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Immigrant Young Adult Literature: A Doorway to Empathy

41.3 million people, or 13% of the U.S. population, are immigrants from another country (Zong and Batalova). Upon arriving in the U.S., they face numerous challenges as they seek to navigate life in a new country with a foreign culture and a different language that often fails to recognize any education or job experience they may have gained abroad and that frequently harbors hostility toward new arrivals. They frequently encounter the “dangerous parochialism in many sections of the nation” and “growing xenophobia” that leads domestic-born Americans to regard them with wary suspicion at best and outright hateful prejudice at worst (Hansen 13). In light of the reality of the significant number of immigrants in the U.S. and the difficulties they face when they arrive, I argue that young adult novels about immigrants should be taught in school classrooms, in order to increase empathy for immigrants among domestic-born students and create a more welcoming community.

While any form of literature can be used to teach students to think critically, a number of education scholars note the power of using multicultural literature to teach youth to think critically about groups of people with different backgrounds than themselves. Joyce Hansen asserts that in the context of the anti-outsider sentiment pervasive in our nation, multicultural literature can be a potent tool that “exposes students to a wide range of human experience and helps them realize that our similarities outweigh our differences” (Hansen 13). Judith A. Haynes and Sarah M. Burns quote D.R. Woods, who claims that “the study of culture [in multicultural

Comment [j1]: Make sure that you format your paper correctly. Ask your teacher or professor which style they prefer you use, and then follow the rules for that style. This paper, for example, is in MLA format.

Comment [j2]: Do not worry if you have trouble coming up with a creative title. Write your paper first, and you will think of something. Many research papers have a title that names the general topic of the paper (“Immigrant Young Adult Literature”), then has a colon, and then gives more specifics about the argument in the paper (in this paper, the author argues that immigrant young adult literature is “A Doorway to Empathy”).

Comment [j3]: A statistic is one catchy way to open your paper. You could also use a short and relevant story, a question, or a strong or interesting statement. You can come up with an introductory hook after you write your paper.

Comment [j4]: This sentence sets up a problem: immigrants often face a discriminatory, prejudiced environment when they come to the U.S.

Comment [j5]: You have probably been told that you should not use “I” in any essay. However, if you read articles written by scholars, experts, and professors, they frequently will use “I” because ultimately, it is their own argument. However, you should never say “I think” or “I believe” because you do not just “think” or “believe” what you are writing—you strongly argue that it is true based on extensive research.

Comment [j6]: A strong thesis statement should clearly lay out your argument and guide your paper. From this thesis statement, it is clear that the author is arguing that teaching immigrant young adult novels is a possible solution to the problem of anti-immigrant sentiment because it can promote empathy about the challenges facing immigrant youth.

Comment [j7]: Quotes should never just be thrown into the middle of an essay. They must be woven into sentences and somehow explained. This quote and the following quotes are explained in the topic sentence of this paragraph, which says that there are numerous education scholars who discuss the power of multicultural literature to help students think critically about people from different backgrounds.

young adult **literature** is a valuable endeavor that can bridge cultural divides by offering deeper more authentic understanding of cultures other than our own” (Woods, **quoted** in Hayn and Burns 136). KaaVonia Hinton and Gail Dickinson suggest that multicultural young adult literature can be used to allow students from marginalized groups the opportunity to see portrayals of themselves (which could be empowering for immigrant students in a classroom reading immigrant young adult literature), but they also assert that it can be used “as a...window for *all* students” into a reality outside their own and “to bring issues of race, gender, and class to the forefront” (Hinton and Dickinson 4). They explain that multicultural literature can not only give students the opportunity to gain perspective on people of various different backgrounds, but it can also let them begin to explore with the challenges experienced by people from historically and currently marginalized **groups**. Ultimately, this exploration can lead to “**empathy**” (Hinton and Dickinson 5).

John H. Ritter, a young adult novelist, offers quotes from two other young adult novelists who provide explanations for how literature can help readers learn **empathy**. “The reader becomes immersed in the fictional world you have created,” **asserts** Catharine Ryan Hyde, “and takes it on—if only briefly—as reality” (quoted in Ritter 10). David Lubar **agrees**, saying that “in a novel, a reader has invested a substantial amount of his own time and emotion. The characters have become part of his life. The fictional world has merged with his world” (quoted in Ritter 10). A novel allows a reader to vicariously experience the world that a character inhabits and learn what that world is **like**. If the world of novel involves marginalization based on race, religion, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, or class, the reader gets a taste, however small and fleeting, of what that marginalization might be **like**. That small taste can ideally become the basis for **empathy**.

Comment [j8]: If you need to clarify something in a quote you can add in information using brackets.

Comment [j9]: If you are using a source that quotes another source and you want to use the source that was quoted, this is how you do the citation. In this example, a book by Hayn and Burns was the source, and they quoted Woods in their book.

Comment [j10]: This sentence essentially puts the quote from the previous sentence into different words, making sure that the quote is explained well.

Comment [j11]: This paragraph starts with the idea that multicultural young adult literature can help readers learn to think critically about people from diverse backgrounds and builds up to the idea that such critical thinking can ultimately lead to empathy.

Comment [j12]: This paragraph transitions from the last paragraph by focusing on how exactly multicultural literature can promote empathy.

Comment [j13]: Words like “asserts,” “argues,” “notes,” “explains,” “discusses,” “suggests,” “implies,” etc. can be helpful for introducing quotes from your sources.

Comment [j14]: You can also use words such as “agrees,” “echoes,” “disputes,” “disagrees,” “emphasizes,” “highlights,” “underscores” etc. to show how the opinions offered in different sources relate to each other and/or how they relate to your own argument.

Comment [j15]: This sentence summarizes the main point of the last two quotes...

Comment [j16]: ...and this sentence connects it specifically to multicultural literature...

Comment [j17]: ...and this sentence connects it back to empathy.

Jennifer Graff offers a similar hopeful prognosis based on her work teaching educators about using immigrant literature in the classroom. She highlights the transformative “effects texts have on people’s attitudes and behaviors,” and then proceeds to assert that “these effects can then affect people’s social relations” (Graff 127). Madeline Hron echoes her sentiment, arguing that “our limited understanding of immigrant suffering may have effects in real life: in public attitudes towards immigrants,” and, by converse, that increasing our understanding of the challenges faced by immigrants (and other marginalized groups) can result in more favorable public attitudes and toward those groups (Hron xii). These authors thus suggest that reading novels about immigrants can help foster empathy in students by giving them a glimpse into immigrant experiences, and this empathy may even translate into more favorable, welcoming attitudes toward immigrants. Based on these assertions, I propose that literature can be a vehicle for promoting domestic Americans’ empathy towards immigrants, and therefore, young adult literature about immigrants should be taught in school classrooms in the U.S.

Comment [j18]: This paragraph takes the argument in the last paragraph a step further by talking not just about how multicultural young adult literature can foster empathy, but how it can actually impact opinions and even real relationships. It also specifically talks about immigrant young adult literature.

Comment [j19]: This sentence summarizes and explains that previous two quotes. Are you seeing a theme? You should always make sure that you explain the quotes that you use!

Comment [j20]: Building on all of the arguments and research presented so far, the author can finally restate the thesis as a well-reasoned argument.

Comment [j21]: Normally, you would end a paper with a strong concluding paragraph, not just a one-sentence restatement of the argument. This paper is actually part of a longer paper, so the longer paper has a more complete conclusion.

Works Cited

- Graff, Jennifer M. "Countering Narratives: Teachers' Discourses about Immigrants and Their Experiences within the Realm of Children's and Young Adult Literature." *English Teaching Practice and Critique*. 9.3 (2010): 106-131. Print.
- Hansen, Joyce. "Multicultural Literature: A Story of Your Own." *United in Diversity: Using Multicultural Young Adult Literature in the Classroom*. Ed. Jean E. Brown and Elaine C. Stephens. Urbana: National Council of Teachers of English, 1998. Print.
- Hayn, Judith A. and Sarah M. Burns. "Multicultural Adolescent Literature: Finding the Balance." *Teaching Young Adult Literature Today*. Ed. Judith A. Hayn and Jeffrey S. Kaplan. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2012. Print.
- Hinton, KaaVonnia and Dickinson, Gail K. *Integrating Multicultural Young Adult Literature in Libraries and Classrooms in Secondary Schools*. Columbus: Linwood Publishing, 2007. Print.
- Hron, Madelaine. *Translating Pain: Immigrant Suffering in Literature and Culture*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010. Print.
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- Zong, Jie and Jeanne Batalova. "Frequently Requested Statistics on Immigrants and Immigration in the United States." *Migration Policy Institute*. 26 Feb. 2015. Web. 7 May 2015. <<http://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/frequently-requested-statistics-immigrants-and-immigration-united-states>>.

Comment [j22]: Always, always, always make sure you have a complete, correctly formatted "Works Cited" page. Don't wait until the last minute to do it because it takes a long time! Once you find out the format that your teacher wants you to use, you can go online to a website such as the Purdue OWL to see examples on how to format the citations correctly.