

An Increasingly Liberal Youth?: Political Ideologies in Young Adult Dystopian Literature

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Abstract

Past research on young adult dystopian literature has focused on the political themes conveyed by these novels but has not attached a specific ideology to the ideas presented in the novels. In this paper, I rectify this situation by using Brian Farmer's definition of "liberal" and "conservative" to analyze three contemporary young adult dystopian novels to determine whether they convey a liberal or conservative ideology to teenagers. I find that the novels all convey liberal principles and beliefs to teenagers when the protagonists rebel against the established conservative governments in order to advance their liberal ideology. I then borrow Condon and Holleque's principle of general self-efficacy to present possible future implications for my research: that these novels may cause young adults to become more involved in the political process and identify with the Democratic party.

Introduction

Twilight is out and *The Hunger Games* is in. Recently, there has been a shift in young adult literature from a focus on paranormal romance novels to dystopia novels. Although you are still likely to see numerous paranormal romances on the shelves of the young adult section of Barnes and Noble, dystopian novels that depict an apocalyptic version of the world we live in are becoming more and more common and popular among teenagers. The recent slate of theatrical adaptations of these young adult dystopian novels and their relative success is a testament to the rising popularity of these novels among teenagers. The theatrical adaptation of *The Hunger Games* made \$408 million at the box office and the novels sold 23.5 million copies in the US alone, spending over 160 weeks on the *New York Times* Bestsellers list (IMDB, 2014; Schutte, 2010).

The new genre of young adult dystopian novels provides an interesting opportunity for scholars to analyze core American values and beliefs. Most of these novels depict a failing government or characters with politically active minds who rebel against their government in order to get justice for the people. While on the surface these novels may seem pure entertainment, scholars such as Melissa Ames have realized that they actually convey deeper meanings after further analysis. Ames (2013) argues that dystopian novels actually reflect the fear-based nature of the American people following the 9/11 tragedy (p. 4).

Other scholars have gone further to claim that young adult dystopian novels may actually endorse certain political ideologies in teenagers. For instance, Michelle Abate claims that children's literature (aimed at pre-teens) conveys overwhelmingly conservative ideologies to children. Although Abate (2011) makes compelling arguments for how children's literature conveys a

conservative ideology, the novels Abate analyzes in her novel are overtly conservative with titles such as *Help Mom! There's Liberals Under My Bed!*, and most of the novels she analyzes do not enjoy as wide of an audience as young adult dystopia novels today (p. 16). I would like to expand on Abate's observation in this article by analyzing more "mainstream" and widely read young adult dystopian novels that are aimed at an older teenage audience who is more likely to be affected by the ideologies conveyed by these novels and take political action.

Young adults have often been considered the least politically active demographic group in America. A 2007 Pew Research Survey found that on a questionnaire of twelve highly publicized political events, those 18-29 years old only answered 5.5 questions correctly. Moreover, a recent survey of 3,000 college students found that "20% claimed they would sell their next vote for an iPod and half said that for one million dollars they would give up their right to vote forever" (Ames, 2013, p. 4). These results show that young adults are becoming disillusioned with the political process and do not view voting or other forms of political behavior as important. This disillusionment is a problem because voting and political engagement are the cornerstones of America's democratic process, and if citizens do not vote or are not knowledgeable on political events, America's democracy may crumble. Fortunately, the recent popularity of young adult dystopian novels that portray characters with high levels of political engagement and activity could prove a turning point in the apathetic nature of teenagers. These novels may convey certain traits and political ideologies that motivate previously apathetic teenagers to become more politically engaged citizens by raising awareness about political issues.

I will begin by examining the existing conversation on young adult dystopian novels and how scholarly analysis of them has changed over time. Then, I will provide a concrete definition for "liberal" and "conservative" adopted from Farmer's book *American Political Ideologies*, as I will be borrowing and using the terms heavily throughout the remainder of the article. Using the novels *The Hunger Games*, *Divergent*, and *The 5th Wave*, I will argue that young adult dystopian novels convey a liberal political ideology to teenagers. Following this analysis, I will elaborate on the principles of general self-efficacy as defined by Condon and Holleque and explain how young adult novels encourage teenagers to develop a higher general self-efficacy, possibly promoting higher levels of political activity (especially within the Democratic Party) in teenagers. Throughout the paper, I will argue that through the characters' rejection of conservative governments, these young adult dystopia novels convey liberal political ideologies to teenagers.

Existing Conversation

Young adult dystopian novels have been around for decades. From *A Wrinkle in Time* to *The Giver* to *The Hunger Games*, these novels have taken teenagers to catastrophic worlds that are eerily close to the world we live in today. Although in all dystopian novels, the underlying theme of an entirely possible apocalyptic world is evident, the ways in which scholars have analyzed these novels have changed greatly over time.

Three scholars who have done extensive research on young adult dystopian novels are Celeste Lempke, Melissia Ames, and Stephen Wolk. Each provides their own unique perspective on the

effects young adult literature has on teenagers. Celeste Lempke, a graduate student at University of Nebraska, comments that the main focus of scholars when analyzing these novels in the past has been on the *topoi* or setting of the novel. As a result of the increased focus of authors on character development, Lempke (2012) concludes that scholars must change the ways they analyze young adult novels and take into account the shifting focus from setting to character development (p. 7). On the other hand, Melissa Ames, a Professor at Eastern Illinois University, argues that young adult dystopia novels reflect the fear-based nature of post-9/11 America using the setting and governmental structure of the novel as opposed to using characters. After 9/11, the government increased government surveillance through the Patriot Act, leaving many citizens with the concern that the government is intruding in their personal lives. Ames (2013) believes that young adult dystopian novels reflect these increased fears of government surveillance and totalitarianism in ways that are appealing to young adults. The popularity of these novels, in Ames's opinion, is a testament to how teenagers are becoming ever more involved and interested in politics (p. 4). Combining Lempke and Ames's approach, Steven Wolk, Professor at Northeastern Illinois University argues that young adult novels can teach teenagers important principles of social responsibility such as multiculturalism, self-identity, and skepticism of the government through both characters and setting. Wolk (2009) believes young adult novels are instrumental agents of education since they teach principles of social responsibility to teenagers and make them better-informed citizens (p. 665).

While extensive research has been done on the social and political messages conveyed to teenagers through young adult novels, little research has been done that attributes a specific political ideology to popular young adult novels aimed at teenagers or argues that young adult novels can increase political behavior in teenagers. In this paper, I will expand past research on young adult dystopian novels in two ways. First, using Farmer's text as a model, I will establish concrete definitions of "liberal" and "conservative" in order to analyze three popular young adult dystopian novels for instances where a certain political ideology is reflected. Then, using Condon and Holleque's principles of general self-efficacy, I will present the future implications of my research that young adult novels may increase levels of political engagement in teenagers and cause them to identify more heavily with the Democratic party.

Theoretical Approach

Political Ideologies

In his book *American Political Ideologies*, Brian Farmer, a Professor of Social Sciences at Amarillo College, explains the political beliefs of each major political ideology present in contemporary American society. Farmer uses anecdotes from major intellectual leaders of each ideology as well as historical trends of the major groups associated with each ideology in order to structure his definition of each ideological group. For example, when determining the major beliefs of conservatives, Farmer looks at the history of the Republican Party and its stance on major issues. For the purposes of this research paper, I will focus on the two most prevalent political ideologies in American society: contemporary liberalism and conservatism. I will also focus on their social rather than fiscal dimensions since teenagers are more likely to be concerned with social issues. In a report issued by Reason Foundation, a public policy think tank, the authors demonstrate how Millennials are becoming increasingly concerned with social rather than fiscal issues. For example,

in the report, fiscal issues such as taxes are not ranked in Millennial's top concerns while issues such as equal rights and civil liberties were ranked among Millennial's top concerns (Reason Foundation, 2014, p. 78). Therefore, I will focus on social rather than fiscal concerns in my analysis, as these issues are more salient among teenagers.

Contemporary liberalism as defined by Farmer has three major principles: a focus on government regulation of markets, increased personal liberties and decreased government surveillance, and a view that every person is intrinsically equal and should be treated as such (Farmer, 2006, p. 99-124).

Conservatism as defined by Farmer also has three main principles: the belief that the government should only be involved in the surveillance and security of the country, resistance to social change, and a skepticism towards alleviating inequality as this process only perpetuates laziness (Farmer, 2006, p. 38-63).

I will borrow Farmer's definitions of "liberal" and "conservative" as a lens through which to analyze three young adult dystopia novels for ideological messages.

Method and Materials

Using Farmer's definition of "liberal" and "conservative," I will analyze three contemporary young adult dystopia novels for instances where the characters or events in the novel seem to endorse a specific political ideology. I will specifically focus on the governmental or societal structure of the country within the novels and the protagonists' reactions to these societal structures. If the characters' reactions to the governmental or societal structure reflect Farmer's principles of liberalism, I will conclude that the novel advocates a liberal ideology while if they adhere to his principles of conservatism, I will determine that the novel advocates a conservative ideology. The novels I will be analyzing are *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins, *Divergent* by Veronica Roth, and *The 5th Wave* by Rick Yancey. I chose to analyze these novels since they each are considered popular young adult dystopia novels (each spent weeks on the *New York Times* Bestsellers List) and because they are all from different times in the 21st Century (2008, 2010, and 2013, respectively), which controls for the fact that political events in one year could have made these novels more liberal or conservative. A brief summary of each novel ensues.

The Hunger Games follows a teenage girl, Katniss Everdeen, who competes in an event called the Hunger Games where two members from each of the twelve districts are chosen to fight to the death for glory and as a reminder to the districts to not rebel against the Capital. While competing in the Games, Katniss begins to view the Capital for what it really is: a totalitarian, militaristic regime that oppresses the masses for the gain of a few wealthy people.

Divergent follows Beatrice Prior, a teenage girl who lives in a society where every citizen is forced to choose a faction or group of people to live with when they turn sixteen. Tris is categorized as a Divergent, or a person who does not fit in one single faction but has an aptitude for all of the five factions. After joining a faction and trying to hide her divergence, Tris realizes that divergence is more dangerous than she ever knew, as those within the factions want to exterminate divergence in order to execute a plot to overthrow the government.

The 5th Wave depicts a post-apocalyptic world where aliens have taken out most of the human population in four waves of attacks. The novel follows Cassie Sullivan as she tries to find her missing younger brother before the 5th Wave comes upon them. Along the way, Cassie realizes that the military and those protecting the few remaining citizens may not be as trustworthy as they once seemed.

Analysis

The Hunger Games

The Hunger Games is one example of a contemporary young adult dystopian novel that advocates a liberal political ideology. By focusing on the societal structure of the country Panem and Katniss's reactions to this societal structure, one is able to decipher underlying political messages in the novel *The Hunger Games*. Specifically, *The Hunger Games* has an underlying liberal ideology since it advocates increased personal liberties and decreased governmental surveillance and a view that every person is intrinsically equal and should be treated as such.

To start, *The Hunger Games* advocates increased personal liberties and decreased surveillance through Katniss's reaction to the phenomenon of the Hunger Games. From early on in the novel, Katniss views the Hunger Games as an agent for President Snow's totalitarian control over the districts. While watching the annual message that is played before the choosing ceremony, Katniss remarks, "taking the kids from our districts, forcing them to kill one another- this is the Capitol's way of reminding us how totally we are at their mercy" (Collins, 2008, p. 18). The Capitol exerts complete control over the citizens, forcing them to take part in the Hunger Games as punishment for a past rebellion. The citizens of the districts have no civil liberties since they have no choice in participating in the games. Even the very young such as Katniss's 12-year-old sister are not exempt from the Games, as Katniss acknowledges before the choosing ceremony: "I protect Prim in every way I can, but I'm powerless against the reaping" (Collins, 2008, p. 15). By demonstrating how the citizens have no control over their participation in the Hunger Games and the ruthless motives behind the Games, Collins shows the dangers of decreased civil liberties. With decreased civil liberties comes oppression from the government and an authoritarian, totalitarian regime that has control over your every action.

Furthermore, the novel *The Hunger Games* also exhibits another of Farmer's traits of a liberal ideology: a view that everyone is intrinsically equal and should be treated as such. There is devastating income disparity between the districts and the Capitol. When describing her District, District 12, Katniss states, starvation's not an uncommon fate in District 12. Who hasn't seen the victims? Older people who can't work. Children from a family with too many to feed. Those injured in the mines. And one day, you come upon them sitting motionless against a wall or lying in the Meadow, you hear the wails from a house, and the Peacekeepers are called in to retrieve the body (Collins, 2008, p. 28).

Contrast this depiction of District 12 with the depiction of the Capitol: [T]he cameras haven't lied about its grandeur. If anything, they have not quite captured the extravagance of the glistening buildings in a rainbow of hues that tower into the air, the shiny cars that roll down the wide paved

streets, the oddly dressed people with bizarre hair and painted faces who have never missed a meal (Collins, 2008, p. 59).

District 12 is depicted as a bleak place riddled with the bodies of starving children, while the Capitol is depicted as a colorful place where the citizens live in excess, never in want of anything. This contrast of images reveals the dangers of a society that does not treat all citizens equally. While residents of the Capitol do not need to participate in the Hunger Games and receive all of their needs from the districts, members of the districts must participate in the Games and create all of the goods that go to the Capitol while none of it comes back to them. Residents of the districts often even have to enter their names into the Hunger Games multiple times in order to receive more food and feed their starving families. Through this depiction of the results of treating different members of the population in different ways, Collins reinforces the liberal idea that the government should treat all citizens equally so that they do not live in poverty and starvation as they live under the conservative government of the Capitol.

Divergent

The novel *Divergent*, by Veronica Roth, is another example of a young adult dystopian novel that advocates a liberal ideology. Tris's reaction to the societal structure of Chicago in the novel aligns with liberal beliefs in increased personal liberties and decreased surveillance and the belief that every citizen is intrinsically equal.

To begin with, Tris's reaction to the societal structure of her country reveals the dangers of decreased personal liberties and increased government surveillance. Tris's city is organized into factions, each of which embodies a certain trait that is essential to the survival of their society. A government leader describes the structure of the city before the Choosing ceremony, which is when 16 year olds decide which faction they want to belong to:

[D]ecades ago our ancestors realized that it is not political ideology, religious belief, race, or nationalism that is to blame for a warring world. Rather, they determined that it was the fault of human personality—of humankind's inclination toward evil, in whatever form that is. They divided into factions that sought to eradicate those qualities they believed responsible for the world's disarray (Roth, 2011, p. 42).

The attempt to eradicate “destructive” emotions from people's minds and fit them into one faction that endorses a specific emotion is an extreme deprivation of liberty on the government's part, which is a conservative belief since conservatives believe that liberty should be deprived in order to ensure the safety of the public. On her aptitude test, which determines what faction a person fits into, Tris is declared as Divergent, which means that she fits into more than one faction. However, the government forces her to pick one faction to fit into and hide her divergence from the rest of the world. The motto “faction before blood” is a guiding principle in Tris's society (Roth, 2011, p. 43). By forcing Tris to fit in with one faction, the government stifles Tris's individuality and causes her many future problems when she feels like she does not fit into any faction. Through Tris's response to the faction system, Roth advocates a liberal ideology since she describes the problems associated with depriving civil liberties and forcing a person to fit into a preconceived societal structure.

Moreover, *Divergent* also supports a liberal ideology since the novel advocates the equal treatment of everyone by the government. In Tris's city, the factions create an inseparable divide and an insurmountable tension among factions. Each faction has a different identity and a different set of rules they live by. Factions often have resentments towards members of other factions. For example, even after Tris switches factions to Dauntless, she experiences exclusion and teasing from other factions. When she takes off her jacket, another initiate remarks, "Ooh. *Scandalous!* A Stiff's flashing some skin!" (Roth, 2011, p. 56). "Stiff" is slang for a member of Abnegation, Tris's previous faction which values selflessness and modesty. Even after switching factions, Tris is still treated with disrespect from members of her new faction, representing how past perceptions of people in opposing factions never die. As a result, people are never able to fully accept each other and tensions between factions ensue. The factions Erudite and Abnegation have a long lasting tension between them, which eventually leads to all out war. A report written in a Erudite newspaper states, "perhaps the answer is that we have entrusted our city to a group of proselytizing tyrants [Abnegation] who do not know how to lead us out of poverty and into prosperity" (Roth, 2011, p.243-244). This report sparks increased tensions between Erudite and Abnegation, eventually leading to war between the two factions. Through her depiction of the effects of treating different members of society in different ways, Roth advocates a principle of the liberal ideology that everyone (and in this case every faction) should be treated equally in order to ensure that insurmountable tensions between groups do not arise and affect the effectiveness of the government.

The 5th Wave

The novel *The 5th Wave* is yet another example of a modern young adult dystopia novel that advances a liberal agenda. Through analysis of the protagonists Cassis Sullivan, Ben Parish, and Sam Sullivan and their treatment by the military, one is able to discern the underlying liberal ideology of the novel.

To begin, in *The 5th Wave*, the protagonists who serve in the military are subject to dehumanizing violations of personal liberties. For example, upon entering the military, the commander tells Ben, "I will teach you to love death. I will empty you of grief and guilt and self-pity and fill you up with hate and cunning and the spirit of vengeance" (Yancey, 2013, p. 131). The next time we hear from Ben, he asserts, "Ben Parish is dead" and that "Zombie" (his nickname in the military) has replaced him (Yancey, 2013, p. 213). Through the dehumanization of Ben after he joins the military, Yancey conveys a cautionary message to teenagers about the negative effects too much government control can have on a person's character. Yancey's depiction of the problems associated with joining the military illustrate a common belief in liberal ideology: that one should never be deprived of civil liberties because of the damaging effect to a person's humanity.

Yancey also comments on the dangers of increased government (or in this case military) surveillance. In the novel, the government has failed after an alien invasion, causing the military to take over the control of the people. However, toward the end of the novel, the military is revealed to be aliens with the conscripted human soldiers killing humans when they thought they were killing aliens. Cassie learns that she cannot trust the military and thus the government because they are actually aliens intent on exterminating the human population. Therefore, through Cassie's rebellion against the conservative government focused on surveillance, Yancey illustrates another

core belief of the liberal ideology: that the government cannot be trusted with increased surveillance over citizens.

In *The 5th Wave*, Yancey also advocates a liberal ideology through his advocacy of the belief that every person should be treated equally. In the novel Cassie meets a boy named Evan who helps her find her younger brother, Sam. However, it is later revealed that Evan is actually an alien. Cassie comes to the realization that although aliens come from a different planet, they still should be treated the same way as humans because they live in a human body and did not know they were aliens until the invasion began. When Cassie realizes that Evan is an alien, she begins to understand that he has a sense of humanity and should be treated as one, stating, “and then there are real human tears in his real human eyes . . . I am humanity but who is Evan Walker? Human and Other. Both and Neither” (Yancey, 2013, p. 372). Through Cassie’s acceptance that Evan is an alien but should not be treated differently from a human, Yancey plants the liberal idea that everyone is intrinsically equal and should be treated as such in teenagers’ minds.

Future Implications for the Political Process

In Meghan Condon and Matthew Holleque’s article “Entering Politics: General Self-Efficacy and Voting Behavior Among Young People,” Condon, a Professor at Loyola University Chicago and Holleque, an independent researcher, argue that higher levels of general self-efficacy in teenagers influence them to engage in political behaviors such as voting. General self-efficacy is defined as one’s “feelings of mastery and control of oneself and the environment, nurtured in childhood and reinforced (or inhibited) by society” (Condon and Holleque, 2013, p.168). In other words, general self-efficacy is the feeling that a person has control over his or her own life. Psychologists have found that when people have less experience in a situation, they rely on their general self-efficacy levels for support and motivation. Since teenagers do not have much experience with politics and voting, they are more likely to rely on their own feelings of general self-efficacy when deciding whether or not to participate in politics. Condon and Holleque found that higher political engagement (measured in this case through voting) is correlated to higher levels of general self-efficacy. Therefore, when teenagers feel like they have more control over their lives and feel like they have higher levels of self-confidence, they are more likely to engage in political behavior.

To apply Condon and Holleque’s theory to young adult novels, young adult dystopian literature has strong protagonists who start out with little control over their lives but progress through the novel to gain higher levels of control and, thus, higher levels of general self-efficacy. Protagonists of these novels encourage the development of higher levels of general self-efficacy in teenagers by providing models for development that teenagers can follow. When teenagers read about another teenager like themselves who can create positive change in the world, they see that teenagers can make a difference in the world. This perceived sense of belonging in turn might increase their general self-efficacy because they feel like they can have more control over their lives like the protagonists of these dystopian novels. Therefore, by modeling that teenagers can have higher levels of general self-efficacy, young adult dystopian novels encourage teenagers to have higher general self-efficacy, and in turn, engage more heavily in the political process.

This concept is significant because in my analysis of young adult dystopian novels, I found that these novels promote a liberal ideology in young teenagers. Since these novels promote higher

levels of general self-efficacy and liberal ideologies, contemporary young adult dystopian novels may cause a greater identification of teenagers with the Democratic Party.

Conclusion

Through analysis of three contemporary young adult novels, I have revealed some of the hidden liberal ideological messages these novels convey to teenagers. These findings are significant for two reasons. First, the tendency of these novels to endorse a certain political ideology may cause teenagers to become more involved in the political process. In an era where the teenage electorate is becoming increasingly disenfranchised with the political process, it is important that their voice is heard so that their opinions are represented in the government. These novels might increase political behavior in young adults since they feature role models that make a difference in the political process and have high levels of general self-efficacy. These characters show teenagers that they too can make a difference in the political process, increasing teenagers' feelings of general self-efficacy and participation in the political process. Second, the liberal ideology presented by young adult dystopia novels may cause teenagers to identify more strongly with the Democratic Party, which endorses a liberal ideology. A recent Pew Research Center study on voting patterns among Millennials in the 2012 election found that, "half of Millennials (50%) think of themselves as Democrats or Democratic-leaning independents while just 36% affiliate with or lean toward the GOP" continuing the widespread trend for teenagers to identify with the Democratic party (2011). The tendency for young adult dystopian novels that are becoming increasingly popular among Millennials to advocate liberal principles may hasten the process by which young adults identify with the Democratic Party.

Further research on the topic could be done analyzing the political ideologies conveyed by different young adult dystopian novels that have become popular among teenagers in recent years to determine if more of these novels convey a liberal ideology or if there are some that advocate a conservative ideology. After analyzing the past three years of young adult novels on the *New York Times* Bestsellers list for the month of November, some young adult dystopia novels I have found that could be analyzed for conveying a conservative ideology would be *The Young Elites*, *Steelheart*, *The Eye of Minds*, *Every Day*, *Never Fade*, *Legend*, *Endgame: The Calling*, and *Atlantia*. Further in-depth analysis would need to be done to determine if these novels are conservative in nature. Furthermore, since I only analyzed the social dimension of political ideologies, further research would have to be done on the fiscal dimension of political ideologies and whether or not these novels represent a fiscally liberal as well as socially liberal political ideology.

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