

Growing Up: A Universal Journey

Coming-of-Age Stories over Time

By Allie Moss

Coming-of-age stories have been told and passed down practically since the start of civilization and date back to as early as Homer's *Telemachy*—detailing the mythical journey of Telemachus, the titular character, from boyhood to manhood—in the eighth century BCE. Despite their vast history, narratives that describe the shift from childhood to adulthood did not receive a name until the nineteenth century. In 1819, German university lecturer Karl Morgenstern dubbed this type of story the *Bildungsroman*, a German word that translates literally as “education novel,” although its definition has expanded to encompass the entire coming-of-age genre. By 1900, this concept had migrated to the English-speaking mainstream consciousness, and the traditional *Bildungsroman*, which deals with moral growth and definition of the self, found popularity with older children and young adults. Over the course of a little more than a century, these stories morphed into the coming-of-age narratives that are still popular and prevalent today.

Coming of Age in the Early Twentieth Century

Although coming-of-age stories share some commonalities that transcend their publication dates, they are also intrinsically tied to what it meant to “come of age” during the periods in which they were written. Near the turn of the twentieth century, when *Ah, Wilderness!* is set, teenagers were very integrated into family life. Post-Industrial Revolution society enjoyed an increase in leisure time, so children and teenagers had more hours to spend with their friends than in the past. However, teenagers were not seen as a distinct group, and while they did spend time socializing with their peers, the modern concept of “teenage culture” did not exist. In fact, it was only within the later part of the twentieth century that childhood was recognized as a distinct stage of development, and that books and toys were created with the specific purpose of engaging children's imaginations.

Teenagers were not notoriously rebellious in the early twentieth century. On the contrary, they were expected to listen to their parents, and disobedient teens who did not repent and reform (in stories and in real life) were seen as out of the ordinary. Rather than creating independent identities by resisting their parents, teenagers transitioned



Teenage newsboys in New Haven, Connecticut. Photo by Lewis Wickes Hine, 1907. Courtesy Library of Congress.

from childhood to adulthood by striking out on their own. Upper- and middle-class teens often cultivated a sense of self by going away to college, and working-class teens achieved the same result by joining the workforce. It is especially shocking for the characters in *Ab, Wilderness!*, then, when Richard goes out drinking, sneaks out to see his girlfriend, and announces that he may forgo college. While these actions might be dismissed as “normal” teenage behavior in 2015, they were radical for a young adult in 1906.

Coming of Age Later in the Twentieth Century

It wasn't until the 1950s that the teenage years were recognized as a stage of life separate from both childhood and adulthood, and that it was accepted that teenagers had their own unique interests and needs. In the economic boom that followed the Second World War, jobs were readily available for teenagers who wanted them. Meanwhile, postwar technology improved transportation and allowed teenagers greater mobility, and new appliances reduced their household responsibilities. This combination provided teenagers with more free time and more spending power than ever before. For the first time, products—including books, clothes, and music—were marketed specifically to teenagers and were advertised as mechanisms through which teenagers could define their individual identities. Teenagers began to spend more time with their friends in diners and coffee shops where they could listen to music, dance, and socialize without the supervision of their parents. This led to the rise of a uniquely teenage culture that broke away from the traditions and mores of their mothers

and fathers.

It should come as no surprise, then, that the literature written for and about teenagers in the 1950s and the years that followed reflects these cultural changes. Authors began to write books expressly for teenagers, and the genre of young adult (YA) literature was born. Many of the coming-of-age stories and books written in the early years of the YA narrative—J. D. Salinger’s *Catcher in the Rye* (1951), Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960), and S. E. Hinton’s *The Outsiders* (1967), to name a few—are still recognized as quintessential stories about growing up. Over the last half-century, the genre has expanded to include other styles of fiction, and many popular modern YA books (like J. K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series and Suzanne Collins’s *Hunger Games* trilogy) are narratives about children maturing into adulthood against a fantastical or dystopian backdrop. Coming-of-age stories in YA literature have also evolved to deal with grittier themes—for example, a character might cope with a drug-addicted parent or have their first sexual experience—which are quite different subject matters from the moral growth emphasized in the early *Bildungsroman* of the nineteenth century. However, the need for self-definition and personal discovery in coming-of-age stories remains as crucial for Harry Potter in the twenty-first century as it was for Richard Miller in 1906 and for Telemachus in 750 BCE.

Coming of Age in *Ah, Wilderness!*

In *Ah, Wilderness!* Richard’s coming-of-age journey demonstrates the universality of certain aspects of becoming an adult. Richard’s affection for Muriel displays his lingering immaturity—he can’t yet articulate his feelings for her, so he borrows the words of Algernon Charles Swinburne, Omar Khayyám, and other romantic writers. Like many modern teenagers, he indulges in his angst and becomes defensive when his parents treat him like a child. His books serve as his first gateway to adulthood, and Richard begins to define himself by the literature he reads, just as many contemporary teenagers form identities based on the media they consume. Richard’s real transition, though, is born out of his encounter at the bar, where he learns the depth of his compassion for others. By the end of the play, his understanding of the world and his place in it has matured. Richard’s coming-of-age story—his first love, his first drink, his first brush with independence, and the growth that comes from those experiences—captures the timelessness of growing up.

SOURCES David W. Brown, “How Young Adult Fiction Came of Age,” *The Atlantic* (August 1, 2011), <http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2011/08/how-young-adult-fiction-came-of-age/242671/>; Maura Kelly, “Must Every New Coming-of-Age Novel Be ‘the Next Catcher in the Rye?’” *The Atlantic* (June 24, 2013), <http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2013/06/must-every-new-coming-of-age-novel-be-the-next-i-catcher-in-the-rye-i/277047/>; Ashley Strickland, “A Brief History of Young Adult Literature,” *CNN* (April 15, 2015) <http://www.cnn.com/2013/10/15/living/young-adult-fiction-evolution/>; Chris Wiegand, “An American Folk Play: Eugene O’Neill’s *Ah, Wilderness!* At the Young Vic,” *The Guardian* (April 14, 2015), <http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2015/apr/14/eugene-o-neill-ah-wilderness-young-vic-natalie-abrahami>