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## Invisible Pain: Stigma and Mental Illness in Young Adult Literature

David Gregory

St. John Fisher College, dgregory\_no@sjfc.edu

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## Invisible Pain: Stigma and Mental Illness in Young Adult Literature

### Abstract

**Overview:** It's not uncommon to hear about mental illness in the current year. For some, it serves as a fuel for artistic expression. But for others, it's a haunting plague looming in the shadows. For a long time, mental illness has been something people never talk about. Because it is not physically tangible, there are people out there who are skeptical of the legitimacy of mental illnesses. As a result, mental illnesses have been given a bad reputation over the years. These conditions have been on the rise, which means these problems will only get worse.

**Author's Reflection:** My name is David Gregory and I am a psychology major at St. John Fisher College. I've been fascinated by the mind since I was a teenager. After some soul searching, I came to develop a passion for psychology, specifically abnormal psychology. After my undergrad years, I plan to pursue a doctoral degree with a focus on clinical psychology. For my paper, I wanted to integrate my passion of the mind with the theme of my research writing course, Literature in Adolescence. In young adult books, I noticed the theme of characters struggling with different mental illnesses. And with the presence of mental illness, stigma played a large role in the characters' struggles. And with these factors, I was able to put together the groundwork for what my paper would be about.

My greatest challenge when writing this paper was self-imposed. I wanted to try implementing more than simply research papers for my sources. Books and academic papers are essential for credibility. But, other mediums can provide a unique perspective and add flavor to what many would perceive as a "boring research paper." At the very beginning of the paper, I decided to include an original poem. "The Prisoner" was written specifically with the paper in mind and functions as a means to set the tone of it. The poem intends to capture the thoughts and feelings of a person struggling with a psychological condition. The idea of adding a song was a later addition and functioned as a connection to our daily lives beyond the realm of research. These two ideas helped to make the writing process much more fun, but also presented challenges in themselves.

My 199 research writing course was helpful in making me a much better writer. Research writing was an area I had thought was weaker overall. Refining and applying skills I had learned in the class, as well as over the years, was a big takeaway from the course. Here, I learned to utilize several writing techniques and develop a strong research paper. One of the biggest things I took away from this course and paper was the ability to be creative in expressing research findings. It doesn't have to be boring and bland to be considered a valid research paper.

**Professor Barry's Reflection** Stigma is something that many of us have experienced. That is why David Gregory's paper "Invisible Pain: Stigma and Mental Illness in Young Adult Literature" is so relevant today with social media occupying young adults' attention so much. But it is isn't just David's paper that made me realize his writing potential but his inquisitiveness to learn how to make his writing what he really wanted it to express. During our "writing chats," David would ask if he could add this or that to his paper because he thought those elements would make the reader see his point clearer. One such addition was his poem at the beginning of the paper, which did add something special to the reading. I was also fortunate to have David for two consecutive semesters and saw his writing blossom to what I hoped for him and hoped for himself. Enjoy his writing about stigma and how young adult literature make us see it in a new light. I did.

Invisible Pain: Stigma and Mental Illness in Young Adult Literature

David Gregory

ENG 199: Literature and Adolescence

Mrs. Barry

April 17, 2019

I certify that this paper is mine alone with support from my teacher, an extra ear, and possibly the writing center in accordance to St. John Fisher's Academic Honesty Policy.

David Gregory

The Prisoner

A prisoner of my mind  
That's what I call it  
To be plagued and alone  
Confined with these thoughts

When life is unkind  
And no one understands  
This invisible suffering  
Strikes its fatal wounds

Everyone is blind  
My sick mind a taboo  
They point and they whisper  
Is my sickness even real?

The Sun will never shine  
Stuck with this broken mind  
My audience of none  
Hears the cries in my hell

By: David Gregory

March 15, 2019

It's not uncommon to hear about mental illness in the current year. For some, it serves as a fuel for artistic expression. But for others, it's a haunting plague looming in the shadows. For a long time, mental illness has been something people never talk about. Because it is not physically tangible, there are people out there who are skeptical of the legitimacy of mental illnesses. As a result, mental illnesses have been given a bad reputation over the years. These conditions have been on the rise, which means these problems will only get worse.

When a person thinks of a mental condition, the first thought is often one of someone who is dangerous. Movies and TV shows love to play with the idea of having characters with

mental conditions. Unfortunately, for the sake of entertainment, the producers of these shows often misrepresent or emphasize the most extreme possibilities or over exaggerate these conditions. The media is guilty of perpetuating the negativity of mental illness as well. In the event of an act of violence, they scour for a motive. If there isn't an obvious motive, many jump to the conclusion that the person must be mentally ill. Attaching the label of a mental illness to a person just stokes the fire of misunderstanding. For those who actually have these conditions, they are misunderstood and feared. Young adult literature (YAL) can help reduce stigma. Through exposure to books such as *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* and *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, directly addressing stigma with mental illness by educators, and utilizing bibliotherapy, the negative image that mental health conditions are given can be reduced.

### **Young Adult Literature: Devalued and Disregarded**

Young adult literature, as a genre, has not been treated very kindly over the years. To most, it is seen as a genre that is not taken seriously. Mary Owen, a librarian at the high school of Hong Kong International School, describes criticisms of young adult books. They have been called, “‘Adult Lite’, not a real book, a genre not in its own right, a step up to adult books, novels for slow learners, books just about sex and drugs, dysfunctional families and dropping out, and a ‘sub-literature’ not worthy of discussion, especially in the classroom” (11). This criticism is generally paired with a misunderstanding of what Young Adult Literature (YAL) really is. For many adolescents, reading is not among the common activities. In a world of bright screens and buzzing phones, there's no end to the competition that reading faces.

Despite the fact that educators rarely use YAL in their classrooms, students have a very positive reception to it when it is used. When several students in a college adolescent literature class were spoken to about learning young adult literature, they all had responses in favor of teaching YA books. One student, named Jami Lee, said,

I was taught by my parents and my English teachers to indulge myself in the classics, literature that had deeper and more meaningful insights on life. Now I know that YA lit does provide meaning for teens. These books aren't just stories about secret crushes and high school sports; they deal with much larger issues that almost all teens have to deal with in some way or another. I think that teens should read books that provide meaning for their lives right then at that moment. Don't get me wrong, I think *The Scarlet Letter* and *The Jungle* are brilliant works, but what are teenagers going to do with the lessons of adultery and the imagery of disgusting meat factories at a time when other issues such as popularity, gangs, sex, and drugs are the most prominent things on their minds? (Crowe 114)

This is a perfect example of how young adult literature is perceived by most people. The classics are pushed constantly by educators, while the young adult books are seen as below them, or not worthy of being taught. Sadly, teens don't get an opportunity to read about the problems that they face on a day-to-day basis. And unfortunately, the classics cover issues that aren't nearly as relatable as YA books.

### **What is YAL?**

Young adult literature is a very misunderstood genre. Some think of young adult literature as "kiddie lit" (Crowe 121) or series books pushed by sellers to make the most money

possible. Part of the reason the genre isn't taken seriously is due to its vague definition. Chris Crowe, a YA author and English professor, addresses the ambiguity of defining YA literature in "YA Literature: What is Young Adult Literature?". After talking at a junior high about utilizing young adult literature, he went to the school's library to see their selection. Unfortunately, their selection was not what he expected. He found that,

Only a handful of books by post-World War II authors appeared on the shelves, and the closest book I found to what I consider young adult literature was John Knowles' *A Separate Peace*. The satisfied feeling I had when I finished my presentation evaporated when I realized that teachers or students who might come into the library looking for YAL would find instead a collection of adult books and classics that make up the bulk of the required reading in secondary school literature programs. If the teachers I had just talked to and their students trusted the "Young Adult Literature" label posted over these books, they would have the mistaken idea that young adult literature consists mostly of classic works that have been deemed suitable for study in junior high and high school.

(120)

A library is a trusted source by many to find books of any kind. It would not be unusual to find that these students would get a misconception as to what the genre really is. If people are convinced that it is just classics, then they will likely ignore the genre altogether.

This unfortunately isn't the only situation that Crowe found that YAL was misconceived. When at a bookstore, the young adult section was entirely different than the library's. This time, "...the racks displayed more than 250 titles, but instead of the lands of books I had hoped to find, I saw mostly series books [*Babysitters*, *Babysitters Club*, *Sweet Valley Twins*]" (120). This is most likely intended by the business. A book series, such as *Goosebumps* or *Babysitters Club*,

increases the likelihood of repeat sales. Stores' goal is to make profit, but their methods have consequences. By selling mostly series books in the YA section, they are contributing to the misconceptions that exist about YA literature. Even the university that Crowe works at did not have a grasp on what YAL exactly is. Dissatisfied, he states, "...a pilgrim on a quest to discover YAL at my university would probably conclude that none of us has any idea what we're talking about when it comes to books for teenagers" (121). A university of all places is unable to pinpoint exactly what YA is. While some parts make it a nightmare to define, there are key features.

Young adult literature is a very diverse genre and can cover topics about almost anything. Anything from romance to mental illnesses are fair game. However, it is this wide range of topics that YA books can cover contributes to its difficulty to define. As Mary Owen puts it, "Readers can vicariously explore gay love, AIDS, rape, teen parenting, depression, violent acts (physical and psychological), passionate vampires and fairies, suicide, incest, murder, political choice and belief and concerns about money, society, the environment and the future" (12). Throughout these topics, young adult books are commonly paired with a person's first time being exposed to one or more of these experiences. In life, people encounter new experiences no matter how old they are. This is why YA literature doesn't have to just speak to teens. Anyone can benefit from reading how these characters tackle issues of varying severity as well as the consequences of the character's actions. Many of these books tackle issues of being stigmatized for conditions that characters have. And, YA books offer the ability to see how a person reacts to and how they feel about being looked at negatively.

## Stigma in YA Books

“We all have pain. And we all look for ways to make the pain go away” (Sherman Alexie, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*).

*The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* by Sherman Alexie offers a look into what it feels like to have to deal with having a psychological condition. The main character, Junior, was born hydrocephalus, a buildup of fluid in the brain (2). This condition has led to a number of problems such as an enlarged head and developing a lisp and stutter. He was constantly picked on and bullied by those on his reservation. After having a long conversation with his teacher, Junior decides to get away from the reservation and go to Reardan, an all-white school. Although he stuck out like a sore thumb, Junior isn't the main focus of experiencing stigma. It's Penelope- a girl he meets who struggles with a psychological condition.

Junior heard someone vomiting in the women's bathroom as he was heading out of the men's room. He had decided to check in on this person to see if they were okay. To his surprise, he finds out it's Penelope- the face of beauty and perfection at Reardan. He tries to comfort her the best he can:

So I say to Penelope what I always say to Dad when he's drunk and depressed and ready to give up on the world.

“Hey Penelope,” I say. “Don't give up.”

Okay, so it's not the wisest advice in the world. It's actually kind of obvious and corny.

But Penelope starts crying, talking about how lonely she is, and how everybody thinks her life is perfect because she's pretty and smart and popular, but that she's scared all the time, but nobody will let her be scared because she's pretty and smart and popular. (108)

To many readers' surprise, Penelope is the one who is struggling with a mental illness. Penelope is extremely popular and smart, but she hides the fact that she is bulimic. She says that she's scared because of her condition, and specifically says that "nobody will let her be scared" (108). Because mental illnesses are a taboo to talk about, she's forced to keep it to herself. Having bulimia would ruin her perfect image that she has built up. This situation paints a very realistic picture for those who actually have these conditions. In order to not be looked at negatively or just differently in general, people hide their condition. When people hide their conditions, people do not see how people really are who have mental illnesses. If people don't see that these people are just as normal as them, stigma will continue to perpetuate.

In *The Perks of a Wallflower* by Stephen Chbosky, the main character Charlie struggles with depression. Charlie's condition led to him being a socially withdrawn individual who had no friends. When he first started high school, Charlie notes that "Some kids look at me strange in the hallway because I don't decorate my locker, and I'm the one who beat up Sean and couldn't stop crying after he did it" (8). This book goes in a different direction than Alexie's does. As he matures both physically and mentally, he finds people that accept him for his flaws. The other side of the coin is that it's okay to be different. Similar to Junior's case in *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, he is accepted in spite of being different. While at a party, Charlie's company was appreciated. It's something he wasn't used to. He had the realization when his friend Patrick said to him, "You see things. You keep quiet about them. And you understand" (37). When thinking about that moment, he wrote in his letter,

I didn't know that other people thought things about me. I didn't know they looked. I was sitting on the floor of a basement at my first real party between Sam and Patrick, and I remembered that Sam introduced me as her friend to Bob. And I remembered that Patrick

had done the same for Brad. And I started to cry. And nobody in that room looked at me weird for doing it. And then I really started to cry. (38)

Charlie at that moment felt accepted, despite being a bit different. The book is a great example of how a person can be accepted by someone and not feel bad about being different. And as a result of being accepted, he becomes happier. Charlie is a good person who was a victim of his environment. Although he was looked at differently, he finds that there are people who accept him. As he is discovering, a mental illness doesn't have to hold a person back if people are willing to give them a chance.

These two characters represent the two different paths that a person struggling with a mental condition can take. Penelope's situation involves how her social status would be affected by others knowing that she has bulimia. This is the path many expect to have to take when they have a psychological condition that they think they need to hide. She sees her condition as an imperfection and goes against the image she has established for herself. The idea that a having mental condition will change a person's perception of them reinforces Penelope hiding her imperfections. On the contrary, Charlie did not hide himself from anyone. He found friends that accepted him regardless of how different he was. Charlie could be himself without hiding the faults that he had. Being accepted regardless of faults should be what everyone strives for. Being looked at differently because of a mental condition takes a huge toll on a person. Penelope, as the face of perfection, could not reveal her bulimia and be looked at in a negative light. Charlie had already been exposed to stigma during the very beginning of his high school career and before then. Many did not see him for the good person he was because they had negative assumptions about him.

## Combating Stigma in the Classroom: Creating Empathy

Help me understand why  
 You've given in to all these  
 Reckless dark desires you're  
 Lying to yourself again  
 Suicidal imbecile  
 You're pounding on a fault line  
 What'll it take to get it through to you precious  
 Over this, why do you  
 Wanna throw it away like this  
 (The Outsider by A Perfect Circle)

In the song “The Outsider” the writer, Maynard James Keenan, tells the story of a situation in which a person doesn’t understand another’s struggle. He writes about a person who does not understand a another’s situation struggling with depression and becoming increasingly frustrated with them. It captures a very common perception (stigma) people have of those with psychological conditions. It becomes frustrating to those around them when the person doesn’t get better or improve. They just want them to get over it and not be the way they are with the condition. This lack of sympathy becomes a detriment when it comes to trying to combat stigmas and negative perceptions of their struggle.

One of the main issues involving stigma related to psychological conditions is the lack of understanding of them. For many that don’t understand, it seems like a ridiculous series of thoughts that make up these conditions. It seems illogical that a person would think in such a way or react to a situation in an “exaggerated” manner. The danger of mental illness is the fact that the person suffering is well aware of the lack of logic but cannot control their mental state. It’s much more complicated than just using logic to undo the seemingly irrational state.

An effective tactic to combating stigma is to bring the issue up in classes. For the most part, a lot of education is centered around a specific curriculum. The curriculum generally favors

works that are considered classics. Although they are well-written and are considered classics for a reason, they do not resonate very effectively with the students that read them. As Michael Cart puts it, “Young adult literature is made valuable not only by its artistry but also by its relevance to the lives of its readers” (“The Value of Young Adult Literature”). Yet, there is little wiggle room for including more relatable content such as young adult books. This is because these books do not get the credit they deserve, as they can be much more effective than classics at delivering their message than classics.

Alice Hays’ dissertation on how young adult literature can produce prosocial explores the topic of utilizing YA books in an education setting. One of the topics that she explores is if young adult fiction can produce greater empathy among students. She cites a study done on the topic, saying,

...there were six students who demonstrated “big moves” and exhibited more empathy than they had prior to reading. Those students had responded to assigned writing prompts in class through their own narratives. Ultimately, those students who both read and wrote stories were more likely to report increased empathy. According to Alsup’s work, this empathy is a necessary step to be moved to action. (19)

Six is not a massive jump by any means, but it is still improvement, nevertheless. It proves that it is possible to see improvements through reading YA books. When there is understanding, action can be taken.

Suicide is often a very heavy topic to discuss and may be avoided altogether in an educational setting. But despite its sensitivity it has become a real problem among young adults, as,

...over 500,000 young adults, ages 15 to 25, attempt suicide and 5,000 young adults succeed (www.teen-depression.info), making it the fourth leading cause of death for children and youth ages 10-14 and the second leading cause of death for young adults ages 15-19 (National Center for Health Statistics, 2002). While teen suicide rates in the United States have declined in the last decade, the current rate remains double that of the 1950s. (Fisher 364)

With the rate being double of that from about seventy years ago, it is most certainly not an issue that should be ignored. Reading a YA book that involves the topic can teach people about the subject. It's important to know the warning signs and to understand when to get help. It's hard to see the signs if it's not known what to look for. By teaching about and discussing the topic, young adult books have the potential to save lives.

### **Bibliotherapy: A Viable Treatment**

Therapy using books seems a bit strange, but it shouldn't be counted out right away. Literature can be a useful tool not just for people who aren't stigmatized to understand, but also to those who are suffering from it themselves. Based on a study for bibliotherapy that looked at reading circles,

They show that participation in the circle provided a short-term better sense of well-being for all study participants. Mikael expressed a consciousness of improved well-being when he said, "I have felt better about leaving home to come here [to the reading circle]," and Alexandra described the reading circle's effect as "to say uplifting would be an exaggeration, but something like that." She also reported that reading alone could prevent

a worsening of her well-being, but taking part in the reading circle could improve it.

(Pettersson 126)

The evidence shows that there is improvement in one way or another. Although there isn't a massive change in their wellbeing, it can plant the seeds that can grow into greater empathy. A reading circle specifically can open people to create dialogue about what they read. It works both ways- with people gaining exposure to conditions they may not understand, and those who suffer from these conditions have a sense of not feeling alone.

### **What Can YAL Do?**

Young adult literature opens the doors to understanding others through the character's experiences with mental illnesses. With the fact that “approximately 2.4 million teens had at least one serious mental illness, most with ‘multiple disorders’” (Richmond 20), it's by no means a minority of people who suffer from this stigma. It could be anyone from anywhere, regardless of background. We have all felt physical pain, but not everyone understands mental pain. Many feel alone with their conditions and truly believe that there is an “audience of none” to accept and support them. By integrating young adult literature into education, the seeds will be planted on the way to reduce stigma and understand people suffering from the stigma of mental illnesses.

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