Young Adult Literature in an Age with Less Reader

Okuma Oranının Azaldığı Bir Çağda Genç Yetişkin Edebiyatı

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Abstract

Teenagers' reading habits are greatly impacted by the changing global environment, as multiple entertainment mediums and technologies compete for their attention. Despite the short- and long-term advantages associated with reading books in young individuals, their attention is increasingly fragmented due to the proliferation of diverse media platforms and entertainment alternatives. Nevertheless, when young people are exposed to more instantly satisfying types of entertainment, it might be difficult to encourage reading in them. Young Adult Literature (YAL) has a lot of potential to help with this problem, though. YAL has the ability to successfully pique young readers' interest with its gripping stories, likable characters, and topics that speak to their problems and experiences. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to give a brief synopsis of YAL's past and present.

Keywords: Young adult literature, children's Literature, English Language and Literature, youth

Öz

Değişen dünya düzeni gençlerin okuma alışkanlıklarını da oldukça etkilemiş ve okuma oranlarının azalmasına sebep olmuştur. Her ne kadar, kitap okumanın uzun vadede gençlere sağlayacağı olumlu dönütler ortada olsa da, çoklu medya teknolojilerinin ve çeşitli eğlence ortamlarının cazibesi onların dikkatlerini büyük ölçüde çalmaktadır. Bu sebeple bu çalışmanın amacı, gençleri kitap okumaya özendirme ihtimaline sahip bir alternatif olarak Genç Yetişkin Edebiyatı (GYE) türünü incelemektir. Genç Yetişkin Edebiyatı, etkileyici hikâyeleri, sevilen karakterleri ve genç okuyucuların sorunlarına ve deneyimlerine hitap eden konularıyla ilgiyi başarılı bir şekilde çekebilme potansiyeline sahiptir. Çalışmada Genç Yetişkin Edebiyatı'nın kısa bir hatihi ve türdeki mevcut tartışmalar ele alınmıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Genç yetişkin edebiyatı, çocuk edebiyatı, İngiliz Dili ve Edebiyatı, gençler

Introduction

The changing world order indeed has a significant impact on the reading habits of young people, as technology and various entertainment devices compete for their attention. Mobile phones and other digital gadgets offer a wide array of activities that trigger the brain's reward system, making them attractive alternatives to reading books. Despite the allure of these modern forms of entertainment, reading books has been proven to yield numerous positive outcomes both in the short and long term. However, instilling a habit of reading books can be challenging for young people, when they are exposed to more immediately satisfying types of entertainment.

On the other hand, there is a great deal of promise for Young Adult Literature (henceforth: YAL) to help with this problem. With its engaging stories, likable characters, and issues that speak to young readers' experiences and worries, YAL is in a unique position to pique their interest. Examining what young adult literature is and why it is relevant in light of contemporary discussions in the field is crucial in this

context. Through an awareness of the distinctive features and advantages of YAL, educators, parents, and legislators may take advantage of its potential to help young people develop a lifetime love of reading. Furthermore, investigating how YAL can support reading and critical thinking abilities can enhance today's youth's educational experiences and better equip them to face the difficulties of a world that is becoming more and more complicated.

Determining boundaries is one of the most significant issues in both children's literature and young adult literature (henceforth YAL). Despite evidence to the contrary (Falconer, 2009, p. 27-28), young adult novels are often believed to be between 70 and 80,000 words long, or the length of an ordinary novel (Belbin, 2011, p. 133). It can be claimed that this genre—written by and for young people—is an outgrowth of American culture. This genre starts to become more well-known in the UK in the late 1970s (Belbin, 2011: 133). Small (in Herz & Gallo, 1996, p. 8-9) provided the following summary of the characteristics of YA novels generally:

•	The protagonist is a teenager.

•	A young person tells the story with the intention of forging a close connection between the writer and the reader.

•	The story is about a problem or concern that may be familiar to young readers.

•	They are often not very long (around 200 pages), with the goal being to capture the reader's interest from the first few pages and entice them to read the remainder.

Young readers are drawn to YAL because, according to Herz and Gallo (1996), they can read the books with ease and find them entertaining. They can learn about human connections and the origins and motivations behind interpersonal bonds by engaging with such information. Similar to this, a lot of young individuals who do not enjoy reading find these works appealing because they cover subjects that pique their curiosity and inspire them to read. As a result, books appropriate for YAL are thought to be a fair substitute for young people who struggle to read the classic novels assigned in literary lessons.

The definition will be simpler if it is known where the boundaries of YAL begin and end. However, there are differing views on what constitutes YAL. According to Nodelman (2008: 97), YAL is a branch of children's literature that primarily caters to young readers but can also contain other forms of adult fiction. Likewise, Zipes (2002: 41) examines YAL as a part of Children's Literature within a unified framework, catering to various age ranges spanning from young children to adolescents. Nevertheless, alternative perspectives exist regarding YAL, which some regard as a distinct subset of Children's Literature possessing unique traits. Within this discourse, a prevalent viewpoint suggests that the age of the protagonist serves as a pivotal criterion distinguishing between YAL, Children's Literature, or works intended for adult audiences (Coats, 2011, p. 322). According to Douglas (2018: 24), YA novels typically focus on individuals aged 14-20, often employing a first-person narrative and exploring the journey from childhood to adulthood. Cart (2013: 10) broadens this age bracket to include up to twenty-five-year-olds, introducing the concept of "New Adult" (19-25 years old), also referred to as the "MTV generation." On the other hand, Trites (2000: 7) takes a controversial stance by categorizing books with themes of sexuality as YAL and those without as belonging to the pre-adolescent category (Children's Literature). While this definition offers some insight, it proves insufficient as it disregards cultures where premarital or adolescent sexual activity is deemed inappropriate. In addition to age considerations, Coats (2011: 322) suggests that literature rewarding virtue and punishing vice falls under pre-adolescent literature, whereas Robert Cormier (*The Chocolate War*, 1974; *I Am the Cheese*, 1977) posits that works questioning moral and social norms, as seen in his novels, qualify as YAL. Given adolescence's contradictory nature, characterized by rebellion against societal norms, this definition appears most plausible. Moreover, as Campbell (2010: 70) contends, YAL delves into existential inquiries such as "Who Am I?" while navigating young individuals' transition into adulthood.

The diverse interpretations of YAL stem partly from the varying definitions of "youth" across cultures and countries. While the United States and the United Kingdom, influential in shaping YAL, share similar socio-economic traits, differences in perceptions of youth still persist. For instance, attitudes toward marriage or alcohol consumption may differ, with UK youth potentially engaging in these aspects earlier than their US counterparts. Furthermore, discussions surrounding YAL extend beyond defining its boundaries; the genre faces numerous criticisms regarding both content and form.

A Brief History of Young Adult Literature (YAL)

Critiques of YAL span various perspectives, ranging from disdain for what some consider mundane and stereotypical content

to negative perceptions arising from controversial subject matter and associated biases (Crowe, 2001 in Bold, 2019, p. 23). Jennings (1956: 226) asserts that YAL often features "contrived, unimportant, and meaningless" content, a sentiment echoed not only by literary critics but also by educators and librarians. In addition, some view YAL as a transitional tool, encouraging young readers to delve into more challenging material (Coats, 2011, p. 316). Research by Hopper (2018) indicates that certain English teachers and school librarians hold a negative stance towards YAL, incorporating it minimally, if at all, into their curricula. The struggle for recognition and legitimacy in YAL mirrors historical challenges faced by Children's Literature since the 18th century. Despite ongoing debates and denials, YAL persists as a distinct genre, shaped by paratextual features. Elements such as the book's launch process, language, design, cover art, critiques, and the identity of those endorsing the book on covers contribute significantly to the genre and identity construction of both the work and its author (Bold, 2019, p. 24).

Literary works aimed specifically at young audiences begins to gain prominence in the mid-twentieth century, with the field solidifying into mainstream publishing during the 1960s and 1970s. The term "Young Adult" is officially coined by the American Library Association in 1966 (Cart, 2010). In the United Kingdom, as interest among young readers shifted away from children's books, librarians began using the concept of "teen fiction" for this genre as early as 1948 (Cart, 2010).

While studies examining the evolution of Young Adult literature in America abound, with notable contributions from scholars like Cart (2010) and Coats (2017), detailed investigations into its development in the United Kingdom are lacking (Bold, 2019, p. 24). Consequently, academic discourse in this area has predominantly been shaped by American discussions on Young Adult literature, influencing British literary criticism in turn.

J. D. Salinger's seminal novel *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951) notably presents readers with a more assertive and perilous teenage perspective, diverging from previous school stories (Hayn et al., 2011). S. E. Hinton's *The Outsiders* (2006), penned at the age of 18 in 1960, directly targets readers in his age group, while Robert Lipsyte's *The Contender* (2018) has marked a significant milestone in the Young Adult genre's quest for independence from Children's Literature (Cart, 2001, p. 96). The advent of authors like Judy Blume, Robert Cormier, and Walter Dean Myers has marked the onset of YAL's initial golden age (Cart, 2016: 34). During this period, a shift towards realism occurs, with works tackling once-taboo subjects such as drugs, sex, and racism. Consequently, the perception of the "Romantic child" associated with Children's Literature fades, along with the expectation of tidy, happy endings (Douglas, 2018, p. 6). Although initially rooted in the fantasy genre prevalent in England, exemplified by works like *Alice in Wonderland* (Carroll, 1865), *The Jungle Book* (Kipling, 2018), *The Wind in the Willows* (Grahame, 2018) *The Hobbit* (Tolkien, 2012), and *Tom's Midnight Garden* (Pearce, 2018) YAL is profoundly influenced by the realistic wave emerging from America. Hollindale (1995: 84) interprets this realism in YAL as a reflection of young people's lives, confronting social experiences and conflicts deemed taboo.

The Outsiders (Hinton, 2006) often regarded as the inaugural example of the "problem novel" subcategory within YAL, dramatically alters both young readers' consumption habits and the writing styles aimed at them. It underscores the existence of a market for books addressing the genuine experiences of youth (Latham, 2007, p. 62). Despite criticisms regarding its emphasis on content over form and occasional concerns that its multicultural structure may overshadow the quality of writing, the "problem novel" genre holds significance for its role in introducing diverse characters onto the literary stage (Egoff, 1980, p. 196). Particularly during a period of heightened racial tensions in England, YAL featuring black Britons emerges as a driving force in mainstream publishing (Sands-O'Connor, 2017, p. 83). Macmillan Topliner publishing, under the guidance of Aidan Chambers, garners attention for its willingness to expand beyond the traditional white, middle-class readership. Chambers argues that books marketed for young people often excludes many potential readers, advocating instead for works that portrays characters from working-class and diverse ethnic backgrounds, aiming to ignite a love of reading among reluctant youth (Pearson, 2016, p. 119). Furthermore, prestigious British awards in Children's Literature, such as the Carnegie Medal, Guardian Children's Fiction Award, and Whitebread Children's (Costa) Book Award, have played pivotal roles in recognizing authors like Philip Pullman, David Almond, Jamila Gavin, Patrick Ness, Kevin Brooks, and Frances Hardinge, who have made significant contributions to YAL's development (Douglas, 2018, p. 4).

In response to the dominance of the "Problem Novel" genre in England, the 1980s observes the emergence of light romance novels in America as a counterpoint (Cart, 2016, p. 42). While these works have faced criticism for accentuating hetero-normative and stereotypical gender roles, they gain immense popularity among young readers, particularly due to their affordable and easily accessible paperback editions. The influence of these series-based novels extends into the YA horror genre and persists into the 1990s. However, YAL has also encountered criticism for potentially compromising the quality of

the fiction genre (Zipes, 2002). As we transition into the twenty-first century, the dominance of realistic or problem novels begins to wane, making room for the rise of science fiction, horror, and fantasy genres exemplified by series like *Harry Potter* (Rowling, 2009), *Twilight* (Meyer, 2022), and *The Hunger Games* (Collins, 2010). These works, especially when accompanied by successful film adaptations, demonstrate the considerable profitability of the YA genre (Cart, 2016). The perception of YAL as a lucrative industry has led to an influx of imitative novels, although in the past decade, there has been a resurgence of interest in realistic fiction, notably spearheaded by American YA writer John Green (Bold, 2019, p. 27).

Nevertheless, the distinction between fantasy and realism in YAL has become increasingly blurred, with recent British works integrating elements from both genres. According to Douglas, blending fantasy and reality in YAL resonates with young adults, particularly because it mirrors the transitional phase of adolescence into adulthood (2018: 8). Much like the liminal phase of young adulthood itself, which exists between childhood and full adulthood, the fusion of reality and fantasy reflects this state of in-betweenness, neither entirely real nor entirely fantastical. This blending extends not only to the content but also to the stylistic methods employed in YAL.

Some critics also characterize YA as books initially intended for a specific demographic (either young or adult) but enjoyed by both young readers and adults. As seen throughout the history of Children's Literature, early examples often involve works originally written for adults being adapted and republished for children, and vice versa. In England Mark Haddon's novel *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (2003) stands out as one of the earliest and most significant instances of this phenomenon, as it is published in dual editions targeting both adults and young readers. Essentially, this genre blurs the lines between children, young adults, and adults, further complicating demographic boundaries. The popularity of YAL has led many adult authors, such as Joyce Carol Oates, Alice Hoffman, James Patterson, and Carl Hiaasen, to explore this genre. Additionally, Lian Hearn's *Tales of the Otori* series, written between 2002 and 2007, finds its place on both adult and YA reading lists in the UK. Wall (1991: 9) delineates three types of address found in such literature. "Single Address" pertains solely to child (young) readers; "Double Address" primarily targets child readers but also extends to adult readers; "Dual Address" addresses both child and adult readers equally. YAL, notably with its dual address feature, has gained widespread popularity. Publishers adeptly appeal to both adult and young readerships simultaneously by varying book covers without altering the book's content. Nonetheless, some critics (Shavit, 2013, p. 90) view this phenomenon as adults exploiting Children's Literature and bemoan the lack of space specifically designated for children. The discourse and criticism regarding the impossibility of Children's Literature, ignited by Rose (1984), persist in a similar vein.

On the other hand, Falconer (2009: 30-31) offers a different perspective, asserting that books function as free cities rather than closed communities. Just as one does not need to be black to read Beloved (Toni Morrison), similarly, one does not need to be a drug addict to read Trainspotting (Irvine Welsh). Books serve as open realms where individuals can freely explore diverse lives, eras, cultures, and realities. Furthermore, YAL and books should not only be perceived as realms crafted by adults for young people and children but also as domains where young adults themselves present narratives to peers and adults alike. Presently, literature intended for and cantered around young individuals can also be authored by young people. For instance, Christopher Paolini pens *Eragon* (2003) at the age of nineteen; Helen Oyeyemi authors *Icarus Girl* (2005) at the age of nineteen; Emma Maree Urquhart creates *Dragon Tamers* (2004) at thirteen, and Robert King crafts *Apple of Doom* (2005) at fifteen. In essence, YAL enables the amplification of young voices, fostering a literary space where their perspectives are heard and valued.

Falconer (2009) argues against attributing the surge in popularity of literary works that appeal to both adult and young readers solely to the Harry Potter series. While acknowledging the impact of series like *Harry Potter* in blurring the distinction between adult and young-adult literature, he highlights numerous other developments contributing to the dissolution of boundaries. In the 1990s, he notes, various elements traditionally associated with childhood, such as "Caterpillar boots, Levis pants, Scooters, PlayStations," became integrated into adult life (Falconer, 2009, p. 32-33). Boundary violations between adults and young adults have extended beyond literature to encompass realms like music, consumption, clothing, and gaming, persisting to this day. While some adults have embraced this period by adopting lifestyles akin to those of young people, aiming to retain a youthful spirit, others have targeted young people as a consumer group, burdening them with unrealistic expectations (Falconer, 2009, p. 37). With the turn of the millennium, a 2008 report highlights that the sale of child-centric products has skyrocketed to the extent that children in England are dubbed "the most materialistic children in the world" (Compass, 2006, p. 19). It reveals that children, exposed to tens of thousands of advertisements annually, are effectively influenced by these marketing messages, shaping their consumption patterns, clothing choices, and leisure

activities. It is noted that children develop affinities for nearly four hundred brands, indicating the extent of their assimilation into consumer culture. Similarly, Zipes contends that children are subject to alarming levels of economic exploitation, with all aspects of their lives susceptible to the hegemony of the capitalist market and elite corporations, effectively turning them into "commercial commodities" (2002: xi). This economic exploitation has been associated with a host of issues, including stress, anxiety, and insecurity among children and young people. In the United Kingdom, several factors (such as family breakdowns, the rise of single-parent households, increased sexual activity among young people, and the highest teenage pregnancy rates in the European Union) contribute to various mental health challenges among young individuals, including depression, eating disorders, behavioural problems, substance abuse, and suicidal tendencies (Falconer, 2009, p. 38). While adults often idealize youth, real young people are left vulnerable to the perils of advertising, grappling with the conflicting societal expectations imposed upon them. Literature serves as a powerful tool in exposing these contradictions, with YAL proving particularly valuable in articulating the challenges faced by young people.

As previously mentioned, American and British YAL maintain their prominence in the field. Kaplan (2007: 53) identifies three primary areas of concentration within YA studies. Firstly, there is a focus on how YAL serves as inspiration and guidance for young people. Teachers, parents, social workers, and youth leaders view YAL as a reflective mirror for young individuals, emphasizing works that address the challenges faced by youth. Studies within this realm also underscore the value of YAL in fostering a reading culture among young people. Readers who find relatable narratives in YAL may tend to develop a positive attitude towards reading, enhance their literacy skills, and mitigate risks such as unemployment, crime, substance abuse, and homelessness. Secondly, studies delve into the utilization of YAL to illuminate the hidden and often intricate experiences of young people, particularly those whose sexual orientations differ. The aim is to shed light on the challenges encountered by youth, providing insights into their diverse experiences. Lastly, research in the third area examines how YAL reflects changing social norms. These studies concentrate on societal expectations placed on young girls, the conflicts faced by young individuals who experience unplanned pregnancies in defiance of social norms, and how literature portrays and addresses these societal issues.

The tendency to position YAL as an alternative for young readers struggling with classic literature or those facing challenges in developing a reading habit is widespread. YA works often feature themes similar to classics, making them favourites in literature courses where students can readily comprehend and relate to the content, which addresses contemporary issues relevant to their lives (Herz & Gallo, 1996, p. 2). Particularly for students with shorter attention spans who may struggle with the depth and complexity of traditional classics, YAL offers a valuable alternative. For instance, themes found in Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations* (2003) reflecting Victorian London, are echoed in the novels of YA authors like Philip Pullman and Edward Irving Wortis (Avi) (Herz & Gallo, 1996, p. 34-37). Similarly, the themes explored in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (2018) find resonance in the works of Robert Cormier, Bruce Brooks, and Chris Crutcher.

Herz and Gallo emphasize that YAL does not aim to replace classics, but rather serves as a bridge to introduce readers to classic literature (1996: 12). They argue that YA works also facilitate the exploration of archetypes proposed by Jung in classical literature. Archetypes such as "Birth/Death/Rebirth, Fall/Expulsion from Heaven, Journey, Trial/Testing, Extinction/Absurdity/Indifference, Family Conflicts/Relationships, Old Wise, Hero, Sacrificing Savior" found in classics, are also present in YA works, facilitating archetype studies in classical literature (Herz & Gallo, 1996, p. 64-70). Additionally, YAL explores universal themes such as "Who Am I?" and "Where do I belong?", as well as addressing various issues including isolation from society or group, coping with adversity, racism and ethnic discrimination, concerns about AIDS, teenage pregnancy, divorce, substance abuse, family conflicts, death and coping with dying, and political inequality.

Conclusion

In summary, YAL which has distinct features from Children's Literature, has gained momentum particularly after the 1950s and has become a widely popular genre with the support of popular culture. In this genre, where realistic "problem" novels have progressed hand in hand with fantasy fiction, works appealing to both adults and young adults have been produced. It also serves as a platform to address youth issues and is sometimes viewed as an alternative or bridge to classics. However, it faces criticism for its limited diversity and representation. Bold's (2018) analysis of YA novels published in the UK between 2006 and 2016 highlights a dominance of authors, particularly white, heterosexual, female writers. The main protagonists in these novels are often depicted as white, heterosexual characters of unspecified ethnicity. The field is largely influenced by Anglo-American authors; with a significant portion of works originating from the United States (white American female authors, constituting 42% of the total, whereas 8% of authors are black, with a notable discrepancy in publication rates

between the UK and the US). Despite assertions about the scarcity of black writers in children's and young adult literature, Bold suggests that the limited representation of black authors is primarily attributed to challenges in securing publishers rather than a lack of interest among black writers (2018: 387). Bold's analysis suggests that black writers, even if they secure publishers, may face pressure to write works that emphasize their ethnic identity and reinforce stereotypes, rather than pursuing their preferred topics. Essentially, they may feel compelled to address issues such as racism, colonialism, and post-colonialism to increase their chances of publication (2018: 387). Additionally, the Carnegie Medal for Children's Literature, established in 1935, has never been awarded to a black writer, sparking criticism for its long history of favouring white writers (Kean, 2017). Furthermore, the best-selling book lists in the United Kingdom are predominantly dominated by white, non-disabled, and heteronormative authors, underscoring the lack of diversity in representation (Bold, 2018, p. 402). Despite initiatives like "We Need Diverse Books," the representation of different races in YAL remains insufficient. This lack of diversity extends beyond race to encompass different gender roles, ethnicities, religions, cultures, and individuals with disabilities.

On the other hand, it is encouraging that YAL has the ability to impact publishing firms and advance diversity. Publishers are starting to realize how important it is to portray a wide range of perspectives and experiences in literature as people seek more inclusive and diverse narratives. Books with characters and tales that represent a range of ethnicities, cultures, genders, sexual orientations, abilities, and backgrounds are becoming more and more commercially viable, and publishing firms are realizing this. More writers from marginalized communities are getting the chance to tell their stories, and audiences are enthusiastically accepting these accounts. Overall, even though there is still work to be done, the publishing industry is changing for the better as a result of the increased awareness of diversity in YAL, creating a literary environment that more accurately captures the complexity of human experiences.

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