

The Angst of the Everyday: Using Narrative to Provoke an Affective Understanding of Adolescence

Katherine A. Bell

Volume 1, numéro 2, 2011

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/nm1_2art01

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

The University of New Brunswick

ISSN

1925-0622 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Bell, K. A. (2011). The Angst of the Everyday:: Using Narrative to Provoke an Affective Understanding of Adolescence. *Narrative Matters*, 1(2), 20–33.

Résumé de l'article

This paper is written as a reflection on an interdisciplinary course I have recently taught on adolescence. I begin by noting the difficulties of negotiating theoretical claims and disciplinary insights about adolescence with a more embodied understanding of how it feels to be an adolescent, which, I argue, helps to humanize and enrich discussions and debates over the parameters of adolescent experience. I describe two narratives that served as springboards for deeper affective considerations of adolescent experience in my course: Paul Feig's *Freaks and Geeks* (1999) and Alice Munro's series of short stories, *The Lives of Girls and Women* (1971). I conclude with a brief commentary on narrative ethics, which helps me contemplate the ways in which imaginative narrative is a strong addition to an interdisciplinary study course.



The Angst of the Everyday: Using Narrative to Provoke an Affective Understanding of Adolescence

Katherine A. Bell

Wilfrid Laurier University

This paper is written as a reflection on an interdisciplinary course I have recently taught on adolescence. I begin by noting the difficulties of negotiating theoretical claims and disciplinary insights about adolescence with a more embodied understanding of how it feels to be an adolescent, which, I argue, helps to humanize and enrich discussions and debates over the parameters of adolescent experience. I describe two narratives that served as springboards for deeper affective considerations of adolescent experience in my course: Paul Feig's *Freaks and Geeks* (1999) and Alice Munro's series of short stories, *The Lives of Girls and Women* (1971). I conclude with a brief commentary on narrative ethics, which helps me contemplate the ways in which imaginative narrative is a strong addition to an interdisciplinary study course.

I am an Assistant Professor who teaches in an interdisciplinary program, and during this past academic year I created and taught an interdisciplinary seminar course on adolescence. The primary work of this course was to encounter adolescents in some usual and unlikely places: in various academic disciplines such as psychology, sociology, and history; in personal places such as diaries, web logs, and students' memories of their own teenage years; in coming-of-age fiction; and in all the real and virtual places youth are drawn to everyday, such as the school yard, the mall, and the internet. The point of the course was to engage with, and negotiate, as many different narratives of adolescent experience as possible; my hope was that this course would allow students to think about the ways different disciplines and people have arrived at and claimed knowledge about what it means to "grow up" and leave childhood behind, so that their own understanding of what it means to be a teenager might grow in complexity and scope.

For their main course assignment, students were asked to lead a seminar discussion on one of the course readings. I also asked them to write a two page reflection on every seminar discussion. The course consisted of twenty female students and four male students in their final year of study, and most approached the core requirement with ease and enthusiasm. Mostly education

students, they were chatty, vivacious, and bright, with a keen interest in doing well in order to better their chances of finding work in a province where the number of new teachers now far exceeds the number of available teaching positions. Students came to the course well informed; they had studied Erikson's (1968) stages of identity development and Piaget's (1958) learning theories. They also, by this time, knew a fair bit about current controversies and concerns surrounding youth and technology, sexuality, civic engagement, and so on. They had their own opinions about such controversies, and they loved to express them. Within the first few classes, I noticed that these students were enthusiastic about discussing what to *do* with youth: how they should be treated, what they should be protected from, and what the parameters of their experience should be. A few students entered heated debates about privacy issues and predators on Facebook. Others were mortified by contemporary music videos. Some—a few young women in particular—were anxious to discuss the need for critical awareness of gender stereotypes in media geared towards youth. I was happy to be met with this enthusiasm. But it seemed the students had no actual desire or inclination in the beginning to think about what adolescence *is*; they did not think to stop and sit with what adolescence might look and feel like.

This may be in part because the task is a bit daunting. There are many different versions of adolescence at stake and these versions do not always cohere; their differences are difficult to reconcile. When asked what adolescence was, some students promptly provided reiterations of Erikson (1968) and used their humanistic understanding of adolescence as a set of distinct stages and phases to keep any prolonged contemplation or alternative explanation at bay. Other students, well immersed in the post-structural lingo of our interdisciplinary program, insisted that adolescence is a cultural construct and a democratic privilege. Course readings by Nancy Lesko (2001) and Marco D'Eramo (2003) reinforced this notion; these authors explore adolescence as a byproduct of both the expansion of the middle class in the Industrial West and the introduction of compulsory schooling, created in part to nourish and control the expanding middle class. I have great respect for this interpretation. But interestingly, in the first few weeks of the course, I found that students' heavy reliance on the constructivist approach to adolescence often shut down or prevented rich conversation; the logic that all experiences were relative and contingent on demographics seemed to preclude sustained imaginative engagement with this phase of the life course.

By the end of the third week, I was beginning to worry that the course was a failed project of interdisciplinarity. One of the goals of interdisciplinarity is to learn how to work through the different ways disciplines arrive at and claim knowledge about a subject in order to come to a more meaningful understanding of that subject. And yet, my students were having a difficult time negotiating different knowledge claims about adolescence, and even cursory

conversations about curfews and cell phones seemed to lapse into relativism because the complexity of the adolescent lives we were discussing were lost in the wake of conversations about arbitrary age brackets, prescribed theories of identity formation, and historical accounts of Western privilege.

Freaks and Geeks: An Unplanned Intervention

At the end of the third week, when a student had to postpone her scheduled seminar on a psychology chapter dealing with self-esteem, I decided, at the last minute, to follow a brief lecture with an episode of Paul Feig's creation, *Freaks and Geeks* (1999-2000), produced by Judd Apatow. This television series was cancelled within its first season, and none of the class had seen it before. I find the program to be quite remarkable, but I was not expecting my students' reactions to it to be so visceral.

The thematic concern of *Freaks and Geeks*—primarily coming-of-age experiences—was certainly familiar ground for the students in this course. Adolescent experience has been making for compelling stories for hundreds of years. In 1774, Wolfgang Von Goethe popularized the philosophical notion of *sturm und drang*—or storm and stress—with his novel, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*. He then continued to write about the restless spirit of young characters who longed to break out on their own and find their own place of belonging in an ever changing world, as in *William Meister's Apprenticeship* (1795)—now known to be the first *Bildungsroman* or coming-of-age novel (Buckley, 1974; Abel, Hirsch, & Langland, 1983). Since *Wilhelm Meister*, there have been many beautifully complex portrayals of adolescence in literature—Stendhal's *The Red and the Black* (1830), Gustave Flaubert's *Sentimental Education* (1869), Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* (1895), and Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations* (1860), to name a few. Such novels deal with the intensity, fragility, indecision, and vulnerability of adolescent experience.

The popularity of coming-of-age narratives has persisted and the genre has proliferated, making excellent headway into all realms: books, television series, and films. But the darker, more complex aspects of the coming-of-age trajectory are often left behind in pop culture; most narratives offered in dramas such as *Beverly Hills 90210* (Spelling, 1990-2000) and *Gossip Girl* (Schwartz & Savage, 2007-) depict rather sanitized or overly dramatic versions of adolescence, rife with catchy pop tunes to help relay the emotions of characters played by attractive twenty-something youth. These were the representations of adolescents that most of my students were familiar with—entertaining enough, on their own, but perhaps not helpful sources for understanding

Freaks and Geeks, much like Winnie Holzman's creation, *My So-Called Life* (Herskovitz, 1994-95), casts awkward, pimply teenage girls who tower over thirteen year old (pre-growth spurt) boys. It is filled with the outcasts of the high school, but even the popular kids are still learning the rules, and they

do not always get them right. Their tentative glances and (often hilarious) attempts at nonchalance or rebellion remind us how exhausting and humbling learning the ropes can be. When the students discussed the episode we watched together, what struck them was both the narrative itself—the official script—and that which did not get translated into words (or into our previous classroom conversations), but affected the episode's atmosphere nonetheless: awkward silences, moments filled with bored despondency, contrived stances and walking styles, tentative frightened glances at objects of desire, and loud, spontaneous guffaws in the cafeteria when teenagers shared infantile jokes and forgot their self-conscious behavior for an instant. The episode we watched together was the pilot; at the end of this episode, we witnessed the mortified expression on young Sam Weir's face when he braved the dance floor for the first time ever to waltz to a slow song with his first crush, and the music suddenly switched tempo to a fast song. His bright red complexion and the way he hopelessly jutted his elbows out and threw his spindly arms into the air to Styx's "Come Sail Away" (DeYoung, 1977) was enough to make several students in my course groan, shield their eyes, and fight off waves of humiliation on his behalf. One student explained that she wanted this boy safely returned to his right and proper place: his garishly patterned living room, where he happily watched bad science fiction TV in the first half of the episode, with his parents somewhere nearby. Then, he began to have a little bit of fun and the intensity of the moment had passed—a moment that might be narrated as trivial and insignificant, but was clearly of staggering import here.

When students later wrote in their journals about their own adolescent experiences, many stated that certain ineffable feelings of their own adolescent lives were somehow summoned forth by one or more of the scenes in this pilot episode. One male student wrote that "I guess I had put the moments of my teens that were so awkward and humiliating out of my mind, and it was strange to revisit them, but I see the importance of doing so." A female student, generally extremely articulate, confessed that "I don't really know how to write about this show, but I'll say that nothing has taken me back to the feeling of my social life in high school quite like the music, and characters, and just, I don't know, every little part of this episode did." Something clearly happened here, which gave more weight to the more theoretical conversations we had been having up until this point.

Anna Freud (1958) offers one explanation: adults, she argues—even young adults—recall the events but not exact atmosphere of adolescence. Adults know what we did or did not do, and have recollections of what we went through, but the intensity of the emotional attachment we had to certain experiences is often lost to us with time. *Freaks and Geeks* returns the adult viewer to the atmosphere of adolescents in uncanny ways. Ratings and reviews of both *Freaks and Geeks* and *My So-Called Life* suggest these series were loved by critics and older generations who had already "struggled through the

doldrums”—but they had low ratings with youth and were both cancelled within a year. They were not cancelled because they were not of high caliber; many serious critics now agree they were, in fact, quite brilliant. It may be that they were cancelled because the face of adolescence they offered was not prettified or sublimated; it was not the face that offered easy escapism for the young.

I figured that if my students—mostly future teachers—were going to engage in serious conversations and discuss controversies that involve the fate of adolescence, then they needed to take seriously the ways in which the knowing of adolescence may, at times, be an actual forgetting of the agency and interiority of real adolescents. There is a way in which adolescent experience is sometimes disavowed in pop culture and distanced by theory. This is not at all to say that such realms are not integral to conversations of adolescents; they absolutely are. And this is not to say that *Freaks and Geeks* was the putatively “authentic” representation of adolescents offered in the course; the setting of the program could not be anywhere but North America and the culminating event of the episode—a school dance—was certainly reflective of Western privilege. It was, however, interesting to think about why the program allowed for feelings to flood into the classroom space that had not previously been there, and why it allowed students to *think about* adolescence in completely novel ways in our academic setting, even though experiences in the pilot mirrored those that many students had in their own lives a short time ago.

As the course progressed, then, there were a few main questions I asked in an attempt to keep the issue of representation at the forefront of our minds: How does the adolescent experience—whatever it may be—get transformed into narrative? How does it translate into various institutional discourses? When we are thinking about adolescence, regardless of if “we” are sociologists, educators, psychologists, policy-makers, or students, how can we do so in a way that is meaningful, but also accounts for the singularity of adolescent experience? How might we mine the *richness* of what it means for young people to “come of age”?

In my course, both imaginative narratives and students' personal narratives became increasingly important ways of holding onto this richness. Bruns (1999) notes that literature—or imaginative narrative—engages the world in a way that exposes human beings to situations that are refractory to concepts, rules, and justified true beliefs (p. 14). Adam Newton (1995) writes that while narratives of the self may sometimes reinforce or close off the parameters of identity, they may also instigate a dismantling or a leap out of conceptual paradigms. They offer enough time and space and affective encounters with interesting characters for the reader to see that adolescence is always more and less than any theory will relay.

After our experience with *Freaks and Geeks*, I made sure that any thematic strand we were to take up in relation to adolescence was enriched by

some form of imaginative narrative that might hold students to the feelings of adolescent experience. I reassigned a new task to the female student who had to cancel her presentation on self-esteem; now she would present on a short story from Alice Munro's classic collection, *The Lives of Girls and Women* (1971), which everyone would read in lieu of the assigned weekly reading. This short story was meant to enrich our understanding of a particularly complex aspect of adolescent experience, which the rest of this paper will concern itself with: individuation, or the breaking of family ties. We read articles by Anna Freud (1968) and Elisabeth Young Breuhl (1996), which allowed us to approach this theme from a psychological perspective. An article on adolescent relationships by Peggy Giordano (2003) allowed us to approach this theme from a sociological angle. My hope, however, was that Munro's story, "Heirs of the Living Body," might help students contemplate more fully how significant the process of individuation might be to adolescents, even if they are unable to recall, or admit to, its importance in their own lives.

Reading Alice Munro: A Sustained Engagement with the Adolescent Need for Individuation

According to Anna Freud (1958), the primary work of adolescence is the preparation for the eventual breaking of family ties. Though it may be a subconscious process, puberty foreshadows and signals the adolescent's realization that the family unit—whether fully functioning or not—will not always be intact. Regardless of the structure of the family unit and the relation or number of primary caretakers, adolescence marks a time when most of us realize that our parents will not, and cannot, be everything for us. They are not always going to be there. Sometimes this results in a preoccupation with death (ergo, Goth culture). Or some of us may realize that our caretakers are human, fallible, and that they may fail us. In any case, adolescence is the realization that we are not just meant to be members of our immediate family; more is expected of us, and we are at the early stages of figuring out what this is. This uncertainty is life; it is carried into young adulthood, but the difference, for Freud, is that adolescents become so preoccupied with their dilemma, so psychically invested in it, that it structures the atmosphere of their existence in ineffable ways.

According to Freud, the work of adolescence is finding a new object to be attached to: a new thing or person to be invested in. This provides a partial explanation for why many young adolescent girls have such an intense relationship with their peers, and why some teenagers become obsessed with activities and heave their life into entirely new forms to accommodate these activities. Looking back, we may laugh about our first crush, or the fact that we didn't make a certain team. But, Freud argues, we cannot *really* tolerate a remembrance of how vital such things were to our attempt at survival—our

attempts to find our own way so that we did not become a doomed, or failed, member of the family.

In Munro's *The Lives of Girls and Women* (1971/1987), Del Jordan is a young adolescent who embraces the breaking of family ties. She is strong and astute, and she strives to articulate the pleasures of possessing a singularity that sets her apart as she makes her way into adolescence. But this is also a story about the helplessness she feels when others around her refuse to allow her a place of belonging outside of their own narratives. She notices this refusal to allow room for others when she thinks about how her mother and aunts talk about her adolescent cousin. When Del's aunts refer to her cousin, who is a bit slow, as "poor Mary Agnes," it is with a "subdued protective tone, as if she had no secrets, no place of her own, and that was not true" (p. 50). Mary Agnes floats in the background in the lives of her aunts, a passive girl meant for pity. Del is troubled by her relatives' tendency to "domesticate" the other—to, as Derek Attridge (1999) puts it, strip someone or something of its otherness, or singularity, in order to come to grips with it (p. 22). Their insistence on seeing Mary Agnes in a protective light leaves Del feeling isolated by her own perspective of Mary Agnes, gleaned through many of Del's curious interactions with the girl's uncanny strength, gleeful aggression, and rather imperial spirit. The discrepancy between experience and narrative troubles Del: she notes that it often seems "nobody else knew what really went on, or what a person was, but me" (p. 50).

Del comes from a close-knit, traditional Scottish-Protestant family, and her mother and aunts gather her into a protective sort of love that is as stifling as it is secure. Her mother is a bright character who often lightens the tone of the text, breathes fresh air into it. These are not stories of abuse or neglect, but ones of a middle class, loving Canadian family. But the harm fringing family interactions becomes apparent a few times, when Del's mother is too quick to bestow her understanding of the world, her values, and her aspirations onto her daughter, and when she is unwilling to really see her daughter.

At one point in the text, in the chapter titled "Heirs of the Living Body," Del's Uncle Craig dies quite suddenly. As always, we see Del's efforts to understand the situation in her own way: how and why he died and what it all means. She is shaken by his death, and her efforts to understand it are tentative and fragile. While her mother cannot foreclose Del's own response to Craig's death—for no adult ever can—she is careless with her treatment of the situation. She thrusts her own explanation onto Del—responding to Del's questions about heart attacks and death with "ominous cheerfulness" (p. 52). Everyone is connected, she argues, and nobody really dies because of this connection. She then insists that Del go to the funeral.

In the brilliant pages immediately after her uncle dies, what might strike the reader—what certainly struck me—is the way in which Del's sharing of a space with her parents is what actually precludes her ability to cope with death.

Del is allowed no room for her own anger and her own coping mechanism; she is brought to the funeral at Uncle Craig's house against her will and told to behave in a particular way. She longs for some sort of escape and leaves the parlor for the back of the house, where she confronts her cousin, who eventually grabs Del in attempt to make her go see her uncle in his coffin. Del retaliates in what appears to be some sort desperate cry for agency. She bites her cousin's arm, and later reflects that "I thought I was biting myself off from everything . . . I thought I was putting myself outside. . . . I thought they would all hate me, and hate seemed to me so much to be coveted, then, like a gift of wings" (p. 61).

But such freedom is "not so easily come by" (p. 61), and although her aunt's initial impulse is to call her a rabid dog, Del's mother's "clear and dangerous voice" promptly takes full blame for Del's behavior, insisting that "I take full responsibility . . . I never should have brought her here today It's barbaric to subject a girl like that to a funeral" (p. 62). Del's aunts are settled by this quick turn in perspective that returns Del to childhood and locates the mother's blunder as the source of any unpredictable behavior. Their conversation deserves to be quoted at length:

"She didn't know what she was doing, likely."

"She was hysterical from the strain."

"I passed out at a funeral myself, one time before I was married."

Ruth McQueen put her arm around me and asked if I would like an aspirin. (p. 62)

Instead of receiving "the gift of wings" (p. 61), Del is ushered to a couch, blanketed, surrounded by coddling aunts, and given cake and tea. The motives behind Del's behavior and her own desperate needs at this fragile time are belied by the return of precedence to her mother's actions. Del is left on the couch and her aunts are free to move on.

As the funeral commences, Del is sickened by the cocoon her relatives have spun around her, burdened by the density of a space she noted was "full of people pressed together, melted together like blunt old crayons, warm, acquiescent, singing. And I was in the middle of them, in spite of being shut up here by myself" (p. 62). Even if she might become etched into her community's memory for the biting incident with Mary Agnes, "they would not put me outside. No. I would be the highly strung, erratic, badly brought up member of the family, which is a different thing altogether"(p. 62).

If we were told Del's story in another form, we might not dwell too long on it. We might note the pouty girl on the couch, chalk her behavior up to textbook adolescent aggression, and then promptly walk by her. Munro's narrative prevents our easy dismissal. Left to her own for a moment on the couch, Del becomes suspended in dread:

The nearest thing to this that I had ever known before was the feeling I got when I was being tickled beyond endurance—the horrible, voluptuous feeling of exposure, of impotence, self-betrayal. And shame went spreading out from me all through the house, covered everybody, even Mary Agnes, even Uncle Craig in his present disposable, vacated condition. To be made of flesh was humiliation. I was caught in a vision—incommunicable, of confusion and obscenity—of helplessness, which was revealed as the most obscene thing there could be. (pp. 63-64)

In my course, we read this passage in relation to Anna Freud's theory of adolescence; her theory helped us to understand how the needs of others to be protected in the family cocoon nearly suffocate Del at time in her life when she is trying to find her own understanding of reality—her own separate identity. Her complete lack of separateness, her immersion in the undifferentiated familial matrix results in violence, withdrawal, and momentary despair.

There are many other insightful, heavy passages in these otherwise bright and forceful narratives of Del Jordan's self-development; students seemed to linger over them and they added some weight to our discussions. The student who did a presentation on this story said that she was compelled to read the whole book and noted that, because all the stories are told from Del's perspective, she began to feel close to her and found this passage difficult to move beyond as she read it. We discussed why as a class: what does it mean, I asked, to be held out to Del's suffering when the adults in the text are not? What are the consequences of being left with Del, while everyone else is at the funeral, both physically and emotionally separate from Del's suffering?

In *Narrative Ethics*, Adam Newton (1995) writes that oftentimes, literature "conflate[s] authorial and narrative audiences and call[s] for performative acts from readers, in spite of ontological and epistemic borders between fiction and reality" (p. 22). He notes that "one faces a text as one might face a person, having to confront the claims raised by that very immediacy, an immediacy of contact, not of meaning" (p. 11). We might say that there is an immediacy of the reader's contact with Del here that exacts its ethical claims on the reader—an immediacy grounded in our affective response, preceding our interpretation, and indeed easily lost *through* our interpretation. Any acknowledgment of Del's suffering obviously will not *help* Munro's fictional character; but it is the implication in her suffering, the proximity to it, that according to Adam Newton, offers an opportunity for a transformative reading experience.

It may be that literature is an ideal way to stimulate what has been described in the field of adult education as transformative learning: learning that effects a change in the structure of our assumptions through which we

understand our experiences (Mezirow, 1997, p. 5). In their own research on the epistemology of transformative learning, Elizabeth Kasl and Lyle Yorks (2002) bring to the forefront the work of John Heron (1992, 1996a, 1996b), which theorizes the role of affect in learning. In his work on *Feeling and Personhood* (1992), Heron outlines four important ways of knowing. An *experiential* way of knowing, which taps into the affective and imaginative parts of our psyche, is manifest when we "meet and feel the presence of some energy, entity, person, place, process or thing" (Kasl & Yorks, 2002, p. 2). *Presentation* knowing, which taps into the imaginative and the conceptual parts of our psyche, is manifest when we grasp the significance or patterns and deviations as expressed in many art forms, including musical and verbal. *Propositional* knowing, which taps into the conceptual and practical parts of the psyche, is expressed in intellectual statements, both verbal and numeric and "organized in ways that do not infringe the rules of logic and evidence" (p. 2). Lastly, *practical* knowing, which taps into the affective and the practical parts of the psyche, is evident in knowing how to practice a skill (p. 2).

The four ways of knowing, developed by Heron and outlined by Kasl and Yorks, are overlapping and complex, functioning as a sort of cycle: a felt experience leads to an intuitive presentation, which leads to a propositional expression and, eventually, to practical action (p. 2). To fully encounter Del Jordan, as she bites her cousin's arm and is overwhelmed with dread after she is banished to the couch, the affective and imaginative parts of our psyche must be fully at work. Then we feel what Heron refers to as "the presence of some energy" and are left to make sense of it. This is difficult work; as Newton (1995) says, this encounter is an "immediacy of contact, not of meaning" (p. 11); it is akin to Heron's "felt experience," which may open the reader to the psychical unruliness of the stage of life Del is in, which we are so often wont to make generalizations about. It would seem that Del's relatives come to know and deal with her from the other direction: they interpret her actions at the funeral all on their own, without pausing a moment with her, and their urge for reparation and problem solving results in a cup of tea, a blanket and a veritable "time-out" session for Del.

I'm not sure many educators would contest the allusion Kasl and Yorks make to the cultural bias, in Western education systems, towards the last two ways of knowing, which are centered on cognitive skills and overlook what they see as the primacy of affect and the phenomenology of "felt experience" (p. 3). I'll note, also, that not all students were desirous or interested in affective connections; some enthusiastically adhered to the problem-solving approach to adolescence that was so prevalent throughout the semester and an (understandable) desire to delineate a clear conceptualization of this life stage; a few others displayed bored body language and wrote cursory journal entries for Munro's short story, effectively detaching themselves from the uncertainty and contention over its meaning, or the difficulty of giving form to what one student

described as the “heaviness of reading it.”

To my mind, this inclination towards the cognitive is not necessarily innate. The humanities themselves are not exempt from cultural biases; we have witnessed in the twentieth century a turn towards a cognitive, rather than an affective, appreciation of the arts, which is perhaps most pithily articulated in Beardsley and Wimsatt's (1954) coinage of "The Affective Fallacy," a term referring to the putative problem of using emotional or personal response as a yardstick for the measurement of a literary text's worth. In his commentary, "What is Literature Now?" Jonathan Culler (2007) provides an overview of a number of theorists, such as Terry Cochran, Jan Swearingen and Tzvetan Todorov, who bemoan the omnipresence of critical approaches to literature that distance students from moral and affective concerns. Todorov, Culler notes, mourns the loss of focus on the human condition in the wake of structuralism and formalism and even deconstruction: approaches to literature that eschew reader-response in favor of the analysis of a text's literary techniques (p. 232).

While Susan Keen (2007) is skeptical of touting all literary texts as ready vehicles for moral education, and is quick to note that we can't predict the ways in which literature will be taken up, she explores certain genres, periods, and movements in the history of literary activity that are more conducive to the immersion of the reader in the reading experience, allowing emotion to coexist with cognition. I wondered, as I read students' journal responses, if in an interdisciplinary or social science class, which is a bit more freed from inclinations towards literary criticism, more avenues are opened up for exploring the “felt experience” of a life stage. Keen argues that, at times, “the very fictionality of novels predisposes readers to empathize with characters, since a fiction known to be ‘made up’ does not activate suspicion and wariness as an apparently ‘real’ appeal for assistance may do” (p. 4). She then concludes that escapism from obligation paradoxically allows “moral affects, such as sympathy, outrage, pity, righteous indignation, and (not to be underestimated) shared joy and satisfaction” (p. 4). Following this logic, it may be that the positive responses to *Freaks and Geeks* and *Lives of Girls and Women* might be partly due to the context of their inclusion in the curriculum. I had turned to *Freaks and Geeks* as a “reprieve” from presentations. I did not ask students to comment on the form or structure of these texts; they were meant to watch and respond in their journals, however they saw fit. I will not make the claim here that this exercise will be so successful the next time around, but the discussion and journal responses I received surely implied that, for some of these students, thinking was made anew in this case.

After the seminar on *Lives of Girls and Women*, one student wrote in her journal reflection that teachers seem to be concerned mostly with the intellectual development of their students; psychically speaking, to summarize her, teachers are mostly concerned with extreme social problems, such as bullying. “Really though,” she wrote, “maybe everyday living is extreme for

some teens. I know it was for me." This stood out as a poignant remark and, with the students permission, I brought this comment to the students' attention. This led to a discussion about how much we might miss if we only refer to milestones or normative markers of adolescent experience as entry points for our discussion. For instance, if we summarized "Heirs of the Living Body" as, simply, an adolescent's first encounter with death, we would miss out on the deeper issues that really trouble Del in this chapter: her enduring inability to successfully relay her experiences and feelings to the adults in her lives, and to make her singularity known to them. These are not moments that are easily captured by the catchy pop tunes of prime time drama; these moments, instead, signify an angst of the everyday, of sorts, which some students openly related to.

Although we cannot predict how narratives such as "Heirs of the Living Body" and *Freaks and Geeks* will be taken up, they certainly increase the possibility for a real responsiveness to the other. According to Derek Attridge (1999), responsiveness to the other involves something like responsibility because the other (here, "the adolescent" in all its forms) "comes into existence only when it is affirmed, welcomed, trusted, nurtured Furthermore, in responsibility I respond with much more than my cognitive faculties: my emotional and sometimes my physical self are also at stake" (p. 28). In the anonymous student evaluations that came at the end of the course, one student noted that "Del stayed with me for the rest of the course and that affected how I responded to pretty much everything else we talked about. She's what I'll remember." While this student did not, and cannot, speak for everyone, to my mind, Del's presence—the presence of an fictional adolescent with a singularity that problematizes the 'theoretical' adolescent—made us (though not always, and not everyone) more responsible with our discussions of adolescent realities.

Narratives such as *Freaks and Geeks* and "Heirs of the Living Body" are not the "real" story of adolescence. They are also partial tellings. But they did humanize and add complexity to our discussions. They helped the students sit a bit longer with the possible experiences and atmospheres of adolescence before jumping into conversations about what to do with adolescents—as was their wont in the beginning of the course.

References

- Abel, E., Hirsch, M., & Langland, E. (1983). *The voyage in: Fictions of female development*. Hanover, NH: University Press of New England.
- Apatow, J. (Executive Producer). (1999–2000). *Freaks and geeks* [Television series]. New York: NBC.
- Attridge, D. (1999). Innovation, literature, ethics: Relating to the other. *PMLA*, 114 (1), 20–31.
- Beardsley, M., & Wimsatt, W. K. (1954). *The verbal icon: Studies in the meaning of poetry*. Lexington: University of Kentucky Press.

- Bruns, G. (1999). *Tragic thoughts at the end of philosophy: Language, literature and ethical theory*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Buckley, J. H. (1974). *Season of youth: The bildungsroman from Dickens to Golding*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Culler, J. (2007). Commentary: What is literature now? *New Literary History* 38(1), 229–237.
- D'Eramo, M. (2003). Fleeting youth: Speaking of a category. In F. Bonami (Ed.), *The fourth sex: Adolescent extremes* (pp. 181–185). Milan: Charta.
- DeYoung, D. (1977). Come sail away. On *The grand illusion*. [Record]. New York: A & M Records.
- Dickens, C. (1860/2008). *Great expectations*. London: Penguin.
- Erikson, E. H. (1968). *Identity, youth and crisis*. New York: Norton.
- Flaubert, G. (1869/2004). *Sentimental education* (R. Baldick & G. Wall, Trans.). London: Penguin.
- Freud, A. (1958). Adolescence. *Psychoanalytic Study of the Child*, 13, 255–278.
- Goethe, J. W. (1989). *The sorrows of young Werther* (M. Hulse, Trans.). London: Penguin. (Original work published 1774)
- Goethe, J. W. (1995). *Wilhelm Meister's apprenticeship: A novel* (E. Blackall, Trans.). In *Goethe: The collected works* (Vol. 9). Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Giordano, P. (2003). Relationships in adolescence. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 29, 257–281.
- Hardy, T. (1895/1998). *Jude the obscure*. London: Penguin.
- Heron, J. (1992). *Feeling and personhood: Psychology in another key*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Heron, J. (1996a). *Cooperative inquiry: Research into the human condition*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Heron, J. (1996b). Helping whole people learn. In D. Boud & N. Miller (Eds.), *Working with experience* (pp. 75–91). London and New York: Routledge.
- Herskovitz, M. (Executive producer). (1994–1995). *My so-called life* [Television series]. Burbank: ABC.
- Kasl, E., & Yorks, L. (2002). An extended epistemology for transformative learning theory and its application through collaborative inquiry. *TC Record Online*. <http://www.tcrecord.org/Content.asp?ContentID=10878>
- Keen, S. (2007). *Empathy and the novel*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lesko, N. (2001). Time matters in adolescence. In *Act your age! A cultural construction of adolescence* (pp. 107–134). New York: Routledge.
- Mezirow, J. (1997). Transformative learning: Theory to practice. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, 74, 5–12.
- Munro, A. (1997). *The lives of girls and women*. Toronto: Penguin. (Orig. published 1971)
- Newton, A. (1995). *Narrative ethics*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Piaget, J., & Inhelder, B. (1958). *The growth of logical thinking from childhood to adolescence*. New York: Basic Books.
- Schwartz, J., & Savage, S. (Executive producers). (2007–). *Gossip girl*. [Television series]. Burbank: CW Television Network.
- Spelling, A. (Executive producer). (1990–2000). *Beverly Hills 90210*. [Television series]. Beverly Hills: Fox Broadcasting.
- Stendhal. (1830/2002). *The red and the black* (R. Gard, Trans.). London: Penguin.
- Young-Bruehl, E. (1996). Adolescence and the aims of hatred. In *The anatomy of prejudices*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Katherine Bell, PhD, is Assistant Professor of English Literature and Contemporary Studies at the Brantford Campus of Wilfrid Laurier University. She has published articles and chapters in the areas of children's literature, young adult literature, education, and narrative ethics. She was also the assistant editor of *Art, Literature and Place: An Ecopoetics Reader* (ed. Rishma Dunlop, 2008). Before her graduate studies, she taught English in an International school in Italy, and in various Canadian high schools.