

Intimations of Infinity: Young Adult Literature as the Last Bastion of the Sublime

There is a moment, breathless and beautiful, that is common to so many Young Adult novels: a moment of sublimity, when the breadth of the world is vast and unknowable, and all boundaries blur away. It is a moment when a narrator becomes transcendent, a “transparent eyeball,” all feeling, all experience, and no form. It’s the moment in Stephen Chbosky’s *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* when Charlie, Sam and Patrick roar through a tunnel in a pickup truck, Sam standing and screaming triumphantly in the bed, before they burst through the other side to nothing but “lights on buildings and everything that makes you wonder.” “In that moment,” Charlie writes, “I swear we were infinite.”

That feeling of infinity is the feeling of the sublime, particularly the Romantic sublime: a state of overwhelming feeling, beyond pain or pleasure but made up of both, in which the experiencer’s mind tries in vain to “grasp at something towards which it can make approaches but which it is incapable of attaining” (Wordsworth). But what makes the sublime so universal to YA literature? I intend to argue that YA literature is in fact the last bastion of the sublime; it is the natural domain of moments of overwhelming, incomprehensible feeling, because the entire teenage experience is one that is so extraordinarily heightened. This is particularly true of the teenage experience as recollected by adults. Young Adult literature is by its very nature “powerful feelings...recollected in tranquility,” as Wordsworth defined poetry: it is the recollection of what it felt like to be adolescent and, in that adolescence, “infinite,” expressed by an author who is now older and (one hopes) wiser, and able to interpret that incredible hugeness of the world from a place of experience. Through the works of writers like Stephen Chbosky, as well as John Green, David Levithan, Rainbow Rowell, Jandy Nelson and many others, we can witness the process of the Romantic sublime at work in YA literature.

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