit example of the hero’s journey in young adult fiction can be found in C.S. Lewis’s *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. The Pevensie children are sent to live with an aged professor during the First World War. There they find a wardrobe that transports them from England to the land of Narnia, where they come to fulfill an ancient prophecy that “two sons of Adam and two daughters of Eve” will free the land from an unending winter and a ruthless dictator called the White Witch. The children make friends in the new land and come to do battle with the witch and her armies. Aided by Aslan, a powerful lion, the four succeed in freeing Narnia from evil’s clutches. The Pevensies then return to Narnia several times in the seven-book series. Each time, the
plot centers on their call and transport from their everyday lives, their battle to help good triumph over evil, their reward (a free, renewed, or everlastingly restored Narnia), and their eventual return to their daily life (except in the final book, wherein most of the Pevensies die in England, but are given eternal life in Narnia).

While the Pevensies are heroes, their story demonstrates that sometimes heroes are not necessarily the only saviors or messiahs in a story. Some heroes, like Aslan, do not make the whole journey themselves; rather, they fulfill certain functions or assist at specific points in the journey. These heroes need not go through the whole voyage in order to be a savior. In most cases, they present themselves as a sacrificial substitute, giving themselves up on behalf of another. In Narnia, Aslan offers himself as a sacrifice in place of Edmund, one of the Pevensie children, who has fallen prey to the White Witch’s temptation. Aslan is killed, but defeats death and returns to help the children ultimately win the battle. The text itself does not chronicle Aslan’s descent into death or his journey back to life; rather, he is a more elusive character whose motivations and adventures are left as a subtext to the complete cycle of the Pevensie children.

The final theme I will analyze in the following chapters is that of death and the afterlife. Death is often attributed to the fall of humankind (which relates back to the myths of creation). The manifestations of the death archetype are legion. Sometimes death is personified; often it comes on the heels of some animal creature, possessing an

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90 Dundes, 77.
unnatural intelligence and predatory inclination. Likewise, the afterlife is often painted like earth, only slightly better. In some cases, visions of eternal torment threaten the cruel and unjust. Generally, the death, whether symbolic or literal, portrayed in myths reflects social norms, taboos, and cultural inclinations regarding belief in an afterlife. For instance, mythic deaths in a remote tribal village are likely to focus on demons who attack the careless (like those who fail to kill a snake if they see one when hunting game).

While the death archetype fulfills many subtle functions in a story, its overarching use falls within two categories: as a potential precursor to judgment and as the pathway to transcendence. As mentioned above, death as justice giver (or, in some cases, as punisher or punishment) is more likely to occur in cultures less exposed to industrialized, modern life. Folk wisdom surrounding death is not necessarily naive, quaint, or entirely created out of superstition. Rather, these stories communicate important truths about living in a particular culture and environment. One example comes from an Algonquin myth about a pair of brothers named Manabozo. The elder Manabozo was at first alone, but a benevolent creative force changes a small forest creature into a brother for Manabozo. (This motif of taking all or part of another creature to create a companion for a solitary

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91 Eliot, 264.
92 Campbell, Myths to Live By, 42.
94 Ibid.
man is echoed in many other cultures. It is reminiscent of the biblical scene of God taking a rib from Adam to form Eve.) The elder brother, vain and proud, says to the younger, “Everything is frozen over. There are no gods. No one is more powerful than you and I. You didn’t know it, so I told you. You and I are alone on this earth.” The snake gods (who do in fact actually exist) hear this and kill the younger brother. The elder Manabozo mourns his younger brother, who returns from the grave as a shadow, but the older brother refuses to let him into the house they used to share. The one most high creator condemns the lesser snake gods for their crime of murder. The elder Manabozo is initiated into the role of the hero for resisting the shadow of his murdered brother, and is granted extraordinary powers in a “medicine bag.”

Other versions of this myth exist as well. While the versions each add culture-specific details, in all of them a proud human declares himself and his brother (who was formerly an animal) to be lords over creation. A trickster figure or jealous god causes the elder brother to suffer for his price by inflicting suffering upon the younger brother. The younger brother returns to “haunt” the elder brother (who mourns but still does not accept the younger one’s return). A more benevolent deity restores order by taking the brother’s pain and using it to transform the man into a supernatural hero. This myth hints at several taboos and social norms. First, the younger brother’s birth was “abnormal,” as he was transformed from an animal, not created human. The younger brother’s fate

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95 Ibid., 664.
96 Ibid., 665.
97 Ibid., 667.
denotes a tribal belief that an abnormal birth predicts a malevolent force and a cursed future. The story also warns against humans rising too close to divinity on their own, lest they offend other gods (often, embodied natural forces). In any case, the myth shows that death is punishment, not just for the one who dies, but sometimes for those close to the offender. But also, avoiding the contamination that death brings can initiate an unexpected cosmic boon.

Often, though, death and suffering (of the hero or other characters) is not the ultimate answer—it is itself the question. What happens in or after death? Are people and the natural world created anew? Is the hero’s journey ended or just continued? Or is there something else, something so unlike current experience that humans cannot even imagine it? For most, the answer to these questions remains a mystery. Much mythic speculation, though, posits that death is a beginning, and that the spiritual energy of a soul can transcend mortality. Take, for example, the story of Odysseus. Calypso, a sea nymph, imprisons Odysseus on her island of Ogygia. She entreats him to stay, promising that, “in the calm possession” of her domain, he will be “beyond the reach of death.”

Odysseus replies:

Goddess and queen, do not make this a cause of anger with me. I know the truth of everything that you say. I know that my wise Penelope, when a man looks at her, is far beneath you in form and stature; she is a mortal, you are immortal and unaging. Yet, notwithstanding, my desire and longing day by day is still to reach my own home and to see the day of my return. And if this or that divinity should shatter my craft on the wine-dark ocean, I will bear it and keep a bold heart within

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98 Ibid.

99 Nussbaum, 365.
me. Often enough before this time have war and wave oppressed and plagued me; let new tribulations join the old.\textsuperscript{100}

Here Odysseus acknowledges the perils of life and the inevitable fate of death if he leaves the immortal’s lair. However, even so, he would much rather live with his human wife than stay forever with another woman (or woman-creature, as the case may be). Odysseus praises living despite the anticipation that it will end in death; “let new tribulations join the old,” he boldly proclaims.

In mythic transcendence, it is not just the negative value of death—an escape from suffering and pain—that makes it so full of potential. Plato demonstrates this point of view when he defends “the aspiration to transcend one’s humanity as a coherent and valuable ethical aim for and in a human life.”\textsuperscript{101} Pursuing the “good” or the ethical (which varies depending on which myth one references) might lead to an eternal union with the ultimate good. The afterlife is subject to as many mythic representations as death itself, if not more. The spectrum is as vast as the infinity it seeks to represent. Heaven could be paradise, or it could be much like earth, cold and distant (visible in the nighttime sky), or still “further up and further in,” a land like C.S. Lewis’s Narnia. Hell might be like descending levels of terror or merely banality, like the River Styx flowing into Hades. In any case, the afterlife frequently appears in modern literature as a representation of possibility and promise, second chances or ultimate justice. Mythic literary criticism contends that how a modern author treats the concept of death reveals

\textsuperscript{100} Homer, \textit{The Odyssey} (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), V, 215-224.

\textsuperscript{101} Nussbaum, 385.
much about the author’s overall intent. As literary theorist Northrop Frye remarks, this “view of literature shows us literature as a total form and literary experience as part of the continuum of life, in which one of the poet’s functions is to visualize the goals of human work.”

After the initial identification and “deep read” of a narrative story, mythic criticism is not satisfied simply to understand how the story uses these classic themes, motifs, or archetypes, nor does it settle for comparing the myth to cross-cultural treatments of the same concept. Rather, it goes on to compare the use of stories of creation, heroes and saviors, and hope everlasting to a larger social and moral framework. Frye notes, “In other words the social context of art is also the moral context. All artists have to come to terms with their communities ... in terms of his moral significance, the poets reflects, and follows at a distance, what his community really archives through its work.”

Why Myth?

A critique leveled against newer works of fiction is that they read too much like older ones. A contemporary best-selling series like *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* may seem, to some, to “borrow” from other money-making series like *Harry Potter*. A

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102 Frye, 115.
103 Ibid., 113.
reader could cite obvious parallels. Both stories feature young adolescent male protagonists who are missing one or both parents. Each boy discovers that he has special powers that must be used to save the world. Harry Potter and Percy Jackson are forced away from the only (albeit difficult) home life they have known, thrown together with a band of similarly powerful young people, and sent on a quest to defeat an old, powerful threat they had somehow intuitively known about since birth.

The similarities in the stories could be viewed as a lack of creativity on the second author’s part, as one series trying to ride the coattails of the other to success.\footnote{Ibid.} However, one who looks at both stories (or any other) from the perspective of a literary critic can realize that the stories are similar for a powerful reason: their narratives are derived from deeply rooted sociological and psychological themes, symbols, and archetypes that can be traced back to the first recorded stories humans ever told. Modern young adult fiction writers are not lazy; they are accountable to a vast literary tradition. Thus, conducting even a cursory literary analysis of texts to be used within a curriculum of moral development is useful, as it allows the practitioner to borrow insights and moral critiques of texts from fields other than just theology. Adolescents are by their very nature suspicious of authority, especially the religious authority valued by their parents and caretakers.\footnote{James W. Maddock, “The Future Without History: Youth’s Crisis of Commitment,” \textit{Religious Education}, 71, no. 1 (January-February 1976): 7-8.} Thus, having a background outside of this tradition can help one build an argument for why teens should read these books in the first place. It is not because an
adult is telling them to do so, but because they connect adolescents (who are also desperate for connection) with a vast network from the past, present, and future.  

The Difference between Mythic Literary Criticism and Analyzing Theology in Narrative

Though literary criticism and narrative theology may have similarities, mythic literary critique has at its heart a different perspective, aim, and goal from narrative theology. Literary criticism seeks to examine a text from multiple viewpoints. As I have noted, myth-critical analysis involves multiple readings, first gaining an understanding of the plot, characterization, and setting elements and then moving on to themes, theoretical aspects, and finally the deeper meanings latent in the author’s work. The critic asks, “What is the author really trying to communicate?” The assumption is that there is an underlying message contained within the lines printed in the book.

A good example of this search for deeper meaning is found in Laura Miller’s recent work, The Magician’s Book. Miller, cofounder of the widely read website Salon.com and regular book critic for the New York Times Book Review, writes here about how she first encountered C.S. Lewis’s The Chronicles of Narnia as a child. She loved Narnia and all the people in it when she was young. She loved Aslan the lion; she was wholly absorbed by the Pevensies’ characters. However, when she was in her teens, she learned the “secret” meaning of Lewis’ work—Narnia was a thinly veiled retelling of

107 Ibid.

mythic themes from the Christian story. Aslan was the Savior. The Pevensies, or “sons of Adam and daughters of Eve,” were heroic representatives of the human race. Later books in the Narnia series even had a garden, forbidden fruit, a tempter, a fall from perfection. Miller was horrified; she felt she had been duped by her beloved novels. She was not interested in Christian myth or even in religion; she wanted a fantasy world to which she could escape. As a literary critic, she had read beyond the words that were printed to realize the “truth” of Lewis’ work—an attempt through myth to convert readers to belief in the story of Christ.

Miller would have been less disturbed had she recognized Lewis’s masterpieces as examples of narrative theology, not Christian allegory with an implicit evangelistic intent. Narrative theology does not seek to layer the written word to find some other “hidden” meaning or authorial intent. Rather, the narrative speaks for itself and one does not try to get behind the text. In narrative theology, Narnia is Narnia. It is not necessarily Heaven, or paradise lost, or a metaphor for our own Earth. Aslan is not Jesus; he is just himself. The Chronicles of Narnia are their own world, one that has to do with ours only in the sense that we are the ones reading about what happened there. To assign the characters, plots, or settings some hidden parallel to something in our world is not entirely the point. Narnia is a narrated place. It was once perfect, but it fell. While the story of its fall mirrors that of the Bible (as it tells of humans falling prey to temptation), narrative theology does not see this as a reinforced indictment of the reader’s sin. It is,

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109 Stiver, 136.
rather, a narrative description of Narnia’s sin that could inform readers as to how to think about their existential reality. Aslan is the savior of Narnia. Aslan is not the Savior of the reader’s Earth anymore than Jesus was literally a lion. Both died to pay a debt for fallen humanity, yes. But the Narnia story is its own distinctive reality; the reader’s Earth and the reader’s Jesus are another story altogether. Narrative theology would see Narnia as Lewis’s narrative vision of the Christian story, interacting with the Christian story’s world, but not necessarily a retelling of it.

This is not to say that narrative theology sees story as irrelevant to readers. Quite the contrary, in fact. Narrative theology goes to a text looking for what the world of the story narrates theologically to a seeking heart. Aslan is a symbol insofar as he encompasses the idea of savior in a new way (and a new world!). As Paul Ricoeur notes, “The text is not only something written, but is a work, that is, a singular totality. As a totality, the literary work cannot be reduced to a sequence of sentences which are individually intelligible; rather, it is an architecture of themes and purposes which can be constructed in several ways.”  

Ricoeur sees a “fusion” of the horizon of the world of the reader and the world of the text; it is here, he believes, that a reader can learn and apply meaning from a text’s work to his or her own life. Seeing Aslan as the redeemer for fallen Narnia opens the cognitive door for a reader, especially a young one. One might think to oneself: “Aslan is for Narnia as Jesus is for our world, perhaps; he defeated death

\[\text{\textsuperscript{110}}\text{ Ibid.}\]

\[\text{\textsuperscript{111}}\text{ Ibid.}\]
as well.” The worlds are not the same, but their stories meet at a narrative horizon that can contribute to theological understanding. Literary criticism, for its part, does not see this. There is the story world, the reader’s world, and the interpretation (both hidden and blatant) that the reader’s world extracts from the story. In contrast, narrative theological understanding permits the story world to stand on its own.
CHAPTER FOUR  
CREATION 

Moral Formation: Narrative in Action 

Communities of faith, like the Christian church, have a vested interest in narratives written specifically for adolescent audiences. While churches cannot necessarily control what narratives children choose to read, they might be able to influence their choices. Even in the teenage years, as young people seek a greater sense of independence, the church can help young people become informed consumers of the messages asserted or implied in the texts they read.\(^{112}\) This chapter will explore the ways in which the theme of creation is narrated in two popular young adult novels, and what developmental impact such narratives might have on moral formation. First, myth critique will identify common archetypes and themes with which readers can identify and connect within a fictional creation. Next, a theological analysis of the highlighted characters and themes will further develop the two novels’ relevance for young adult moral formation. 

Narrating Creation in Two Young Adult Novels 

No one knows for sure what made up the universe “in the beginning,” but countless modern and mythic narratives have speculated about its origins. I will look at two young adult novels that explore the nature of creation: M.T. 

\(^{112}\) Donald Ratcliff, ed. 316.
Anderson’s *Feed* and Terry Pratchett’s *Nation*. These texts deal loosely with creation stories and, in doing so, ask questions about the meaning of the created world (including both nature and human-altered Earth). I will first identify the archetypes and symbolic imagery used in *Feed* through mythic literary analysis and then move to a theological assessment. Following a similar discussion of *Nation*, I will synthesize the two analyses by seeking to answer questions that arise from the theological and literary critiques. In comparing and contrasting these two narratives, I will identify the moral coordinates by which the characters of the novels lead their lives—and by which readers are invited to think about their own lives. I will then suggest ways in which those moral coordinates may be used to stimulate dialogue with teenagers regarding their beliefs about the nature of creation.

**A Myth-Critical Analysis of Feed**

M.T. Anderson, the author of *Feed*, has said that his book is not a “futuristic novel.” He instead thinks of it “as a novel that uses images from an imagined future in an almost allegorical way to discuss things we’re dealing with now.” An allegory is generally thought of as a text that contains “a meaning beneath the surface.” Usually there is “a one-to-one relationship; that is, one idea

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113 In this chapter, when I refer to a novel as a whole, their names will be in italics (*Feed* and *Nation*). However, when I refer to “the feed,” I am writing about an important plot device of the former book; when I refer to “Nation,” I am referring to the island in which much of Pratchett sets his plot.

or object in the narrative stands for only one idea or object allegorically.\textsuperscript{115}

Thus, interpreting the imagery in \textit{Feed} is relatively straightforward, since the author himself admits that deeper, readily identifiable “meanings” lie within the text.

\textbf{Synopsis of Feed}

In Anderson's dystopian future, the titular “feed” refers to technology, which functions equally as search engine, entertainment system, communication network, and educational aid. But its greater and more subtle purpose is to facilitate the consumption of goods and to mold consumer tastes into more easily defined categories. Protagonist Titus and his friends all have the feed connected to their brains; the story's action starts when the group goes to the moon for spring break. While there they meet Violet Durn, a homeschooled, nontraditional beauty who quickly attracts Titus with her quirkiness. Titus, his friends, and Violet go to a club called “Rumble Spot,” where activists hack into the young people’s computerized brains and cut them off from “the feed,” which is an outgrowth of the Internet that has been linked directly into participant's brains without the need for intermediaries.

The kids wake up in a hospital, where Titus and Violet grow closer. After returning to Earth, they spend more and more time together. Violet expresses her feelings against the feed, proposing the idea that independent thought, choice, and

\textsuperscript{115} Guerin et al, 82.
knowledge are far better for humans and the dying earth than the corporate-filtered easy life offered by the feed. She tries to interact with Titus and his friends while staying true to these ideals, but Titus’s friends are threatened by Violet, an unpredictable enigma who thinks too much (or, at least, does too much thinking for herself).

Later, Violet reveals that she had not received the feed at birth like other children. Moreover, her father was not able to afford the best brain-to-feed hardware and software when she did get it. Thus, while Titus and his friends were able to recover completely and quickly from the hacker’s attack, Violet’s brain hardware and feed software were more severely damaged. After several attempts to fix the problem, Violet tells Titus, no one was able to help her. Her body and brain will deteriorate until death, since the feed controls so many intrinsic physical systems.

While the humans’ (particularly Americans’) rape of the natural world slowly eats away at the possibility of Earth's ability to sustain life, Violet slips deeper into feed malfunction. She loses control of her body and starts to lose memories and cognitive function. Titus, his friends, and the rest of humanity likewise suffer from lesions and other maladies, though their pain seems mitigated by the feed’s control over their emotional and physical response to pain. Not wanting to have to think about the reality of Violet’s accusations regarding America’s commercialization and resource exploitation, he pulls away from her as she becomes sicker. When Violet is bedridden and almost dead, Titus goes to
see her. Violet’s father blames Titus for her death, criticizing his aloof treatment of her after she became sick. Titus stays with Violet at the very end, whispering to her that he knows why people must “fight the feed.” The story ends ambiguously, not indicating clearly whether the dying Violet is aware of Titus’s presence or whether this scene offers any ultimate redemption.

The Symbolism of Nature in Feed

Feed begins, “We went to the moon to have fun, but the moon turned out to completely suck.”¹¹⁶ The moon as a symbol has held great sway in both mythic and scientific circles; here its presence immediately sets the stage for a commentary on creation. It controls the tides and keeps many of Earth’s essential natural systems functioning so as to support life. The moon also has held a significant place in myth, as it is generally viewed as originating at the time of creation, and has been elevated to the status of a god in some cultures.¹¹⁷

The fact that Feed says the moon “sucked,” despite all its historically ascribed importance and eerie beauty, alerts the reader right away to the narrative world’s stance on creation and nature. Nature as we know it today is no more; many animals, plants, fresh water supplies, and the former protection from the sky’s ultraviolet rays are all gone. All mystery and beauty have been forgotten, so

¹¹⁶ Anderson, 3.

much so that people travel to the moon for vacation, only to find it void not only of oxygen and gravity, but of any other sort of interest whatsoever.

Within *Feed’s* account of nature (within which I include outer space) are many important symbols. The moon is technically “dead,” as it cannot sustain life. Also, there is no life in the vacuum of space, and most celestial bodies that we know of are inhospitable to even the simplest organisms. However, the heavens are alive with potential and divine energy—they are the opposite of dead. Outer space and the sky and sun often represent creative energy, consciousness, and the passage of time and life.\(^{118}\) The sun and sky are typically presented as the father or male, the moon as the female or mother.\(^{119}\)

Anderson’s treatment of the heavens indicates that human use of them for personal gain and consumption has led only to destruction. If the realm outside the Earth belongs to no one, or perhaps to divine entities, then humans tamper with that realm at their peril. The youths in *Feed* who visit outside and look at the sky see no wonder there; Titus tells Violet that “the red planet [Mars] was a piece of shit” and “dumb.”\(^{120}\) Violet is disgusted, not believing that someone could dismiss an entire planet so frivolously, but that is how people regard space in


\(^{119}\) Ibid.

\(^{120}\) Anderson, 37.
Feed. There is not much to consume, that which has been put there to consume is
gone, and now it is worse than dead—it is uninteresting.

Many of the functions of a human’s brain are replaced by “the feed,” a
corporate run, Internet-like system. The portrayal of the natural world in this
book demonstrates a loss of creativity and freedom of consciousness; the feed, by
its nature, replaces thought. It does not, technically take over thought; rather, it
records a person’s wants, needs, fears, likes, and dislikes and then creates a
profile aimed at marketing to them. Through marketing, then, corporations try to
bring people closer to one another so that there is little difference among
individuals and everyone likes the same thing. Original thinking? Gone. Also,
as further evidence of the loss of creative power, humans can no longer reproduce
without significant medical intervention. They must go to the “conceptionarium”
because the ambient radiation has made everyone sterile or barren. Just as the sun
and moon are no longer part of the life cycle, neither is their corresponding
fatherhood or motherhood.121 The “mother” of this world is dead and humanity is
on its own. Like the sea, poisoned rivers also denote the interruption of “the
flowing of time into eternity.”122

121 Kenneth L. Golden, Uses of Comparative Mythology (New York: Garland, 1992), 89.
122 Ibid., 100.
Archetypal Characters in Feed

Humans destroyed the natural world in *Feed*. The protagonists of the story were not solely responsible, but the generations they represent were. The characters of *Feed* are falling apart in much the same way as the world around them: their skin is falling off, and their minds are crumbling from the effects of having computers hardwired into their nervous systems.

The first archetypes a reader encounters are male characters—Titus, Link, and Marty. In the derelict world of *Feed*, Titus represents the “Wise Old Man” archetype. This is not necessarily saying much, since most people’s thinking ability has atrophied to the extent that few people can read. Also, Titus does not do well in “School™.” In this context, however, his school struggles are actually indicative of his wiser status. School™ teaches students how to decorate their rooms, how to use the feed, and how to exploit the world to their advantage. That Titus does poorly in learning exploitation speaks of his potential for redemption.

Titus is initially as much the fool as any other character in *Feed*. He is of his culture; he cannot read, he does not like to think, and he consumes and refines his consumption based on popular taste. However, when Violet is introduced, she notes that he is the “only one of them who uses metaphor.” He notices how alienating it can be not to be in community, and that the corporate culture that has raped his world is not the ideal his friends think it is. As Violet’s health

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123 Anderson. 63.
deteriorates and she eventually dies, Titus becomes aware that to really live is to “fight the feed.” He comes to grasp irony, nuance, and arcane knowledge that is available to all but meaningless to most. He is redeemed. From the beginning to the end of Titus’s transformation, he becomes more and more like Campbell’s “Wise Old Man archetype.”¹²⁴ Titus is the necessary backdrop to the appearance of a hero later, even if his body is too deteriorated for him to be the hero himself.

The counterpart to this Wise Old Man is the “trickster” archetype found in Marty and Link and, additionally, in the female characters Quendy, Loga, and Calista. They are the ones who keep Titus from being a hero. These characters surround him with mediocrity and pull him back into the void of thoughtlessness. On the other hand, Violet represents the soul mate, “the Sophia figure, Holy Mother, the princess or beautiful lady”—incarnation of inspirations and spiritual fulfillment (cf. the Jungian anima).¹²⁵ Violet is home schooled and did not get the feed until later in life. She can read, as her father is a professor of “dead languages”; she does not want to consume, but to learn. As Titus describers her, “She was the most beautiful girl, like ever. She was watching our stupidity.”¹²⁶ Titus’s ability to see Violet as beautiful indicates that he is capable of thinking


¹²⁵ Guerin et al., 187.

¹²⁶ Anderson, 13.
and feeling something other than what the feed tells him to think and feel; in this way, Violet begins to liberate Titus from the feed’s control.

Symbols, Archetypes, and Moral Formation

Adolescents around age 14 and older (the intended audience of *Feed*) are at a stage of cognitive development where they are moving out of egocentrism and broadening their experiences in the world through social relationships. Teenagers’ ability to make high-level moral conclusions (when presented with a question of what they think is right versus wrong) also continues to develop and solidify in this stage, and their personality becomes more codified. Thus, introducing symbolism and archetypal characters with whom they can easily identify (that is, characters their own age facing similar decisions and moral dilemmas) sets the stage for possible *theological* thinking (as discussed in the following section). Meanwhile, myth analysis allows practitioners of teenage moral formation to identify within *Feed* symbols and characters that the teenagers are implicitly experiencing within the text.

**Narrative Theology in *Feed*: The World Was Dead to Begin With**

*Feed* shows significant interest in with creation-related themes. As we initiate an analysis of the implicit theology of *Feed*, there are several questions worth considering. First, one must ask what it means to the Christian to be

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127 Miller, 59.
created in the image of God. If humans surrender their thoughts and bodies to technology, what remains (if anything) of the divine likeness? When humans become alienated from their original created selves, what is the nature of one person’s relationship to another? Second, when was it that humans were expelled from “Eden” in *Feed?* When the natural world adapts and persists (even in a small way) amidst humanity’s decline, what does that say about creation? What is humankind’s proper relationship to creation? *Feed* raises all these questions and suggests answers that vary from hopeful warnings to dire, irreversible indictments.


The story of the creation of humankind found in Genesis begins, “Then God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness. ... So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them, male and female he created them.’ ”128 What does it mean to be created in the image of God? One interpretation of this statement has “often been taken to refer to particular human traits, such as rationality, moral agency, or the capacity for love.”129 In *Feed*, humans have forsaken much of their rationality, thought, and consciousness to the feed.

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At first the feed seemed like a good thing, in that it sent all the information available on the Internet directly into one’s brain. The feed allows Titus and his friends to retain their moral agency and capacity to love. However, their actions and thoughts display the fact that the feed makes it easy for these qualities to atrophy. As the story begins—Titus and his friends are devoid of creativity, passion, and thought. The moon symbolizes this wasteland; with the disappearance of mystery, so too did the human mind lose its passion for the divine. However, after Titus meets Violet, the novel moves to a second section, “Eden.” Violet teases Titus out of his stupor, showing him that he too has the capacity to be more than the feed, more than a slave to consumerism. Titus resists, as he intuitively knows it is easier to be stupid and boring than self-aware and concerned.

Here is the first central theological conflict of Feed. Humans have exercised their will over the natural world and all the creatures in it.\textsuperscript{130} However, humans did not use their agency to move closer in relationship to God, each other, or anything else in the natural world. Instead of being stewards of the material, but still looking to know God more, they absorbed themselves in the finite.\textsuperscript{131} As a result, the likeness and image of God became obscured until humans did not remember what God could look like in the first place. In “Eden” Violet shows


\textsuperscript{131} Ibid., 144.
Titus that he has kept eating of the tree of knowledge; this fact scares Titus because he begins to understand what doing so has made him sacrifice in return.

The human possession of “God’s image” from Genesis is also frequently interpreted as an expression of relationship. As Titus and most of the characters in the book willfully ignore everything outside themselves, or “use” people or things only in a spirit of consumerism, where is the image of God? Perhaps, much as in mythic symbolism, it is evidenced in what they are lacking.

If God’s image is one of corporate well-being (after all, God said, “Let us make mankind in our image”), the gradual deterioration of the bodies in *Feed* indicates the reverse: the destruction of lives. In this way, the well-being of humanity is intimately linked to all of creation. If humans fail to act as stewards of each other or of God’s creation, they do so at their own peril. The world may be dead, but hope remains when Titus remembers a sense of love and moral agency (namely, that it is better to “fight the feed”).

**Genesis 2:18: It is Not Good for Man to be Alone**

Later in the second creation account in the Book of Genesis, it is written that God created a partner for man, for “it is not good that the man should be

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alone.”

This too is argued in *Feed’s* “Eden,” where Titus (the “Wise Old Man” of his group) notes the importance of connection and community in the face of existential solitude. Titus notes, “I guess if I’m honest? Then I was hoping to meet someone on the moon.”

He also notices that, in the midst of outer space, “you need the noise of your friends.” The desolation, so much like what was happening to the earth, has scared Titus enough that he begins to seek something other. He finds this in spades with Violet. She is a mirror for Titus, showing him all that he is choosing to lack in letting the feed think for him. At first Titus is grateful for this new companion. But this relationship is *too* real; Titus does not want to know what he is really missing. When Violet is dying, he refuses to be wrested from the feed’s grasp. He tries to stay in Eden (the title of the first section of the book), or even in Utopia (the third section in the book), but fails.

He realizes that he, like the rest of humanity, was evicted long ago of his own choosing. His attempts at forming relationship and community are defiant and hopeful in light of what the feed has conditioned him to want, but he does not fully realize the sacrifices necessary in order to regain community until Violet is already gone.

In denying connectivity, the people of *Feed* once again deny their fundamental likeness to God. “In their various communities, human beings are to

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135 Genesis 2:18.

136 Anderson, 5.
be understood not merely as the image of God’s rule over creation, but also the image of his inward nature. The inner fellowship of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit is represented in the fundamental human communities, and is manifested in them through creation and redemption.”

The feed claims that it can bring everyone together through instantaneous communication and access to the same information. However, it actually denies community in two fundamental ways. First, many people who lack material resources do not have the feed in the first place. The poor and marginalized are therefore barred from most any participation in the global community and have no way to voice the injustices done to them by those able to consume the feed. Second, the feed tries to lessen individuality by molding every person into a single, identical package that responds to the same advertisement. If each individual is unique in the sight of the creator, then destroying individuality is a sin against God’s intention in creation.

As individuals become isolated from relationship, the image of God becomes obscured and its communal aspect is denied. Though being connected through a virtual network has superficial similarities to human community, the feed does not promote fellowship with other people; its seduction is purely the ease with which people can access goods, services, information, and entertainment. Titus and Violet’s relationship shows that actual human contact is

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137 Moltmann, 241.

138 Ibid., 242.
the first real step in recreating a community that evidences the communal aspect of the image of God.

Genesis 1:28-30: Dominion Over the Land

The feed’s effect on human relationships with one another is echoed in its effect on human relationships to the natural environment. Genesis, after telling us that humanity was created in God’s likeness, goes on to say:

“And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.” ... God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it. ... See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit, you shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.”

What does Feed say about proper relationship to the natural world? In the world of the novel, most of the Third World is opposed to the influence of American corporations. Violet, who is educated enough to voice the concerns of marginalized populations, argues that humans were meant to be stewards of creation, not tyrants over it. Though humans do have the ability to do with the animals and life-giving land whatever they will, that does not mean they should. The irony is that with proper stewardship, the earth has unlimited potential and nearly unlimited resources; however, abusing the earth leaves it unable to regenerate and continue the processes necessary for sustaining human life.

139 Genesis 1:28-30.
Wealthy humans damn themselves (and thus everyone else) to annihilation, because they claim dominance rather than servanthood. Violet’s father drives this point home to Titus when the youth comes to visit Violet on her deathbed. Her father says, “‘We Americans … are interested only in the consumption of our products. We have no interested in how they were produced, or what happens to them’—he pointed at his daughter—‘what happens to them once we discard them, once we throw them away.’” Anderson argues in *Feed* that when men and women “throw away” their true responsibility for dominion, that dominion will eventually crumble.

### Defining “Moral Coordinates”

Having identified literary tropes and theological themes important for analyzing *Feed*, insofar as the novel can be useful in the context of young adult Christian moral formation, we can now identify and explore the “moral coordinates” of the text. The moral coordinates of a story are the set of assumptions that form the unique worldview of the story within which the characters make moral choices. These coordinates function behind the implicit moral reasoning of the characters and are the backdrop necessary to understand why characters behave as they do. The moral coordinates of a specific story are benchmarks from which readers can compare their own situations, choices, and

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140 Ibid., 290.

141 Cook, 416-417.
patterns of moral reasoning to those of individual characters or the world of a novel.

The worlds of *Feed* and *Nation* (like any of the other story worlds we will discuss in chapters 5 and 6) are not the world of the reader. As such, one cannot assume that the tenets of Christianity (or any religion or moral code) that exist in the reader’s world need apply (or exist) in the world of a novel. However, a fictional world can have rules, religion, or moral codes and consequences within which the characters operate, in which they believe, or which they use in making moral decisions within their stories. Locating these tenets and then discussing how they affect characters’ moral decision making processes are like drawing the map of a new city. Once a reader understands the moral compass points from which the characters are operating in making their moral choices, that reader can then begin to bring the decisions and actions of the characters into conversation with his or her own worldview, circumstances, and opinions. The argument of this dissertation is that practitioners of moral formation can use the books examined in this project particularly well, because each world has such a dense, unique, and morally provocative set of coordinates that readers can engage intellectually and emotionally.

**The Moral Coordinates of Feed**

In order to be a moral agent, one must have free will and an intellect capable of perceiving right action from wrong. History has proven that humans
retain their moral agency even when their freedom to act is compromised by a fear of repercussions.\textsuperscript{142} Granted, it is easier to act on one’s convictions of right and wrong when one’s life is not at risk. However, even people trapped in oppressive regimes still possess the ability to make decisions they deem morally correct. Unless their brains have been physically altered, they still retain the ability to distinguish right from wrong. They may choose to act in ways contrary to their moral beliefs, and thus condition their minds to believe that what was once wrong is now morally acceptable. Still, at any point humans have the ability to embrace a different set of moral coordinates and change their beliefs and behaviors to reflect this new alignment.\textsuperscript{143}

The above discussion on free will is an important preface when we consider the moral coordinates with which Titus and his friends are operating in the world of \textit{Feed}. As demonstrated first through a literary critical view of the text, Titus’s world is dead. Independent thought has disappeared, and hope has gone with it. How did this happen? A major contributing factor, if not the single cause, is that humans surrendered their free will and intellect to the feed and the corporations that run it. The first decision a person has to make in Titus’s world is whether to accept the feed or to reject it. In an action analogous to the Christian sacrament of infant baptism, parents make the decision to graft infants into the

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Langdon Gilkey, \textit{Blue Twilight} (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 2001), 85.
\item Ibid, 86.
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feed’s fold shortly after their birth. Most parents believe this is a wise move, so that their children will fit in with society (and because the technology melds better with a growing body than with an adult). This first decision, then, to buy in to the corporate mindset is taken out of the hands of an individual.

Since this decision has been imposed on the child, his or her moral agency has been compromised by another. The feed then begins the subtle (and not-so-subtle) attack on the intellect. Commercials, entertainment, and “School™” undermine individualism, thinking for oneself, and the existence of alternatives other than the feed. Thus, the growing child must contend with the unhappy reality that he or she is, essentially, a slave. The feed is linked to vital bodily systems. Once linked, a human literally cannot survive without it. The body is compelled to eat food that, while the only thing that can sustain it, is also slowly poisoning it.

Unfortunately, realizing one’s residual free will and taking charge of one’s intellect is difficult and improbable—especially for Titus and his friends, who are wealthy citizens of the dominant world superpower. In Titus’s world, one is encouraged to use “free will” to consume. School™ exists to educate young people how to best use the feed to purchase and be entertained. To be “free” is to be idle, and to use the intellect to buy things is to allow the feed to mold you into the ideal consumer (that is, just like everyone else). Coveting material things and exploiting the world and everyone else in it is the norm. Titus frequently makes reference to the evils of the corporations running everything, but he (like all those
around him) either ignores or rationalizes his part in the problem. He lets the feed dictate the moral coordinates in which he stands—for thinking too much hurts. Titus, along with the rest of wealthy, idle America, sets its course toward complete intellectual and moral destruction.

The greatest “sin” evidenced here is what Paul Tillich called “concupiscence,” the desire for the finite.\footnote{Gilkey, 147.} It is not just that the characters of \textit{Feed} want food, shelter, or material goods with which to sustain themselves. Rather, the pleasurable and consumable becomes the only direction of the conscious; the mind wholly craves to possess and dominate the entire creation.\footnote{Ibid.} Living in this way turns the soul away from the divine and results in “the attempt to cram the whole world into one’s mouth.”\footnote{Ibid., 147.} Titus and those around him model this exact mindset, the result being eloquently expressed in Tillich’s idea of sin or “estrangement.” Titus is estranged even from curiosity about something beyond himself—the moon did, after all, “completely suck.” The consequence of this sin “inwardly is an utter emptiness of soul, with no real relations or vocation in life. And objectively it means, granted the technical power to do so, the ultimate destruction of nature.”\footnote{Ibid.}
Violet (and moreso her father) represents the free will and intellect liberated from ultimate estrangement. She tries to act as a catalyst for Titus to escape as well. She demonstrates the different moral coordinates one needs in order to navigate a course toward the good. She shows Titus the power in memory. She shows him sites on the feed that display how the world used to be—fecund, plentiful, and natural, not manufactured. The moral importance inherent in the desire to remember these things is perhaps more significant than the ability. Coupled with the desire to remember is a faith or hope that things could (or should) improve from their current state in *Feed*. Titus nonchalantly argues against corporate control, but claims powerlessness. He ignores the reality of the dying world and oppressed people, because he sees no hope for a restored future. Once again, Violet opens him to the importance of hope and faith—not in spite of the current world situation, but because of it. Hope in something greater than what the feed has to offer is the world’s only chance.

What is there in which to hope, though? Both literary and theological analyses of *Feed* point out that the book leaves little to be redeemed. Violet helps Titus realize what he already knew but lacked the language to articulate—love can set you free. Love justifies fighting the feed. Love is the only thing greater than the corporations, than the consumption, than the idle ease afforded to Titus and his close circle. Titus has perceived that, in the vastness of space and even amidst the noise of Earth, life was less valuable without companionship and
community. An intimacy with nature and with other people is necessary to save what is left of humanity and the rest of the created world.\textsuperscript{148}

Even if Titus is expelled from Eden, he can begin to find his way back. He realizes how precious human ties can be when he begins to lose Violet. Initially he pulls back and rebels against his blooming love, trying to escape into the feed and to ignore the promise presented by his prospective liberator. Too late he realizes that love is in fact a greater good than consumption. Although Anderson does not describe Violet’s last perceptions, he leaves the readers with the impression that Violet might have heard Titus and understood him in her last moments. I imagine Violet taking satisfaction in Titus’s discovery that loving Violet, a young woman with a mind and a soul, was more important than sales and feedcasts. The open ending permits the interpretation that Violet dies knowing that she has altered Titus’s moral coordinates, steering him in a path that could force him to confront the wrongs of the world that he had heretofore ignored.

\textbf{Toward Becoming a Steward}

The teenagers in \textit{Feed} echo the reality of teenagers today in both subtle and blatant ways. Though young people do not have media hard-wired into their

\textsuperscript{148} Cook, 419-420.
cerebral cortexes just yet, they are bombarded with social influences and pressures from electronic sources, most notably the Internet. Rare is the adolescent who does not have a Facebook account, which brings with it a myriad of stimuli that mirror those in *Feed*. Likewise, our world is not so advanced in its decay as to contain bubbled cities built to protect people from the poisoned world, but much of our world is diseased and lacking in proper stewardship.\(^{149}\) Thus, though the climate of *Feed* is much more extreme than our present condition, readers can identify with its characters and situations.

*Feed*’s commentary on the nature of free will and the intellect offers various insights that a teenager could take from the text. First, *Feed* indicts those who would neglect disciplined learning in favor of instantaneous information. The acts of reading and writing form within the person a stronger soul than surfing the Internet does—even when one is researching a two-page school report. Curiosity should be fed by going out into the world and experiencing life, including both its good and bad parts. The intellect is responsible to the entire world around it, responsible to be aware of the plight of others.\(^{150}\) When confronted with injustice or suffering in another person or within the natural world, one has an obligation to work towards liberation of the oppressed. To


retire into more pleasant images, that is, to withdraw from the reality of the world, is to acquiesce to a dangerous foe.\footnote{Cook, 419.}

How will a teen reader react to this? By committing to community service? By checking out more library books and spending less time on Facebook? By rejecting society and becoming an anarchist recruiting people to his cause on street corners? Most teens are not likely to respond with such dramatic life transformations, but \textit{Feed} is likely to awaken in them a greater awareness of the temptations and dangers of the present, culturally constructed reality. \textit{Feed} warns that it is easy to give up hope of changing the world when powers too great to move are in charge, and to accept the small boons such powers give. It is easy to let the intellect atrophy, to be entertained by virtual bread and circuses. It is easy to crumple up resources and dispose of them when they are no longer new and shiny. However, \textit{Feed} also demonstrates the consequences of such a mindset. It screams that those most affected will be the ones who inherit the mistakes (and the deleterious impact on the natural world)—namely, the next generation, or the teens themselves.

Raising awareness is the first step in changing behavior. \textit{Feed} might make a young reader angry enough to reconsider his or her lifestyle, or to recommend the book to a friend. In this way, it raises consciousness. As teens are in the process of rebelling against authority (as we will discuss further in chapter 6),
Feed could inspire them to react against media overload or in favor of some sort of environmental activism. Wanting to be in constant contact and in line with their peer group is characteristic of this age group, but so too is raging against convention. Thus, Feed suggests a set of moral coordinates that appeal to the adolescent sense of angst and alienation. It reminds the reader of real-life humans’ sense of autonomy with regard to moral agency, and warns that one’s mind and one’s natural surroundings must be guarded at the individual level. Only then can the corporate body of humanity have a chance.

In these ways, the coordinates of the characters in Feed and the way in which these moral coordinates may be appropriated by readers are compatible with the Christian story. That is, the biblical creation story agrees that, while humanity is granted a certain power over the natural world, it is also called to be steward of this world. In naming the animals in the Garden of Eden at the time of creation, Adam was connected to them. When he and Eve violated nature, eating fruit of a tree that was not made for them to take, their intellect and moral agency took on a new form. No longer were they a pure extension of God’s perfect creation; they now had full awareness of choices other than God (choices that could lead them further away from God’s perfection). Each choice that put the self before right action pushed humanity further away from nature’s potential

152 Cobb, 1185.
153 Cook, 419.
154 Ibid., 420.
bliss. We see a similar tragedy unfolding in *Feed*: the Garden is walled up against a dangerous world, and there are cracks in the glass domes. The poison is seeping into humanity’s last stand against its own fallen nature. The reader, like the church as a whole, is called to be an advocate for nature and for those suffering from the rape of the land.  

From Moral Coordinates to Moral Formation

As demonstrated before, a myth-critical approach to literature is particularly helpful in that it teases out symbols and archetypes that appear time and time again in popular fiction aimed at children and young adults. These currents that run through stories like *Feed* lend themselves to further, more theological interpretations. Practitioners of moral formation can usefully frame these theological analyses by thinking of the mythic symbolism and theological analysis as the theory that underlies the characters’ practices in a novel. For example, Titus could remain the fool when he is a slave to consumerism; as such, he is shunning proper relationship to other humans and the natural world, and thus denying his creation in the image of God. However, when Violet shows Titus how to release himself from the feed’s erosive influence, he becomes the Wise Old Man, admirable yet still able to relate to others. Youths in the process of identity formation can learn from Titus’ mistakes asking themselves what they

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would do if they were in his place. In this way, *Feed*’s moral coordinates serve as practical conversation starters to uncover and further develop teenagers’ views. By integrating new, faith-based coordinates into current assumptions, a youth minister or other practitioner of moral formation may see *Feed* as not just a text, but an instrument of “personality formation.”

From “Feeding” to Forming the Imagination

M.T. Anderson has written:

In the case of *Feed*, I did have certain real concerns that drove me to write the book—for these were the things I was passionate about at that time—and I wanted readers to be as worried by the world I depicted as I was. I wanted to create an environment that was uncomfortable and untenable, but which therefore forced the reader (and myself) to experience the world outside the novel differently. But of course, I assume that everything a kid reads has some kind of residual effect in producing their ideology, whatever it is. Narrative, after all, is driven by submerged structures of justice and injustice, right and wrong. As we learn what kind of stories our culture tells, we learn the values our culture supports.

In wanting to “worry” readers, Anderson appeals to a “potent mediator of divine grace,” that is, “the holy imagination.” In raising a teen’s awareness of problems with a culture’s current narratives, Anderson opens a door in a teenager’s mind. On the other side of this door is the potential for action or for reshaping the imagination. The Christian church, then, can “stoke young people’s

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157 M. T. Anderson, e-mail message to author, 15 November 2010.

imaginations with the stories, symbols, and images of Christian tradition to equip them for the kind of artistic knowing” that allows them to understand what the tradition requires of them. In other words, *Feed* is meant to be deeply troubling. Practitioners of young adult formation can use that reaction within readers to elicit an openness in their teenagers’ imaginations as to what the Christian faith would have to say about the theological issues *Feed* brings to mind.

**A Myth-Critical Analysis of Nation**

Another novel that engages the theme of creation is Terry Pratchett’s *Nation*. It begins as a boy named Mau is at sea, in the midst of completing his tribe’s ritual that moves him from life as a boy toward obtaining the soul of a man. A devastating tsunami hits his small, decimated island (named “Nation”), depositing him on shore and killing his entire tribe, who had been waiting for him there. Mau, in addition to the experiencing the shock of having his life ripped away, does not know if he is a boy or a man, or if he even has a soul.

At the same time, readers meet Daphne, a little girl about Mau’s age, sailing aboard the schooner *Sweet Judy*. She is en route to meet her father, the Governor of the Pelagic Territories (where Mau’s island is located), at a distant port. The tsunami picks up the *Sweet Judy* and tosses Daphne onto Mau’s island, seemingly killing everyone on board except her.

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159 Ibid.
Meanwhile, the population of England suffers an influenza plague. This flu kills all local heirs to the throne, causing “The Gentlemen of Last Resort,” a secret organization under the Crown, to go out looking for the Governor of the Pelagic Territories and his daughter (the shipwrecked Daphne), as he is the last living heir to England’s throne. The Gentlemen must find the Governor and have him take the crown on English soil (even if he is standing on just a bag of transplanted soil) within nine months or he will forfeit his inheritance.

Mau and Daphne meet, but fail to communicate. Mau thinks Daphne is a ghost; Daphne thinks Mau is an ignorant native. However, as tsunami survivors from other smaller islands near Mau’s arrive, the two band together with the others to try to survive in this new, unpredictable world. Just as their lives come to a “new” normality on the island, Daphne’s father arrives to rescue her. The Gentlemen soon arrive as well and hold an impromptu coronation service. Daphne leaves the island while Mau stays behind to lead the band of survivors.

Symbolism of Nature in Nation

From the very beginning of the story, the sea and nautical imagery figure prominently in Nation. The sea is the stage for much of the action. Readers first meet Mau when he has departed to a smaller island off the shore of Nation to engage in the ritual to become a man. There he must make his own boat to sail back to his home shore, where (it is implied) he will be circumcised and become a man. Likewise, Daphne and her father are both at sea and must return home so
that they too may claim their new (royal) status in society. Unlike the dead sea of *Feed*, the ocean in *Nation* is teeming with life, and almost a living being itself. However, it too is deadly: the raw, animated power of water destroys as much in *Nation* as poisoned nature does in *Feed*. The water also brings people together, sustains them, and flows with potential. The waters of *Feed* symbolized the dying or already dead world; the waters of *Nation* symbolize the continuing cycle of creation inherent in existence.

In *Feed*, the subversion of the sea that symbolized the destruction of nature; in *Nation*, however, the sea has a more positive mythic function. For example, in Nation’s creation myth, Imo (the highest god) “set out one day to catch some fish, but there was no sea. There was nothing but Imo.” Imo creates the sea, fish, dolphins, land, and humans (who were land creatures with dolphin souls). The creatures were corrupt, and Imo remade the land (much as God in Genesis sent a flood but saved Noah). Locha, death, is then given the mortal world, and Imo makes a better world in the sky. When a human dies, Locha sends him to be a dolphin until he passes on to Imo’s new world. The myth ends, “And this is why we are born in water, and do not kill dolphins, and look toward the stars.” In this myth, water represents the mystery of creation and also encompasses the hope of life after death; these are two of the most

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161 Ibid., 2.
common symbolic functions of water in literature.\textsuperscript{162} If Imo is the father of life, the waters are the mother. Dolphins are souls waiting to go to Imo’s land in the sky (heaven). They are Locha’s creatures only for a time—they ultimately belong to Imo. Here, water is pure, raw, and primal. It gives and takes, in the same way that existence is a cycle of prosperity and destruction, life and death. Though Carl Jung might argue that water is a common symbol for the unconscious, here it might be more rightly interpreted to represent the conscious, working mind.\textsuperscript{163}

There are other lesser gods than Imo, mostly glimpsed in their conversations with Mau. When Mau returns to find Nation obliterated by a tsunami, the Grandfathers scream at him to “right the god anchors,” stones that are said to keep the gods connected to the Earth. They impel him, in his devastated state, to keep tradition, to move forward, to band together with other survivors who show up, and to continue their way of life. Daphne, after she teams up with Mau to help the survivors thrive, hears her own voices, those of the Grandmothers. These voices are of the ancestors, but also divine manifestations of the first of Mau’s people. The Grandfathers are connected to “grandfather birds,” birds of prey who wish everyone would die so that they could eat the carcasses. The Grandfathers are warriors, consumers, and hunters who fight to survive; the Grandmothers are gentle gatherers who sing intrinsically important

\textsuperscript{162} Guerin et al., 185.

\textsuperscript{163} Segal, 151-153.
things, like beer and babies, into proper being. Without the correct song, beer would be poisonous and babies could lack a great destiny.

Archetypal Characters in *Nation*

The male and female natures of different gods are personified in Mau and Daphne, respectively. Mau is the hero figure, though his “hero’s journey” is altered from its original trajectory, causing it to spin off course and orbit a new world entirely.¹⁶⁴ Mau begins the traditional quest, going away from the world he knows in order to encounter and defeat an uncertain foe. He builds his boat and embarks on his return trip, but the wave destroys the world to which he was headed. Mau thinks he is left in limbo, between the boy and man stages. He left his boy-soul on the little island, but was not given the soul of a man to replace it. He thinks himself a demon, because the pain of the trauma he experienced has made him question the existence of Imo and the Grandfathers and the nature of his universe. For the reader, Mau’s first journey turns out not to be his entire hero’s quest (as Mau thought it was), but only the preface.

Daphne, on the other hand, shifts her representation through more than one female archetypal phase. At first, it seems as though she is the soul mate for Mau. She is the first person Mau encounters after the wave. Mau does not even recognize her as a person, since he is unaccustomed to seeing pale-skinned people (also called “trousermen”). He comes to realize that she is a human like him, as

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.
their attempts at communication yield more fruitful results. They become friends and, were circumstances different, could possibly have become husband and wife. However, Daphne is eventually rescued from Nation and takes her place as princess within the Empire, while Mau stays with his people. Daphne is a help and a healer, but not really the incarnation of inspiration or spiritual fulfillment, as the soul mate typically is.\textsuperscript{165} Rather, Daphne is more the good mother in this story. She is associated with “the life principle, birth, warmth, nourishment, protection, fertility, growth, and abundance.”\textsuperscript{166}

When a pregnant woman from another island comes to Nation with a few survivors from her home, Daphne is given the task of serving as midwife. The baby’s father is there, but birth is a woman’s affair in Nation’s culture. Daphne knows instinctively what to do. When told that she must sing the baby’s soul into being, Daphne sings the only song she can think of: “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star.” It translates well into the island tongue and is seen as a powerful song for a warrior. Daphne secures her place within the “good mother” archetype, as she gives the warmth and promise of a soul enfleshed.

**Two Creation Accounts: Theology in Nation**

In the beginning God created the heavens and the Earth. This is true for both Genesis and the island of Nation. In Nation, the sea was created, then the

\textsuperscript{165} Campbell, *Myths to Live By*, 168.

\textsuperscript{166} Guerin et al., 187.
fish, the land, humans, other land creatures, and finally death (because there were too many people and there was not enough to eat). Nation’s story then moves to a time when the people are wicked and Imo thinks his creation flawed. Locha, death, talks Imo out of destroying the creation completely, arguing that Imo should leave the mortal world to Locha’s control. Imo agrees, but then creates other gods so that Locha “would not have things all his own way,” but rather that “while the people should die, it would be in their right time.”

At first glance, Nation’s creation myth is similar to that of Genesis, but on closer examination one sees that it turns the story of Genesis on its head. First, Imo does not say that his creation is “good,” as God does in Genesis 1:31. Rather, Imo is annoyed with his faulted creatures because they are “stupid and lazy.” The God of the Bible is pleased with the heavens and Earth as initially created; Imo is disappointed. God in Genesis created order out of chaos and made the universe in God’s own image; Imo was engaging in more of an experimental art project. However, the Bible does tell two stories of humanity falling into wickedness that parallel those in Nation. Adam and Eve fail to obey God’s orders and eat of the tree of knowledge in Genesis 3:6; later, all the peoples of the Earth fall short of God’s expectations and God “determines to make an end of all flesh” (Genesis 6:13).

\[167\] Pratchett, 2.
In each Genesis story, humans lose their favored place in God’s creation. Adam and Eve are forced to leave paradise, while all living creatures except those on the ark perish in a great flood. The ultimate consequence of their transgressions against God and against the goodness of creation is death. Ironically, in Nation’s myth, death itself talks Imo out of destroying the world. Death convinces Imo that, even if humans do not evidence divine worth (i.e., deserve immortality) currently, Imo should not give up on them. Imo agrees and comes to see that earthly souls are good and worthy of eventual immortality. Since the Earth of Genesis was created “good” and its creatures were beloved, they had within them the chance for ultimate failure. They so displeased God as to be removed from eternal paradise. In Nation’s myth, though, humanity was never beloved or particularly good in the first place.

Nation’s Myth: Imo and Sin

In Nation’s creation myth, Imo is God, though Imo is also gone. He left to create a better world, and only there can souls meet him one day. The natural world is left to Locha and other minor deities. The identity of these deities is ambiguous, as are their actual existence and the plight of humans on Earth. In Nation the concept of sin as we know it appears to be lacking, insofar as sin is action that separates humanity from the deity—for Imo has already separated himself. Moreover, there seems to be no original sin, as there was no perfection from which to fall or a command to disobey. The only existential folly and
laziness of humans, as Imo noted, manifests itself in the current world of Nation as disobedience to the lesser gods. These deities are best exemplified as the Grandfathers that Mau hears in his head, mythic versions of ancestors who had such great scientific achievements. Sin against them is to ignore their voice and the rituals prescribed in their myths, though, as Daphne discovers, many of the myths and rituals (like the beer song) exist to transmit “scientific” knowledge from one generation to the next orally. Thus, sin in this sense is intellectual laziness, turning one’s back on the knowledge of those gone before. Here, science and religion are one. Creation is such that religious understanding complements the natural world; myth narrates natural principles and infuses them with ancestral memory.

Sin on the island of Nation does not consist of specifically ignoring divine commandments. Several expectations are underscored, however: respect for elders and ancestors, the communal aspect of ritual (coupled with the practical aspects that Daphne uncovers), and belief in Imo and the lesser gods. Mau casts himself (in both his own view and the view of others) into existential estrangement not when he ignores the screams of the Grandfathers to re-root the god anchors (which would be the logical expression of sin, if sin was a punitive state for ignoring law), but when he denies the communal importance of his people’s customs. He isolates himself from his history and the other survivors in his disbelief and his individual reaction to emotional pain. In Nation pain should be experienced communally, and it is more than just a matter of survival that an
individual should mourn and hurt in unison with those around him. In a difficult world, sharing pain does not just tame Locha, it also makes infuses a difficult life with divine, creative power. When the Grandfathers cry out, you do not ignore them; you cry with them.

The Hermit Crab and the Righteous Man: Mau and Job versus God

Often the Grandfathers cry out when terrible things seem to happen by chance. Mau rages against this, screaming “Does not happen!” to the heavens when Locha looms near. Here Nation asks, what does one do with the problem of suffering in light of the notion that the world was created by a higher power? Mau constantly asks why the tsunami destroyed the world as he knew it. He doesn’t know whom he is asking—Imo, the Grandfathers, Locha, someone (or something) else—but still he queries. For example, on Nation there is a “Cave of the Grandfathers,” where old men’s bodies are placed after they have died. Nawi, a wise old friend of Mau, was ineligible to enter the cave after his death because he had “been born with a leg that didn’t work properly and that meant he’d been cursed by the gods.”168 Mau wonders why any god would curse an innocent baby—what could a newborn do to anger the gods? Nawi laughs at Mau’s question. “It was a gift, boy, not a curse,” he said. “When much is taken, something is returned.” That, in essence, is Nation’s take on the problem of pain. It does little to answer the question of who is doing the giving or the taking. Or,

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168 Ibid., 41.
similarly, it does little to answer the question of whether Imo or the lesser gods create pain and determine consequences of actions, or if they are just abstractions used to explain human actions (or the random occurrences of nature, like tsunamis or mutations in physical bodies).

The characters of Nation cannot answer the question any more definitively than Job could in the Bible. Righteous Job was determined to demonstrate that some believers are devout enough to remain faithful even through suffering. Job loses everything—his family, his livelihood, his home, his land, and his health. Though he does not denounce God, he cries out, “God has cast me into the mire, and I have become like dust and ashes. I cry to you and you do not answer me; I stand and you merely look at me.” Job’s suffering inherently questions God’s own goodness; why would a good deity allow such a thing?169 God does not elaborate on the reasons for “allowing” suffering, but instead articulates that God’s ultimate goodness lies outside the comprehension of the intellect.170 God says in Job 38:4, “Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding.” Job can reply only that he does not know the ways of the universe, and repents of his doubt and questioning in the face of suffering.


170 Ibid., 437.
Just as Job asked God why he suffered, Mau too asked again and again.
The Grandfathers screeched with ire in response, “WHAT WILL YOU DO, HERMIT CRAB? WILL YOU PULL DOWN THE STARS? WILL YOU SMASH THE MOUNTAINS LIKE SHY COCONUTS TO FIND THEIR SECRETS? THINGS ARE AS THEY ARE! EXISTENCE IS ITS OWN “BECAUSE”! ALL THINGS IN THEIR RIGHT PLACE. WHO ARE YOU TO DEMAND REASONS? WHO ARE YOU?”\(^{171}\)

This is a similar response to the one Job received. No human mind can grasp the infinite; therefore it is futile to ask “why” in response to the problem of suffering. Just as God is the great “I Am,” things in Imo are as they are.

Daphne and Mau come to view suffering as part of life. However, both come to realize that suffering itself does not disprove God’s existence; rather, pain makes God’s power more acute.\(^{172}\) God asks Job to explain the minutia of the universe, from birth to death, and Job is humbled by his inability to do so. Mau and Daphne are similarly humbled. All three people are restored not by explanations of the meaning and divine nature of human suffering, but by their ability to continue on living, and by their continued quest for understanding and faith. All become more keenly aware as the story goes on that “a

\(^{171}\) Pratchett, 155.

\(^{172}\) Waters, 450.
retributive/recompensive theology distorts God’s ways and confines Him to human standards of interpretation.”

Science and Faith: Moral Coordinates of Nation

As stated previously, the Earth of Nation is in much better shape than that of Feed. Here the impending fate of nature is not intimately tied to the story’s theology of creation; the plight of “undiscovered” peoples is more pressing than nature’s demise. So too do questions about the nature of the created world and the divine’s participation in it play a more active role in the plot of Nation. Whereas, in Feed, questions about moral agency were presented through a world where corporations and technological advancement were phasing out human free will and thought, in Nation such questions are set against explorations of tradition, ritual, and their part in scientific knowledge and inquiry. As such, the moral coordinates of Nation do raise questions regarding participation in communal belief systems, but the central conflict has more to do with faith in that which cannot be proved, versus belief in what can be empirically, scientifically proven.

Ritual Orders the Cosmos

The first set of moral coordinates that a reader encounters in Nation belongs to Mau. His island, Nation, has a firmly established belief system according to which one must honor the Grandfathers, the gods. To do so, one

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173 Ibid.
participates in “right living,” that is, participation in communal ritual. In this way, order is maintained and society is composed of individuals strongly linked together as one. Babies are sung into the world and thus given souls. Boys leave the large island to retrieve the soul of a man on the offshore island kept for this purpose. Beer is sung into being during its making. These practices imply the presence of numerous rituals in which all members of Nation’s society participate. This honoring of the gods and the communal ethos form a very clear-cut set of moral coordinates for every member of the society.

These coordinates are smeared clean off the map for Mau, however, when natural disaster and personal tragedy collide. Mau’s society—the backbone of his moral code—is completely obliterated. With it goes Mau’s belief in the myths and rituals that he thought kept such tragedies from occurring. He rages at the Grandfather gods and angrily insists, “Does not happen!” His moral code was not one of nuance and gray areas before. Now, like his destroyed home, his faith lies at the bottom of murky pools, drowned by the crushing weight of tragedy. As a lone survivor, Mau is forced to reorder his moral coordinates rather quickly. In his traumatized mind he hears the voices of his dead ancestors in his head, demanding that he “right the God anchors,” or keep tradition and belief alive, despite his inability to believe in them himself. When survivors from surrounding islands begin to arrive, this maintenance of the old ways serves to give them hope. Mau, though he thinks himself a demon or human shell with no soul, knows he must maintain this hope for other survivors.
Mau’s new coordinates are that of an individual leader. His social role encompasses new responsibilities, new emotional motivations, and larger concerns. His moral bearings have become untethered from the traditions and beliefs he held only weeks before. He makes decisions not based on what he wants to do at a particular moment (which is usually to give up), but what his reconnecting community needs. He rights the god anchors despite not believing that they do anything. He lets the men and women continue with their rituals, even though he considers them a waste of time, doubting that these efforts result in any divine participation. He puts others before himself, knowing that, through the rebuilding of community, that which has been destroyed may be honored, if not fully remade. In doing this, he is helping his own wounds to heal, though he does not realize it, in the direct aftermath of the tsunami. Mau orders his world and his moral responsibilities so as to focus on acting for the good of his people, rather than succumbing to the voices in his head that rage against the gods of his youth. While his moral coordinates have thus shifted, they nonetheless remain oriented toward a greater good.

Job and his Friends

Though she is from the other side of the world, Daphne encounters a shift in her moral outlook similar to that of Mau. Daphne holds to her father’s worldview that one should believe in what one can empirically observe, form a
hypothesis about, and prove through rigorous experimentation. While Mau’s worldview and moral coordinates shifted toward Daphne’s empirical way of thinking since the tsunami hit, Daphne shifts more towards Mau’s original point of view, joining with the lost peoples of Mau’s island chain and engaging in their rituals. She examines them and finds scientific justification for some of them. For example, Daphne determines that, although the “beer song” is not directly responsible for making the beer turn from poison to pleasant libation, stirring the beer mixture for the length of time it takes to sing the “beer song” in ritual is necessary to make the liquid safe to drink.

However, other phenomena occur that Daphne cannot explain by reason alone. The “Grandmothers” speak to her, as the Grandfathers spoke to Mau. They tell her that the ways of Nation’s people are profound, rooted in something greater than anyone currently alive can fully understand. When Mau is close to death, the Grandmothers guide Daphne in bringing him back. Daphne begins to see the value of belief in the unexplainable and supernatural.

This discovery alters Daphne’s attitudes and actions. She no longer tries to maintain her natural grandmother’s standards, stops wearing corsets and petticoats for the sake of “decency,” and trusts the knowledge of the island peoples. Daphne has maintained her scientific curiosity through disaster, but it has brought her to a place of searching not just for empirical knowledge, but for a connection to something greater than her own mind. Through delivering babies, tending to the traumatized, and rooting Mau to the mortal coil when Locha tempts
him to become a dolphin, Daphne finds that she has the internal resources to do such things because the Grandmothers (unexplainable force that they are), not science, tell her she can do them.

Faith in Many Forms: Science and Religion in Nation

The union between Mau and Daphne brings together their shifting worldviews, causing them to collide and bruise one another. However, because they are so intimately bound by shared experience, they each have no choice but to bear with the other one. Thus, Mau helps Daphne bring the Grandmother’s voices into concert with her scientifically driven moral code, while Daphne helps Mau realize that his original beliefs might not have been so unfounded. The children lean on one another, the force of each one’s weight causing the other to learn how strong they really are. Both act as a unit for what is best for the people around them. Daphne is willing to abandon reason to perform a ritual she does not understand if it gives a survivor hope; Mau is willing to right the God anchors and delve into the forbidden cave of the Grandfathers to prove the worth of his people. Together their moral coordinates move forward, reinforcing the value of communal traditions.

“Myths” versus Myth: Narrative and Belief

A reader of Nation might come away with the message that myth and ritual mean something, even outside of their roots in faith. One could draw a parallel to the Christian sacraments of the Eucharist and baptism, which are not
performed simply because ancestors did them; rather, such rituals and the stories told within them have power to change and shape reality. While it need not be argued that the Eucharist has a hidden scientific basis like the one Daphne discovers for the beer song and ritual, one could posit that many who practice it in earnest believe it to be essential to shaping reality in a positive way. Participation in the liturgy of the word is the Christian church’s parallel to the insistence of Mau’s people on ordering one’s life through ritual. Just as the church has a time and season for everything under heaven, so too did the island of Nation. Nation argues to adolescents that a faith’s story and story-in-action have more to offer than meets the eye—worlds more.

Mau’s shift from complete belief to doubt in the face of tragedy speaks to any teenage experience, not just that of one touched by tragedy. He was ritually moving from boy to man, but had that transition disrupted. Most teenagers in the United States lack rituals to guide them from child to adult; they can identify with Mau’s identity confusion. This is even truer if they face extenuating circumstances that press harder on their ever-changing brains and bodies. Mau copes with his reality by shoving those who seem to have caused the great offense (the destruction of all that he knew) out of his mind. But these forces, the Grandfathers, cannot be silenced. Their voice is too ingrained in Mau’s spirit to

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174 Gilkey, 12-14.
be so easily wiped away. So Mau does the only thing he can do—he listens. He acts on what he hears. Mau hates it—he hates himself, he hates the gods.

Similarly, teenagers rebel against what they have been taught. They might refuse to go to church, to participate in that body that could sustain them. They rebel against the specific moral teachings of their parents and experiment with contradictory ideas and actions. But, at the end of the day, the church is still there. Its stories remain the same; they remain repeated time after time. Ordinary times lead into Lent, then to Christmastide, and then to ordinary once again. Regardless of any individual’s rebellion, the church abides; hopefully, what the teenagers have learned in their youth will remain as well. As in Mau’s case, times of crisis and confusion can call out profound responses from adolescents, inspiring them to make moral decisions based on what their faith has taught them is right. Nation communicates that doing so is not weakness, but strength.

Nation does not, however, argue clearly that there is indeed a great Creator ordering all of reality. Its answer to the central question of whether science or faith best explains reality is unclear. Sometimes myth and ritual best explain how things really are; at other times science shows that faith was covering up a glorious truth for silly reasons. The book also questions outright whether the world is in fact good. After all, what fundamentally good God would allow horrible tsunamis to happen? A purely scientific worldview can explain that tsunamis are the result of other natural phenomena, portraying the universe is guided mechanistically by cause and effect (with no particularly great cause
starting the whole thing). From a faith-based perspective, this is a dangerous line of reasoning, especially for teenagers, as such a naked approach to the problem of suffering threatens to unravel most faith claims. *Nation* does not answer this threat to faith with either faith-based or scientific reasoning.

Two Worldviews: Mau and Daphne and the Reader’s Context
The two points of view presented in *Nation* (science and religious faith) come together to help Mau and Daphne survive, however. Science is unable to create hope and form community in the way that the survivors need it, but it does show Mau that his people are greater (when he feared them meaningless in light of the trousermen’s power). Likewise, her own grandmother’s faith might have held Daphne captive, but science allowed Daphne a perspective that opened up the mystery of the Grandmothers’ existence.

Readers can thus see in *Nation* a means of articulating and perhaps resolving the central conflicts among their beliefs. Whether it be the problem of suffering, the existence of one Creator God, or how to reconcile what science argues to be false with what faith claims to be true, *Nation* gives readers fictional conversation partners for the journey. Christians may not feel a need to defend the mysteries of the Christian story in response of *Nation’s* questions about the practical value of story and ritual, but they may find in the book an important resource in articulating why and how they understand their actions and beliefs to be inherently practical.
Developmental Theory in Practice and Nation

An important part of teenagers’ spiritual development that carries over from childhood is their conception of the divine, their image of God. In Piaget’s model, a young child equates God with his or her own father, though imagining God as bigger, older, or living in the sky. As children move into their preteen years and early teenage years, the image of God allows for metaphorical language, and children can maintain the idea that God is “like a Father” while recognizing that in essence he is not like their own father at all. However, parents have a powerful influence in how their children come to view God. Several studies have considered what factors influence a teenager’s image of God, and how those images may vary across gender, socio-economic, and cultural lines. The results of such studies are generally presented on an individual basis and do not form a conclusive picture of how all or even most teens see God, but they have yielded some interesting conclusions. First, higher levels of educational achievement by a teen’s parents are generally correlated with more benevolent images of the divine in the teenager. Similarly, teens whose parents allow them more autonomy in decision making, social outlets, and use of


176 Ibid., 106-107.

resources appear more likely to see God as a “friend” rather than as a frightening authority figure.\textsuperscript{178} Parents who have fewer years of education, those who do not demonstrate affection often, and those who discipline their children often are more likely to raise a teenager who views God as distant or as a disciplinarian.\textsuperscript{179}

A teenager’s view of God is fluid, however, and subject to more influences than just parental control. Teenagers, unlike younger children, have generally achieved the cognitive ability to look past their parents’ views (even if these are still one of the most determining factors in their opinions) and form their own. Indeed, teenagers often view their parents’ beliefs as the starting place for rebellion. The image of God, then, can be shaped by other factors and forces.

Popular culture has increasingly staked a claim on the religious imagination of both adults and young people.\textsuperscript{180} Books like \textit{Feed} and \textit{Nation} question and offer critiques of common images of God through narrative. For example, consider a 15-year-old female whose parents are strict, but loving. She is not allowed to go on dates, wear makeup, or spend too much time away from home during the school year. While it is not always the case, studies would postulate that her image of God would most likely be that of an authoritarian caregiver, a maker who is always watching out for sin and transgression out of

\textsuperscript{178} Paul Knitter and William Madges, \textit{Faith, Religion, and Theology} (Mystic: Twenty-Third Publications, 1990), 50.

\textsuperscript{179} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{180} Ibid.
loving concern. This young woman would come to the book *Nation* with these preconceived notions, along with her burgeoning quest for identity and independence from her parents. Here she finds a fictional hero, Mau, who has held a similar view of the divine for all of his life, until tragedy strikes and all that he has ever known is destroyed, including his image of God. He then begins the difficult task of reconstructing faith, while at the same time his mirror image, Daphne, begins to move toward greater belief in the supernatural through her own trauma.

This hypothetical young woman might hold the narrative about Mau and Daphne in tension with her own life. What would she do if her own life were ripped apart? Who would God be then? Would God be the same? Would her experience prove that God didn’t exist? Or does a text like *Nation* reinforce the reader’s own sense of ambiguity, given that Mau and Daphne’s worldviews did not prove strong enough to withstand a tsunami’s blow?

James Fowler, whose research on stages of faith borrowed from Piaget’s stages of cognitive development, would argue that reading a work like *Nation* is a valuable developmental exercise in learning to form a more “adult” image of God. In earlier years, our hypothetical girl would have seen “possibility” was a

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181 Potvin, 50.

182 Gollnick, 91.

subset of reality; in other words, truth is whatever has been told to her. But now, reality is instead a subset of possibility, in that she has some measure of control over what can be and how she perceives what is. She is “now able to conceive of the possibility of an infinity of perspectives on a problem,” and “shows a marked improvement in taking the perspectives of others” in understanding the world around her. Thus, her image of God is not just that of her parents. Her encounters with the God (or gods) of Nation influence her thinking, its characters’ questions grafting themselves into her thought processes. She knows these people to be fictional, but can understand that their experiences and ideas have something to offer to her own faith life. Her image of God, like that of most others in her peer group, thus takes on unique characteristics colored by her interactions with the culture at large.

We can thus observe ways in which Feed and Nation can become particularly valuable tools for young adult moral formation within a faith-based context. Feed presents symbols and archetypes (or a plot and characters) in which or in whom they can see themselves. Titus and his friends are, in their values and reflections, fairly typical teenagers, even if their world is unlike that of the reader. Mau and Daphne also confront situations that teenagers are likely to face (such as confronting suffering and moving from childhood to adulthood quickly under

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184 Ibid.
185 Ibid.
186 Ibid., 76.
difficult circumstances). In these texts, the characters display their moral coordinates. Their reasoning is typical of their age; that is, they are characters constructed to act like their teenage readers.\textsuperscript{187} Titus, Violet, Mau, and Daphne are all trying to figure out who they are and how their self-identification will influence the moral choices they will make. So too is the adolescent reader. Depictions of young adults in novels are often what authors (usually adults) want youths to be, not what they are.\textsuperscript{188} Their archetypes frequently represent the best and worst of all people, not necessarily contemporary young adults.\textsuperscript{189} Thus, it is useful for student and moral formation practitioner alike to look at narratives and discuss how their suggested moral coordinates and “truths” might translate into the students’ everyday lives and moral decision-making processes.

\textit{Nation}’s Myth and Theology in an Adolescent Context.

Frederick Buechner has written: “How do I happen to believe in God? ... Writing novels, I got into the habit of looking for plots. After awhile, I began to suspect that my own life had a plot. And after awhile more, I began to suspect that life itself has a plot.”\textsuperscript{190} In Terry Pratchett’s \textit{Nation}, Mau starts the story believing

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{187} Ian Knox, “Religion and the Expectations of the Modern Society Towards the Adolescent,” \textit{Religious Education}, 70, no. 6 (November-December 1975): 649-650.
\item \textsuperscript{188} Jeffrey Kaplan, “Perception and Reality,” \textit{ALAN Review}, 5, no. 1 (Fall 2008): 48.
\item \textsuperscript{189} Ibid., 49.
\item \textsuperscript{190} Frederick Buechner, \textit{The Alphabet of Grace} (San Francisco, Calif.: Harper-SanFrancisco, 1989), 51.
\end{itemize}
that life has a plot, while Daphne believes the opposite. By the end of the book, their positions switch. This switch succinctly captures the teenager’s experience of life. Children begin puberty when hormones chemically signal their bodies to change. Before this point, their worldviews have been largely formed by their adult caretakers. However, as they move into the world and encounter a wider range of experiences, their worldviews begin to become more of their own making. Here, “when the onset of formal operational thought bequeaths the capacity to ponder one’s inner life, the need for sensation becomes subjected to the younger person’s newly acquired reflective capacities. As a result, youth become fixated on feelings, evaluating every experience according to its emotional topography; heights and depths, ecstasy and angst, heaven and hell. In short, during adolescence we develop interiority.” As another scholar puts it, “The soul grows larger to allow more space for becoming.”

This is the point where Nation can be useful to teenagers and the practitioners of adolescent spiritual formation who love them. It is not necessarily that the plot invokes creation myths that mirror that of the Bible, or that Mau and Daphne encounter the divine in their struggles. Rather, the value of Nation for spiritual development lies in Mau and Daphne’s struggle to develop their

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192 Kenda Creasy Dean, Practicing Passion (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 96.
193 Ibid.
194 Ibid.
interiority as trauma compels them to question the worldviews carefully cultivated in them by their respective cultures and organized faith groups. Both are forced to decide for themselves what they believe and how that belief will influence their actions and moral choices. In this decision teenagers can see themselves. Adults trying to guide young people to or through the Christian faith can use this literary material to help their charges cultivate their own interiority and inner resources so as to similarly engage their new, challenging roles as emerging adults.
CHAPTER FIVE
HEROES AND THEIR JOURNEYS

Myth, Adolescence, and Moral Development

“My life becomes mythic in the teenage years”\textsuperscript{195} Mythic symbols or archetypes, like the hero, are particularly appealing to adolescents, who are looking for “mirrors” that reflect their own “myth of self.”\textsuperscript{196} This chapter will highlight heroes whose stories can articulate or challenge the moral coordinates of their adolescent readers, presenting some behaviors that stem from loving, life-giving motivations and others that appear selfish and detrimental to others.\textsuperscript{197} The two novels presented in this chapter, \textit{I Am the Messenger} and \textit{Stargirl}, both feature modern heroes who continue the mythic hero’s journey. Each novel offers a complete, articulated world that mirrors the reader’s world in many ways, including the presentation of implicit moral coordinates in which the characters are operating. I will reflect theologically on these books’ worldviews, and ask how each story world’s moral coordinates might be appraised in light of themes from the Christian story.

\textsuperscript{195} Dan McAdams, \textit{The Stories We Live By} (New York: Morrow, 1993), 19.


**Why the Hero Archetype Matters: The Search for Independence**

The experiences of early childhood shape the image of God that teenagers later hold. However, that early image can expand and change due to the older child’s own volition as well. One of the most prominent features of the adolescent phase of life is the drawing away from one’s parents to form a more independent self. Robert Coles says:

> It is commonplace that our concern about teenagers is more often than not unwelcomed by them, seen by them as a clinging intrusion that predictably stirs defiance on the part of young men and women anxious and determined to achieve a growing measure of independence. This search for independence is of course both encouraged and resisted in various ways by parents and teachers, by our society as well. We know deep down that our children ought to leave us and build their own life, yet we also want them to stay close. ... Still, they yearn to be their own persons, and we, their elders, by turn courteously or reluctantly, learn to accommodate them.”

Youth in this stage of life are prone to rebelliousness, stubborn assertiveness, isolation and loneliness, and melancholy. They resist the moral values of their parents while, at the same time, clinging to a sense of “what matters most” learned by their caregivers. This paradoxical tension alienates teenagers from those people who most want to help them define a strong, healthy sense of self, but at the same time strengthens the need for these same adults. It is “no wonder that matters of right and wrong, the

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199 Ibid.

200 Ibid., 135-136.

201 Ibid., 136.

202 Ibid.
heart of moral thinking, can take on a powerful meaning at this time."\textsuperscript{203} Teenagers often question adult authority figures and use their “refutations of the conventional as a means of finding for oneself something ‘better,’ something more ‘real.’”\textsuperscript{204} Within this search for something better and more real, adolescents need to be surrounded by people whose moral decision-making processes they feel they can (or should) emulate.\textsuperscript{205}

The people with whom a teen interacts (most notably parents and then, later, peers) have a powerful influence on a teen’s own moral-decision making.\textsuperscript{206} However, sometimes still more input is needed. In the film \textit{Library of the Early Mind}, author Nancy Garden reminisces on growing up with romantic feelings for another woman.\textsuperscript{207} Garden did not know that she was a lesbian; she lacked the knowledge and support system to understand what she was feeling. She turned to novels, “as bookish youth tend to do,” to try to understand her own life through the stories of others. She found that there were no such stories, no narrative examples (moral or otherwise) to guide her decision making process. This experience led her to write the young adult classic \textit{Annie on My Mind}.\textsuperscript{208}

\textsuperscript{203} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{204} Ibid., 153.


\textsuperscript{206} Ibid., 239.

\textsuperscript{207} \textit{Library of the Early Mind} (film, directed by Edward J. Delaney) (Backspace Productions, 2010).

\textsuperscript{208} Ibid.
Situations like Garden’s show that, developmentally, narratives can provide essential input for adolescents. While topical novels help in specific ways (by addressing relevant topics, as Annie on My Mind did with homosexuality), other fictional stories help to guide independent moral thinking through myth and mythic characters. After all, “people seldom if ever act according to principles and rules stated in words” and logically arranged arguments. Instead, they act “according to models, metaphors, stories, and myths.” Thus, “narrative thinking may be the most effective way to engage the minds of the young in ethical issues.” Mythic characters, like the hero, grow as a result of struggles between their own values and the values of the story world. Readers are most pushed to grow in their moral thinking process by reading these types of stories. A hero may not be the model of a morally mature person, but he or she challenges the reader to grow with him or her, and to ask what it would mean for a hero to “think well, love well, and to act well.” Heroes and their journeys ask youths what it means not only to know the good, but also what it means to love it.

In analyzing the structure of a hero’s journey in a young adult novel, practitioners of spiritual formation are afforded a glimpse into why teens read; adults thereby obtain access to the implicit appeal of popular fiction. Even if teens are “left alone” to read,
adults concerned with their moral formation can read the same books so as to discern what is happening in the story, what the hero stands for, and how to discuss the book with the teenager.\footnote{214 Sutton and Parravano, 289-290.} It is important to help teens understand that, while fiction might not represent their reality, it can help them usefully interpret their own world and grow in their moral reasoning as a result.\footnote{215 Ibid., 132.}

Teenagers read, in part, to understand their own situation.\footnote{216 Ibid., 293.} Books, both “problem novels” or stories read just for the fun of it, connect young readers with safe, vicarious encounters that allow new perspectives about their own experience.\footnote{217 Ibid., 293-294.} Author Janet McDonald says:

I have been asked why the books I write don’t paint a clear, bright line of judgment with regard to situations I depict, such as teenage pregnancy, vandalism, or fistfights. One person asked me simply why I didn’t ‘get on a soapbox.’ Well, soapboxes are for soap, and soap is for washing clean. Books give off light, and light reveals the dirty, the clean, and the in-between. It is more important to me that young people read than they behave well. Put more provocatively, closed legs are good, but an open mind is better.\footnote{218 Ibid., 300.}

Adolescence is a period of often difficult and rapid change.\footnote{219 Laurence Steinberg, Adolescence (Boston: McGraw Hill, 2008), 20.} During this rocky time, novels allow teenagers a view of their situation not from a pulpit, but from a podium.\footnote{220 Sutton and Parravano, 300.}
Authors’ voices may not teach virtue or morality, but still they always ask questions that, while entertaining, can also inspire, motivate, and catalyze growth.

**A Myth-Critical Analysis of *I Am the Messenger***

Ed Kennedy is nineteen and wholly unremarkable. In fact, Ed revels in his mediocrity, seeking nothing to relieve him from it. He says of himself, “I’m an underage cabdriver. I’m typical of many of the young men you see in this suburban outpost of the city—not a whole lot of prospects or possibility. ... Nice to meet you.”

Ed would have probably continued to live a life of unremarkable boredom, but he happened to be present at a bank robbery and managed to stop the thief before he got away. In addition to his 15 minutes of fame, Ed starts receiving playing cards with missions on them. He is to figure out the cryptic clues on the cards and deliver messages to those to whom the clues refer.

From the first card, Ed delivers a message to a family with an abusive father, a mother, and a young daughter. His other two messages on the first card go to a lonely old woman, Milla, and then to a teenage runner. He successfully rids the mother and daughter of the abusive father, comforts the old woman, and helps Sophie, the athlete, run with passion once again.

Ed then receives more playing cards with messages to deliver. He helps a priest reconnect with his brother and revitalize his congregation, gives ice cream to a single mother who never treats herself, shows an older brother how important it is to care for his

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younger sibling, enables a poor family to have a happy Christmas, confronts his own mother about how she treats him, and attends a movie in an old theater whose aging proprietor loves the place too much to close it. Then he gives aid to three personal friends, helping Marv reconnect with a lost love (and daughter), Reggie gain some ambition in life, and Audrey realize that lasting love is possible.

The final message has to do with Ed himself. Ed thinks that the robber he stopped at the beginning of the story may be coming back to kill him, but ultimately he comes face to face with Marcus Zusak—the book’s author. Zusak declares that, although Ed is a character in a book, he is real, and that, if someone as unremarkable as Ed can do great things in the world, so can anyone else. Zusak says that Ed inspires him. Ed, the character, does not know how to process this experience of meeting his maker. Ultimately, though, not only do Ed and Audrey end up together, but Ed comes to realize that he is more than the messenger of the title; he is the message.

Joseph Campbell and the Hero’s Journey

In The Hero with a Thousand Faces, the prominent scholar of myth and literature Joseph Campbell outlined what he called the “monomyth.” The analysis of the hero in both I am the Messenger and Stargirl found herein relies heavily on Campbell’s cycle of the monomyth, often called the hero’s journey.”

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Campbell says of the hero archetype, “The hero, therefore, is the man or woman who has been able to battle past his personal and local historical limitations to the generally valid, normal human forms. Such a one’s visions, ideas, and inspirations, come pristine from the springs of human life and thought. ... The hero has died a modern man, an eternal man—perfected, unspecific, universal man.”[223] The hero’s main function is to return from his journey “and teach the lesson he has learned of life renewed.”[224] The journey consists of several parts that are depicted visually below and explained in greater detail in the analysis of both novels in this chapter. Several, more nuanced parts of the journey (for instance, the appearance of helpers) are not included in the chart below, but are referenced in the analysis of the books themselves.

![The Hero’s Journey as Described by Joseph Campbell][225]

**Ed as Hero: Call and Departure**

Despite seeming listless and completely unmotivated to better his situation at the beginning of the book, Ed sets in motion a series of events that lead him to his own...
hero’s journey and to unexpected changes, both small and large. Ed is at the bank with his best friend Marv when the holdup occurs. After the robber tries to flee the scene of his crime, Ed, in a fit of bravery and initiative totally unlike him (“for some reason I’ll never understand,” Ed says), pursues the gunman and tackles him to the ground, enabling the police to nab him. “Local deadbeat makes good,” Ed jokes to himself about the event.  

The chase and capture of the bank robber might seem too constitute this hero’s whole (short) journey, but it proves to be Ed’s departure, or what Joseph Campbell would regard as his call to adventure.  

He is still mediocre, scared, uninvolved Ed. But, in stepping outside of himself and putting himself in conflict’s way, he has altered something small but fundamental in his world and in his self.  

Ed’s impulsive move, an unself-conscious, altruistic act that came from somewhere deep, propels him toward the role of hero.

Developmentally, Ed is in much the same place as many of his readers. Pioneering psychologist Jean Piaget and, later, Erik Erikson noted several stages of typical child development. Both of their theories postulated that, in adolescence, a child must achieve mental and physical milestones before “maturing” to the next cognitive phase.  

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226 Ibid., 14.


228 Ibid.

229 Miller, 151.
Ed describes Ed the adolescent’s turmoil succinctly. Ed does not know who he is or what he wants to be. Had it not been for his “call to adventure,” Ed would have lacked the resources to integrate the primary roles of his early life (son of a deadbeat father and difficult mother) and figure out how to achieve a cohesive personality that integrated the roles he longed to achieve (good friend, lover, achieving member of society).

Psychologist William Pollack argues that society creates a “boy code” for young males. The code “consists of the values and rules society sets and boys adopt, which then influence their feelings and behaviors.” The code can be summed up “with four stereotypes of male ideals and modes of behavior.” Boys learn that, to be a man, they need to be independent and strong, daring, powerful, and not displaying weakness or “feminine” attributes such as warmth and empathy. The danger in this lies social code in the fact that boys, and adolescent boys in particular, “are relentlessly cheered on by culture to emulate titanic heroes conjured out of fantasy and never reachable.”

Developmental theorists Carol Gilligan and Lyn Mikel Brown argue similarly, charging

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230 Miller, 154.
231 Ibid., 155.
233 Ibid.
234 Ibid.
that older models of moral development laud these qualities, to the detriment of both girls and boys.\textsuperscript{236}

Society has taught Ed Kennedy this code, telling him that he should be strong, stoic, and successful. When he failed to achieve any of these qualities by age nineteen, he thought himself a failure. His transformation from slob to savior is particularly powerful because he learns that the “male ideal” does not necessarily make a hero—that love and vulnerability take as much courage as brute force. His journey is mythic because of the distinctive form it takes, making it an appealing story with abiding power to touch the lives of today’s (or future) teenagers. Part of what makes his journey so relevant for practitioners of adolescent spiritual formation is that Ed is does not set a dangerously high standard that can crush the healthy formation of young spiritual and moral identities.\textsuperscript{237} He does not have to display incredible physical achievements, act violently, or execute revenge to be a veritable male hero.\textsuperscript{238}

\textbf{Initiation and the First Threshold}

After the bank robbery Ed receives the first playing card, containing three addresses where, as Ed discerns, people need his help. Again Ed despairs in his mediocrity. After eliminating the possibility that someone whom he knows has sent the card, he guesses that someone who saw him featured in the newspaper sent it. He isn’t

\textsuperscript{236} Lyn Mikel Brown, \textit{Packaging Boyhood} (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2009), Kindle Location 126.

\textsuperscript{237} Ibid., Location 231.

\textsuperscript{238} Ibid.
the man the papers made him out to be, Ed thinks. So he ignores the card. Campbell describes this as the “refusal of the call.” Eventually, though, with a little guidance and some prodding from a few men with guns, Ed delivers the right messages to the right people on the first card. This is Campbell’s “crossing of the first threshold” for Ed, the place where the hero moves from comfort into the unknown, from the mundane to the extraordinary.

Adolescence is itself a kind of initiation (into the adult world) and represents the crossing of a threshold (out of childhood and into a new, freer role). Teens’ focus shifts from self-interest to fulfilling the expectations of others. Motives for “pro-social” behavior tend to stabilize or “become more other-oriented during adolescent years.” Ed’s journey mirrors this reality, as he is called from his selfish, childish ways to become more engaged in his society. He, like readers, is standing at the precipice of adulthood, poised to move forward or remain stagnant. His choice of the dangerous, unknown route offered to him sets in motion his narrative adventure. It also asks readers what moral choice they would make: would they respond to the “pro-social” call to help others, or would they resist such expectations? Teens are usually expected at this stage to

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239 Campbell, *Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 56.
240 Ibid., 75.
241 Ibid., 75.
242 Ibid., 136.
243 Ibid., 232.
244 Ibid., 234.
choose the latter course; seeing Ed (a hapless modern hero) stumble at first in his moral development is a useful guide.²⁴⁴

Too often is reading seen as a “girl thing.”²⁴⁵ Marketers and authors “think boys prefer pictures and large print; they think boys want actions adventures, gross or goofy characters, and fantasy.”²⁴⁶ In accepting that these types of stories are the only kind that will “get boys to read,” many miss the great potential in young adult fiction like I Am the Messenger. Stories like that of Ed Kennedy are “one of those media-safe havens where real boys are represented among the sea of superheroes, farting giants, battling robots, and predatory aliens.”²⁴⁷ Young adult novels “create lead male characters who are isolated, rejected, or vulnerable, who struggle internally as much as with the world around them; that is, they emphasize the inside battle as much as the outside.”²⁴⁸ Ed is such a character; that is what makes his call that much more potent.

Road of Trials

Ed starts down his “road of trials” with a lament. Ed rails to Audrey, “While you’re screwin’ that guy, while Marv plots his pointless soccer match, while Ritchie does whatever the hell he does when he’s not playing cards, and while the rest of this town

²⁴⁴ Ibid., 231.
²⁴⁵ Brown, Location 2873.
²⁴⁶ Ibid.
²⁴⁷ Ibid., Location 3260.
²⁴⁸ Ibid.
sleeps, I’m doing its dirty laundry.” Audrey tells him, “You’re chosen.” Ed yells back, “It’s just ... I wish it was easier ... I wish it was someone else who was chosen for this. Someone competent. If only I didn’t stop that robbery. I wish I didn’t have to go through with it all.”

Still, Ed goes out and does his best to tackle his missions. These experiences are essential in transforming Ed’s thinking. Before, the mean streets of his home and the violence that defined them were just the status quo. Ed did not participate in the violence, but he did not think much of it. Having been threatened with violence and having himself had to threaten violence in delivering his messages as well, Ed comes away from the experience a changed man. He experiences Campbell’s “apotheosis,” the remaking of his worldview. Rather than buying into society’s myth that strength lies in brute, unthinking force, Ed realizes that compassion takes far more courage and is more important to the world. He has “broken free of the prejudices” of his “own provincially limited rendition” of role models and societal archetypes.

Just as adolescence is an initiation into adulthood, so too is it a “road of trials” (another of Campbell’s stages) for most people. It is a period often characterized by moodiness and rebellion. At the very least, a teen has to deal with not being a child, and not yet being an adult. This in-between situation leads to “trying on identity roles,”

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249 Zusak, 119-120.

250 Campbell, Hero with a Thousand Faces, 145.


252 Ibid., 124.
to both good and ill effect. Ed’s own road of trials interprets this plight, demonstrating how difficult it has been for him to “put on” the role of good son, friend, achieving member of society, and in some cases, savior. Readers can identify with him in his perceived mediocrity and ask themselves what they would do in his situation. Ed’s own potential was always inherent; so too are teen readers’ motivations and abilities.

James Fowler’s “Synthetic-Conventional” stage of faith development posits that adolescents, like Ed and his readers, are becoming more aware of what others think during their adolescence. The formation of identity becomes more of a self-reflective process. This development is apparent in Ed’s emotional struggles during his mythic road of trials. Previously, Ed’s identity was poorly defined because he didn’t care to think about much beyond himself. He hid in books. When he is forced out of this stupor and into the world (much as the teen reader is thrust into a social sphere larger than the family), his identity is shaped by what he thinks he must do for others. He starts to gain faith in what Fowler would call “transcendent value and power as perceived and grasped through the forms of cumulative tradition.” Ed stakes a claim in something larger, something communally held, when he starts acting for others, and he himself is fundamentally changed. He, like the readers of his story, is maturing both in moral decision-making and in capacity for self-reflective thought on religious faith.

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253 Ibid.

254 Van Hasselt and Hersen, 446.

255 Ibid.

256 Ibid., 445.
This is another key point for a practitioner of adolescent spiritual development interested in making effective use of *I Am the Messenger*. Knowing that Ed’s emotional development mirrors that of the youths they lead opens up opportunities for communication. For the teens themselves, Ed’s journey is developmentally significant and engaging for three reasons. First, he is a typical adolescent or young adult in that he longs for communion and intimacy. Like many teenagers, he wants to be passionate about *something*, but does not know what. Like many of the youths whom practitioners of spiritual formation will encounter, he lacks narratives to spark, ignite, and guide his own potential. After his trials, he (like readers) realizes his story’s potential—he is not the messenger, he is the message. Teen readers can become the message too: their passion, when practiced, can change the world. Those in the Christian church can connect this narrative with the idea of a “passionate Christ,” connecting youths’ experiences with ways to live out the church’s moral teachings. Ed had literal playing cards; all teens have figurative ones, in the form of the daily challenges in moral decision-making that can be inspired or informed by *I Am the Messenger*.

**The Hero’s Return: Ed Meets His Maker**

In literary terms, the end of Ed’s story is surprising. Ed completes his tasks, his hero’s journey, and there waiting for him at home is Marcus Zusak (the author), who has written himself into the story as a meta-aware narrator. Ed asks him, “Why me?” Why is

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Ed the hero of the story? Is Ed real? What does his hero’s journey mean? The meta-narrator replies:

Yeah, it was about a year ago, and I saw your father buried. I saw you and your card games and your dog and your ma. I just kept coming back, watching, the same way you did at all those addresses. ...I killed your father, Ed. I organized the bungled bank robbery for a time when you were there. I instructed that man to brutalize his wife. I made Daryl and Keith do all those things to you, and your mate who took you to the stones ... I did it all to you. I made you a less-than-competent taxi driver and got you to do all those things you thought you couldn’t. … And why? I did it because you are the epitome of ordinariness, Ed. ... And if a guy like you can stand up and do what you did for all those people, well, maybe everyone can. Maybe everyone can live beyond what they’re capable of—maybe even I can. ⁵⁄₉

Here, then, is the hero’s journey summed up perfectly. Why tell stories about heroes? Why does the form of the journey matter? Why does the telling of it matter? One reason is that narrative has the power to inspire or even transform the reader into a hero too. Ed is “real,” and everything that happens in this story (like all stories) is real, because it is affecting the reader’s mind. It can change the reader’s story and thus his or her reality.

Throughout the action of *I Am the Messenger* Ed is approaching manhood, or what one author calls “the big impossible.” ⁵⁄₂⁹ He, like many male readers, seems to suffer from a type of “emotional illiteracy.” ⁵⁄₃⁰ That is, at a young age, Ed and the boys he represents were “systematically guided away from emotional lives toward silence, solitude, and distrust.” ⁵⁄₃¹ This social pressure caused Ed to shut down and stop trying to

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⁵⁄₉ Zusak, 353.


⁵⁄₃⁰ Ibid., 9.

⁵⁄₃¹ Ibid., xv.
go out into the world. In the world of the reader, it can lead to a “destiny of aggression,” where “aggressive impulses are allowed free rein.” Ed’s use of redemptive violence in delivering some of his messages (or the author’s use of violence to motivate Ed in the first place) typifies the problem in a culture where there is only “one way to be a man”—namely, to be violent. After initially trying to hide from the realities of violence and neglect, Ed becomes a perpetrator himself, only to become aware later that violence is not the answer. In his experience a moral question is posed to all of us. Ed matures and, upon his “hero’s return,” realizes he is more than the product of a “culture that offers no security.” He is the message that anyone can be a hero.

Can Ed Kennedy’s mythic journey from aloof cab driver to Ed Kennedy the passionate advocate for others help to change what Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton call “disengaged” youth into “religiously devoted” teens? Or can he guide “spiritual seekers” to deeper communion with their associated faith communities? I believe he can. Ed suffers from the “sin of despair” that leads to dull resignation, a sense of dejection that produces inertia. Youths can easily fall prey to dejection and inertia, given their passionate longings and their still limited autonomy. Identification with

262 Ibid., 14.
263 Ibid., 256.
264 Ibid., 75.
266 Ibid.
267 Jurgen Moltmann, In the End—the Beginning (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 93.
characters like Ed allows readers to ally themselves with someone who knows dejection, the search for autonomy, and a longing for passion and intimacy—with one who can inspire through example and rather than authority. In finding empathy with a character like Ed, teens can embrace the idea that “pain might be better than dull resignation in which nothing matters.”

*I Am the Messenger* can be a bridge connecting teens’ sense of pain and emptiness to a source that can make its experience more transformative and less likely to result in an adolescence that is “more dead than alive.”

**I Am the Messenger’s Hero’s Journey in Conversation with the Christian Story**

A recent large-scale endeavor called the “National Study of Youth and Religion” (NSYR) uncovered many interesting results with regard to teenagers’ actual attitudes concerning faith and spirituality. First, it showed that teens have trouble articulating their religious beliefs or why something is right or wrong. Second, though teens are most influenced by the faith of their parents, teens see religion (and Christianity in particular) in a “benignly positive light.” Adolescents’ actual “faith,” then, is something Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton have titled “therapeutic

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268 Ibid.

269 Ibid.


272 Ibid., 124.
individualism."\textsuperscript{273} In this “benignly positive” faith, “moral duties, pain, and suffering are not seen as they traditionally often were, as an inevitable part of life to be endured or perhaps through which one should grow in personal character and spiritual depth. Rather these are largely avoidable displeasures to be escaped in order to realize a pleasurable life of happiness and positive self-esteem.”\textsuperscript{274}

This reality offers the possibility for conversation between myth in young adult fiction and the Christian story, in two ways. First, stories like \textit{I Am the Messenger} can help practitioners of young adult formation give their young people a model by which to view some actions as morally better than others. Also, Ed’s journey shows a young person moving from belief in a therapeutic individualistic worldview, to one a lifestyle characterized by faith (in the transformative power of the messages delivered) and action.

\textbf{A Hero Wandering: The Moral Coordinates of Ed Kennedy and Friends}

\textit{The (Im)morality of Mediocrity}

Ed Kennedy, like the youths who responded to the NSYR, is often unable to put in words what is right and what is wrong. Nonetheless, themes emerge in the world of the novel that demonstrate implicit moral coordinates in which the characters act. A first major moral tenet is the idea that it is morally wrong simply to exist—to live with no purpose. The teenagers of \textit{I Am the Messenger} all appear listless as the story opens. Ed,\textsuperscript{273} Ibid., 172-173. \textsuperscript{274} Ibid.
the narrator, is particularly without purpose. He feels guilt over this lack of direction, but also feels crippled by inertia and unable to change anything. Only something completely extraordinary can draw Ed out of his stupor. Through his subsequent behavior it becomes evident that one of the greatest sins one can commit is to waste the potential inherent in life, no matter how pathetic an individual may consider that life to be.\textsuperscript{275} Anything is possible, and that possibility is particularly significant when a person acts for the good of another. Here practitioners of adolescent spiritual formation can make inroads with those with whom they work, using \textit{I am the Messenger} as a narrative bridge to the transformative power of community and engagement. It is not a metaphor for the church, but still exposes teen readers to a wider network of people committed to a passion-filled existence. Surrounded by such people, teenagers are less likely to feel unhappy about such personal concerns as their body and physical appearance, significantly less likely to feel sad and depressed, and more likely to feel loved and cared for.\textsuperscript{276} In reading a novel like \textit{I Am the Messenger}, youths can begin making cognitive connections with the possibilities for challenge and community available in their own lives.

Ed is angst-ridden mainly because choosing to do what he felt was morally right has caused him emotional turmoil. He resents his call and rarely faces suffering without self-pity. In this way, he defines himself as a savior completely unlike Jesus Christ (who

\textsuperscript{275} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{276} Ibid., 225.
Ed is, instead, a typical teenager preoccupied with how he can feel better about his own situation. However, his perseverance in doing what he felt was morally right (delivering the messages, no matter what the personal cost) presents an interesting set of choices to teenagers. Ed’s story argues that, despite the angst, suffering, and potential danger, doing the right thing is rewarding as well. The Christian church, as interpreter of morally right action for its youths, connects with Ed’s story at this point. In a world where “hopelessness is a constant refrain in the life stories of many teenagers today,” the church argues that “Christian hope is the expectation of a future rooted in the promises of God, which motivates us to live in the present with certainty and confidence.” Though the “promises of God” might not agree with Ed’s moral coordinates (particularly his belief that violence can be redemptive), the novel does imagine a “narrator” who suffers with creation out of love for it and compels Ed to act.

*I Am the Messenger* clearly communicates that a person ought to live with purpose. Ideally, that purpose should be to serve others; through such service, a person is amply rewarded. This truth offers an excellent starting point for teaching teenagers about the potential value in engaging in morally right action. Adolescence, as a time of identity formation, is also a key period during which young people are seeking out what purposes

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277 Van Hasselt and Hersen, 232.


279 Moltmann, 164.
are worthy of their time and attention.\textsuperscript{280} Those who work with youths need to communicate that “the faithfulness of God in history, Christ’s resurrection, and the experience of life in God’s spirit are the ground for the expectation of eternal life in God’s future new world. We are only drawing the conclusions, and tracing the horizons of the hope which springs from these foundations, and in so doing we arrive at eternal life.”\textsuperscript{281} \textit{I Am the Messenger} is a narrative map of how a person can seek to live out expectations yet to be fulfilled. Though Ed Kennedy does not act because of faith in God, he acts because he believes he is part of something bigger. His story helps teens engage the idea of stepping outside themselves, and how life might look should they commit to living out their Christian, countercultural faith.\textsuperscript{282}

The most powerful message that \textit{I Am the Messenger} sends is that moralistic, therapeutic deism is not a helpful, healthy, or worthwhile belief system. Such a worldview is evidenced in the lives of Ed and his friends before Ed’s journey commences. They did not care about the good and certainly didn’t love it, as Christians are called to do.\textsuperscript{283} After Ed is changed by his quest, however, all acquire a new way of thinking. He is in many ways “rewritten.” Christians similarly have a message, purpose,
and identity “grounded in God’s accommodation to human culture.” Likewise, “faith flies in the face of self-fulfilling norms of consumerism and addresses issues of openness, not by avoiding the cross, as Moralistic Therapeutic Deism would have us do, but by clinging to it.” Ed is not Christ, but he demonstrates what denial of “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism” could look like, even in difficult settings. He could be an inspiration to the many Christian churches where “adults lack confidence in articulating, much less teaching, their own faith.”

Stories like *I Am the Messenger* can allow adults to compare morally right actions to damaging ones, using examples from the narrative. Moreover, *I Am the Messenger* powerfully raises questions of belief, and of how belief should inform action. As popular fiction, it is an accessible means of making relevant the Gospel’s call to action. Kenda Creasy Dean argues that “God calls God’s people … to converse fluently behind the wall” of the church, “using the Christian community’s distinctive language, perceptions, and assumptions.” However, the Christian community is also called to “take part in the conversation on the wall, which requires competence in the language, perceptions, and assumptions of the broader cultures.” *I am the Messenger* is “on the wall” of

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285 Ibid., Location 626-628.

286 Ibid, Location 625.

287 Ibid., Location 1894.

288 Ibid.

adolescent life; as such, it represents a tool that can help cultivate a “bilingual consciousness” to move teens away from moralistic therapeutic deism.

Treating Others as You Would Yourself: The Good in Community

_I Am the Messenger_ also embodies the message that participation in a larger community offers great potential for change, and that it is morally wrong to seek isolation. An individual mired in grief, oppression, or pain can often be delivered from suffering by emerging from solitude into community. Several of the people who receive Ed’s messages are transformed by the realization that they are not alone. Ed demonstrates that someone (albeit an anonymous someone) cares enough about them to help them change their lives. Loneliness, difficult life situations, and pain are not necessarily erased, as Ed lacks the power to free his charges from these troubles entirely, but he does bring significant improvement to their lives. In doing so he communicates a key moral imperative of _I Am the Messenger_—that helping to create community is one of the greatest acts of love.289 Passion is born out of this love, which again keeps the scourge of mediocrity at bay.290

There are churches in Ed’s universe. There are good members of the clergy, like Father O’Reilly, who strive to bring people together and let love, not the pursuit of personal appetites, guide one’s life. However, Father O’Reilly is failing to reach the impoverished around him. It is Ed, the epitome of all of the lost people of the city, who


290 Ibid.
must reach others. Thus, in addition to demonstrating the well-substantiated truth that participating in an “identity-bearing” community improves young people’s chances of thriving, the book argues that teenagers can be ambassadors to a culture, even if that culture wants to engulf them.  

If “God’s love is consequential love, which calls for a consequential faith,” it “calls for communities where holiness—not niceness—rules the day.” Ed is forced to realize there is such a thing as a new life. He takes messages to people not because he wants to, but because he has to. Eventually, he remains in the city because he loves it enough to want it to change. We can make an analogy between his experience and why the Christian church continues to tell its story to an uninterested (or even hostile) culture. It gathers its community through lived “messages” like the Eucharist, the “remembrance” of Jesus Christ, the one who transforms human brokenness into Christ’s one Body. Ed is not a messenger of Christianity, but a character who demonstrates how teenagers can be empowered to live their faith outside the walls of their place of worship.

Heroes on the Wall

Kenda Creasy Dean writes:

Youth ministers are notorious for ignoring ecclesial decorum to negotiate on-the-wall (and sometimes, we should admit, off-the-wall) conversations between the gospel and popular culture for young people who are unfamiliar with, or unconfined by the church’s way of doing business. Carrying over God’s word


292 Ibid., Location 702.

293 Ibid., Location 1651.
from one context to another resonates with handing on Christian tradition from one generation to the next. In both cases, the gospel winds up in the hands not of church powerbrokers but of people on the margins: lay people, young people, novices in faith whose newfound ability to participate in the behind-the-wall conversation sets in motion new ways of “being church.”

Ed Kennedy, a man on the margins, is called to a hero’s journey that transforms him into a new and better person. He communicates a model of how one can move from disengaged to, as Dean calls it, one “practicing passion.” He is the mythic hero made real; he is an example of how faith can propel a young life on a hero’s journey of its own.

Teens long for such an adventure; the Christian church and its practitioners of young adult formation can appropriate tools from popular culture to guide where their teenage heroes’ journeys end up.

Ralph Waldo Emerson said, “That which dominates our imaginations and our thoughts will determine our lives, and our character.” By reading young adult novels with an eye toward how the popular hero’s journey engages the Christian story and community, practitioners and young adult formation can help to shape adolescents’ imagination and thus their character. This statement is true for two reasons. First, each person “comes to know who he or she is by creating a heroic story of the self.” The story becomes a self-defining myth, which is a unifying, central story behind various

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295 Dean, Clark, and Rahn, 116.


297 McAdams, 11.
episodes in life.\textsuperscript{298} Just as a self-fulfilling prophecy comes true in large part because a person believes it will, the self-defining myth shapes a teenager’s imagination because he or she believes the story is essential to one’s identity. Secondly, novels like \textit{I am the Messenger} have characters deeply rooted in timeless myths, as well as mood, tone, and setting so visceral that the brain can experience them as if they were physically real, like “a waking dream.”\textsuperscript{299} Thus, to the mind, a novel becomes integrated into the very thought processes that create personal myth, thus helping to fashion a teenager’s “history of the self.”\textsuperscript{300}

\textbf{A Heroine’s Journey: A Myth-Critical Analysis of \textit{Stargirl}}

Jerry Spinelli’s \textit{Stargirl} is as different in narrative style from \textit{I am the Messenger} as its heroine is from Ed. Zusak’s work is written in the first person; Spinelli uses a third-person omniscient perspective. \textit{Messenger’s} characters were older and had few prospects in life, and violence colored many of the book’s acts of redemption; \textit{Stargirl’s} characters are younger, their conflicts less defined, their voices lighter in tone. This book tells the title heroine’s story from the perspective of Leo, a boy who falls in love with her and describes how her heroics subtly unfold.

Previously home schooled student “Stargirl” enters Mica High at the beginning of her junior year. She is unlike anyone the students of Mica High have ever seen. \textit{Stargirl}

\textsuperscript{298} Ibid., 20.

\textsuperscript{299} Sutton and Parravano, 133.

\textsuperscript{300} McAdams, 102.
brings a ukulele to school and sings to people on their birthdays. She always carries her pet rat with her. She joins the cheerleading squad and cheers not just for the home team, but for everyone. When anyone in town dies, she mourns for them. When anyone celebrates something, she sends a card. She participates in a dozen anonymous acts of kindness each week. She dresses however her mood strikes her, wears no makeup, and changes her name when her old one no longer fits.

At first, things go well for her. People like the attention she gives them. Her quirky antics attract people to her, particularly Leo Borland, who falls in love with her. He follows her and starts to appreciate a beauty and potential of which he was previously unaware. However, the two most popular students at Mica High are threatened by Stargirl’s nonconformity. They begin a campaign to demoralize her and break the other students’ fascination with her. Leo, unable to cope with being a social outcast, asks Stargirl to change. She tries to be “normal” for a while, leaving her rat and ukulele at home and dressing like everyone else. Even so, she is still not popular. She ends the attempt at conformity, bringing back her crazy clothes, ukulele, and her rat. Leo does not ask her to the end-of-school dance, opting instead to stay home. Stargirl goes with another friend and prompts her dull schoolmates into a conga line out into the desert. When another girl, Hillari Kimble, slaps Stargirl for “ruining everything,” the unperturbed heroine kisses Hillari on the cheek and zooms off into the night. The next day, Stargirl does not return to school. She and her family move away, and, although Leo and the rest of Mica High never see her again, her legacy lives on through small acts of nonconformity.
Initiation

Little girls are not made of sugar and spice, yet somehow this metaphor is a pervasive image. It indicates to society that girls and women should be “nice.” Societal cues teach girls that the feminine ideal is to care about others more than they about their own well-being, never to be quick to anger or to take control, and certainly not to be aggressive, competitive, or mean with or to one another. When a girl breaks this mold, her femininity is called into question and her female peers often ostracize her for not “acting like everybody else.”

In this context, it is not surprising that the students of Mica High initially respond to Stargirl with shock, suspicion, and disbelief. Why would anyone act like this, the students ask? Stargirl’s call to adventure, unlike Ed Kennedy’s in I am the Messenger, happens before the book (but not the story) starts. She has been helping and encouraging people from the sidelines, with anonymous birthday cards and small acts of charity, but she has longed for interaction with her peers. So she has left the valuable but safe world of home schooling to move into the public school system. Stargirl is free in ways the other students are not—she does not know that she should not be completely herself all the time. This is a common trait in mythic heroes. She does not know social


\[302\] Ibid., 67.

\[303\] Ibid., 104.

conventions or that certain people are gatekeepers to Mica’s social pecking order—or, if she does know, she does not care. This unique young girl does not refuse the call to adventure; indeed, her prior acceptance of this possibility has helped to make her who she is in the first place.\(^{305}\)

Stargirl, as a character, can powerfully combat common assumptions that pervade young female emotional and spiritual development. There is a “hidden curriculum” in society and the church that “teaches girls they are not important.”\(^{306}\) Though those around Stargirl try to challenge and erode who she is, she demonstrates to them that being fully oneself allows a greater connectivity. That is, allowing each individual to flourish makes the group less cohesive, but a more positive force overall. Stargirl encounters the very real high-school social reality that some of her peers are threatened by her confidence.\(^{307}\) Her resolution ultimately to ignore her own beliefs and conform for a time is a tacit acknowledgment that relationship is of primary importance to girls.

Girls’ spirituality radiates from their relationship with God; that relationship blossoms in connection with others around them.\(^{308}\) Thus, connection, relationship, and community are essential for girls’ spirituality to flourish. Stargirl, as a character, evidences this truth. She did well as a home schooled student but needed something more, something that could only be found in the company of her peers. When introduced

\(^{305}\) Ibid., 4.


\(^{307}\) Simmons, 114.

\(^{308}\) Ibid., 119.
to the challenging social context of Mica High, she tries to connect and build relationships by showing small acts of kindness and love. She is never happier than when Leo lets himself enter a relationship with her. Though Stargirl never claims to be explicitly Christian, she makes clear her belief in the sacred, and in the sacred potential found in other people. She wants to share what she has found deeply moving, so that others could be so moved.

Road of Trials and Return

Hillari Kimble and Wayne Parr, the “popular kids” at school, are not pleased that their influence over the students of Mica High has eroded because of Stargirl. They demand conformity, for this is their source of power. Their eerie sway over their classmates demonstrates their role as the monster whom the hero must defeat.  They mount the expected assault on the one who has come to defeat them. It starts when the Mica high basketball team starts winning consistently. As quickly as the students have embraced novelty in Stargirl, they now trade their former aloofness for school pride and a desire for basketball success, which reaches a fevered pitch in the postseason as the team pursues a state championship. Stargirl, unaffected by school affiliation, still cheers whenever anyone does something noteworthy in the game. When an opposing school’s star player is injured, she is the first person on the court to comfort him. This horrifies her classmates from Mica High, who wonder why Stargirl should go against “the team.”

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309 Norman, 5.
310 Ibid.
The same groupthink-dream from which Stargirl had started to awaken the students has slipped over them once again. Stargirl is dropped from the cheerleading squad, and Hillari Kimble and Wayne Parr, playing the role of mythic monster, pave the way for an increasingly difficult road of trials.311

The reader does not learn directly how these experiences affect Stargirl or how she analyzes the situation. However, through narrator Leo, the reader does learn that Stargirl does have supernatural help of a kind. Again, such a guide is typical in myth, especially when it appears that the hero may be facing certain defeat.312 Archie, a retired professor and paleontologist who serves as Leo’s mentor, previously tutored Stargirl during her home schooling years and still serves as her advisor. Archie advises Leo that the wisest thing to do would be to love Stargirl for who she is and to place less value in what the other kids think of her.313 Leo could thus be seen as the hero’s soul mate.314 He reflects on Stargirl’s nature:

“How did this girl come to be?” I used to ask myself. Sometimes I thought she should be teaching me. She seems to be in touch with something that the rest of us are missing. ... You know, there’s a place we all inhabit, but we don’t much think about it, we’re scarcely conscious of it, and it lasts for less than a minute a day. ... It’s in the morning, for most of us. It’s that time, those few seconds when we’re coming out of sleep but we’re not really awake yet. For those few seconds we’re something more primitive than what we are about to become. We have just slept the sleep of our most distant ancestors, and something of them and their world still clings to us. For those few moments we are unformed, uncivilized.

311 Ibid, 6.

312 Campbell, Hero with a Thousand Faces, 63.


314 Campbell, Hero with a Thousand Faces, 63.
We are not the people we know as ourselves, but creatures more in tune with a tree than a keyboard. We are untitled, unnamed, natural, suspended between was and will be, the tadpole before the frog, the worm before the butterfly. We are, for a few brief moments, anything and everything we could be.\textsuperscript{315}

Here Archie demonstrates his place within the Wise Old Man archetype.\textsuperscript{316} He counsels Leo and teaches Stargirl. Leo tries to love her as per Archie’s advice, but his love of social acceptance takes its toll. Leo talks Stargirl into giving up her true nature for Leo; in fact, for a time, she goes by the name (Susan) given to her by her parents. This represents the common trope of the hero (or heroine) “coming down” from her exalted status and “putting on” more mundane characteristics.\textsuperscript{317} But after Hillari Kimble and Wayne Parr still do not accept her, Susan becomes Stargirl anew, marking as complete the hero’s necessary time with the mortals whom she might inspire.\textsuperscript{318}

“Contemporary realistic fiction written for girls reassures readers their everyday lives matter. School stories, friendship stories, stories about falling off the stage during a ballet recital: to anyone too old to have to worry anymore about being picked last in gym, such fare can seem trivial. But the authors of these books understand that sometimes the most mundane dilemmas can be the weightiest.”\textsuperscript{319} Myth-critical analysis of such fiction demonstrates how the lives of such characters not only capture the feelings of

\textsuperscript{315} Spinelli, 104.

\textsuperscript{316} Joseph Campbell. \textit{The Hero with a Thousand Faces}. 63.

\textsuperscript{317} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{318} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{319} Rogger Sutton and Martha Parravano. 240.
contemporary young girls, but are also connected with the hopes and dreams of so many generations before them. Girls’ struggles with bullies, body image, pressure to conform, and frustration over not being heard are meaningfully confronted in Stargirl. The heroine’s initiation, her road of trials, and her return (in Stargirl’s case, her return to home schooling) are similar enough to the real pitfalls of high school to make her a companion as well as a heroine.

**Search for Identity: Stargirl the Hero in Moral Formation**

Jean Piaget and other early developmental psychologists (like prominent moral theorist Lawrence Kohlberg) might argue that Stargirl matures less in the course of her story than *I Am the Messenger*’s Ed Kennedy.\(^{320}\) Piaget (followed later by Kohlberg) based his stages of cognitive development on the idea that adherence to rules, and the increasingly nuanced thought and application of justice within those rules, represented a standard for maturation in moral reasoning.\(^ {321}\) But girls and women care less about strictly adhering to rules, preferring a more fluid approach to problems that allowed them to maintain harmony in relationships.\(^ {322}\) Stargirl was a victim of injustice. She never sought to play by, or even to “make right,” the rules of the high-school social game. However, she did heroically try to establish and maintain relationships. As Lyn Mikel Brown notes, this is evidence of a typical teenage girl who draws “attention to the quality of

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\(^ {321}\) Ibid., Location 400

\(^ {322}\) Ibid.
relationships between people”; Brown notes how deeply such concerns” influence what girls “value and how they act in the world.”

A sense of “becoming,” or the search for identity, is another defining characteristic of the period of adolescence. This quest for self has been called “the spiritual problem of our time.” Girls grow into their identities (or “become” themselves) and become surer of their moral decision-making differently from boys. All teens have to navigate the difficult waters of identity formation discerning not only how to read the maps given to them, but which maps to read in the first place. Paramount in identity formation are several aspects within the individual, including physical changes, emotional maturation, and influences from the wider culture. Stargirl and those around her are very much entrenched in this search for identity; Stargirl’s archetypical heroism arises from her interpretation of the struggle. Practitioners of young adult moral formation can find within the narrative of Stargirl many themes and realistic incidents that they can relate to their group.

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324 Van Hasselt and Hersen, 443.

325 Gollnick, 91.


327 Ibid., 237.
The Greatest of These: *Stargirl* in Conversation with the Christian Story

“Despair paralyzes and hope mobilizes.” If this is the case, Ed Kennedy represents despair and Stargirl hope. While Ed as both messenger and message demonstrated what a hero can save people *from* (alienation, bondage, and brokenness), Stargirl is a kind of icon and a window through which readers can see what a hero can save people *for*.

Earth Angel: The Moral Coordinates of *Stargirl*

Whereas the city of *I Am the Messenger* is cool and gray, *Stargirl* is set in fictional Mica, Arizona, where the deep blue sky is uninterrupted and the ancient light of the stars is unobscured. The flat, hot, dusty desert is a place of magic; green things grow in the most unlikely places, and the sun sets dawn and dusk on fire as it rises and sets on the horizon. Whereas Ed Kennedy and his friends were disenfranchised and alienated, Stargirl stands out because she loves every good thing around her and finds good in all things.

1 Corinthians 13:12 reads, “For now we see in a mirror, dimly, then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. And now faith, hope, and love abide; these three; and the greatest of these is love.” In what ways can a teenager turn these nouns (faith, hope, and love) into verbs? *Stargirl* makes subtle suggestions as to how faith, hope, and love can be active within

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Fackre, 205.
one’s life narrative. The book does not argue for a Christian worldview, but it can “feed a hunger we didn’t know we had.”

Faith

Amidst the myriad forces of adolescent identity formation (such as personal context, educational settings, gender, and social class), it is often difficult for teenagers to develop self-confidence, in that what it means to be “a self” is constantly in flux. Social pressure from peers is at the forefront of social experience, teaching teenagers that it is better to be stylish, pretty, and popular than to be unique and ostracized. The need to “fit in” encompasses not just how one looks, but also what one believes. To be a committed Christian is especially difficult in a world where faith is no longer the status quo.

Sociologist Ann Swidler calls the expectations and implicit guidelines of a group its “cultural toolkit.” The Christian church also has its stated set of beliefs, calling people to believe in a “peculiar God-story.” One generation of Christians is called to communicate to the next the “story of God’s courtship with us through Jesus Christ, of God’s suffering love through salvation history and especially through Christ’s death and

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329 Sutton and Parravano, 134.
330 Van Hasselt and Hersen, 279.
331 Simmons, Odd Girl Out, Location 1830.
332 Dean, Location 135.
333 Simmons, Odd Girl Out, Location 805.
334 Dean, Location 418.
resurrection, and of God’s continued involvement in the world through the Holy Spirit.”\textsuperscript{335} This message has become muted in today’s culture, and many young people are unable to recognize the story that is supposed to build the foundation for their very being.\textsuperscript{336} Many caring practitioners of adolescent spiritual development are, albeit unwittingly, communicating a watered-down “cultural toolkit” that has nothing to do with the Christian church’s distinctive God-story.\textsuperscript{337}

For these reasons, \textit{Stargirl} is a valuable narrative tool. So much of popular culture, novels included, tells a girl what she needs to be.\textsuperscript{338} Little girls should be “perfect angels,” elementary school girls are boy-crazy “pre-tweens,” middle-school girls are full-fledged teenagers, and high-school girls are “sold an identity story of the sexually free model-diva-rock star that younger girls are supposed to look up to.”\textsuperscript{339} Though these images sell millions of dollars of merchandise, they are detrimental to girls’ healthy psychological development.\textsuperscript{340} As such, Stargirl, as a character, is peculiar. The world around her presents these same stereotypes. It would prefer that she dress like everyone else, keep her head down, not attract attention, and certainly not be remarkable, even if that uniqueness makes other people feel better about themselves. Initially she does not

\textsuperscript{335} Ibid., Location 232.
\textsuperscript{336} Ibid., Location 233.
\textsuperscript{337} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{339} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{340} Ibid.
seem to resist this cultural pull because she wants to, she is just simply peculiar; this peculiarity may sometimes isolate her, but it gives her more freedom and happiness in the end.

Most teens don’t aspire to be martyrs to the faith, or to become saints.\textsuperscript{341} However, Christian youths are asked to try to make moral decisions based on doctrines and traditions that strike them as in conflict with the society they currently live in. Teenagers often feel alienated from the faith, moral expectations, and cultural contexts of their parents, let alone the world of the Bible.\textsuperscript{342} They are asked to be, in action, not comfortably “normal” but Christ-like and uncomfortably radiant.\textsuperscript{343}

Stargirl demonstrates one way to be peculiar, to make moral decisions about something other than fashion or social acceptability. Stargirl loves others as she loves herself, and as a result her joy is very full. The novel does not tell the Christian story, but tells the story of a world where a girl loved others as much as she loved herself. For Christian young people to become ones who “live with the gospel” and let it “empower them to proclaim and enact Christ’s embrace,” they need a “missional imagination” to take root.\textsuperscript{344} Stargirl has a missional imagination, if not a Christian one. She views herself as an emissary of love to others and acts accordingly. Her story argues that it is

\textsuperscript{341} Bernard Brandon Scott, “Heroes from on High.” \textit{Anglican Theological Review}, 69, no. 2 (April 1987): 141.


\textsuperscript{344} Ibid.
preferable to be peculiar and actively loving than socially acceptable and passionless. If one lives in such a way, one’s social status might suffer at first, but ultimately everyone is better off for having been exposed to something so remarkable in the first place.

Hope

The book goes on to warn, however, that individuality is not without danger. Though living without a care for fashion or convention makes one purer in soul, there are many who would rail against it. Typically, these are the people who maintain control through preserving the status quo. Hillari Kimble is the main gatekeeper in *Stargirl*; her character is seen time and time again in other social systems. Author Rosalind Wiseman calls these girls “Queen Bees.” Hillari the queen bee’s station in life is fashion-embodied—untouchable, beautiful though dull, and much desired. She has on their side the fact that fear of the strange has deep roots. Hillari uses this to maintain her power and control over the student body of Mica High. But, ironically, the group suffers when it is forced to have nothing to hope for; it then unconsciously yearns to be free.

As the adolescent’s identity emerges on a variety of levels, numerous influences suggest how an adolescent should feel, and many of them are not particularly hopeful.

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345 Hein, 1299.

346 Wiseman, 24.

347 Ibid.

Erik Erikson’s fifth stage of development deals directly with the critical conflict between the formation of a cohesive, integrated identity and identity diffusion. Stargirl’s mental state is not well developed, though Leo’s definitely is. Contrasting Leo’s reliance on peer approval with Stargirl’s seeming obliviousness to it presents a balanced picture to teenagers. Stargirl is hope-embodied. She is able to integrate her radical commitment to the love of the other with her own loves and passions. The Christian gospel, like her example, “makes strange the society we live in.” Even if Stargirl does not argue for the Christian gospel, she does demonstrate that living a narrative counter to the one dictated by the wider culture is possible. The Christian gospel “provides an alternative way to make sense of our lives, a behind-the-wall conversation that offers possibilities beyond the entropic political or economic scripts handed to us by the culture at large.” As such, teens hoping to embody this alternative in their own lives could benefit from engaging with someone experiencing similar circumstances and challenges, like Stargirl.

Love

“The fruit of a consequential Christian faith is holiness, not niceness, which is not a course for the faint of heart.” While some might characterize Stargirl as “nice” if they met her on the street, most would probably just think she was weird. In today’s

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349 Miller, 154.

350 Dean, Location 3164.

351 Ibid., Location 3165.

352 Ibid., Location 688.
modern society (and perhaps most societies before) to be holy is to be weird. The Christian story implores people so to love one another that they become weird to the world, as such love is not how one might “get ahead” in a market-driven society. Another reason why this sort of manifestation of love is problematic is that, while individuals can exemplify it, the community must embrace it for it to have lasting power. Stargirl’s attentions all “flowed outward,” but she was unable to convince all of her classmates to live in this way as well. Her peers’ fears regarding Stargirl’s radical, nonconformist, love-infused lifestyle come to a head when Stargirl takes part in Leo’s in-school talk show. The other students shout on camera:

“Why can’t you be normal?”
“Why do you wanna be so different?”
“Yeah—is something wrong with us, you gotta be so different?”
“Why don’t you wear makeup?”
They were all standing now, jabbing, jutting, shouting ...
“You don’t like us, do you. Do you ...”
The jury went on shouting.

The backlash against Stargirl grows from the other students’ fear that her love is revealing something was lacking in them. The characters in the book are very true to life, as the above statements also appear in interviews with girls who bully and have been

\[353\] Ibid.
\[354\] Ibid.
\[355\] Gudorf, 102.
\[356\] Ibid., 51.
\[357\] Ibid., 67.
bullied.\textsuperscript{358} Researcher Rachel Simmons asked a group of high-school girls why they disliked another girl at the school. Simmons recounts their conversation: “‘We want her to be less confident so she won’t talk to our boys,’ Keisha said. ‘Somebody new come in, they threatened by what they are. Look at her, this and that. She’s going to take my friends, she’s going to take my man.’ I asked, ‘Do girls want other girls to be confident in general?’ ‘No,’ came a chorus. ‘No.’ It was Keisha. Why not? ‘Girls don’t because they’re threatened by what they are.’”\textsuperscript{359}

The Bible tells of a rich man who asked Jesus what good thing he must do to get eternal life (Matt 19:16). Jesus told him that in addition to following the Ten Commandments, if he really wanted to be perfect, he should sell his possessions and give to the poor, so that he will have treasure in heaven. Then Jesus said, “Come, follow me.”\textsuperscript{360} The young man was devastated; he was very wealthy and did not want to give up his material possessions. This story might be, in part, an indictment against wealth. However, it is also a story about reordering one’s goals and priorities.\textsuperscript{361} If one wants to enter the kingdom of heaven, one must “give up” earthly pleasures for the sake of showing love and following Jesus. This story exemplifies what it means to “follow Jesus.” It is not easy or even desirable to most. This difficult path of sacrifice and moral

\textsuperscript{358}Simmons, Odd Girl Out, 1342.

\textsuperscript{359}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{360}Matt 19:21

\textsuperscript{361}Dean, Location 3091.
conviction is intimidating to teenagers who derive so much of their self-esteem and identity formation from their peers.\textsuperscript{362}

Though Stargirl does not “take up the cross” and shun worldly goods and ideals for the sake of Jesus Christ, she does demonstrate what it means to put service to others before service to the status quo without losing herself in the process. She is in many ways a completely ordinary, flawed teenager. But her narrative argues against the “hidden curriculum” that “teaches girls they are not important.”\textsuperscript{363} Instead, it presents a female character who is strong, vibrant, and committed to making the world a better place. This is a message that young women need to hear, in both sacred and secular settings. Such confidence breaks the rules of femininity.\textsuperscript{364} The more this independence becomes reinforced and ingrained in one’s identity, the more it is a means to “resist the oppression likely to touch [girls’] lives.”\textsuperscript{365} Readers engaging with \textit{Stargirl} can graft the possibilities suggested in her narrative into their own daily lives, empowering them to carry out the countercultural moral action encouraged by their faith traditions.

Practitioners of young adult spiritual formation must have a firm understanding of the challenges inherent in teens’ psychological and social context. Girls, like Stargirl, desire intimacy, but later struggle for “voice, power, safety, and legitimacy.”\textsuperscript{366}

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Van Hasselt and Hersen, 238.
\item Simmons, 18.
\item Simmons, Location 1390.
\item Ibid., Location 2181.
\item Brown, \textit{Girlfighting}, Location 241.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
desperately need the support of their friends to remain emotionally, psychologically, and physically whole in a world that takes them less seriously, values their looks and their bodies above all else, and still requires that they please boys and men to succeed.”

But, like Hillari Kimble and her followers at Mica High, too often girls turn against each other (as do boys). Support is lacking at this fundamental level. Church youth leaders thus can use *Stargirl* in a number of ways. The book can start the conversation with teenagers about their own experiences in struggling for connection while (perhaps) facing opposition from their peers. Second, Stargirl (the character) can inspire discussion about how one can be “peculiar” (true to one’s beliefs) in an unbelieving world. Finally, *Stargirl* validates the desire and necessity of relationships, but gives a practical narrative of how sometimes it is difficult to form meaningful relationships in the school setting.

This observation can be linked to discussion of the value of forming life-giving relationships in the church, especially for those who lack them elsewhere.

**Sunflowers Keep Blooming: *Stargirl in the Real World***

Author Jerry Spinelli’s web page offers tips on starting your own “Stargirl Society.” Such groups have popped up in high schools all over the United States; their mission is to encourage random, kind acts and to foster nonconformity in the face of the usual high school pecking order. The existence of such groups speaks to the power of young adult fiction, showing that *Stargirl* has evoked real-life responses by adolescent

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367 Ibid.

368 See Jerry Spinelli’s web site, www.jerryspinelli.com/stargirl.htm
readers. The teachers who wrote the Stargirl Society manual write, “We feel that the project provided the girls with a comfortable space in which they were given the opportunity to express themselves and interact with one another in a less inhibited way. Through teaching the girls, we learned how easy it actually is for people to be open to new ideas and new people: we all have the drive to connect with one another but simply need the opportunity to do so.” The idea that freedom through nonconformity is purer, and better for the mind and spirit, obviously rang true to some readers, who then used the book as inspiration to band together with others and rejoice in their difference. Jerry Spinelli has said of the book’s influence, “I’d love to see this thing become a more widespread movement. I personally find the Stargirl Societies so appealing and meaningful that I can imagine them becoming a legacy that I cherish more than the book itself.”

When asked for his thoughts on whether he writes books to have such power, Spinelli responded:

I try to keep the storytelling element paramount, but yes, there is often in the back of my mind the hope that my stories will have a positive effect on at least a few readers. I'm happy to say that over the years I've gotten quite a bit of mail to that effect. There have been widespread effects as well. For example, there are Stargirl Societies around the country, and even the world. Members participate in Stargirl-like activities (dropping loose change on the sidewalk; leaving anonymous complimentary notes; inner beauty pageants). The State Department even got into the act, commissioning copies of Stargirl to be printed in Arabic and distributed

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371 Ibid.
in the Middle East in an effort to promote understanding between us and them. And as South Africa struggled toward an apartheid-free society, the government ordered hundreds of copies of *Maniac Magee* [one of Spinelli’s earlier works] for distribution throughout the country.\(^{372}\)

As Spinelli has said, “stories are a reflection and distillation of human experience. When we find a story that speaks to us, we may identify with a character and once we close the book, continue on to ‘write’ our own sequel. That story we write is likely to reflect the values of the story we read. Stories, said poet Muriel Rukeyser, are the stuff from which the world is made, not atoms.”\(^{373}\)

**Development, Narrative, and the Myth of Self**

Cognitively speaking, every image a very young child sees and every face that smiles back at him or her is absolutely real, good, trustworthy, and true.\(^{374}\) As a child grows up, he or she begins to distinguish reality from fantasy; by the teenage years, many have concluded the opposite of what they believed as children, finding the world to be often cruel, uncaring, or even out to get them. It is here that “teens need to discover a God who suffers with them when their “minds and bodies throb with pain.”\(^{375}\) They need to develop a “holy imagination” capable of believing in the promises of God.\(^{376}\) From this imagination teens can develop a “personal myth,” where they see themselves as

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372 Jerry Spinelli, personal e-mail communication, 30 October 2010.

373 Jerry Spinelli, personal e-mail communication, 30 October 2010.

374 Brown, *Packaging Girlhood*, Location 188.

375 Dean, *Starting Right*, 270.

376 Dean, *OMG*, 55.
individuals capable of acting from their faith in the Christian story.\textsuperscript{377} Here, faith groups may use narratives produced by popular culture as an opening where a teen’s identity (or “personal myth”) can begin to engage with other narrative structures.\textsuperscript{378}

Novels like \textit{Stargirl} and \textit{I Am the Messenger} are particularly useful because they have strongly developed characters who are flawed but seek to do good. The novels paint vivid pictures of young adult life, do not pretend that adolescents can easily do the “right thing,” and are ambiguous enough to let the reader determine what the “right thing” might be. Both make assertions about reality, or how reality should be. So too does the Christian story. These books are told from the perspective of adolescents and raise questions about mythic and theological topics. The answers the stories present are not the Christian story reimagined. Rather, they are stories that ask questions about reality.\textsuperscript{379} They ask readers to become part of the setting, the minds of the characters, the mood, and the tone of the book. In “living” these stories, teenagers gain new perspective on their own “myth of self.”\textsuperscript{380} Practitioners of young adult spiritual formation can ask anew the moral questions raised by the experience of these novels, invite discussion of how the Christian story would answer such moral dilemmas, and allow teens to participate in a “back-and-forth” engagement with both popular culture and the Christian story. This

\textsuperscript{377} Fowler, 172-173.

\textsuperscript{378} Wuthnow, 309-310.

\textsuperscript{379} Sutton and Parravano, 125.

\textsuperscript{380} McAdams, 84.
process gives teens a place to form a cohesive rather than a diffused backdrop for identity formation.\textsuperscript{381}

\textsuperscript{381} Jousselin, 13-14.
CHAPTER SIX
FREE WILL’S PROMISE: HOPE IN THE TWILIGHT SAGA

Narrating Hope in (Un)death

One of the defining characteristics of adolescence is passion. During the teenage years, passion is still in search of objects worthy of the young person’s time, attention, and love. Passion can also easily overwhelm, consume, or be directed in an unhealthy manner. The objects of adolescents’ passions are often at odds with those of the adults charged with loving and guiding them. Teens feel like “outsiders” being gawked at by both their peers and adults.

For this reason the mythic theme of the monstrous is particularly appealing in adolescent literature. Narratives that feature monsters allow readers both to identify with a passionate character (in that both teens and monsters are on the periphery of the adult world) and to more imaginatively step outside their own experience. Stephanie Meyer’s Twilight series has enjoyed phenomenal popularity in part because her novels offer monsters, both beautiful and terrible, to whom teens can relate or in whom they may forget themselves. But Meyer’s work also presents a persistent, powerful potential of love and hope. This combination of the monstrous and the hopeful opens the door to

384 Beth Felker Jones, Touched by a Vampire (Colorado Springs: Multnomah, 2009), 1.
385 Ibid., 94.
invigorating dialogue with the Christian story, as well as the formation of imagination in adolescence.

**Synopsis of the *Twilight* Series**

*Twilight*

Stephanie’s Meyer’s monster love story begins when Isabella Swan (“Bella”) chooses to move in with her father after her mother marries a minor-league baseball player. Bella quickly makes friends at school, but her biology lab partner Edward Cullen seems repulsed by Bella the moment he meets her. However, weeks later, Edward miraculously saves Bella from a car crash.

Bella becomes obsessed with figuring out how Edward was able to save her life. After talking with a family friend, Jacob Black, about the mythology of the Native American tribe to which Jacob belongs, Bella comes to the frightening conclusion that Edward is a vampire. However, despite the danger and his vampire family’s disapproval, Edward and Bella fall in love. Soon their relationship is complicated by the arrival of three other vampires. Edward and his family are “vegetarians” and survive on animal blood to avoid killing humans; the three new vampires, however, enjoy human prey. James, a gifted “tracker” vampire, sets his sights on Bella. Since Bella is so important to Edward, the Cullens claim Bella as family and hatch a plan to protect her. However, James tricks Bella into thinking that he has captured her mother and lures Bella into a trap. Edward and his family arrive just in time to save Bella; Edward kills James in the process.
New Moon

On Bella Swan’s 18th birthday, Edward and his family throw her a birthday party. While unwrapping a gift, Bella cuts her finger, causing Edward’s adopted brother to be overcome by her scent and to attack Bella. Edward realizes anew how much danger human Bella is in every time she is with him and his family; he leaves suddenly, giving little explanation except to tell the devastated Bella that they are over “forever.”

In the months that follow, Bella sinks deeper into a haze of depression. However, through spending time with Jacob Black, she begins to feel more like herself. She also discovers that engaging in “extreme” activities like motorcycle riding allow her to “hear” Edward’s voice in her head. Later, Bella finds out that Jacob and his tribe are actually descendents of wolves; that is, they are werewolves. His tribe, sworn enemies of all vampires (even the Cullens, though the werewolves have a truce with the Cullen family), protect Bella when James’s mate, Victoria, comes back to seek revenge for his death.

Meanwhile, several misunderstandings and miscommunications lead Edward to believe that Bella has committed suicide. Anguished over the supposed loss of Bella, Edward flees to Italy to try to have the Volturi (vampire royalty) kill him (as only they have the power to end otherwise immortal Edward’s "life"). Edward’s sister Alice enlists Bella’s help, and together they put a stop to Edward's plan. However, the Volturi are enraged that Bella, a human, knows that vampires exist. They give the Cullens an ultimatum: either Bella dies or she becomes a vampire.
**Eclipse**

The Cullens figure out that recent serial killings in Seattle have been perpetrated by an army of newborn vampires created by Victoria. The Cullens ally themselves with the werewolves for the cause of neutralizing this threat. Shortly before the battle, Jacob overhears Bella and Edward talking about their recent engagement. Jacob threatens to kill himself in order to manipulate Bella into admitting she loves him. Meanwhile, Victoria and her army enter a fierce battle with the Cullens and the werewolves. Eventually Victoria tracks Edward’s scent, and Victoria is killed as Edward defends Bella. Victoria’s army is quickly defeated without its leader. The battle between Edward and Jacob for Bella’s heart is likewise settled, as Bella decides that, while she loves Jacob, she loves Edward more. Edward invites Jacob to his wedding, but Jacob runs away, furious.

**Breaking Dawn**

There are three “books” within this last installment of the *Twilight* series. The first is told from the point of view of Bella. She recounts her nervousness about getting married, telling her parents about Edward’s proposal, wedding planning, the wedding itself, and her honeymoon on a private island. Edward finally gives in to Bella’s desire to consummate their relationship on their honeymoon (he did not want to do so before they were married, nor did he think it a good idea, since he as a vampire could easily hurt the still-human Bella). Only a few days later, Bella realizes that she is pregnant. Because her child is half-human and half-vampire, the pregnancy progresses at an extremely rushed
pace. Carlisle, Edward’s adopted vampire father, emphasizes that the couple should return, as Bella’s health may be in jeopardy. Edward is beside himself with grief, shame, and horror at the “monster” he has created inside Bella. He tells Bella that Carlisle will “take care” of everything. Bella has already bonded with her child, however, and enlists the help of Edward’s sister Rosalie to keep Bella and the baby safe from anyone who might try to destroy the child.

Book two in the work is written from the point of view of Jacob the werewolf. Jacob’s tribe, the Quileute, is horrified by the dangers and consequences that could ensue if Bella’s child is born. The tribe plots to destroy the baby, even if it means killing Bella herself. Jacob refuses to accept this course of action and leaves. Bella’s child completes her abbreviated term of gestation, but during labor the half-breed child breaks many of Bella’s bones and she loses considerable blood. In order to keep Bella from death, Edward changes her into a vampire.

The third book of Breaking Dawn returns to Bella as the narrator. She wakes up to find that she has been granted her wish and has been changed into a vampire. Her baby Renesmee develops very rapidly, and is able to communicate mentally with her mother and anyone who is physically close enough to her. All seems well, but soon things become complicated when the vampire royalty, the Volturi, hear about Renesmee and think her an “immortal child” (i.e., a child who has been changed into a vampire—a beautiful but uncontrollably dangerous creature). The Volturi vow to destroy Renesmee and the Cullens. In order to try to save their baby, the Cullens gather vampires from around the world to act as witnesses to the fact that Renesmee is not what the Volturi
accuse her of being. The Volturi are convinced that Renesmee is not an immortal child, but still believe that she may pose a threat to vampires’ secret existence. Edward’s siblings Alice and Jasper arrive in the nick of time with Nahuel, a half-vampire, half-human creature like Renesmee. He argues that his existence proves that the baby is no threat. The Volturi nevertheless want to put an end to the Cullens and their persistent threat to the Volturi’s power, and the two sides seem about to engage in battle. However, it becomes apparent that Bella has the power to shield others from psychic attack, the specialty of several of the Volturi guard. The Volturi, aware that they lack their usual upper hand, agree to let Renesmee and the Cullens go unharmed. The Cullens return home, with the knowledge that Renesmee will reach maturity in about seven years and, though not quite immortal, will have a life span far longer than that of a normal human. Bella is content too, in that she finally seems to have achieved her happy ending with Edward, Jacob, and the rest of her family.

The Mythic Vampires of the Twilight Series

Given the long history of monsters in literature, myth criticism has a lot to say about them. The figure of the “monster-tyrant is well known to the mythologies, folk traditions, legends and even nightmares of the entire world,” and the characteristics of these monsters are everywhere “essentially the same.”\textsuperscript{386} Many monsters “remaining from primeval times still lurk in the outlying regions and, through malice or desperation,

set themselves against the human community." This is certainly true of Stephanie Meyer’s first monster, the vampire. In her books, vampires must feed on the blood of mammals, and most choose human blood (as it tastes the best). They are born predators, with features and skills honed to lure their desired prey. Meyer’s vampires are (usually) immortal, powerful, and as beautiful as they are dangerous. There are relatively few vampires in Meyer’s story world, as a body of vampire royalty enforces population control and rules are in place to conceal the vampires’ existence.

Meyer’s vampires share several of the universal monstrous characteristics found in many myths from different cultures. First, the monster is “a metaphor for all that must be repudiated by the human spirit. It embodies the existential threat to social life, the chaos, atavism, and negativism that symbolize destructiveness ... that is, the id.” Twilight paints the vampire as a creature who not kills willingly and without remorse (though Edward Cullen and his family prove to be exceptions to this rule). If a vampire does not kill his prey, but stops feeding and lets his venom works its painful transformation, a new vampire will be born. The result is a new creature with an insatiable thirst, no longer mortal. What then happens to the immortal soul? The reader is left only to guess; Meyer’s characters spend much time agonizing over this very fact throughout the course of the series. However, most of the vampires in the book are indeed the embodiment of the id, seeking only pleasure, the thrill of the successful hunt,

387 Ibid.

388 Ibid.

and a satiated appetite.\textsuperscript{390} Since the creatures mostly “observe no limits, respect no boundaries, and attack and kill without compunction,” they “say yes to all that is forbidden.”\textsuperscript{391} In saying yes where law-abiding, social humans must say no, monsters are not only a threat, but also become objects of envy. Jealousy at their power and freedom serve to further ostracize the creatures.

The Location of Mythic Monsters

Another common mythic aspect of monsters is the places in which they are found. The monster generally lives on the fringe of society, lurking along the shadowy borders between civilization and chaos. Often monsters infest “distant wildernesses of which people are afraid, like mountain tops, oceans, glaciers, or jungles.”\textsuperscript{392} They merge with the “ordinary” world in a repetitive cycle. First the monster appears in a safe community, where no one understands what is really happening. The monster then wreaks destruction and causes a reaction, while the community rallies around a hero who defeats the monster. However, often another monster comes along to take the previous one’s place, and the cycle starts anew.

Meyer’s world follows this pattern. Vampires typically live in remote areas, those close enough to humanity to be detected. A few get bored and start a killing spree in a populated area. The community never really knows what has happened, as Meyer repeats

\textsuperscript{390} Ibid., 382.
\textsuperscript{391} Gilmore, 12.
\textsuperscript{392} Gilmore, 13.
the mythic motif of disbelief and ignorance throughout the series. Likewise, the methods of vampiric killing are standard as well, including biting, dismembering, and draining dry (though she adds the addition of venom to explain how a victim not killed by an attack could be transformed into a vampire).393

**Stephanie Meyer’s Vampires and Adolescence**

David White writes, “Youth do not make good monsters. They are too alive to the possibilities of human flourishing, to peace, justice, love, and vitality.”394 However, the “uneasy incongruity in which youth now find themselves does not easily allow for such life, but creates young people as the walking wounded.”395 Adolescence can be a time to uncover great gifts and potential, and start on the path toward a healthy adulthood. Too often, though, culture paralyzes adolescents in passivity.396 It also communicates dangerous norms that make an adolescent feel at odds with his or her own moral self.397 That is why Meyer’s vampires, the Cullen family, are so attractive. They are creatures driven to kill, destroy, and let their id determine destructive, self-indulgent patterns. However, because of respect for life and a belief in the redeeming power of choice (and, in Edward’s case, true love), they choose to go against their monstrous

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393 Ibid., 180.
394 David White, *Practicing Discernment with Youth* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2005), 33.
395 Ibid.
396 Ibid., 39.
397 Ibid.,53.
The Cullens’ bodies lust for one thing, their minds for something better. They have the promise of youth, but it seems like a curse. Still, they strive for the good in spite of despair.

The vampire Cullens are like adolescents in their monstrousness. Their youth, vigor, beauty, and appetites are difficult to control, and most of the people around them fear them. Many young people may not feel exceptional, but these same attributes in them make many adults similarly wary of teenagers. The Cullens find little joy in their potential; Edward especially feels despair about the reality of so much living ahead of him. However, in Bella he finds love, meaning, and purpose. Bella likewise finds in Edward a dangerous love that can free her from her own mediocre mortality. Teens, who often feel monstrous themselves, could see in the Cullens an outlet for their marginalization. Other adolescents who feel more mediocre than monstrous may find in these vampires an escape from their own seemingly eternal prison of culturally imposed passivity.

From Monster to Victim to Victor

“For many people supernatural figures such as vampires, witches, and ghosts became religiously insignificant during the twentieth century, interesting for their special powers but no longer automatically signaling meanings antagonistic toward the church.

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398 Jones, 131.
399 Steinberg, 132.
400 Jones, 15.
Put bluntly, these days a girl can be a Christian and still like vampires."\(^{401}\) And

Stephanie Meyer’s vampires are definitely well liked. Edward—beautiful, brooding, monstrous, but so pure in spirit—appeals to readers for the romance he offers, not the horror he inspires.\(^{402}\) His character subverts the notion of an evil monster. He is instead a “sympathetic vampire,” with whom “female reader-fans identify rather than fear.”\(^{403}\) Edward’s “entire unwanted ontological status is his flaw, and thus his flaw is excessive and taken to extremes appropriate to melodrama. His unwelcome vampirism is not a sign of evil, but of victimhood.”\(^{404}\)

Historically, vampires have been seen as an embodiment of sensuality and sexuality, as well as of why one should not crave earthly immortality.\(^{405}\) The Cullens, however, are akin to victim monsters, vampires unhappy with their status and trying to act morally in a difficult world. Then, as Edward and Bella’s romance becomes eternal, the victims become the victors in and through love. As adolescents so often feel victimized in society, they can relate to characters that manage to overcome this adversity. “An important appeal of confronting the stories of the supernatural in teen culture, then, may have references to a need to feel competent and powerful in the face of


\(^{402}\) Ibid., 6.

\(^{403}\) Ibid.

\(^{404}\) Ibid.

\(^{405}\) Ibid.
powers beyond one’s control.” Part of the appeal of the Cullen vampires is that, although they are powerful beyond human measure, they are also marginalized and victimized by their own ontological status as monster. They are perpetually young, outside the sphere of societal influence, and by necessity solitary. Still, they are compelled to act ethically and to make important moral judgments based on the ideas that life is worth preserving and that love might really conquer all. Teenagers, girls especially, deeply relate to the Cullens’ situation. Here the “mingling of the human and spirit worlds is a large part of Twilight’s appeal,” because it plays to the “passion of young people for a connection with transcendence.” The power of Twilight’s story is completed by the dangerous yet ultimately sacred romance between Edward and Bella. As one young reader has said, “When I read the book I feel all these intense feelings inside, when I’m in these stories it’s like I’m the one in love.” This powerful connection allows readers to transcend their own lives (as monsters or victims) to become like the characters, for good or for ill.

**Twilight and the Mythic Werewolf**

*Twilight* is not just about vampires, as Meyer also injects werewolves into the plot. Another ancient foe of humans, werewolves have appeared in myth from as early as ancient Greece. An “accursed soul named Lycaon, who tears up the scenery in the fable

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407 Mercer, 7.

408 Ibid., 3.
by Ovid” is the source of the term lycanthropy (or “werewolfery”). Werewolves fare better in Meyer’s treatment. They are descendants of ancient Native American tribes who kill only to protect their land and their people. They are less creatures of the night and more humans who embrace their raw, animalistic side. Their creation myth reads, “From that point on, [great Quileute tribe spirit chief] Taha Aki was more than either wolf or man. They called him Taha Aki the Great Wolf, or Taha Aki the Spirit Man. He led the tribe for many, many years, for he did not age. When danger threatened, he would resume his wolf self to fight or frighten the enemy. The people dwelt in peace. Taha Aki fathered many sons, and some of these found that, after they had reached the age of manhood, they, too, could transform into wolves. The wolves were all different, because they were spirit wolves and reflected the man they were inside.”

One thing that vampires and werewolves share in common is their immortality—or, at least, they have in common an “enhanced” mortality. In the Twilight series, vampires are immune to the sun (it only makes them look more radiant), stakes in the heart, garlic, crosses, and holy water; they can be killed only by each other. Werewolves are more vulnerable, but their strength, speed, and group ethic make them nearly impossible to catch. However, since vampires crave human blood, their immortality seems morally tainted. Protagonist Edward Cullen and his family do not want to be murderers, despite their compulsory hunger. Since they were once human and became

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409 Clark, 40.

vampires, their thirst is not natural, as is the hunger of another predator (like a lion or tiger hungering for its living prey). So the Cullens are forced to live forever tortured by their most innate desire.\textsuperscript{411} Even worse, Edward is convinced that, should they die, they will be damned. He views his soul as inextricable from the ability to die; though his immortal status is breaking this natural order (as well as placing him higher on the food chain), he perceives living forever as tantamount to being cursed to hell.

Werewolves, on the other hand, have no such angst. They are born werewolves and hunger as other wolves do. They need not eat sentient creatures, and their super strength, power, and ability to kill are used strictly as a policing measure (or to hunt lesser prey than man). As such, Edward’s antithesis occurs in the character of Jacob, who is inherently joyful and filled with peace. Jacob has the best of both worlds: he can choose to remain young, transforming into a man/wolf beast with the cycles of the moon, or he can opt to grow old gracefully.

The measure of the mythic monstrous in \textit{Twilight} seems to be intrinsically tied to a creature’s “natural” state. Those who are born what they are (werewolves) are dangerous, but not monsters. Those who are born one thing and “turned into” something else are cursed by this act of choice, even if another made the choice. This change, in turn, affects the creatures’ prospects for immortality. Typically, immortality as a mythic theme takes two narrative forms. First, the immortal being is able to “escape” from time

\textsuperscript{411} Meyer, \textit{Twilight}, 269.
and return to a paradise from which he or she previously fell. Vampires, in Meyer’s description, were originally human and thus captive to all the failings and trappings of a fall away from the divine (as we have explored in chapter 3 above). In becoming a “monster” Edward sees himself as even further removed from the prospect of return. He cannot die, nor does he have a soul to be redeemed. A second form of immortality in myth comes in the “mystical submersion into cyclical time,” that is, the “theme of endless death and regeneration.”

Humans achieve a kind of immortality “by submitting to the vast, mysterious rhythm of Nature’s eternal cycles, particularly the cycles of the seasons. This is the werewolf experience. When “cycling” with the moon, the werewolf does not age. Werewolves can die, but they can also step outside of ordinary human mortality for a time if they choose. It is their natural right to do so. Vampires, on the other hand, were not created with such a natural choice. They are unable to submit to Nature’s rhythm; they stand outside of it. The feud in Twilight feud between vampires and werewolves thus represents two faces of mythic immortality: natural and hopeful versus unnatural and cursed.

412 Guerin et al., 190.
413 Meyer, Twilight, 476.
414 Guerin et al., 190.
415 Guerin et al., 190.
416 Meyer, Twilight, 184.
Werewolves and Adolescents

If the Cullen family offers identification with and escape from a monstrous “other,” Jacob the werewolf embodies another aspect of adolescence entirely—cyclical time. Jacob is a part of the earth, not bound to death by it but nonetheless more a part of nature’s rhythms and changes. He is like a puppy dog, a safe playmate for readers (young female readers especially) experiencing their own budding physical desires. The werewolves, with their ability to “imprint” on a mate forever (that is, offer love and loyalty that extends past a normal, mortal timeline), speak to a teenager’s deep need for connection.417 Jacob and his tribe are less supernatural than the Cullens, but able enough to speak to a teenager’s deepest plea: “Please, please tell me it’s true. True love is always worth dying for. Please tell me I’m worth dying for. Please tell me someone loves me this much and won’t let me go.”418

From Gothic to Chic

Like vampires, werewolves have historically had a distinct role in literature, as beings who embodied “the internalized grotesque.”419 Similar to other gothic monsters, “the werewolf has been thoroughly constructed as an alien ‘other’ threatening the social body; the negative of a normalized social identity.”420 Werewolves answered the

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417 Dean, Clark, and Rahn, 31.
418 Ibid.
420 Ibid., 44.
question of “who should be removed” from a small, tight-knit social group of towns and villages.\textsuperscript{421} Whereas vampires were dangerous because they stood outside the ravages of death, werewolves were dangerous because they were all too natural. They were monsters, but still more, they were freaks. Werewolves were less supernatural and more nature gone wrong.\textsuperscript{422}

In the *Twilight* series (especially the films), though, the freaks become sexy. Jacob Black and the other young werewolves of his tribe are generally shirtless, showing off their chiseled chests and strong, hyper-masculine bodies. They are not cursed and completely controlled by the moon—just connected to it. Meyer’s werewolves play more into recent popular fantasy that “is characterized by nostalgia for an archaic past, pastoral or ecological themes, anti-modernism, religious overtones,” or “emphasis upon harmony and balance.”\textsuperscript{423} Just as Meyer changed vampires from objects of horror to ones of romance, she changed the werewolf from a gothic beast to a fantasy dream.

The idea that those cursed with natural deficiencies should become sleek, desired, and powerful is appealing to a teenage reader in the same way that the Cullens’ move from victim to victor is attractive. However, Jacob represents another shift in Western culture’s changing perception of monsters. Often in literature of the Gothic period or

\textsuperscript{421} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{423} Bourgault du Coudra, 137.
earlier, the relationship of the “higher” self to one’s baser instincts was one of denial.\textsuperscript{424} In the character of the werewolf, particularly Meyer’s type of werewolf who knows what he is and embraces it as powerful, the self realizes “there is no other self to become.”\textsuperscript{425} That is, a werewolf is a werewolf and he need not be anything else. Jacob is still dangerous like Edward—both are “larger than life” powerful.\textsuperscript{426} But he is a “good male” because he protects Bella from “bad” creatures that want to harm her.\textsuperscript{427} In this way, Jacob narrates subtle positive messages to teenage readers. Not only is it okay to be oneself (even if society thinks him or her “a freak”), but there is great power in that. Also, \textit{Twilight} creates “a space for girls to experience and explore sexual desire in the safety of a narrative imagination in which they personally are neither exploited or objectified, nor asked to become party to nameless, unfulfilling sexual expression.”\textsuperscript{428} Jacob and Bella’s relationship is heated but chaste. Their friendship endures, despite obvious sexual undertones. The heroine is never in any danger from the wolf, even if the wolf is still a monster, for this is a good monster who exerts control over his dangerous

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item Ibid., 149.
\item Ibid.
\item Mercer, 13.
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tendencies. Jacob is a respite from a world where “nameless, unfulfilling sexual expression” is all too common for adolescent readers.

From Myth to Mystery: Moral Coordinates of Twilight

Critics and fans alike argue that Stephanie Meyer’s Mormon faith plays a strong role in many aspects of Twilight’s plot, characters, conflicts, and eventual happy ending. This issue could easily provide enough material for a book of its own. However, like the other books discussed in this study, the Twilight series offers its own narrative world, capable of being discussed and critiqued separately from the “real” world of writers and readers.

Free Will and the Monsters’ Appetite

Edward Cullen is convinced that, if and when he dies, he is surely going to hell. He believes that vampires have no souls and that, if they do have some sort of spirit, being a vampire damns that spirit to an eternity of suffering. His adoptive father Carlisle and beloved Bella, however, find hope in the idea that vampires have free will and that their choices might have some sway in gaining them eternal life. Carlisle is so committed to his hope that he changes dying individuals into vampires, in order to give them a chance to live into their God-given potential on earth, when that potential appears about to be taken from them too soon. Carlisle and Bella hope in a compassionate God who

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429 Ibid.
forgives transgressions; they see repentance in the actions of vampires who try not to kill humans despite an almost overwhelming urge to do so. The fact that vampires can elect not to do something based on some sort of ethical impulse (left over from their days of being human) indicates a hope for them in this “life,” as well as a favorable hope for an afterlife of some sort. They have made a clear, positive ethical choice not to kill. In this case, their ability to choose is as important as the moral directive (not to kill humans) that they observe.

From Free Will to Romantic Love

That humans can escape their own sinful nature and conquer evil in this life is the primary moral dictum of the *Twilight* universe. However, another theme that runs throughout the series is the importance and power of love (particularly romantic and familial love). These two types of love inform most, if not all, of the main characters’ moral decisions. For example, at the start of the first book, Edward believes himself a monster. When he first meets Bella, he is overcome by her scent and practically attacks her in the middle of biology class. Even after he saves her life, he tries to avoid her because he feels his kind is too dangerous for her. After the two fall in love, his concern grows even stronger. She wants to be a vampire too, so that she is no longer a fragile burden to Edward and his family. But he thinks vampires are damned, their souls forfeited when they lost their humanness, so he refuses to transform her. He does not want anyone to endanger Bella’s soul, even if the change could enable her to be with him.

431 Jones, 139.
“forever.” Edward would sacrifice the thing he wants most in eternity because he “loves” Bella too much to damn her. Bella, for her part, does not care about her soul’s assurance in an eternal afterlife, as any eternity without Edward would be her own hell.

Virtue and Moral Decision Making

Sex, a natural outcropping of romantic love, is viewed as dangerous in the *Twilight* series. Edward’s strict moral code bids him wait to have sex with Bella until they are married. Bella is amused that Edward would be so “old-fashioned” in trying to protect her “virtue.” He argues back, “This is one area in which I’m just as spotless as you are. Can’t I leave one rule unbroken? ... You know that I’ve stolen, I’ve lied, I’ve coveted ... my virtue is all I have left.” Bella, having lived through her parents’ difficult divorce, is frustrated by Edward’s position but agrees to marriage.

Engaging Love, Hope, and Free Will from a Developmental Perspective

The term “spiritual formation,” in some sense, cannot be separated from the idea of “imagination formation” when one refers to youths. Faith, when communicated to the young, takes on an inherently narrative quality. A new world is formed within the mind and imagination when youths hear the stories of their faith. “A story, when it is told, is first and foremost a world, a little cosmos, a place which the listening child may

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432 Ibid., 57.


dwell.” Little worlds also come into existence when young people read a story. Narrative is an invitation away from current reality, into a place where possibility and impossibility are merged. As such, every act of the imagination is an act of hope. Imagination rejoices in the idea that the impossible is (or at least might be) possible, even if the thing being imagined is not currently present in reality. As Robert Coles puts it, “A compelling narrative, offering a storyteller’s moral imagination vigorously at work, can enable any of us to learn by example, to take heart in what is, really, a gift of grace.” Indeed, “the key to moral growth for Christians, then, is the capacity for our imaginations to be transformed by the image of Christ, by the metaphors, stories, and images of the Christian faith.” Adolescents’ religious seeking is in many ways a hunger “for a God who knows, accepts, and confirms the self deeply, and who serves as an infinite guarantor of the self with its forming myth of personal identity and faith.” Teens’ imaginations expand beyond the myths they know to include the myths they are told anew. When metaphors, stories, and images are given the cognitive freedom to challenge the status quo and the authority of parents and other adults, the God they describe has a better chance of remaining in an adolescent’s “holy imagination.”

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435 Ratcliff, 13.
436 Coles, The Call of Stories, 191.
438 Fowler, 153.
Narratives like the *Twilight* series raise questions about the nature of the soul or life’s ultimate consequences and thereby feed and challenge the moral imagination about hope and the eternal. Robert Coles writes,

> So it has been for many of us—going back, way back, to the earliest of times, when men and women and children looked at one another, at the land, at the sky, at rivers and oceans, at mountains and deserts, at animals and plants, and wondered, as it is in our nature to do: “what is all this that I see and hear and find unfolding before me? How shall I comprehend the life that is in me and around me?” To do so, stories were constructed—and told, and remembered, and handed down over time, over the generations. Some stories—of persons, of places, of events—were called factual. Some stories were called ‘imaginative’ or ‘fictional’: in them, words were assembled in such a way that readers were treated to a narration of events and introduced to individuals whose words and deeds—well, struck home ... or [whose presence] changed the shape of his life.\(^{440}\)

The crux of the ethical dilemmas, romantic conflicts, and violent actions of the plot in the *Twilight* series have much to do with the question of eternal hope. Bella and Edward might be together forever, but is this benefit worth sacrificing one’s soul? Edward, a nearly spotless soul (except for the murders perpetrated out of hunger), does not think so. Bella, on the other hand, is ready to risk it all to share life with Edward. However, Edward has anecdotal evidence, supposedly from the Christian tradition, that he is damned. Again, love’s optimism intervenes in their drama, binding Bella to Edward’s family for all time. After time passes away, what then? Are they doomed? Meyer does not give us a final answer. Still, Bella believes, with Carlisle, that there is hope for those who try.

\(^{440}\) Coles, *The Call of Stories*, 189.
Engaging Adolescents’ Hope and Free Will

Edward and Bella are in love but remain chaste until marriage. Jacob Black desires Bella to the point of desperation, but his love for her also remains chaste. Abstinence is thus presented in the *Twilight* series as by far the sexiest choice one could make. Many Christian denominations “say we care tremendously about premarital chastity, but somehow the tools we give people to live premarital chastity are not working as well as we might hope.”  Edward Cullen embodies perhaps the most powerful cultural argument available that “true love waits,” for his story captures the intersection of hope, free will, and adolescent experience most clearly. Teenagers’ bodies, fueled by hormones they cannot always control but can at least channel, argue that humans were made for sex. The Christian faith would counter argue that premarital sex only “tells a partial truth; that’s why it resonates with something. But partial truths are destructive. They push us to created goods wrongly lived.” *Twilight* argues that the created good (arguably God’s created good) comes to those who seek it and are willing to wait. How chastity becomes an essential part of the free will’s participation in hope’s fulfillment within the *Twilight* series will be discussed later in this chapter.

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442 Winner, 121.
Engaging the Moral Coordinates of the *Twilight* Series in Conversation with Christian Theology

The characters of *Twilight* make choices within a certain framework of implied patterns of what is right and wrong. These moral coordinates inform not only *what* they choose to do, but also *why* they choose to do it. The most important implicit belief of the *Twilight* universe is the idea that all sentient creatures (human and monsters alike) have free will.\(^{443}\) Free will allows for moral choice, which is best expressed in the Cullen family members’ denial of their violent, monstrous nature (they refuse to feed on and kill humans). The responsible exercise of such control may be enough to offer the hope of eternal salvation (from a God who may or may not exist) and mean that they, though monsters, are not damned. Their behavior suggests not only that one can will to rise above one’s violent nature, but also that love ought to be the most powerful motivator of that will (with romantic and familial love being paramount). Love itself has ethical constraints, though, especially in the sexual expression of that love. Also, preserving life because of love is of utmost importance. The will, freedom, and love thereby lend hope to monsters who otherwise seem cursed in both the present and the future.

The Potential of Free Will

Violence, like murder, plays an important part of the plot of *Twilight*.\(^{444}\) The goodness of the Cullens and the moral fabric of the universe Meyer has constructed,

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\(^{443}\) Jones, 138.

\(^{444}\) Jones, 131.
however, are based on a rejection of violence. In *Twilight*, humans (and vampires) are flawed, but essentially good. Morally corrupt desires run “deep and strong,” but free will allows a person to choose good or evil. “Vigorous effort can make a person good; the harder a person tries, the more morally righteous he is likely to be.” Meyer implicitly argues that God will reward moral effort, and the possibility of eternal life requires “constant striving.” Carlisle tells Bella, “I look at my ... son. His strength, his goodness, the brightness that shines out of him—and it only fuels that hope, that faith, more than ever. How could there not be more for one such as Edward?” Bella agrees and thinks similarly of Carlisle, “I couldn’t imagine anyone, deity included, who wouldn’t be impressed by Carlisle. Besides, the only kind of heaven I could appreciate would have to include Edward.”

This fundamental belief that good works are enough to free one from his or her sinful nature is different from the hope of the Christian gospel. In that narrative, humans are good as created by God, but broken by sin, and nothing they can do on their

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445 Ibid.
446 Ibid. 139.
447 Ibid.
448 Ibid.
449 Ibid. 139.
450 Ibid.
451 Jones, 139.
own can restore their original, created wholeness.\textsuperscript{452} To escape from these sin-tainted natures, humans are given the gift of grace through Jesus Christ. God, not one’s desire to be morally good, effects the transformation.\textsuperscript{453} Free will does allow a being to choose God, but moral righteousness is not the ground of salvation.

Hope in the Christian story “has a job to do.”\textsuperscript{454} In the “continuous and far reaching labor of the moral life, hope is the sense of possibility that generates and sustains moral agency.”\textsuperscript{455} Hope is not, however, grounded in the idea that sentient humans can overcome sin on their own. Miroslav Volf and William Katerberg describe the freedom in the Christian story’s hope: “How can the transcendent hope for God be joined with the immanent hopes of men and women? ... Because (and in so far as) the resurrection hope sees a future for those who are gone, those who are living in the present gain courage for the future. Because of a great hope for the overcoming of death and transience, our little hopes for future better times gain strength, and do not fall victim to resignation and cynicism.”\textsuperscript{456} Likewise, “God’s faithfulness to his creation, his identification with the struggles of creation, and his power and providence to bring about

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{452} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{453} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{454} Ellen Ott Marshall, \textit{Though the Fig Tree Does Not Blossom} (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006), xiii.
\item \textsuperscript{455} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{456} Miroslav Volf and William Katerberg, eds., \textit{The Future of Hope} (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 19.
\end{itemize}
its restoration” are best articulated as hope. It would be easy to despair (as Edward does in the Twilight series), since the hope of eternal life is so tied to a creature’s inevitably sinful actions. The potential and hope in free will seen in Twilight thus rely on the idea of a compassionate God, but are not identical to the compassion described in the gospel story.

Free Will, Hope, and Adolescent Development

Decision-making abilities improve “over the course of adolescence, with gains continuing through the later years of high school and into young adulthood.” These “developments provide the cognitive tools for behavioral autonomy,” like “being able to look ahead and assess risks and likely outcomes of alternative choices.” Cognitively speaking, a teenager becomes better able to exercise his or her free will, for good or for ill, as he or she grows through adolescence into young adulthood.

It is here that literature and myth can make inroads to influence the continual refinement of free will’s role in the moral decision-making process—through engaging the adolescent’s changing imagination. A “healthy” imagination engages the world around it, interprets it, creates a vision of what could be, empathizes with those who are

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457 Ibid., 226.
458 Jones, 139.
459 Steinberg, 312.
460 Ibid.
not part of an ideal vision, and moves an individual to a creative response.\(^{461}\) The task, then, for Christian adolescent spiritual development is to steer teenagers “into a particular storytelling tradition—that is, the narrative, language, and culture of the Christian faith as it has been lived and expressed for two thousand years.”\(^{462}\) Teenagers’ increasing autonomy can be constructively informed as they find a place for themselves in the Christian story.\(^{463}\) They can be guided in this direction if they are allowed to ask critical questions first about what the Bible and other church writings and traditions teach, and then about how and why these teachings should influence their lives (in a very different world) today.

Fiction must have at its core a pattern of themes that provide satisfying patterns for the “imagination to grab hold of.”\(^{464}\) The Twilight series has plenty of these: good versus evil, forbidden romance, both redemptive and gratuitous violence, and action-packed adventure. The novels’ mythic monsters resonate with teenage readers, who, themselves often feeling similarly maligned, misunderstood, and marginalized by the adult world, can relate well to them. Edward Cullen and Jacob Black’s moral dilemmas become the reader’s moral dilemmas. The possibilities inherent in their free will become the readers’ possibilities. Practitioners of young adult formation can use the hold on the

\(^{461}\) Arthur, 61-62.

\(^{462}\) Ibid., 137.


\(^{464}\) Arthur, 81.
imagination exerted by *Twilight* to ask teenagers where they find themselves in these stories, and how the stories inform their understanding of the exercise of free will. Then one can make transition to a meaningful synthesis, development of a personal vision, and an empathic, creative response using stories from a teenager’s faith tradition.\(^{465}\)

**Love and the Christian Story**

1 Corinthians 13:4-13 reads:

> Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears. When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me. Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known. And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.

Edward’s moral coordinates follow only some of the contours of this passage. He always protects, trusts, and hopes in Bella. Since, however, he does not place any hope in God, but in the mortal Bella and his finite existence, he despairs and fails to persevere.\(^{466}\)

Though he may seem to act purely out of love, he does not think through the consequences. In many ways he still reasons with the reckless love of a child; he has not yet put childish ways behind him. The same could be said of Bella and Jacob Black (who

\(^{465}\) For an example of what such a move may look like, see the sample four-week lesson plan included in the Appendix of this dissertation.

\(^{466}\) Jones, 26.
are, after all, still in fact young). While perfection has come to the vampires, it is physical, not spiritual. Their ability to love does not quell the fear of their state of being. They are ultimately unable to fully believe that “love never fails.” The most optimistic of them—Carlisle and Bella—still don’t know if there is a God who accepts vampires. While all the characters claim to act out of love, believe in its power, and seek to embody it as it is described in 1 Corinthians, all the motivating love in the book is tinged with existential despair.

Romantic Love, Sex, and the Christian Story

Edward and Bella are consumed by their romance. 467 Bella’s love for Edward is not like that described in 1 Corinthians; rather, it is idolatrous. She does not know if there is a God, but if there is and if Edward has no place in God’s kingdom, then she would rather be in hell with Edward than in heaven with God. Bella is ready and willing to give up her whole life for a romantic partner. 468 This is not a healthy love. As Beth Felker Jones observes:

Real love makes sacrifices, but real love does not assume that the thing that is sacrificed has little worth. It doesn’t seek pain for pain’s sake, or hide the truth of pain from a loved one. Real love, then, looks very different from Bella’s love for Edward. Real love happens between two people of value, not between a girl who things she is nothing and the boy is everything. 469

467 Ibid., 20.

468 Ibid.

469 Ibid., 41.
Despite the overwhelming potency of Edward’s love for Bella, he is still resistant to the sexual expression of that love. He argues that he wants to maintain their “virtue,” but does not explain why he feels that remaining chaste outside institution of marriage is morally favorable, only that he is sure it is. Biblical commentary on sex is varied and numerous biblical characters fail to live up to standards found therein. In the Hebrew Bible, especially in the prophets, there are several references to lewdness, sexual immorality or “licentiousness.” New Testament accounts favor monogamous marital sexuality as a “gold standard,” while the virginity of the woman before marriage is held as a “valued commodity.” However, many biblical figures “hardly display sexual fidelity.”

Many Christian denominations treat marriage, and by extension sex, as “essentially a portrait or reflection of God’s relationship with his people.” The apostle Paul equates marriage and marital sexuality, or “becoming one flesh” in Ephesians 5:31, to the relationship between Jesus Christ and his followers. Thus, to be faithful to one’s spouse is a reflection on the promise-keeping of God. The institution of marriage is a metaphor for the closeness of God to God’s beloved people (or the corporate body, the

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470 Regnerus, 17.
471 Ibid., 18.
472 Ibid.
473 Ibid., 21.
474 Ibid.
475 Ibid.
church). Though Edward Cullen as a character does not appear to be “saving” Bella’s virtue on explicitly theological grounds, he does articulate that he is “old-fashioned” in this way. In part, this statement means that he buys into the history of the institution of marriage and its moral normativity, even if he does not know the exact evolution of that normativity. This point is essential. Edward and Bella’s romance is the greatest draw for the *Twilight* series’ immense popularity. However, their romance is chaste, as in the first book it is “281 pages of narrated desire,” culminating in “a first and very short kiss.”  

As such, their relationship (and its resulting commercial popularity) demonstrate that free will, love, and virtue resonate powerfully with teen culture and the adolescent worldview today.

**Sex and Adolescents**

Adolescence is recognized as a time of developing sexual identity and often experimentation. Hormonal changes trigger puberty, indicating the physical capability and increasing emotional maturity associated with sexual reproduction. Media depictions of sexuality are legion; so too are the interpretations of biblical norms related to sexual expression. Adolescents’ biologically hard-wired interest in sexuality, the proliferation of images of sex in the media, and the diffuse interpretation of sexual ethics combine to

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476 Mercer, 10.

477 Steinberg, 369.
create a “perfect storm” of confusion within Christian youth as to what churches want and expect of them.\textsuperscript{478}

Into this fray enters the \textit{Twilight} series with its clear-cut doctrine: sex is for marriage. Sex solidifies a family unit, and this family unit is essential for salvation on earth and perhaps eternal salvation. Sex is also mysterious and dangerous, as is communicated by the fact that Edward the perfect (if monstrous) being might hurt Bella with his sheer physicality.\textsuperscript{479} But sex with Edward is exciting, in part, because he is a monster (not because it is a “gift of God” for marriage).\textsuperscript{480} This theme is underscored by the cover art for the first book in the series, which shows a stark black background with a woman’s alabaster hands holding a single, shining, blood-red apple. Edward presents temptation, both carnal and ethereal; he loves Bella but could destroy her. Bella is likewise “forbidden fruit,” a delicate, mortal flower whose virtue (and soul) Edward is cursed to desire.\textsuperscript{481}

The \textit{Twilight} series is unique among popular young adult fiction in its view of the physical expression of romantic love. Other best-selling novels like Cecily Von Ziegesar’s \textit{Gossip Girl} or \textit{It Girl} series, Megan McCafferty’s Jessica Darling novels, or Zoe Dean’s \textit{A-List} books (to name just a few) include teenagers engaged in premarital sex. Bella and Edward (or Bella and Jacob) are, in this regard, “old-fashioned” indeed.

\textsuperscript{478} Regnerus, 41.

\textsuperscript{479} Jones, 57.

\textsuperscript{480} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{481} Ibid.
Many charge that the books “push” a chastity and abstinence-only agenda. Some find this message positive, arguing that Meyer “knows that romantic tension is often better built with anticipation than action; that there is enough excitement in gazes, conversation, proximity, and maybe a few stolen kisses to keep young lovers busy for years—if they allow themselves to indulge in this slow kind of seduction.” Others are uncomfortable with the underlying faith-based norms implicit in the characters’ decisions. One critic writes, “The Twilight novels espouse values more suited to 1809 than 2009: They offer up chaste romance with an ideal man, initially mysterious and menacing, who eventually confesses his love for the heroine and protects her from his own unruly desires—and from evil men who want to ravage her (or ‘suck her blood’).” Another laments, “The more you examine Stephanie Meyer’s themes, the more obvious it becomes that her books are a thinly-veiled religious screed against teen sex.”

Christian teens (usually regardless of denomination) are often confused about how biblical mandates and traditions from their faith should influence their decision-making about sex. As such, the Twilight series is a useful discussion starter with teens about the

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486 Regnerus, 198.
subject. The series offers an endorsement for waiting for the unity of married love for sexual experimentation. The *Twilight* series “presents sexual abstinence in a positive light, through the powerful example of its forbearing heart-throb hero.”

However, even after marriage, Edward and still-human Bella’s physical relationship is far from perfect. In fact, “Bella wakes up the first morning of their honeymoon black and blue from bruises Edward has given her; Edward has broken the headboard of their bed; and feathers are flying everywhere thanks to Edward’s violent attack on the pillows.”

Thus, “vampirism makes a sickly, twisted metaphor for sexuality. Nothing like mutual complementarity can exist between humans and vampires—at least, not without completely rewriting vampire nature somehow. Vampires have nothing to give and everything to take; humans have everything to lose and nothing to gain. Humans may complete vampires, but vampires don’t complete humans, any more than a lion completes an impala.”

This admission that the joys of sex are not clear-cut either inside or outside marriage is helpful to teens looking for guidance on a complex, life-changing issue. As Mark D. Regnerus writes in his study *Forbidden Fruit: Sex and Religion in the Lives of American Teenagers*, “Popular, media, and peer cultures are well positioned as sex

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488 Ibid.

educators if parents are not. We owe our children a more comprehensive sex education—
moral advocacy and information—than most of them are getting.” Likewise, “if
congregations intend to be faithful to their own traditions about the body and sexuality,
they should ... start having more frank conversations about the real sexual issues that real
people face. Combined with a recovered understanding of Christian sexual ethics, such a
course would be pro-chastity, pro-family, and pro-sex. The Twilight series engages what
being “pro-chastity, pro-family, and pro-sex” could, should (and often should not) look
like.

**Heaven is a Place on Earth: Hope in the Twilight Series**

The Christian story, or the storied world of Christianity, understands the end of all
things not only as “the end,” but as a place beyond time that encompasses and fulfills the
“entire biblical narrative from Genesis to Revelation,” because it is “hope, forward
looking and forward moving, and then also revolutionizing and transforming the
present.” In Twilight, Stephanie Meyer uses mythic forms to question the nature of life,
death, and hope. The novel posits a redeemed creation, as “it is only by means of
narrative that hope is experienced in the first place,” for “when people hope, they lay a
story arc over a certain span of history.” Through monsters in particular, the author

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490 Regnerus, 212.

491 Ibid.

492 Jones, 12.

demonstrates that “the role of imagination in awakening and sustaining hope has profound implications for literature.”\textsuperscript{494} This is true because “human beings need to organize the inchoate sensations amid which we pass our days—pain, desire, pleasure, fear—into a story,” and when that narrative “leads somewhere and helps us navigate through life, it gives us hope.”\textsuperscript{495} Meyer does not seek to narrate Christianity’s storied hope. If anything, her depiction of the characters’ happy ending as an “eternal family” evidences her Mormon faith.\textsuperscript{496}

Still, the \textit{Twilight series} allows practitioners of adolescent spiritual formation to argue that every act of the imagination is an act of hope; every act of hope is planted and grown within the imagination’s capacity to see past what \textit{is} into what \textit{could be}. Through hope, the mind can surpass even death. Such hope is essential for all of us, since “Christian hope is the expectation of a future rooted in the promises of God, which motivates us to live in the present with certainty and confidence.”\textsuperscript{497} Central to a theology of hope in adolescent ministry is “a potent spirituality” sufficient to address the “problem of evil” and one that helps to form “coping skills in the face of tragedy and disappointment.”\textsuperscript{498} It is possible to place the hope of \textit{Twilight}, that Edward and Bella (and the rest of the vampire/werewolf/human) family will be together forever, into

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{494} Emily Griesinger and Mark Eaton, eds., \textit{The Gift of Story} (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2006), 320.
\item \textsuperscript{495} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{496} Jones, 88.
\item \textsuperscript{497} Dean, Clark, and Rahn, 270.
\item \textsuperscript{498} Ibid.
\end{itemize}
conversation with the Christian story’s promise of eternal life as a means of encouraging young adult formation. The novels play with the idea of time; they argue that Bella and Edward are not slaves to chronos, but are children of kairos. Their lives are not cyclical, but eternal. As “the time of this world is the time of transience, the time of the future world is the time of the world that endures and is eternal.”

The *Twilight* series questions the nature of eternal life, how it will come to be, whether it is really true, why it must be preceded by suffering on Earth, and how the mortal realm relates to all that happens in the unknowable beyond. These are questions that need to be engaged by the “moral imagination,” which Robert Coles defines as “our gradually developed capacity to reflect what is right and wrong with all the emotional and intellectual resources of the human mind.” Our moral imagination gives us the ability to live in the present while looking forward to what is not yet. In their teenage years, many youth may discover that “there are often sharp contrasts, perhaps even contradictions, between the moral values of their culture and those of their churches and congregations.” But when such institutions take a serious look at narratives from popular culture and use them to help guide teens in moral decision-making and spiritual development, conversations might not be stilted by adolescents’ questioning mindset.

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499 Moltmann, *In the End—The Beginning*, 108.


501 Hill, Knitter, and Madges, 51.
Hope, Time, and Influencing Adolescent Readers

Though Stephanie Meyer’s books ask questions of eternity and of the possibilities of hope, they do so in a manner that is often inconsistent with the Christian story. If “eternal life is undisturbed participation in God’s eternity,” and “if this participation in the eternity of the living God brings human life eternal livingness, then the time of this eternity is no longer irreversible time.” Moltmann, 159. Therefore, though Edward, Bella and company are eternal, their hope is a different one from the Christian’s hope. Their *kairos* is not God’s time—it is their own. Bella’s hope is tied to being with Edward and her daughter for all time, not with God (or with the rest of the creation, for that matter). God is, at best, a happy afterthought and possibility. Practitioners of teenagers’ spiritual development, when using the *Twilight* series as a resource, might want to stress here the Christian story’s emphasis that hope looks forward to eternal life with and through *God*, and to stress how this hope should impact our moral choices throughout the life span.

Particularly important in this discussion should be the role of parents in the lives of the characters in *Twilight* (along with the role of parents in most young adult literature) and the implications for moral decision-making. In countless young adult novels, parents are either dead, absent, or unfit to help teenagers cope with life. Joelle Anthony, “The New Red-Haired Best Friend,” *Society of Children’s Book Writers and Illustrators Bulletin* (November-December 2010), 22-23. In the *Twilight* series Bella’s mom leaves to marry a younger man, and her father knows little about his daughter and can’t understand her even though he tries. Bella takes care of her father far

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502 Moltmann, 159.

more than he influences or protects her. Yet, in real life, parents are by far the most important moral decision-making role models that most teenagers have.\footnote{Richard Weissbourd, \textit{The Parents We Mean to Be} (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2009), Kindle Electronic Version, Location 1561.} For teenagers raised in the church, parents are usually the ones who have first and most strongly communicated the Christian hope to them.\footnote{Brenda Munsey, \textit{Moral Development, Moral Education, and Kohlberg} (Birmingham: Religious Education Press, 1980), 337-339.} When novels habitually diminish parents’ potential in moral-decision making, by creating characters who do not need the moral authority of adults, the church should highlight this tendency and consider what it might be communicating to young parishioners.\footnote{Arthur, 137.}

Parents have a power and responsibility to reclaim their place as the communicator of hope through the Christian faith. By reading the fiction their teens read, rather than simply censoring books, they can raise questions with their teens or advocate that their church’s religious education staff do the same. Parents and church leaders should look at \textit{Twilight}, its use of appealing mythic archetypes, and its romantic and adventurous appeal and ask, “How can I help adolescents use this narrative to form a healthy spiritual imagination?”\footnote{Ibid., 82.} By looking at how and why teens find wonder, an attractive alternative world or reality, the possibility of transcendence, and the presence of mystery in \textit{Twilight}’s articulated hope for the future, adults can begin to understand how they can engage their youths in conversations about what love and hope mean in and
to the Christian community and make it “resonate as much as the narratives of the

*Twilight* series.”\(^{508}\)

\(^{508}\) *Ibid.*, 84-87.
CHAPTER SEVEN
CONCLUSION

What are people without their stories? What is the church without its stories? Both, if they were to continue to exist at all, would be little more than empty shells. Bodies would be listless, minds untethered by memory. Human faith in God requires a narrative framework with which to express and sustain it. Even the most ecstatic, transcendent experience, one that defies the very nature of verbal description, still requires a mind for story in order for such an encounter of God to have a meaning and context for a human who inevitably must return to the mundane world of the mortal coil.

“Narrative,” the term often applied to this notion of the storied world, also describes an individual’s relationship with herself, her relationship with someone else, her relationship with God.

In chapter 2 of this study I defended the power of narrative in Christian theology, which gained popularity in intellectual developments that arose in the late 20th century. The advocates of narrative argued that Christian faith is a culture or is “culture-like”; it has its own language, practices, and worldview generated by Scripture. Reflection on religious claims rooted in stories seemed the necessary threshold to cross to gain access to this culture. Theologians like David Tracy, Paul Ricoeur, and Sally McFague agree

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509 Hauerwas and Willimon, 11-12.
510 Comstock, 687.
that “stories are a critical and neglected genre in which important religious truths and practices are communicated” in the Bible.\footnote{Comstock, 688.} However, they do not believe that theology is derived exclusively from biblical texts. Rather, they believe narrative is a “privileged mode” for understanding the “grammatical rules and concepts” for Christian texts and practices.\footnote{Ibid.} Excessive use of abstract reason (and of prose that is disconnected from the way humans actually speak and think) does not communicate faith as it is really experienced by actual people. In the stories humans tell themselves about each other and about that which is outside them, theology can find “truth” about the lived experience of the divine.

As such, narrative is a powerful device in shaping both sacred and secular imagination. “Great spiritual teachers down through the ages have understood the power of narrative, but appreciation of the role that narrative may play in the development of children’s imagination, and of the role that imagination may play in children’s spiritual development has been longer in coming.”\footnote{Ann M. Trousdale, “The Role of Literature in Children’s Spiritual Development,” in International Handbooks of Religion and Education, vol. 1: International Handbook of the Religious, Moral and Spiritual Dimensions in Education, part 5 (New York: Springer, 2006), 86.} This is also true with regard to teenagers. Many practitioners of young adult formation are aware of this truth, given the proliferation of religious themes in popular culture today (young adult fiction specifically). This appeal to narrative imagination, the part of a person that takes in and makes anew the stories comprising personal history, personality, and hope for the future,
demonstrates again how essential story is to a person’s intrinsic beliefs and ideas. Theology has much vested in narrative, since it has the added weight of incorporating human beings’ relationship to the divine into its stories. As such, theological practitioners within any faith group, like the Christian church, have the responsibility of acknowledging the importance and relevance of narrative, paying particular attention to what it is and how it works. The conversation in chapter 2 concluded with the argument that narrative shapes the imagination, and how this altered perception is important in the faith life of teenagers in particular. The next important step is to consider the methods by which one can judge the quality of one narrative versus another. This analysis can guide us to help the church find a common language with which to discuss high-quality literary texts (like secular young adult popular fiction) with its members.

In chapter 3, I argued that not all narratives (especially fictional stories) are created equal. Thus, it is necessary to have a framework of reference by which one may judge the quality and content of a work of fiction. Literary criticism is the field of study that attempts to determine the value of a written work. It has at its heart a philosophical examination of the goals and methods of literature. Alongside literary criticism, the use of narrative in theology is an attempt to understand the “story world” and its unique, self-contained contributions to furthering theological understanding. In chapter 3 I demonstrated the interpretive approaches of both literary criticism and narrative theology, arguing for the particular relevance of mythic literary criticism and exploring the themes,

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symbols, and motifs from myth criticism that were the most pertinent to the task of analyzing the works of young adult fiction. Finally, I demonstrated important differences between narrative theology and literary criticism, even if their aims can be, as I have sought to show, complementary. Having completed this task, I sought to lay the groundwork for a literary and theological analysis of three pairs of young adult narratives. In using literary criticism and narrative theology, I hoped to use the two disciplines’ different aims and methods to fully flesh out the implicit theologies contained in works meant for a largely secular audience.

In chapters 4, 5, and 6, I compared various works of young adult fiction, examining how each one treated, from a literary and theological standpoint, three great themes of the Christian faith: creation, salvation, and hope. In chapter 4, I demonstrated how the novels Feed and Nation ask questions about the nature of creation in their respective story-worlds. Both speculate about the existence of God, about humanity’s relationship to the divine, about humanity’s place in creation, and the role each created element plays in the bigger picture of the universe. A theological analysis of these characters and symbols took these representations further, showing how they invite readers to think about the created world and their role in it. These two novels present different sides of creation’s coin, allowing younger readers to more deeply ponder their own thoughts about nature, human nature, and God.

In chapter 5, I discussed two texts, Stargirl and I Am the Messenger, that feature unlikely heroes and, more importantly, ask questions about the nature of “a savior” in a way that teenagers could find engaging. In comparing and contrasting this pair of
narratives, I found that both have the capacity to challenge teenagers’ beliefs and assumptions (or lack thereof) about their place in the universe, whether they need a savior, and their own ability to change the world. The two novels take for granted that humans are not currently all they were created to be, and each tells a story about people who are able to rise up and produce change. Here the interaction between these secular texts and the sacred Christian story are useful for comparison, if not completely illustrative of one another. The readers, by engaging in their own storied world and in those created by authors, bring their own perception to texts’ heroes and saviors. In doing so, they implicitly are always reforming and reevaluating their beliefs and ideas about the sacred saviors and heroes about whom they have learned. If nothing else, the two stories in this chapter speak to the possibilities and perils that coexist with the potential of salvation.

Chapter 6 discussed how the Christian story interrelates free will, hope, and love and compared it to the books of the *Twilight* series. I discussed the ways in which Stephanie Meyer develops the concept of the mythic “monster” and questions the nature of choice, love, and what immortality really means, but eventually rejects other worldviews that offer less hopeful visions of the fate of the human soul and of the world as a whole. Meyer writes fiction to posit a redeemed creation, and would agree that “it is only by means of narrative that hope is experienced in the first place,” for “when people hope, they lay a story arc over a certain span of history.”

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515 Volf and Katerberg, 31.
Having explored in chapters 2 and 3 the general reasons why narrative is important to theology, and why literary criticism can usefully add to a theological analysis of young adult fiction, we then moved from theory to practice. In chapters 4 through 6, I used popular teenage literature to illustrate the many ways in which fiction is uniquely suited to form, shape, and challenge teenagers’ moral growth, based on where they are in terms of cognitive and social development. A brief description of psychological developmental milestones up to and including the teenage years pointed out four key points in the spiritual life of teenagers—refining their image of God, establishing identity, developing independence, and expanding their religious imaginations—and considered the part that narrative can play with regard to each aspect. This discussion of moral development complements the analysis of young adult fiction in that it demonstrates how teenagers could come to gain such insights from the texts themselves or, more likely, with help from those charged with their spiritual and faith formation. Throughout chapters 4-6 I offered practical suggestions as to how the texts presented here could be used in a curriculum for young adult spiritual formation.

Not every novel written with a young adult audience in mind is also a groundbreaking theological text. I do not claim that the novels discussed in this study are such. However, I do claim that many such narratives can, upon analysis, provide for deep reflection on a variety of themes from the Christian tradition. Likewise, in concert with literary analysis, one can discern the literary value of a text and tease out concerns and suggestions for engaging teenagers in spiritual formation. The books presented here—some of them award-winning, most of them incredibly popular—are unique in
how well they rise to this task. However, one must always keep in mind the practical concerns of adolescent psychological development (as well as the preceding psychological developmental milestones from early childhood) in working with individuals or groups of teens. Developmental factors impact the way teenagers will approach popular media, and efforts to engage popular culture require a certain caution in making sure that leaders know the audience they are nurturing. If such care is taken, though, young adult fiction can indeed be one of the most useful forms of narrative the Christian faith has at its disposal to bring its story to the next generation.
APPENDIX

SAMPLE CURRICULUM

Introduction

The lessons included here are one example of how a practitioner of young adult spiritual formation might use myth and theological analysis to practically engage youth using popular fiction. Myth criticism teases out the author’s appeal for the shaping identity and imagination, two important aspects in moral formation. Through looking at the way in which mythic themes and archetypes in popular fiction are explored within this dissertation, it is hoped that practitioners of young adult spiritual formation might begin to read popular fiction with an eye for the “great themes” within literature (creation, the hero’s journey, monsters, etc.), to learn how to spot examples of these sorts of works, and encourage teens to read other popular books that likewise deeply develop these themes and characters. Thus, myth criticism can help practitioners select worthwhile popular books, extract themes that teens will find engaging, and place a teen’s literary experience within a much wider context that they could apply to other books read outside of their faith community. In using terms like monster, hero, journey, or even in discussing “happy endings,” youth will be engaging in implicit myth criticism of their own. It is useful for group leaders to have some understanding of the

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516 Please refer to pages 29-31 and 37-49 of this dissertation for further discussion about the importance of mythic criticism in connection with selecting texts for use in spiritual formation for teenagers.
methodologies surrounding this sort of analysis. Ultimately, however, myth criticism is a backdrop against which theological discussion can be placed.

This curriculum is meant to provide an outline of suggestions for engaging youth theologically with popular fiction. The objectives, discussions, and activities can be tailored, augmented or exchanged depending on the group’s dynamics and particular interests. In each lesson, “essential questions” are included. If leaders need to extend a discussion or go in a different direction from what the lesson plan indicates, the “essential questions” provide a means to quickly access the core of each lesson.
Unit Overview

Theological Focus: Hope

Young Adult Fiction Focus: Twilight by Stephanie Meyer

Theological Focus:
- Selected passages from Wisdom of the Desert by Thomas Merton.

Total Number of Sessions: 3 weeks

Objectives

- Students will identify specific instances in Twilight where moral questions and theological themes are present.
- Students will articulate how literary characters in Twilight make moral choices and develop as moral beings.
- Students will identify the implied “moral coordinates” of the story world of the young adult fiction presented.
- Students will engage moral teachings from specific parts of the Christian story (including, but not limited to, biblical texts, denominational documents, and canonical and non-canonical historical works) in conversation with the moral coordinates present in Twilight.
- Students will creatively express their own moral coordinates, using examples from both the Christian story and Twilight.

Introductory questions for the theme of “hope”
The questions listed here are meant to serve as a starting point for beginning to think theologically about Twilight. Practitioners might find it helpful to use these as a means to tie the three lessons together with the theme of “hope.”

- Can you name an example of when a character in Twilight is faced with a moral decision? Do you feel he or she made the “right” choice?
- Can you compare and contrast a choice and outcome from Twilight with the assigned reading from Christian texts?
- If you were a character in Twilight, based on your similarities in thinking and choice making, who would you be?
- In what ways do characters have hope in Twilight?
• In what ways does the Christian story teach us to hope? Is this hope similar to that in *Twilight*? Why or why not?
• In what do you hope? Why? What influences this hope the most?
• Does *Twilight* or any other fiction work affect the way you think about your faith? About how you make moral choices? Why and how?

**Before Week One:** Instructor(s) or facilitators must contact young adult spiritual formation class participants to make sure:

1) Each group member has access to a copy of *Twilight*.
2) Each class participant reads chapters 1-10 before the first meeting.
Week One: Images of God and Hope

Content: *Twilight*, chapters 1-10 and Psalm 31

Objective:
- Students will be able to compare characters in *Twilight* to the themes of heroes and monsters.
- Students will explore Biblical images of God.
- Students will be able to begin to articulate how a person’s character (or “role” like hero or monster) can affect his or her image of God.

Essential Questions
- How do you define “hero” and “monster”? How is this contrast explored in *Twilight*?
- Depending on who you ask, could God be considered a hero or even a monster? Why?
- What or who is God to Edward, Bella, or Carlisle? A hero, monster, or something else?
- Does a person’s image of God depend on how they see themselves? Does it depend on how others see them?
- What is your image of God? What shapes this image?

Materials:

chart paper
markers
copies of Psalm 31

Lesson:

*Introduction of Theme*
- Divide the youths into groups of four of five. Give each group chart paper and markers. Students will work in teams to create a poster depicting heroes and monsters. (Can be any hero or monster; students can use images from *Twilight*, but are not limited to the book.)
- On the reverse side of chart paper, have students create a poster depicting God. Encourage concrete images or the use of words for less concrete ideas (i.e. “God is love.”)

*Incorporating Theology*
- Read Psalm 31 aloud.
• Ask to reread the passage to themselves.
• Discuss this lesson’s essential questions (listed below).

**Synthesis of Literature and Theology:**

**Small Group Discussion**
- Divide the students into small groups.
- Ask each student group to choose one of the following roles from *Twilight*: Edward, Bella, or Carlisle.
- Using what the students know from the first six chapters (or more of the book, if several have read ahead), ask each student what Edward, Bella, or Carlisle would say about what it means to be a “hero” or “monster.”

**Large Group Discussion**
1) What images of God does the author write about in this psalm?
2) Do you think God is really like any of these things (e.g., a rock, fortress, goodness, etc.)? Why or why not?
3) What images do you think of when you think of God?
4) Look at your poster for “heroes and monsters” and compare it to your images of God. Are any of the images of the same? Why do you think that is?
5) Why do you see heroes and monsters a certain way (movies, books, people you know, etc.)? Why do you see God the way that you do?
6) In what ways do you think being viewed a certain way (like Edward is viewed as a monster) affect his image of God?
7) How do images help or hurt our hope in God? (For example, does the idea that “God is a fortress” inspire you?)
8) What images of God help Edward (Bella, Carlisle, etc.) have more hope for the future?

**Closing**
- Remind the students to read chapters before next session.
- Close with prayer.

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517 See synopses of the *Twilight* saga as well as the theological analysis section in chapter six for further context on character’s thoughts.
Week Two: Identity and Hope

Content: *Twilight*, chapters 12-18 and Exceptions from *Wisdom of the Desert*

Materials:
chart paper
stickers
markers
copies of *Wisdom of the Desert*

Objectives
- Students will identify the implied “moral coordinates” of the story world of *Twilight*.518
- Students will creatively express their own moral coordinates, using examples from both the Christian story and *Twilight*.

Essential Questions
- In what ways do characters have hope in *Twilight*?
- What stories (myths) give the characters of *Twilight* hope? (Note to facilitator: You might want to rely heavily on the myths of Jacob Black’s tribe.)519
- In what do you hope? Why? What influences this hope the most?
- Does *Twilight* or any other fiction work affect the way you think about your faith? About how you make moral choices? Why and how?
- Do you think stories (myths) shape the way you see yourself? How?520
- Who were the Desert Fathers?
- What do the Desert Fathers have in common with Edward Cullen and his family?

Introducing the Theme
- Before class, write 20-30 adjectives (smart, funny, shy, rebellious, loving, atheist, etc.) on individual sheets and post them around the room.
- After Session Opening, distribute 10 stickers to each youth. Give them two or three minutes to put a sticker on each sheet that contains a word that they feel describes them. Invite the youths to speak about the words they chose.

518 See pages 69-70 and 176-180 for the definition of “moral coordinates” and further explanation of coordinates in *Twilight*.

519 See myth criticism section of chapter six for further explanation.

520 See chapter one for more information about how stories impact self-understanding.
Potential questions:
1) Was time a factor in the words you chose? Would you have chosen differently if you could do it again?
2) Are there one or two words that you most identify with? Why or why not?
3) Would you have chosen different words to describe yourself a year ago?
   Five years ago? Why? What would you have chosen?
4) What words were missing that you think should have been posted?
   • Invite students to list what adjectives characters from Twilight would have chosen. Are there many similarities between the group and these characters? Why or why not?

Incorporating Theology
• Seat the group so that students are sitting in a large circle. Hand out sections from Wisdom of the Desert. Have one or several volunteers read them aloud.
• Ask the students to sit for a few moments and reread the passage to themselves.
• Invite students to list what adjectives the Desert Fathers might choose to describe themselves.

Large Group Discussion:
1) Are the characters in Twilight like you? Why or why not?
2) Are the Desert Fathers like you? Why or not?
3) If you think you have things in common with the characters in Twilight, do you think you would make similar choices? (For example, if you identify with Bella, would you choose to love Edward even if it meant that you would give up your soul? Or, if you identify with ostracized Edward, would you choose to avoid Bella to save her from the danger you pose?)
4) Even if you find the way the Desert Fathers lived very different from the way you live, is there still something they can teach us?
5) What do the characters of Twilight hope for?
6) What do the Desert Fathers hope for?
7) What do you hope for? How do all the things about you (be it the internal characteristics described in the opening activity, or other factors like where your family is from, where you live, where you go to school) shape what you hope for?
8) Does reading about what the characters of Twilight hope influence you? Does reading about the Desert Fathers? Why or why not?

Closing
• Remind the class about the reading assignment for the next session.
• Close with prayer.
**Week Three**: Imagination and Hope

**Content**: *Twilight*, chapters 19-24 and Revelation 21:1; Revelation 21: 22-27

**Materials:**

- chart paper
- sheets of colored paper
- markers
- copies of Revelation 21:1; Revelation 21: 22-27
- Magazines, newspapers, other collage materials as available

**Objectives**

- Students will be able to summarize what Edward and Bella (and possibly other characters in *Twilight*) think about salvation.
- Students will begin to engage how their faith tradition envisions “life after death.”
- Students will begin to articulate what they imagine happens after death.

**Essential Questions**

- Can Edward die? What happens to him after he dies?\(^{521}\)
- Why doesn’t Edward want to change Bella into a vampire?
- Why does Bella want to become a vampire?
- What does Carlisle think about becoming a vampire?
- Edward believes he is going to hell because he has no soul. Though he does not explicitly cite the Bible for this belief, he implies it is because of his understanding of Christianity. Can you think of any biblical passages that would support Edward’s fear that he is going to hell (for his “sins” as a vampire)?
- Are vampires’ actions (like killing humans for sustenance) sinful?
- Who do you agree with: Edward, Bella, Carlisle, or do you think (in the world of the book)? Do you have another, unique view (apart from what the characters of *Twilight* believe) about what happens to vampires’ souls? Why?
- What do you think happens when you die?
- Is there a heaven? Describe it.
- Is there a hell? Describe it.
- Did reading *Twilight* change what you think about life after death?
- Does reading the Bible influence the way you think about life after death? Why or why not?
- Is the biblical view of death a “happy ending?”

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\(^{521}\) See pages 194-196 for a discussion of Edward’s theology concerning what might happen to him after death.
• Is becoming a vampire a “happy ending?”

Introducing the Theme and Incorporating Theology
• Seat the group so that students are in a large circle. Hand out Bibles and have one or several volunteers read Revelation 21:1 and Revelation 21: 22-27 aloud.
• Ask the students to sit for a few moments and reread the passage to themselves.
• Divide the youth into groups of four or five. Give each group poster board and markers. Each group should also receive a question from which they must draw or write their answers to present to the larger group.

Small Group Activity
• Hand out paper to each student and magazines
• Option one: have students draw pictures, write words, or cut out images from magazines to imagine their view of heaven.
• Option two: have students draw pictures, write words, or cut out images to form a collage depicting the new creation described in Revelation.
• Gather drawings and post on a wall as a mural.

Small Group Discussion
1) What is happening in this passage from Revelation? (Have students explain pictures if relevant.)
2) Do you think this is describing heaven?
3) Does this fit with what you think heaven is like?
4) Do you think the world will end this way?
5) Is this a “happy” ending for the world?

Large Group Discussion
1) Do you think Edward (or the other vampires Cullen) will go to heaven? If not, what would happen to them? Is there another “happy ending” other than heaven possible?
2) Do you think Edward (as well as the other vampires and werewolves, who are essentially immortal) have souls, if they do not die (like humans die)?
3) Why does Edward refuse to change Bella?
4) Why does Bella insist on being changed?
5) Edward is afraid to damn Bella to an eternity with no soul if she becomes a vampire. Bella (and Carlisle) believe Edward’s “goodness” proves he does have a soul. Who do you agree with—Edward or Bella?
6) What do you believe happens after you die? What do you hope happens after you die?
7) Can you give examples from the Bible about what life after death might be like?
8) What do the characters of *Twilight* believe about life after death? Would any of them believe “heaven” insofar as the Bible describes it could be a possibility for them? Why or why not? If not, what do they hope their possible happy ending could be?\(^\text{522}\)

- Depending on students’ answers, place pictures of the characters from *Twilight* in the mural where students feel they “fit.” Ask students to place themselves where they “fit.”

*Closing*
- Close with prayer

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\(^{522}\) See chapters 23-Epilogue of *Twilight* as well as the penultimate and final sections of chapter six for further context.
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Spiritual Formation and Development


Theology


