

**Jessica Allen Hanssen**

## **How I Live Now**

### **The Project of Sustainability in Dystopian Young Adult Fiction**

#### **Abstract**

*It is impossible to ignore the enduring and sweeping popularity of young adult novels (YA) written with a dystopian, or even apocalyptic, outlook. Series such as *The Hunger Games*, *The Maze Runner*, and *Divergent* present dark and boding worlds of amplified terror and societal collapse, and their vulnerable protagonists must answer constant environmental, social, and political challenges, or risk starvation, injury, and various forms of pain and suffering. More frequently than not, the tensions of the dystopian YA universe turn to the natural world, one of sustenance and renewal, for resolution. The continued popularity of dystopian fiction written expressly for young adult readers requires critical examination, as teachers must prepare themselves to deal with the questions raised by these texts. The trend toward the dystopian seems like rather a bleak expression of political and social hopelessness, but it does offer certain insights into what young readers want from the world around them. Much of the appeal of the dystopian comes from imagining not just problems, but how to solve them. The ingenuity and resourcefulness displayed in dystopian YA novels is not only appealing, but becomes a bold and ultimately optimistic statement on the need for environmental and social sustainability. The optimal incorporation of dystopian YA into the English as a foreign language (EFL) curriculum relies on the preparation of instruction as understood by Wolfgang Klafki in a mode and format that feels fresh and encourages student-led engagement, genuine multimodality, and an organic progression from the closed circle of the classroom to the open arena of adult civilization.*

#### **Keywords**

*Dystopian, young-adult fiction, Klafki, sustainability, identity, ecocriticism*

## **Introduction**

It is impossible to ignore the enduring and sweeping popularity of young adult novels (YA) written with a dystopian, or even apocalyptic, outlook. While dystopian plots and settings have featured in novels throughout the 20th century, their resurgence in popularity in recent years, especially within the YA category, is notable. Series such as *The Hunger Games*, *The Maze Runner*, and *Divergent* present dark and boding worlds of amplified terror and societal collapse, and their vulnerable protagonists must answer constant environmental, social, and political challenges, or risk starvation, injury, and various forms of pain and suffering. The genre's popularity, even outside of school, is perhaps connected to the difficult choices that today's young people frequently have to make – or, just as likely, a reaction

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to the lack of choices that young people feel they have: teenaged YA author Alex Campbell perceives a “correlation with the rise in dystopian fiction and social networking”,<sup>1</sup> and author and critic Laura Miller notes a connection between surveillance culture and the continued popularity of the genre,<sup>2</sup> social networking and surveillance culture being two sides of the same coin, a coin that ends up in an aggressor’s piggy bank. Quality YA novels of this type produce in their readers a sense of belonging, fighting a common enemy, and a general sense of catharsis: the critical question becomes how, and why, should this matter in the context of English education.

More frequently than not, the tensions of the contemporary dystopian YA universe turn to the natural world, one of sustenance and renewal, for inspiration and resolution. This is different from the adult dystopia that is popular, for example George Orwell’s 1984 (1949) or Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985), in which their protagonists seek resolution through society. In these novels, Winston and Offred, respectively, do not abandon their homes or their societies, but rather attempt to subvert the existing political and social structures from within. This move is made from a position of adulthood, from being a fully enfranchised part of the society, even when being in sharp disagreement with its rules. The YA protagonist, still hovering between childhood and adulthood, experiences the “flight” aspect of “fight or flight” much more keenly than her adult counterpart, perhaps as an instinctual reaction to stimulæ seen as developmentally threatening, such as direct attack or dwindling resources.

Ecocriticism, which is briefly defined as “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment”<sup>3</sup> has been for some time an important way of understanding the impact of nature through the creation and interpreting of children’s literature: ‘classic children’s literature has long been preoccupied with natural history, ecology, and human-animal interaction’<sup>4</sup> What distinguishes a children’s novel or even a non-dystopian YA novel set in nature, from a dystopian young adult novel is the constant presence of ambiguity, which permeates the dystopian YA setting, plot, and theme like a heavy fog. With the rise of industrialization, and then its stagnation into an information-driven economy, and with population and temperature increases overtaking the Earth’s ability to sustain optimal conditions, it is difficult for young people to conceive of having what their parents or grandparents may have had, even in times of outright war or poverty – the sense of independence that comes from knowing that the earth can and will provide for them when called upon to do so. All of this fear may not be directly stated in contemporary dystopian YA novels, or by their readers, but it is baked into the extreme challenges their protagonists face. An impor-

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1 Alex Campbell, “Why is Dystopian Fiction Still So Popular?” *The Guardian*, 18 November 2014.

2 Laura Miller, “Fresh Hell: What’s Behind the Boom in Dystopian Fiction for Young Readers?” *The New Yorker*, June 14 and 21, 2010.

3 Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm, eds., *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1996), xviii.

4 Sidney Dobrin and Kenneth Kids, eds., *Wild Things: Children’s Culture and Ecocriticism* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2004), 4.

tant distinction in YA dystopian fiction is that the required resources, be they food, shelter, or safety, are to be found in nature, but unlike a child's story, these are not immediate or easily gained, but are often hard-fought and temporary comforts, and the protagonists do not have much time to reflect or process before they have to move on. Growing up is hard enough without having to additionally articulate one's environmental ethics on top of it. The actions YA protagonists take against a dystopian enemy model such an ethics through lived plot rather than stated theme, and are therefore more readily understood and articulated by YA readers, who become literate in the need for sustainability at the same time as they become literate in narrative: through understanding the YA dystopia, these literacies become one and the same. The quiet moments of environmental sanctuary in these texts become significant as spaces for reflection: the oasis of these moments becomes a primary signal of both grief for what was lost, and hope for what might be found.

Contemporary dystopian YA is, on its face, an expression of the fear of dwindling environmental resources and the impact of a changing biosphere, which has distinct ramifications for humanity, and especially for the young teenager caught between childhood and adulthood. Within these novels, there is a much greater narrative at stake, that of the very real threat of existing on a dying planet before ever getting the chance to truly live as an independent person, and fighting for a culture's safety, comfort, and security occur at the same time as fighting for personal acceptance and independence within that culture. Whereas in a typical interpretation of fiction, the "world" is that created within the fiction, the society and its interaction, "ecocriticism expands the notion of the world to include the entire ecosphere."<sup>5</sup> This opens up all kinds of ramifications and ambiguities in the text, and yet also all kinds of possibilities for meaning building. Ecocritic Ursula K. Heise states, in the context of the survival of endangered species, that it is the stories connecting humanity to nonhuman species (both flora and fauna) that "frame our perception...indirectly or indirectly, explain why we care, not just as individuals but as communities or cultures".<sup>6</sup> This is where the function of school as provider of the required interpretative tools becomes relevant; ecocriticism contains an inherent fusion of scientific, literary, and philosophical outlooks that makes it attractive as a teaching perspective, but it has to be approached systematically in order to function effectively and in a long-lasting way.

Wolfgang Klafki attempted to categorize and, in a sense, narrativize classroom instruction through his understanding of how preparation and methodology combine towards creating exemplary classroom experiences, and his ideas on the subject continue to shape the structure of educational practices in Scandinavia, Europe, and beyond.<sup>7</sup> There is, for Klafki, the basic, tangible task at hand that is the lesson and also its more significant func-

5 Glotfeldy and Fromm, xix.

6 Ursula K. Heise, *Imagining Extinction: The Cultural Meanings of Endangered Species* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 5.

7 Wolfgang Klafki, "Didactic Analysis as the Core of Preparation or Instruction" (1958, translated 1963), *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 27, Volume 1 (1995). 13-30. Accessed online: <http://faculty.education.illinois.edu/westbury/Abo/Klafki.html>.

tion as part of a larger, intangible structure. Moments and texts that teenagers perceive as authentic are important for the encouragement of lifelong learning, as it is only when “educational topics of *relevance* to the student’s present and future lives” (my italics) are engaged that they become prepared for assuming their adult role in society, one that requires not only participation but innovation. The careful teacher chooses learning materials and techniques that will not only impart the required lesson, but will motivate learners to seek a higher and more significant purpose, one that may not be as easy to articulate as immediate learning outcomes or skill, but can be accessed autonomously later as *Bildungsgehalt*. If, as Klafki posits, autonomy is part of the basis of achieving *Bildung* through the meeting of the student with the educational material, then a good way of encouraging such independence is to make sure that the educational material itself feels relevant and authentic to the student’s interests in the present time,<sup>8</sup> and while Ingvild Gjerdum Maus here relates this idea to classes in art and design, this sentiment is perhaps even more urgent in the subject of English, where authenticity, autonomy, and sustainability haven’t exactly been desired or encouraged.

Klafki himself recognized this need for consideration of the individual pupil and her lifeworld, and revised his original theory to include increased attention to the pupil and not just on the instructional method and content,<sup>9</sup> what is now familiar as the “didactic triangle between teacher, discipline and student”.<sup>10</sup> When engaging a dystopian YA novel, the reader abandons her own oppressors, and temporarily finds solace and escape in the protagonist’s lifeworld, and learns something about survival that she can perhaps apply, in a less-extreme arena, to her own lifeworld. Much of the appeal of the dystopian comes from imagining not just problems, but how to solve them. The ingenuity and resourcefulness displayed in dystopian YA novels is not only appealing, but becomes a bold and ultimately optimistic statement on the need for environmental and social sustainability.

English as a school subject, particularly when it is a foreign language (EFL) is all too often perceived as a way into other, more important, subjects, rather than a *Bildung* subject all on its own. The very obviously changing nature of the ways in which English is used speaks to the opposition between the need to preserve and protect the tradition of studying English, and also to think carefully about the various directions in which the tradition can evolve, as ways of creating sustainability from within the subject. The continued popularity of dystopian fiction written expressly for young adult readers, in a time when there are so many other attractive and more immediately authentic English-language outlets online, requires critical examination, as teachers must prepare themselves to deal with the moral,

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8 Ingvild Gjerdum Maus, “Developing Holistic Understanding in Design Education for Sustainability,” in eds. Astrid Skjervén and Janne Reitan, *Design for a Sustainable Culture: Perspectives, Practices and Education* (London, Routledge, 2017), 162-63.

9 Wolfgang Klafki, *Dannelsessteori og didaktik – nye studier*, trans. Bjørn Christiansen, (Århus: Forlaget Klim, 2001).

10 Sigmund Ongstad, “The Concept of Lifeworld and Education in Post-Modernity: A Critical Appraisal of Habermas’ Theory of Communicative Action,” in eds. M. Murphy and T. Fleming, *Habermas, Critical Theory and Education* (London, Routledge, 2010), 58.

philosophical, and environmental questions raised by these texts if and when they choose to use them in school. Today's young readers, like the protagonists they admire, also find themselves faced with a constant barrage of societal challenges, and the literature they consume is perhaps a response to feelings of frustration and alienation. In order for the subject to "be absorbed by and fill the young mind while, at the same time, pointing forward to future tasks and opportunities of a mature life,"<sup>11</sup> it must address its learners on their own level, while also showing them the way forward. There is an important balance to be struck between the text and its interpretation, particularly with regard to environmental critique, if the full value of the text is to be realized later.

This paper therefore explores and develops the idea of sustainability in dystopian young adult fiction, with emphasis on engagement with the natural world in YA and a focus on how teachers might choose to use dystopian young adult fiction to engage their students in critical, reflective, and authentic classroom discussion per Klafki's understanding of sound methodology. Some of the research questions being addressed, through an examination of the role of dystopian YA in the English literature classroom, include:

1. How could careful pedagogical methodology, with respect to Klafki's understanding of Bildung and sensitivity to ecocritical perspectives, enable fuller engagement between the YA dystopian text and its readers?
2. What unities exist between the classroom and idea of the ecosystem, or between the YA protagonist and the reader? In what way does the idea of safety or sanctuary in the novels also serve as a metaphor for the exemplary learning experience?
3. What can teachers do to influence the young reader of dystopian YA to encourage a sense of environmental responsibility, hopefulness and societal renewal?

## History and terminology

The following section delineates the development of the YA genre since the 1950s, explores the 21<sup>st</sup> century trend toward the dystopian in YA, with a specific focus on some of its central themes, and introduces the idea of "sustainable development" as relevant within the field of teaching literature in the second-language English classroom.

The YA genre is characterized by its precise ability to address topics that concern the adolescent reader, and "refers to a story that tackles the difficult, and oftentimes adult, issues that arise during an adolescent's journey toward identity."<sup>12</sup> JD Salinger's 1951 *The Catcher in The Rye*, although not written specifically with a teen audience in mind, is often cited as its earliest example. Since the genre's development through the 1960's, popular subjects for exploration, usually in a realistic way (although, notably, not always in a realistic setting) include "changing family patterns, death, ethnic groups, and changing [gender]

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11 Klafki, "Didactic Analysis"

12 Jonathan Stephens, "Young Adult. A Book by Any Other Name...Defining the Genre," *ALAN Review* (Fall 2007): 40-41.

roles” and frequently deal additionally with “taboo” subjects such as “pregnancy, adolescent physical change, birth, and drugs”.<sup>13</sup> The lure of the forbidden attracts young adult readers, and the immediacy of the plot keeps them captivated long enough for them to actually learn something about the world. YA novels present society in sociological terms, as a “symbolic universe”<sup>14</sup> in which conflict arises from whether the protagonist shares the given society’s values, beliefs, and behaviors surrounding those subjects. More often than not, the protagonist is correct to question society, and finds her rightful place in the symbolic universe having gained experience and maturity. Young adult fiction therefore provides relevant insight and understanding to its reader in an immediate and meaningful way,

The world for young adults has changed over the years, and so have the books. While teenagers today are of course concerned with the same coming to age issues such as identity and the Self, themes which were explored by in the late 1960s and 1970s YA “Golden Age,”<sup>15</sup> by writers such as Judy Blume, Paul Zindel, and Robert Cormier, they also face external and unforeseen pressures resulting from increasing globalization and environmental change. Revisiting Stephens’ view on adolescent issues being “oftentimes adult” in nature, YA fiction to a greater extent, now also tackles these in a more literal and direct way than previously. Whereupon the plot and resolution of “classic” YA novels, such as *The Pigman* (1968), *The Chocolate War* (1974), or *Forever* (1975) would have been dependent on the protagonist rebelling against his or her society from within, they would not have depicted environments that were actually stricken by poverty, famine, or economic collapse. The protagonist of a “classic” YA novel is already at the top of Maslov’s pyramid, seeking self-actualization, and not at its bottom, seeking the simple security of food and shelter. They have homes, however complex, and do not need to immediately leave them out of fear or direct threat. And yet, when one looks at the books and series which top the YA charts today, in what many consider to be a “Second Golden Age” of children’s and young adult literature, the idea of leaving home and making one’s way in a hostile and challenging landscape is par for the course. The whole idea of introducing the dystopian element, then, is somewhat Hegelian: every child, in order to become a free citizen, needs to experience the world developing dialectically between opposites.<sup>16</sup> Here, Honneth expands on Hegel’s idea of the meeting of two opposed subjects, which “are compelled to restrict their self-seeking drives as soon as they encounter one another”.<sup>17</sup> If we understand the act of reading as a meeting of the student and the subject, then the encounter with a dystopian YA novel pre-

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13 Maja Pank Mertz, “The New Realism: Traditional Cultural Values in Recent Young-Adult Fiction,” *The Phi Delta Kappan* 60, Volume 2 (October 1978), 101.

14 Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality* (Penguin, Middlesex, 1967), 94-104.

15 Michael Cart, “From Insider to Outsider: The Evolution of Young Adult Literature,” *Voices from the Middle* 9, no. 2, (2001), 96.

16 G.F.W. Hegel, *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences*, Vol. III, trans. William Wallace (Oxford, Oxford UP, 1971), 408.

17 Axel Honneth, “From Desire to Recognition: Hegel’s Grounding of Self-Consciousness,” *The I in We: Studies in the Theory of Recognition*, Trans. Joseph Ganahl, (Cambridge, Polity, 2012), 15.



sents a clear opposition to the world the reader would like to live in, and this natural opposition helps the reader form his or her worldview in an age-and skill-appropriate mode.

A 2013 study by Scholes and Ostenson yielded several common elements in YA dystopian literature of the last 20 years, including pressure to conform, limited or complete lack of individual freedom, and little hope for change.<sup>18</sup> In addition, they point to dystopian YA fiction as frequently sharing common themes, especially “inhumanity and isolation, agency and consciousness, and relationships (romantic and otherwise)” that are particularly relevant to adolescent development. The protagonist and target reading audience for the YA genre are in a position that is unique to human beings – that of being in a developmental state that is between childhood (defenselessness, helplessness) and adulthood (self-sufficiency, responsibility). In the dystopian landscape, young people’s access to moving from childhood to adulthood is threatened by external pressures such as economic, political, or societal forces, and the only way for the protagonist to move from adolescent liminality to adult agency is to leave their oppressors and engage a new society. This movement mimetically represents the developmental step of leaving home and taking care of one’s own needs for food and shelter, and also represents a biological imperative to move from non-reproductivity to reproductivity. Normally, the role of the parent-figure or society would be to provide the tools, skills, and encouragement to make these breaks. Yet, because in a dystopia, an oppressor limited the adolescent protagonist’s agency, the protagonist often lacks the physical and emotional resources required to move forward. It is in nature, then, that the necessary resources are found. Chief among these resources is a sense of safety or sanctuary, from within which further choices can be made. In a utopian situation, children would have no need to leave home, and only do so if and when they felt ready, and the natural world would be a source of joy and delight. In the dystopian world, parents are dead or dying, and it is up to the protagonist to compensate for this loss by independently engaging an as-yet untainted nature for sustenance and security.

The period between childhood and adulthood establishes an entirely new perspective on how young people picture the world and their place in it. Familiar elements such home and family that once were preserved as safe and comfortable become subjects of the strange and unknown. While the motives are diverse, teenagers nonetheless feel the desire to leave, a desire closely related to the wish of establishing identity and autonomy away from the parental home. The spaces the adolescent protagonists enter in these YA novels are characterized by their liminality. The characters are on the search for a safe space, a place they can call home. Terri Doughty discusses the connection between the adolescents’ rite of passage towards adulthood and liminal spaces in YA fiction, and states that “the liminal spaces provide opportunities for the protagonists to review the ways they see themselves, others, and their interactions, as well as moments of choice that becomes self-

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18 Justin Scholes and Jon Ostenson, “Understanding the Appeal of Dystopian Young Adult Fiction”, *ALAN Review* (Winter 2013), 11.

defining”.<sup>19</sup> The liminal space, which in dystopian YA is frequently the wilderness, becomes a holding area where the characters are able to redefine their notion of home to a healthier one. The safety and security of food and shelter, what most of us like to refer to as home, is not only pleasant but a biological imperative. It is generally provided to the young, and it is during our adolescent years that we begin to feel a yearning for a home of our own. Our search for home is initially a search for a place or a state of mind in which we are able to develop and exist as stable and healthy human being, but this sense of home is nevertheless vulnerable to external changes that might cause disruptions to our sense of home as a place of safety. James Tuedio claims that “disruptions of this sort ‘deterritorialize’ our concept of home and problematize the orientation we have taken for granted, which will reveal a new ‘uncanny’ sense of home based on rejection, disruption, and the breakdown of expectations”.<sup>20</sup> The YA reader, frequently looking for fictional universes that present real-world problems once-removed, perhaps feels connected to this idea that in the dystopia, the misfits will somehow band together and become each other’s home. Therefore, when a protagonist enters a liminal space on their search for a true identity or home, it becomes a place of transition that gives them insight into themselves and the world around them, and help shape them as individuals, and, notably, the reader accompanies the protagonist in this transition.

The awareness that fiction is seen as a stabilizing force against rapid change – cultural, technological, and environmental – is not lost on today’s YA writers or teachers of literature to young people. Young adult literature is, by definition, meant to be explored in the classroom, and the savvy teacher would encourage this phenomenon as a way of ensuring a certain amount of continued interest: in literature and society in general. The idea of “sustainable development” is trendy in business and government to describe the idea of secure and stabilized resources, and is explained by David Selby as being “a range of distinctive philosophical responses to the question of humanity’s relationship with the environment, each response offering its own challenge to the learner on how to live ethically and responsibly on the planet”.<sup>21</sup> Sustainable development presents, on its face, a paradox: we simultaneously wish to both sustain and develop the world as we know it. Various concerns (political, educational, economic) seek to exploit aspects of the human-nature relationship under the same “sustainable development” umbrella. While the term is commonly used as a buzzword for energy consumption and management, for example the reduction of waste or carbon impact, other definitions of the word imply *nourishment*, and when we literature and language teachers think of our role in the outside world, are we wrong to think of

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19 Terri Doughty, “Dreaming Into Being: Liminal Space in Charles de Lint’s Young Adult Mythic Fiction,” in *Knowing Their Place? Identity and Space in Children’s Literature*, eds. Terri Doughty and Dawn Thompson, (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011), 156.

20 James A. Tuedio, “Thinking About Home: An Opening for Discovery in Philosophical Practice,” in *Philosophy in Society*, ed. H. Herrestad, A. Holt and H. Svare, (Oslo, Norway: Unipub Forlag, 2002), 210-215.

21 David Selby, “The Firm and Shaky Ground of Education for Sustainable Development,” *Journal of Geography in Higher Education* 30, Volume 2 (July 2006), 359.



“cultural sustainability” as a relevant outcome? Even within the idea of sustainable development as an organizing principle for human development, there exists a split between meeting new challenges while preserving existing resources, that I can’t help but relate back to the subject of English, where there has been a certain schism between those who teach the subject as an extension of modern-day social sciences or business, and those who teach it as an extension of classical aesthetics. English has to address all of these things, and more, and there is only so much space allotted in the school day, and so choices are made.

I often wonder what we will all talk about when we are speaking a common language at last, and I sadly suspect that it will be about how to live now, when all of the earth’s ecosystems are damaged. Sustainability involves an explicit future perspective, one in which the relationship of nature and society is balanced in an acceptable way, and it is correct and even ideal that the literature used at school to promote language learning also seeks to illustrate this balance to its youth reader in an authentic and provocative way. We will need to be able to shape a narrative not only of extinction, but of renewal.

## Examples from dystopian YA

The following section presents specific examples of sanctuary and sustainability from several popular YA dystopian novels, and how these are created. By understanding how these respites from the dystopian are shaped on a technical level, learners gain access to the process of narrative at the same time as they encounter larger formative ideas.

In the YA dystopia, time is perhaps the most endangered of resources. There is never enough time to stop and think, or to rest; the protagonists must keep moving or risk peril. To add to this dreadful sense of time, the youthening of the YA protagonist (as opposed to the adult protagonist of a traditional dystopia, or even the older teen of “golden age” YA<sup>22</sup>) intensifies the reader’s feelings of angst and fear, and also intensifies her feelings of relief and safety when sanctuary is found. When moments of respite occur, they are all the more significant due to their scarcity. Time itself, although a uniquely human concept, becomes a natural sanctuary, and it is in the liminal spaces of a novel’s plot that the luxury of time is most readily felt.

Safety and sanctuary in dystopian YA comes from the way in which descriptions of setting provide moments of slower plot, brief respites from the fast paced action where the discourse time of explanation and description exceeds the story time of the novel’s plot. For example, when Thomas, in James Dashner’s *The Maze Runner* (2009), enters the Glade, the green sanctuary at the center of a deathly maze of monsters and traps, the reader is treated to a 5 page description of the Glade and the work that is done there that in no way advances the plot or explains Thomas having been dropped into this perilous situation. By allowing this much narrative space to make sure both the reader and Thomas are properly

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22 Cart, “From Insider to Outsider”, 95.

introduced to the Glade and its functions, the idea of the Glade as a sustainable device of survival and security gains depth, and allows the reader to interpret scenes within the Glade with more precision. One finds the same kind of slowed discourse time in Philip Pullman's *The Golden Compass* (1995), where numerous pages are devoted to establishing the remote and icily exotic North in opposition to the crowded urban South,<sup>23</sup> and even *Twilight* (2005), where Stephenie Meyer lavishes pages of description on meadows, woods, and riverbanks, to no real plot advancement. These moments underscore the intense drama of the rest of the story, even if they don't directly contribute to it. Likewise, the most compelling moments of a story are not always direct combat or challenge, but indirect, personal challenges, such as when Daisy has to forage for food<sup>24</sup> for her and her younger cousin in *How I Live Now* (2004): since most readers of the book don't have to look farther than their parents' pantry for unlimited food, but nevertheless yearn for the independence to choose when and what they can eat, the idea of foraging for survival captivates readers and brings them closer to the protagonist.

The YA dystopian universe presents a unique paradox: the more immediately threatening a situation is for the protagonist, the more immediately engaging it is for the reader, thereupon less sanctuary for the protagonist creates more sanctuary for the reader. For the reader of YA dystopia, and as a partial explanation of its popularity, the narrative itself *becomes* the sanctuary, the free space between the societal and developmental pressures she faces. Unlike the aforementioned Glade, as well as the Capitol in *The Hunger Games* and Jordan College in *His Dark Materials*, while hyper-separated from reality, also present great dangers to those who would seek to defend them; they have become their own contained systems of corruption and misinformation. What sanctuary Katniss Everdeen of *The Hunger Games* or Lyra Belacqua of *His Dark Materials* find is in the natural world outside of these corrupt systems. While the typical YA reader might never find herself hunting and gathering for survival, physically fighting an enemy, or running away from an oppressor, her emotional connection to the protagonist's plight informs her attitudes about the societal pressures she faces in the "real" world. These protagonists do not conquer the wilderness, as in a typical person-versus-nature archetype, but immerse themselves in it, and have to learn coexistence with each other and the world around them. When Katniss hunts for food, she also relies on Gale's trapping skills and Peeta's camouflage expertise; likewise, when Lyra traverses the Arctic, she does so with the help of an armored bear, a witch, and several other human and non-human helpers. The reader, encountering these moments, is com-

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23 Pullman's newest contribution to the *His Dark Materials* universe, *The Book of Dust: La Belle Sauvage* (2017), also makes extensive use of the home/safety trope, with protagonist Malcolm Polsted taking refuge from complicated situations in his mother's kitchen, and recalling these warm moments of safety and security later in the novel, when both are in short supply.

24 This food happens to be mushrooms, which turn out to be mildly hallucinogenic. Coincidentally, Schütz and Luckmann use the idea of eating mild mushrooms as an extended metaphor for relating "the actual experience" of a thing to the "the sedimentation of past situational problematics" (13)...too bad Daisy didn't study pedagogical theory first.

pelled to consider her own relationship to her ecosphere, and whether she could do what these heroes do, or in what way her life is different from theirs. An important yet often overlooked aspect for young readers is that reading is safe. You can read a book on the most “out there” of subjects, on anything you want to know, really, and the book can’t bite you or tell you you’re not allowed to read it – it can’t judge you. Much of the young reader’s information about how to react to life situations is in fact informed by literature, in which emotions are mimetically represented, and in the YA universe, these emotions are often amplified and explained carefully, more often than not in the first person. This returns to Klafki’s idea about the creation of *Bildung* over time, and what is immediately present in a lesson versus what comes later as a result of continued processing of the learning material.

## Discussion and classroom implications

The next section discusses the YA dystopian novel in the context of the English as a foreign language (EFL) classroom, and how correct pedagogical planning accounts for the authenticity and striated learning outcomes that these texts can represent. It contextualizes the use of dystopian YA in a historical philosophical/pedagogical framework, and additionally faces the future of the subject as multimodal and dynamic with some suggestions for how to engage the themes of dystopian YA through alternate text types.

The very subject of EFL is by definition both conservative and futuristic. We tweedy types hold on to, for example, our grammar charts, maps of the London Underground, illustrations of the three branches of American government, and especially the Anglo-American literary “canon” with two hands, as it is generally believed that to learn a language is to also learn its history and culture, and no one wants to be the one to pull up the ladder on the rich cultural impact that these ideas have had on decades of English learners. Holding on to all of this history, however, does not exactly leave teachers free for exploring new approaches to new problems, and yet students are encouraged to master English so that they can communicate freely with diverse peoples in an ever-changing world. It’s a difficult balance, and choices will have to be made.

Pedagogical planning in English that includes time devoted to reading a novel that is written specifically for the target audience is seen as the integration of instruction into a pupil’s *lifeworld*, which Schütz and Luckmann understood as “that province of reality by which the wide-awake and normal adult simply takes for granted in the attitude of common sense”.<sup>25</sup> As teenage readers are still working through what the everyday reality of their lifeworlds will eventually be, fiction becomes an important way in which experiences – of nature, of human interaction, or of systems that adults take for granted – are presented to them. When Habermas later identified the lifeworld as the relationship of

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25 Alfred Schütz and Thomas Luckmann, “The Everyday Life-World and the Natural Attitude,” *The Structures of the Life-World, Volume 1*, (Evanston, IL, Northwestern University Press, 1973), 3.

the given to that which we experience together;<sup>26</sup> this also relates back to the idea of the shared interpretative community of classroom literature as being a central arena for gaining knowledge and awareness about the natural world. In this context, the selection and appreciation of literature for the target audience of teen readers becomes a particularly potent tool for presenting physical, social, and cultural phenomena that will enter and eventually become part of the reader's reality.

Dystopian YA could be an ideal vehicle for working with language at the middle and secondary grades levels, and for exploring significant philosophical or social issues such as justice, ecology, and feminism in a modern and authentic way, which Nation and Bonesteel clarify: "An authentic reading experience involves the second language learner in the same kinds of reading processes and reactions that we experience when reading in our first language."<sup>27</sup> Due to the wide variety of YA novels being published in English, it is relatively straightforward for EFL teachers to find novels that meet the length and complexity requirements of their learners. All too often, however, YA is left out of the school curriculum, or treated as an afterthought. In a time when international YouTube superstars seem to speak directly to teenagers about their interests, and the immersive MMO video game universe directly connects them to each other, in ways that are perceived to be authentic, the classroom frequently does not address such movements, and favors more traditional approaches to language learning such as grammar books, presentations of canonical fiction, and fact-based research on themes of limited teen interest. The *International Handbook of Research in Arts Education* explains that "The reality is that national policies on English curricula and assessments tend to prioritize traditional, print literacy and tend to marginalize the broader, richer definition of the subject endorsed by the research community".<sup>28</sup> All too often, at least in Scandinavia, EFL places emphasis on textbooks for instruction rather than "authentic" texts (Drew et al., 2007:30),<sup>29</sup> thus diminishing the ability of language to impart authentic culture. Today's EFL teachers, in addition to increased accountability such as standardized testing, which many teachers feel limits their time for working with novel-length texts in class (and when they do have the time frequently choose a so-called "classic," devoid of authentic presence or meaning in a teen reader's life), also face a situation in which the subject of English itself is quickly becoming inauthentic, that is, the English being taught in school is too far disconnected from the English used outside of school. The end result here is that, while interest in learning English remains high, it risks becoming a delivery device for vapid and base consumerism, as presented and modeled in the

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26 Jürgen Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action Volume 2: Lifeworld and System. A Critique of Functionalist Reason*, trans. Thomas A. McCarthy, (Boston, MA, Beacon Press, 1981/1987), 355.

27 Paul Nation and Lynn Bonesteel, "The Authentic Reading Experience: Building Reading Comprehension and Fluency," [http://www.pearsonlongman.com/tertiaryplace/pdf/authentic\\_reading\\_experience.pdf](http://www.pearsonlongman.com/tertiaryplace/pdf/authentic_reading_experience.pdf).

28 Kathy Hall (et al). "Assessing English Within the Arts," in *International Handbook of Research in Arts Education*, ed. Liora Bressler, (Springer Netherlands, 2007), 398.

29 Ion Drew, Ron Oostdam, and Han van Toorenburg, "Teacher's experiences and perceptions of primary EFL in Norway and the Netherlands: A Comparative Study," *European Journal of Teaching Education* (2013), 330.

“real” world of the internet but not in school. While it is unlikely that YouTube superstars or MMO gaming will find their way into an EFL curriculum, the dystopian YA novel is an economical way of bringing authenticity, sustainability, and a connection to the multimodal teen universe into the English classroom in an engaging and encouraging way, and is therefore worth making time for.

When introducing a dystopian YA text into the EFL classroom, a text which contains an inherent environmentalist critique, it is tempting for teachers who wish to impart the text’s significance as critique to move too quickly away from the text itself, or to use it merely as a “springboard for leaping into discussions of environmental analysis”.<sup>30</sup> This attitude, while common enough in first language instruction, doesn’t always translate well into a second language environment, because here we are also dealing with language barriers between the reader and the meaning, leading perhaps to the misunderstanding that literature is a code meant to be cracked rather than an art requiring interpretation, and so pupils wait for the teacher to crack the code for them, and meaning is given rather than created. It is not a *sustainable* approach, for it not only violates the presentation of the YA text as authentic, it removes the feeling of reading as sanctuary, and also strips the text of its future impact as environmental *Bildungsgehalt*. Instead of seeing this as a problem, we should interpret it as an opportunity, and create a new macro for second-language (i.e. English) literature studies, in which aesthetic reading is taught from the ground up with the language itself, and social meaning is generated as a product of reader-response interpretation; the process of narrative becomes a part of the way pupils think about English and think in English. Janice Bland refers to this movement in cartographical terms, as “redrawing the boundaries of EFL teaching to include authentic literature for young learners and teenage learners,” as a way of ensuring adequate attention to learning to read mindfully.<sup>31</sup> Correct methodology here would rather focus on the text’s narrator or narrative perspective, and how these interact within the given hostile or sanctuary landscape, and the metaphors to “real” life created herein, rather than working backwards. Dystopian YA is highly suited to this style of formalist-meets-ecocritical analysis, and by bringing it into the classroom students learn analytical and narrative techniques at the same time as they develop a heightened sense of environmental awareness.

When the teacher of dystopian YA literature wants to combat the fear, alienation, and frustration that so many young adults face, a conscious attempt should be made to treat the class time itself like the oasis or meadow where the dystopian protagonist finds temporary solace from a harsh and unyielding society. If a YA novel is used as a common class text, the assignments created to supplement it should not be objective tests, as this reinforces several kinds of competitive hierarchy: teacher vs. student and a so-called “stronger” stu-

30 McDowell, Michael J. “The Bakhtinian Road to Ecological Insight,” in *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm, eds. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996), 383.

31 Janice Bland, *Children’s Literature and Learner Empowerment: Children and Teenagers in English Language Education*, (London, Bloomsbury, 2013), 211.

dent vs. “weaker” student. Discussions, projects, and creative writing exercises all achieve the same curriculum results as traditional comprehension-based evaluation, but without the stress of unnecessary competition. There are other lessons and texts that can be tested in this way, and should be, but in the case of dystopian YA the thematic clash between text and method becomes too strong, leaving a potentially confusing and certainly hypocritical takeaway message.

The curriculum is in the main open for teachers to include authentic reading materials, and it is up to the teacher to choose texts which will enable a positive and nurturing space for interpretation and exploration. Since dystopian YA novels are frequently chosen outside of school, a teacher who wanted to place the learning material closer to the learner would choose from this, even when the immediate value of the text seems less accessible. Not much here has changed from Wolfgang Klafki’s original ideas about the value of a curriculum:

“... the framework is, in the main, delineated by the curriculum or syllabus. This is no less applicable if the latter has assumed the desirable form of a set of guidelines which do not explicitly set out the individual items of subject-matter but give basic issues or thematic areas, mostly with supporting examples, leaving the selection of suitable details up to the school or the teacher”<sup>32</sup>

I see here an opportunity to expand this notion of Klafki’s “suitable details” directly as justification of the application of authentic reading materials in the second language. If properly managed by the teacher, nothing will be lost in terms of social engagement: according to the originator of reader-response theory Louise Rosenblatt, the literature teacher

“can play an especially important part in this process, since it is very likely that the student’s social adjustments will be much more powerfully influenced by what he absorbs through literature than by what he learns in the usual impersonal and theoretical social-science courses”<sup>33</sup>

By choosing a good authentic text for exploration, and teaching it methodically with an emphasis on aesthetic appreciation and generating response, teachers and learners alike gain a lot, and lose little.

Good pedagogical planning takes into account the idea of pupils as being members of multiple lifeworlds, each with their own rules and norms: “As people are simultaneously members of multiple lifeworlds, so their identities have multiple layers that are in complex relation to each other. No person is a member of a singular community. Rather they are members of multiple and overlapping communities – communities of work, of interest

32 Wolfgang Klafki, “Didactic Analysis”.

33 Louise Rosenblatt, *Literature As Exploration*, (New York, Appelton-Century, 1938), 22.



and affiliation, of ethnicity, of sexual identity, and so on.”<sup>34</sup> Schütz’s 1945 essay “On Multiple Realities” considered the various kinds of interaction as “zones of potentiality,” where it is “intimacy and anonymity, strangeness and familiarity, social proximity and social distance, etc., which govern my relations with consociates, contemporaries, predecessors, and successors”.<sup>35</sup> Since each learner belongs to multiple lifeworlds, and also relates to them through these oppositional zones of potentiality, a considerate teacher must be able to understand and attempt to negotiate these roles. Having a common basis for discussion of various challenges to identity formation, such as those presented in the contemporary dystopian YA novel, makes this process considerably easier.

As for the idea of nature as a source of freedom, inspiration, and sanctuary in the literary education of young readers, the line from Rousseau to Dewey is clear. This influence, particularly Dewey’s idea that reading should be “wild” and without undue influence, can be found in his 1897 “Pedagogic Creed”: “The teacher is not in the school to impose certain ideas or to form certain habits in the child, but is there as a member of the community to select the influences which shall affect the child and to assist him in properly responding to these influences”.<sup>36</sup> For Dewey, authenticity in education comes from enabling eventual adult functionality through consciousness-raising via “expressive and constructive activity”:

“I believe that the only way to make the child conscious of his social heritage is to enable him to perform those fundamental types of activity which make civilization what it is ... I believe, therefore, in the so-called expressive or constructive activities as the center of correlation.”<sup>37</sup>

He indicates in this same creed that through literature, and not expressly through nature as a subject unto itself but in the presentation of nature through social interaction, interpretation and unification arise simultaneously.

Dewey’s sentiments are later echoed in Rosenblatt’s development of reader-response theory, that the individual reader’s reaction to a text depends heavily on her influences and personality.<sup>38</sup> While a teacher may have more experience reading and discussing literature, her experience is but one in a plurality of voices of lived experience. Classrooms influenced by these attitudes to teaching literature center the teacher as a guide more than as a leader to avoid undue hierarchical influence. The YA genre, as early as its inception in the 1960’s, consciously attempts to eliminate or mitigate parental involvement, so that the protagonists – and by extension the reader – can come to terms with its (frequently

34 The New London Group, “A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies.” in *Multiliteracies: Literacy Learning and the Design of Social Futures*, eds. Bill Cope and Mary Kalantzis, (London, Routledge, 2000), 17.

35 Alfred Schütz, “On Multiple Realities,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Volume 5, No. 4 (June 1945), 548.

36 John Dewey. “My Pedagogic Creed” *School Journal* Volume 54, (January 1897), 77-80.

37 Dewey, “My Pedagogic Creed”.

38 c.f. Louise Rosenblatt, *The Reader, The Text, The Poem: The Transactional Theory of the Literary Work*, (Carbondale, IL, Southern Illinois University Press, 1978).

difficult) themes without the anxiety of parental or adult influence. The books don't *feel* like school, and in that way they can be more effective than a "traditional" class novel in teaching important life skills, because they don't inspire a sense of dread, conformity, and hierarchal expectation the way "traditional" class novels so frequently do. Wilberg's understanding of Klafki's exemplary as the combination of subject matter and relevance, what she terms "mimetic didactics" is central here: "...giving students the possibility to interpret the examples as both subject matter and something relevant to their own lives is facilitated through imaginative work."<sup>39</sup> The subtle use of contemporary dystopian YA in the English classroom directly connects the very imaginative realm of the dystopian to their future, hopefully non-dystopian lives through multiple layers of meaning-making and interpretation, all of which can be guided by the teacher through thoughtful classroom preparation.

I would also propose here that modern video games and board games, with their open-ended narratives and richly developed settings, create interesting possibilities for class texts and pairings with YA novels: it would be rewarding to combine, for example, SimCity or the strategy game Settlers of Catan with *The Hunger Games* or *Divergent*, or even in the place of a class novel, as an immersive exercise in the development of a better and more sustainable society, and also raises new and important questions about the role of technology in said society. Expanding dystopian YA to the multimodal platform addresses the criticism leveled in the *International Handbook of Research in Arts Education*, and also bridges the gap between what Klafki establishes as the exemplary experience, which Wagenschein refines as those "in which a person is completely gripped, body and soul, by a fundamental experience. Such a formative experience stimulates true education."<sup>40</sup> If video game culture is so immersive as to be chosen by many teenaged learners to the exclusion of all other activities and the consternation of adult society, then why not lean into it, and treat the game as a complementary text, with the respect and consideration a classroom text deserves? This speaks to Wagenschein's desire to reduce the curriculum without diminishing it through an economy of text and interest. Ultimately, a text, no matter how rich in content, is only as meaningful as its reader wants it to be. Generating and encouraging good responses from literature, by which is meant at a minimum the ability to connect what one reads to one's own experience, is at the heart of what the language teacher should work for: "the mind as it meets the book...is the center of a curriculum in literature";<sup>41</sup> and in this case the incorporation of video games as a supplementary literary text becomes an organic, multimodal, and flexible way to allow the meeting of young mind and YA novel; an immersive extension of the alternate and safe universe that young readers frequently select for themselves.

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39 Ilmi Wilbergh, "The Representation of Reality in Teaching: A 'Mimetic Didactic' Perspective on Examples in Plenary Talk," *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research* 61, no. 5 (May 2016), 617.

40 Martin Wagenschein, "Teaching to Understand. On the Concept of the Exemplary in Teaching." Translated by J. Salted and C. Holdrege. 2008. Originally published as *Zum Begriff des exemplarischen Lehrens. Verstehen lehren.* (Weinheim, Beltz Verlag, 1997), 27-59. [http://natureinstitute.org/txt/mw/exemplary\\_full.htm](http://natureinstitute.org/txt/mw/exemplary_full.htm).

41 Alan C. Purves, Theresa Rogers, and Anna O. Soter. *How Porcupines Make Love II: Teaching a Response-Centered Literature Curriculum*, (New York, Addison-Wesley, 1990), 15.

Perhaps the easiest and yet greatest way teachers can encourage positive reading experiences for young is to incorporate, not just directly but indirectly, elements of reader-response critical theory into their lesson plans and activities, whatever the text ends up being. To engage pupils using reader-response strategies is a modern and approachable way into what Klafki idealized as the “special case” of the classroom in which it is the *structure* of the classroom content, rather than the content itself, which renders the subject interesting, stimulating, vivid, and tellingly, conceivable.<sup>42</sup> While the school is not a natural culture, and cannot reflect a truly authentic language use, it does have its own internal logic and language, one where the presentation of teenage protagonists with authentic-sounding teen voices facing dystopian situations might be exactly jarring enough to wake up and engage a room full of learners used to more rote lessons and/or condescending or irrelevant selections from readers. If the literature teacher can harness the explosive power of a reader-response environment, and structure lessons which engage pupils to respond to texts on their level and in a democratic and meaning-forming way, then his or her job has just become a lot easier. YA novels exist for exactly this purpose, and should be used to encourage quality and meaningful reading experiences that mimic the ideal societies the texts promote.

## Conclusion

The trend toward the dystopian in contemporary young adult fiction (YA) seems like rather a bleak expression of political and social hopelessness, but it does offer certain insights into what young readers want from the world around them. Literature featuring young protagonists in war or other traumatic circumstances has become increasingly popular during recent years, and English teachers wishing to impart lifelong learning of the second language ought to capitalize on this trend. Novels such as *The Hunger Games*, *The Maze Runner*, *Divergent*, *His Dark Materials*, and *How I Live Now* feature young protagonists who are in the midst of conflict or facing great threat, which sends them on a quest that forces them away from their safe haven, their *home*, and towards something strange and unknown in order to restore the world to its original state. One might surmise from the staggering popularity of the YA genre that young people are looking for solace from their feelings of disenfranchisement, and looking for answers to questions about how they are supposed to live when they, like the protagonists they admire, might feel trapped and isolated. Sensing a shared enemy, both protagonist and reader find a sense of belonging, and of working together, in authentic and natural ways, toward cathartic renewal. The genre’s popularity also suggests that these selfsame readers believe that the answer is out there somewhere, and so they keep reading, they keep fighting. English teachers should look at this trend not as a distraction from the so-called “classics” or an existing local or national curriculum, but as a way of celebrating an adolescent’s natural development, and choose organizational strategies and critical lenses such as ecocriticism that promote lifelong reading as a kind of cultural sustainability.

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42 Klafki, “Didactic Analysis”.