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# The Enigmatic Self: An Ongoing Exploration of Literary Selfhood from the American Renaissance to Contemporary Young Adult Literature

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The Enigmatic Self: An Ongoing Exploration of Literary Selfhood from the American  
Renaissance to Contemporary Young Adult Literature

by

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Honors Thesis

Submitted to:

English Department  
University of Richmond  
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## I. Introduction

To say that the world cannot invade the precincts of the self is to indulge in bravado, and yet, even while sadly recognizing this, I still see the self as my last bulwark against oppression and falsity. Were this bulwark to be breached, I would indeed be broken.

– Irving Howe, 1991<sup>1</sup>

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Assuming the near impossible task of sorting through and delineating various conceptions of the self in and throughout literary and civil history, literary critic Irving Howe adopts a highly perceptive and profoundly analytical approach to the enigmatic individual. In the article quoted above, "The Self in Literature," Howe consolidates what he believes to be the most promising attempts at coding and decoding abstractions of the self across numerous literary, philosophical, and sociological texts. The success of Howe's analysis lies in his ability to simultaneously embrace and scrutinize seemingly incompatible notions of bodily and spiritual discourse. With the knowledge that such investigations of the self often create more questions than they can answer, Howe's research miraculously uncovers a clear and comprehensive interpretation of the self that combines his independent thoughts with scholarly reasoning and literary imagination. Howe's account of the self expresses the deeply-rooted tension between the burden of human existence and the individual's capacity to overcome such adversities. Thus, he prescribes an apt assessment of literary selfhood that many find inarticulable (Howe 56-77).

Despite Howe's success, it cannot be denied that the self, both as a literary and non-literary concept, is ever-changing and persistently evasive. Howe's work signifies a meaningful contribution to the growing body of academic scholarship surrounding literary selfhood;

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<sup>1</sup> From Irving Howe's "The Self in Literature" (1991), p. 57.

however, his conclusion does not represent a fixed concept of the self, nor does it restrict future theorists from exploring their own existential hypotheses. This is not to say that Howe's research and analysis will cease to matter within these intellectual dialogues. On the contrary, Howe's impermanent principles further advance our generalized understanding of the self as a fundamentally inscrutable construct. Studies of the self are therefore radically and necessarily collaborative. They must be continually improved upon, contextualized, and revised. The self is, in essence, boundless.

Consider this Thesis, then, an addition to the ever-expanding theory of the self. In particular, this Thesis attempts to reconcile areas of curiosity that have not yet been explored. Existing academic scholarship lacks in its analysis of contemporary texts and their renderings of selfhood within the context of the modern world. These recent works cannot be ignored. They build upon conceptions of the self that have existed throughout literary history and translate past interpretations for the benefit of the contemporary reader.

Many existing models of selfhood emerge from the American Renaissance.<sup>2</sup> Writing during a period that can best be described as a sociopolitical limbo in American history, Renaissance writers drew on the nation's past and present to formulate an honest prediction of an American future and the individual's place within it. The American Renaissance marks the pivotal years between the conclusion of the American Revolution (1791) and the inciting battle of the American Civil War (1861) (Levine 3-21). During this time, the newly independent nation sought to rebuild and reimagine their community within a clearly-defined and mutually agreed

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<sup>2</sup> The American Renaissance period spans, roughly, from 1830 to 1865.

upon national identity. However, the polarizing issue of enslavement, the outlining of early feminist methodologies, and the birth of capitalism proved the search for sociocultural, intellectual, and moral unity to be futile. Stifled by the pervasive uncertainty of America's identity crisis, Renaissance writers like Ralph Waldon Emerson and Henry David Thoreau attempted, instead, to define the self, perhaps hoping that personal clarity might inspire consensus on a national level.

This preoccupation with selfhood throughout the Renaissance period contributed to an influx of new vocabulary to describe the self and its relationship to surrounding political and cultural influences. Examining the emergence of this new language of the self serves to deepen the existing body of historical knowledge regarding the period's attitude toward the individual and its place within an existing sociocultural structure. Analyzing vocabulary of the self throughout the Renaissance, historian Louis Masur writes, "Some words such as self-government, self-culture, and self-reliance emerged for the first time in this period. Older words, such as self-denial and self-improvement, became vested with new meanings" (Masur, 191). Following the Revolution, it is reasonable to assume that independence had become a symbolic necessity within American culture and vernacular. However, given the communal movement toward national freedom, it was expected that the succeeding years would have emphasized the collective over the individual. Yet, the emergence of words like self-government, self-culture, and self-reliance subvert these expectations. You will notice a common theme amongst the Renaissance's new vocabulary. The new language implies a drive toward radical autonomy, one in which Emerson and Thoreau (amongst countless others) found themselves engrossed.

Throughout the Renaissance, literary writers and thinkers approached the inscrutable self by attempting to reconcile the inherent contradictions within America's morally and rationally

divided society. The works of Emerson and Thoreau consider existential, political, and philosophical dilemmas surrounding democracy and freedom as an entry point into their vast exploration of the self in its various forms. These writers are often closely associated in the minds of contemporary readers, by virtue of their reputable contributions to the Renaissance period. However, the two shared more than their respectability. Emerson and Thoreau each demonstrated a persistent interest in the natural world as a fundamental component of the self. Historical scholarship and recovered documents indicate that Emerson and Thoreau had significant professional and personal relationships with each other throughout their literary careers (Mudge 273, 290). Though there are countless connections to be drawn between them, it is important to note that Emerson and Thoreau each created work that spoke to their independent thoughts, beliefs, and perspectives. As Renaissance poet Walt Whitman writes in "Song of Myself," "I am large, I contain multitudes" (Whitman 1356). This perception of the self as one that is multifaceted and innately contradictory is central to the model selfhood constructed by Emerson and Thoreau. Their writings, though at times conflicting, join together to devise a rendering of the American self that defined the Renaissance period for all other writers.

In his book-length essay *Nature*, Emerson describes the Natural world as a web of interconnected worldviews that are governed by a universal and spiritual truth. His famous transparent eye-ball metaphor, a model for many transcendentalist thinkers, implores readers to reject superficiality in favor of a form of social cognizance, which he refers to transparency. As Emerson describes it, transparency occurs when one surrenders to Nature's divine social spirit. Published 5 years after *Nature*, Emerson's "Self-Reliance" presents Nature's social spirit in action. In response to the transparent eye-ball, "Self-Reliance" calls for a social and spiritual revolution and a critique of the superficial limitations of a civil existence.

Similarly, Thoreau's isolation in Walden Woods enhanced his understanding of the self and its role within a newly industrialized American society. In his book, *Walden*, Thoreau considers the self as a relative construct, one that is capable of both adapting and connecting to its social surroundings. In *Walden*, Thoreau finds himself deeply connected to the Nature that Emerson describes so passionately in his writings. By the time he wrote "Resistance to Civil Government" in 1849, Thoreau had undoubtedly become aware of Emerson's ideas. His essay argues that resistance is not only powerful, but necessary for authentic selfhood. Thoreau engages with Emerson's Nature and its profound social influence, declaring that social and political resistance are acts of transparency in which the individual must trust their intuitions and rely on Nature to guide them towards the common good. Yet, he also goes a step beyond that, reshaping Emerson's transparency to fit the modern world. Through this process, Thoreau discovers a new term to describe Emerson's concept: vulnerability.

Like the literature of the Renaissance, contemporary Young Adult (YA) literature<sup>3</sup> is equally interested in the self as it functions within and without modern societal infrastructures. YA literature develops an intricate theory of selfhood that speaks to modern adolescence, a period that, much like the Renaissance, is characterized by its relentless uncertainty. Throughout this transformative stage, young people seek to answer the question, *Who am I, and where do I fit in?* In an attempt to provide their readers with clarity, YA authors like Ivan E. Coyote and Suzanne Collins write novels that identify and dissect the complexities of adolescent selfhood. In a time of rapid technological development, growing racial tensions, and political upheaval, the central characters of these novels embark on a journey of self-discovery and social analysis. YA

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<sup>3</sup> For the purpose of this Thesis, 'contemporary' YA literature includes only YA novels that were published after 2000. In addition, this Thesis will only discuss YA literature that has been written and published in the United States.



literature questions the adolescent's ability to fit in and stand out in an ever-evolving sociocultural landscape.<sup>4</sup>

It is difficult to imagine a comparison between these two literary traditions which appear to be so vastly different. After all, Emerson and Thoreau described 19<sup>th</sup>-century American life from their own subjective points of view, while the YA genre is comprised almost entirely of fiction. However, the relevance of this comparison stems from the periods' constructions of the self as a literary concept. As Thoreau observes, "We commonly do not remember that it is always the first person that is speaking" (Walden 970). Both Renaissance literature and contemporary YA literature approach the self with careful attention to existing social models. Coyote and Collins, much like Emerson and Thoreau, are undeniably influenced by the period in which they write. Their characters are conceived of detailed accounts of modern adolescence, and therefore as subject to trauma, heartbreak, injustice, and love as all consumers of literature are. That is to say that fictional adolescence, as it appears in YA literature, is restricted by the very same anthropological laws which govern adolescent life in the non-literary world. Through this model, the YA genre effectively designs a parallel between the individual self and its social environment.

Out of YA's theory of the self as a "socially constructed" (Howe, 190) concept emerges an element of literary realism<sup>5</sup> wherein current events serve to connect fictional adolescents to their non-fictional counterparts. According to a 2023 study conducted by Terri Suico and other

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<sup>4</sup> For the purpose of this Thesis, 'young adult' describes people between the ages of 12 and 18. From this point forward, they will be referred to as 'adolescents' or 'young people' in order to distinguish them from children and grown adults. 'Young Adult literature' will continue to be notated as 'YA literature' throughout.

<sup>5</sup> "Broadly defined as "the faithful representation of reality" or "verisimilitude," realism is a literary technique practiced by many schools of writing. Although strictly speaking, realism is a technique, it also denotes a particular kind of subject matter, especially the representation of middle-class life" (*Realism in American Literature*).

literary scholars and researchers, as contemporary mainstream culture becomes more involved in politics, social justice, and national tragedies, so too does the literature that young people read (Suico, et al. 123). Given the impressionable nature of young audiences, Coyote and Collins design their novels to reflect and unpack their readers' lived experiences. Their adolescent characters, therefore, encounter challenges that mimic the realities of adolescent life.

Roberta S. Trites, a scholar of Children's Literature, refers to this imperative relationship between the self and the social as "social power," which she argues is a necessary component of all YA fiction (Trites, "*Do I Dare Disturb the Universe?*" 2). Social power describes one's will to construct an identity within a world or system that is destined to challenge them. Given its recurrent presence in YA literature, Trites's social power is imperative to our understanding of the genre and how it defines adolescent selfhood. Like Howe, Trites's account of the self, which derives from social power, is two-fold. It presents the self as being in constant conversation with its environment. Trites argues that the individual is bound to encounter barriers throughout their development. Yet, her concept of social power also implies that these barriers are fundamental to one's ultimate identity construction. According to Trites, the power of the self lies in its capacity to evolve alongside its social surroundings. YA literature's model of adolescent selfhood is, therefore, built upon these two principles. YA novels address the question of social power, creating a language for young readers to navigate their own development within the complexities of the social world.

The American Renaissance and contemporary YA literatures both analyze and interpret the self in relation to social environments whose politics, morals, technology, and ideologies are actively and rapidly evolving. Using Trites's concept of social power as an abstract paradigm, the YA literary genre builds upon a model of the self that was first conceived during the

American Renaissance. Authors like Coyote and Collins embrace the Renaissance self in their works and reinscribe it within the context of modern adolescence. Coyote brings Thoreau's vulnerability, a derivative of Emersonian transparency, to the forefront of their discussion of adolescent selfhood. They frame self-discovery as an innately vulnerable process, one that involves a willingness to yield to inevitable social obstructions. Meanwhile, Collins adopts Thoreau's view of resistance by insisting that defiance is fundamental to adolescent development in an unjust society. Revealing accounts of the self that are often hidden or misinterpreted in Renaissance literature, Coyote and Collins contribute new and revolutionary hypotheses to the ongoing exploration of the enigmatic self.

## II. Literatures of the American Renaissance

To believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you, in your private heart, is true for all men, — that is genius.

– Ralph Waldo Emerson, 1841<sup>6</sup>

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Many believe Emerson's writing, in particular, to have shaped the Renaissance period's perceptions of the self. Emerson divides the self into two distinct parts: the Soul and nature.<sup>7</sup> The Soul encompasses all that is distinctly subjective, while nature (or the "NOT ME" (Emerson, *Nature* 2)) describes all that exists outside of the individual, including one's social and familial relationships. The Emersonian self is thus a composite of all that is subjective and objective. Contemporary readings of Emerson's *Nature*<sup>8</sup> and "Self-Reliance," however, consider the Emersonian self to be one that is entirely subjective. Such interpretations of his work suggest an image of Emerson as a great American individualist, relying on his decisive speeches and essays to support a model of selfhood that is tied to a profoundly anti-social ego. Within the historical context of America's newfound political independence, these readers identify Emerson's writings as a blueprint for American individualism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Patell 442).

This reading is in no way misguided. Emerson's tenacious writing and oration certainly lends itself to these interpretations. His essay "Self-Reliance" champions an individualist

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<sup>6</sup> From Ralph Waldo Emerson's "Self-Reliance" (1841), p. 236.

<sup>7</sup> Throughout *Nature*, Emerson, drawing on Thomas Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus*, sometimes refers to "nature" as the "NOT ME" (Emerson, *Nature* 182n4).

<sup>8</sup> "Ralph Waldo Emerson's slender first book, *Nature* (1836), is generally considered the founding document of Transcendentalism, the major manifestation of Romanticism in the US" (Mott Abstract).

outlook, in which the self appears at odds with the restrictive architecture of its social surroundings. In this essay, Emerson writes that “Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members” (Emerson, "Self-Reliance" 238). Without further context, this statement seems to condemn Emerson to a model of the self which foregrounds a domineering, autonomous existence. His statement solicits a ruthless rejection of a structured social existence in favor of rebellious individuality. The contentious nature of Emerson’s language embodies the self-assured attitude of a radically imperial individualist. Emerson distinguishes society as the antithesis of the self, alluding to a combative disruption of man’s intuition and an oppressive eradication of all that constitutes the individual. He continues, “Whoso would be a man must be a nonconformist” (Emerson, "Self-Reliance" 238). Placing society and the individual on opposite ends of a seemingly inflexible spectrum, Emerson’s "Self-Reliance" appears to denounce the importance social and political alliance within the development of a fully autonomous self. Presumably, then, one can argue Emerson’s cry for nonconformity to be a declaration of imperial reasoning.

In spite of this evidence, however, a more nuanced reading of Emerson’s work reveals a second account the self-reliant individual that is far more compelling. This account, first evidenced in *Nature*, brings forth a version of the self that is, in fact, deeply and empathetically connected to its social environment. In many ways, Emerson’s conceptualization of Nature<sup>9</sup> contradicts the very argument that "Self-Reliance" and other subsequent works by Emerson claim to defend. This discrepancy was, no doubt, intentional on the part of Emerson, whose

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<sup>9</sup> In his 1836 essay, *Nature*, Emerson asserts that “the universe is composed of Nature and the Soul” (Emerson, *Nature* 182). The use of the capital “N” is both intentional and evocative. Philosophically speaking, Emerson’s Nature represents “essences unchanged by man” (Emerson, *Nature* 182). Nature, by Emerson’s design, is a supernatural force. At its worst, Emerson’s Nature is a window into the sublime, and, at its best, it is a manifestation of all that is divine in the universe. In Emerson’s view, touching Nature is synonymous with touching God himself.

intricately woven discussions of the self rely on one another to formulate a comprehensive theory of American selfhood. Emerson understands Nature to be a divine, spiritual presence, one that is responsible for constructing an intricate web of social relations. Through Nature, the world is united under a single, universal truth, which governs the seemingly self-reliant thoughts and actions of the individual.

It is significant to note the years in which *Nature* and "Self-Reliance" were first published (1836 and 1841, respectively). Considering the precision with which Emerson defines his view of the self, it is completely possible, even likely, that the two works were written with the intention of advancing a single and highly complex idea. The theory of the self developed in *Nature* may provide necessary context for an accurate reading of "Self-Reliance," and vice versa. Describing Nature in hugely glorified terms, Emerson reveals a nuanced approach to delineating the paradox of a self-reliant existence:

For although the works of nature are innumerable and all different, the result or the expression of them all is similar and single. Nature is a sea of forms radically alike and even unique...What is common to them all, – that perfectness and harmony, is beauty...A single object is only so far beautiful as it suggests this universal grace (Emerson, *Nature* 189).

The term "nature", written with a lowercase "n", holds an entirely different meaning in Emerson's texts than "Nature" with a capital "N." The former represents all that stands outside of the individual, but is not a feature of the latter. In essence, nature encompasses the wants, needs, fears, and anxieties associated with social demands, as well as the social demands themselves. Emerson attests to the apparent diversity of the social world, a claim which, at face value, speaks to his alleged individualist ideals. However, he follows this claim with an assertion that, despite the differences between one individual and another, each share a common and fundamental aspect. That aspect, Emerson specifies, is their beauty (which, interestingly, he

equates to harmony in his writing). Nature, whose landscapes Emerson describes with disciple-like admiration, is the pinnacle of beauty and grace. If Emerson recognizes elements of beauty in nature, while subsequently worshiping the abundant beauty that exists within the divine Nature, then the two must be connected. It is in this moment that Emerson confidently articulates the link between the self and the social. He insists that the individual cannot achieve beauty (or a closeness to Nature's divine spirit) without their relationship to the "universal grace" that connects them to nature (or the social world). The Emersonian self, while distinctly self-sufficient, is therefore tethered at all times to a spiritual network of other similarly self-sufficient individuals.

Those who subscribe to the reading of Emerson as a radical individualist often cite his transparent eye-ball metaphor as another example of his imperial model of the self. Emerson's transparent eye-ball, discussed in *Nature*, describes a transcendental state in which the self divides into its two constituent parts in order to passively observe the infinite flow of the universe (Emerson, *Nature* 183). In this state, the NOT ME becomes so inconsequential to the Soul that it floats by, never attaching itself to the Soul in any meaningful way. Emerson writes,

Standing on the bare ground, — my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space, — all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eye-ball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God. The name of the nearest friend sounds then foreign and accidental: to be brothers, to be acquaintances, — master or servant, is then a trifle and a disturbance. I am the lover of uncontained and immortal beauty. In the wilderness, I find something more dear and connate than in streets or villages. In the tranquil landscape, and especially in the distant line of the horizon, man beholds somewhat as beautiful as his own nature (Emerson, *Nature* 183).

Transparency is a form of surrender, a spiritual embrace of Nature's "Universal Being." It assumes a relationship between the self and Nature that is predicated on trust. For an individual to be transparent, they must rely entirely on the divine forces of Nature to guide their most

primitive instincts. To be a transparent eye-ball is to possess an unwavering will toward the abandonment of all that is superficial, in particular, “mean egotism.” Only in the absence of the imperial ego, Emerson argues, can one experience such a vast social existence. Within the context of "Self-Reliance," the marriage of the Soul and Nature supports a fully realized and enlightened version of the self, one that, in Emerson’s own words, is “part or particle of God” (Emerson, *Nature* 183).

Many literary scholars have interpreted the transparent eye-ball as a metaphor for Emerson’s defiant isolation. Author J. Heath Atchley, for instance, regards Emerson’s transparent eye-ball as “a staple of nature mysticism” (Atchley 257). Reading the transparent eye-ball outside of the context of Emerson’s larger analysis (one that includes "Self-Reliance"), Atchley concludes that Emerson’s withdrawal from society requires a great deal of self-delusion on the part of both Emerson and his readers. Though misdirected, Atchley’s observation is not incorrect. Emerson’s devotion to transparency implies that the individual can realistically remove themselves from the existential forces of their social reality. Of course, this concept is completely illusory in the eyes of the modern reader. The nature of our innately social world does not allow us to exist merely within ourselves. Thus arises a fundamental flaw in Atchley’s reading of Emerson; the detached self is inapplicable within the context of the modern world. What Atchley fails to consider in his interpretation of Emerson is the way in which the transparent eye-ball surrenders to the divine forces that actually connect the self to the NOT ME.

Other literary scholars have questioned why Emerson chooses an eye-ball to substantiate his claims about transparency. Emerson’s transparent eye-ball is two-fold in meaning. It is both a device through which one receives visual stimuli and a vessel for external consciousness. The



latter form of vision (which author Robert Tindol refers to as “unseeing,” (Tindol 18))<sup>10</sup> is filtered through the ego, formulating a view of the world that is at once subjective and objective. Unseeing, to use Tindol’s vocabulary, is a function of acquiescence. The former, which Emerson labels “superficial seeing” (Emerson, *Nature* 183), describes a sight that is merely sensory. Superficial sight cannot permeate the spiritual light of the Natural world like Tindol’s unseeing can. It is, in fact, vision interrupted. Distinguishing between the two, Emerson writes, “The sun illuminates only the eye of the man, but shines into the eye and the heart of the child” (Emerson, *Nature* 183). In Emerson’s thinking, the sun is a manifestation of Nature’s unrestricted spiritual potential. A highly important component of the universe, the sun exists at the center of our Earth’s axis and is considered among many religions and spiritualities to be a symbol of divinity.<sup>11</sup> To *see* the sun (that is, to view it beyond one’s superficial seeing), is to perceive the magnitude of Nature’s spiritual capacities.

Emerson’s transparent eye-ball is not accessible to all, however. Only those whose Souls have not yet been corrupted by the power-hungry ego are able to transcend their will toward superficial sight. This perhaps explains Emerson’s fixation on the child throughout his development of the transparent eye-ball metaphor. By virtue of their inexperience, the child is inherently devoid of all malice and ego. The child’s Soul is instinctively selfless, pure, and malleable. Having not yet been exposed to principles of individualism, the child is still able to distinguish between their personal convictions and social personas. This innate purity of the Soul is what allows the child to see (or “unsee,” to use Tindol’s language once more) the sun in its

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<sup>10</sup> In his close reading of Emerson’s transparent eye-ball metaphor, Tindol articulates “The eye is both an organ of seeing and “unseeing” (Tindol 18).

<sup>11</sup> For example, San Petronio in Bologna is home to the oldest cathedral observatory (Heilbron 389).

remarkably divine state. It is important to note, too, that the child leads a critically dependent, and therefore deeply social, life. By this nature, the child's world revolves around a sense of transparency and honesty that is central to Emerson's theory of the self. Thus, the child that Emerson describes is not merely a child. Rather, it is a personification of the union of nature and Soul and the critical link between internal and external forces. Through the child, Emerson illustrates the way in which the self is at once wholly autonomous and intimately connected to its social world.

Returning to the alleged nonconformist manifesto, Emerson's vision of multifaceted selfhood finally comes to fruition. As he writes in "Self-Reliance," "The populace think that your rejection of popular standards is a rejection of all standard, and mere antinomianism; and the bold sensualist will use the name of philosophy to glid his crimes. But the law of consciousness abides" (Emerson, "Self-Reliance" 247). Self-reliance, within the framework of our universal spirit, is not an act of self-reliance at all. Rather, it is an act of trust, a vulnerable submission to the spiritual realm of communal reasoning. To be self-sufficient, as Emerson urges his readers to be, is to commit oneself to his or her own truth, and to acknowledge the ways in which that truth coincides with a robust and intensely social reality. According to this second account of Emerson, then, "Self-Reliance" must be read as a subversive text. Full of carefully-constructed and deeply esoteric allusions to *Nature*, "Self-Reliance" mocks the hypocrisy of its own title by proposing conformity "at the very moment that it extols individuality" (Patell 441). As literary critic Cyrus Patell states, "From the time that [individualism] became a part of the American vocabulary in the early part of the nineteenth century, Americans—including Emerson and his followers—have always conceived of individualism as a social formation" (Patell 441).

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*It's said that the cells in our bodies regenerate every*

*Seven years.*

*Seven years.*

*Seven years*

*until his hands have never touched me.*

*Seven years*

*until my skin forgets him—the silver sting of his ice-cold hands wrapped around my neck, the rough edges of his teeth on my ear, the portrait he drew along my spine from loose hair and blood.*

*Seven years.*

*Until violence is a stranger.*

*I can wait*

*Seven years.*

*Remember for*

*Seven years.*

*Survive for*

*Seven long years.*

*What choice do I have but to wait those*

*Seven torturous years?*

*With every second that passes, four babies are born. Four babies painted in their mother's blood, collages of fingers and toes and wandering eyes like spinning globes. Each baby a clock, an anxious tick and a tock like a hair pin trigger.*

*Zero to seven, seven to fourteen, fourteen to twenty-one.*

*Life is a waiting game, an infinite stopwatch, an ocean with no floor.*

*I wade in the ocean for*

*Seven years.*

*Tread water with shallow breath and aching knees. After five or six, I begin to worry. Worry that the ocean might turn on me, restart the clock with its waves of colossal apathy, wrestle me with violent disdain, swallow my limbs in its stoic ripples. I wait*

*Seven more years*

*with my head under water. Shut my eyes. Let salt crystals nest in my t-shirt and seaweed wrap around my ankles. Let schools of fish feast on open wounds, abuse my pruning skin and call it lunch.*

*Seven dying years*

*until I gasp for air, until I feel condensation on my purple lips.*

*Seven years*

*until my next chance to swim.*

*In school, they teach us about space. Stars and galaxies and asteroids. The space between you and me. "Personal space." A flood gate. The borders of our bodies. Our elbows sharp, like barbed wire. The soles of our feet turned a gun-powdered black. The barbarity of intrusion. The open waters that exist between parted lips made crisp and cruel, icy waves sloshing between our separate shores.*

*Seven years*

*Mean nothing to the waves, whose righteous independence feeds their infinite belly. Our space flows like the water. Back and forth, giving and taking, sharing and withholding. It holds molecules and cells in its gentle palms, smooths barbed-wire elbows, and dusts gunpowder from our feet. Our space parses letter by letter through the bottled messages we send off to sea.*

*Through letters, we unfold. We untangle. We uncross. Flowers bloom from our open palms and naked chests. Sunlight drips like melted butter from your balmy lips, my rosy cheeks. Our borders bleed like ink in rain. One becoming another. We find each other in the shadows. Two magnets searching through space for hips and thighs and hair with infantile curiosity. Your fingers curl at my waist like a question mark. I respond with dropped shoulders and a tipped-back head. I float atop your tender waves.*

*Our seven years,  
A fleeting infinity.<sup>12</sup>*

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<sup>12</sup> This poem, titled "A Fleeting Infinity," was originally written for Dr. Julietta Singh's Decolonial Literatures Seminar at the University of Richmond (Fall 2022). The poem has been edited for the purpose of this Thesis.

Emerson's notion of transparency emerged at a time in American capitalist history when the physical landscape of Nature was obscured by a thick and impermeable coat of industrial smoke. Beneath this man-made veil, transparency became far more central to a wholly realized existence than ever before. And yet, the growth of American industrialism forced writers like Thoreau to rework the structure of Emerson's thinking to suit the new world. By 1854, when Thoreau wrote *Walden*, all subjective reasoning had become distorted by the fast-paced environment of capitalism. Everyone, even the child, was condemned to superficial sight.

Thoreau, often regarded as the patron saint of non-violent resistance (Doyle 5-7), reimagined Emerson's transparent eye-ball within the context of newly-industrialized American society. Like Emerson, Thoreau is commonly misunderstood as a proponent of radical individualist principles. Readers substantiate this interpretation through a selective reading of works like *Walden* and "Resistance to Civil Government."<sup>13</sup> Thoreau's physical isolation in *Walden* and his contentious opposition to democratic structure in "Resistance to Civil Government"<sup>14</sup> seem to suggest his self-reliant and antisocial account of the self. This reading is not wrong, per se. However, it fails to consider the ways in which Thoreau, like Emerson, develops his concept of the self over the course of multiple texts. Any one work by Thoreau is therefore insignificant to his analysis of the self unless actively considered within the context of his other works. When read collectively, *Walden* and "Resistance to Civil Government" advance

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<sup>13</sup> The modern reader may have heard Thoreau's "Resistance to Civil Government" referred to by its newly revised title: "Civil Disobedience." Thoreau's original title was changed in 1866, just four years after his death, in order to soften its blunt and abrasive tone (Doyle 5). Throughout the remainder of this Thesis, I will continue to refer to Thoreau's essay by its original title.

<sup>14</sup> Thoreau writes, "That government is best which governs least" (Thoreau, "Resistance to Civil Government" 953).

an understanding of the American self as deeply social and exceptionally resilient throughout the period of early industrialization.

In Thoreau's transcendental "experiment" (Balthrap-Lewis 44) in Walden Woods (Concord, Massachusetts, 1845-47), he removed himself from civilized society for two years in order to survey the land, the self, and their relationship to one another.<sup>15</sup> This experiment is often assumed to be demonstrative of his asocial nature. Thoreau addresses and refutes this interpretation directly within the opening pages of *Walden*, writing, "I should not obtrude my affairs so much on the notice of my readers if very particular inquiries had not been made by townsmen concerning my mode of life, which some would call impertinent; though they do not appear to me at all impertinent" (Thoreau, *Walden* 970). Thoreau sets up his argument as one that requires a sense of trust between himself and the reader.

Author and Renaissance expert Alda Balthrap-Lewis dismisses the common reading of Thoreau as an asocial revolutionary. In fact, Lewis argues, Thoreau's relative solitude suggests an atypical degree of social interest, by which Thoreau seeks to expand the accepted definition of sociality to include a relationship with Nature. In line with Emerson's thinking, Thoreau's transcendental state enhances his social spirit by making him acutely aware of his connection to the universal conscience of divine Nature. Lewis insists that ignoring the non-human members of Thoreau's social circle results in a rather severe misreading of his theory of the self (Balthrap-Lewis 44). This progressive interpretation of Thoreau's sociality, in conjunction with Emerson's universal spirit, brings into question whether Thoreau's solitude was ever solitude at all. Lewis states, "The higher values [Thoreau] pursued were intimately related to society, or to

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<sup>15</sup> Before entering Walden Woods in 1845, Thoreau had already worked as a land surveyor for many years (Kohn 26-8).

relationships with others” (Balthrap-Lewis 41). By Lewis’s own judgement, *Walden* is just as much a social experiment as it is a study of the self.

While Thoreau actively sought out isolation in Walden Woods, he did so with the intention of returning to society with a changed outlook on social structures and his place within them. Still, even in isolation, Thoreau never once denied himself of his inevitably social existence. Throughout his time in Walden, he attempted to reconcile the paradoxical relationship between personal autonomy and capitalist expansion. Contemplating the railroad (which he calls the “Deep Cut” (Thoreau, *Walden* 1065)), Thoreau writes, “We do not ride on the railroad; it rides upon us” (Thoreau, *Walden* 1018). To Thoreau, industry acts as an oppressive, domineering force, one which violently (as the word “cut” suggests) disrupts the private democracy of American individuals. The Deep Cut symbolizes industry’s imperial expansion throughout the nation. Though intended to facilitate connection across long distances, Thoreau argues that the railroad is in reality a vicious machine that invades necessary physical and metaphorical spaces.

If this sentiment sounds familiar, it is because Emerson, imagining the perils of an overbearing social structure, expressed an almost identical concern just thirteen years earlier. Given this connection, we should consider Emerson’s transparent eye-ball as a roadmap for Thoreau’s theory of relative selfhood. It is important to note that Emerson’s ‘Nature’ and Thoreau’s ‘Nature’ serve the same purpose within their independent writings. Thoreau believes the Natural world as a network of infinite social connectivity. Thus his closeness to Nature soothes the instinctive loneliness of Thoreau’s physical isolation. Thoreau writes,

To be alone was something unpleasant. But I was at the same time conscious of a slight insanity in my mood, and seemed to foresee my recovery. In the midst of a gentle rain while these thoughts prevailed, I was suddenly sensible of such sweet and beneficent society in Nature, in the very pattering of the drops, and in every sound and sight around my house, an infinite and unaccountable friendliness all at once like an atmosphere sustaining me.... I thought no place could ever be strange to me again. (Thoreau, *Walden* 1039)

Thoreau acknowledges the social nature of human existence and the ways in which that sociality has been narrowly defined by popular society. Even he who willingly lives in solitude finds himself at moments overwhelmed by the “unpleasant” feeling of seclusion. And yet, he sees this feelings as an illness, something from which he must recover in order to fully embrace his most pure and authentic selfhood. Thoreau’s undoing of his social instincts manifests through his revolutionary interpretation of sociality as it exists beyond the confines of human society.

Thoreau. In Nature, Thoreau discovers himself to be a member of the universe’s most elemental social structure, one which (to echo Emerson’s concept of universal grace) is infinite in its capacities. Claiming that Nature’s society sustains him suggests that Thoreau has allowed himself to surrender to the forces of the Natural world. It is only through this Emersonian acquiescence that Thoreau can conclude that the self, when grounded in Nature, is resilient and socially adaptable.

Contemplating the significance of Thoreau’s hand-drawn maps and diagrams within his theory of selfhood, Dr. Denise Kohn writes, “When we travel across space while marking our movements on a map, or we look at maps of varying size and scope that represent the same place, our perspective of our own relationship to the physical world on which we stand changes” (Kohn 28). As Thoreau describes throughout the book, his two years in Walden afforded him a comprehensive analysis of the physical landscape throughout different seasons and from multiple vantage points. These shifts in perspective are equally applicable to Thoreau’s social analysis.



*Walden* asserts that the only way to view society through an impartial lens is to remove oneself from society altogether (Thoreau, *Walden* 976).<sup>16</sup> Derived from transparency, Thoreau's construction of the self relies upon a perspective that is equal parts subjective and objective.

Transparency functions as a measure of perspective within Thoreau's thinking. Only from this pure and unadulterated state can he truly see the relationship between the individual and society. In fact, through his self-centered impression of the universe, Thoreau expands upon Emerson's thinking, adding an element of social relativity to the existing concept of transparency. He writes, "Wherever I sat, there I might live, and the landscape radiated from me accordingly" (Thoreau, *Walden* 1012). In the woods, Thoreau discovers transparency to extend far beyond its rejection of superficiality. It promotes a profound harmony of stability and inconstancy within the individual. As Thoreau's willingness to isolate suggests, the self is adequately independent. However, the self is also malleable and socially cognizant. It has the capacity to evolve and expand in order to fit the mold of its social environment. To this extent, one can argue that Patell's evaluation of American individualism as a socially-informed construct applies to Thoreau as it does to Emerson.

Thoreau's plea for resistance is thus inextricably linked to Emerson's transparent eye-ball metaphor. To engage in true resistance requires the self to have both "depth and purity" (Thoreau, *Walden* 1062). Like the child in Emerson's writing, Thoreau imagines the deepest and purest self to be one that can distinguish between their convictions and the convictions of others. Resistance, then, quiets the parts of the Soul that have been contaminated by unenlightened and unnecessary social anxieties. Thoreau writes:

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<sup>16</sup> Returning to Louis Masur's study on the Renaissance's vocabulary of the self, Thoreau's decision to remove all excess from his life delivers new meaning to the word "self-denial" (Masur 191).

Action from principle, —the perception and performance of the right, —changes things and relations; it is essentially revolutionary, and does not consist wholly with any thing which was. It not only divides states and churches, it divides families; aye, it divides the *individual*, separating the diabolical in him from the divine. (Thoreau, "Resistance to Civil Government" 958)

The division of the self and the separation of the diabolical from the divine mirrors Emerson's concept of transparency as an act of impartial observance. This separation is, to Thoreau, "essentially revolutionary." Both Emerson and Thoreau reject superficial notions of sociality and civil living in favor of a more robust and harmonious existence.<sup>17</sup> They endorse transparency as a defense against the frivolity of the social world. Transparency, as Emerson and Thoreau understand it, is an act of resistance (and resistance, a transparent act). To resist within the superficial architecture of American society is to rely upon the self and the self alone, and to trust that Nature's spirit will guide our intuitions.

With this newfound understanding of the ways in which Emerson's transparency functions in Thoreau's writing, readers of Thoreau may consider his fierce and dynamic writing to put forth an account of the self is at once independent and dependent. Like Emerson's "Self-Reliance," Thoreau's "Resistance to Civil Government" encourages its readers to act according to their own principles rather than to the principles instilled upon them by America's supposedly democratic society. Though Thoreau's call for resistance certainly resonates with individualist theorists, this call can also be interpreted as a form of social cognizance. Personal and political defiance, though seemingly reclusive, asks the self to surrender to Nature's divine spirit. Thoreau criticizes the democratic voting system for its failure to hold the individual to their convictions. Thoreau claims, "The character of the voters is not staked" (Thoreau, "Resistance to Civil

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<sup>17</sup> Discussing his views on land ownership, Thoreau writes, "Why should they begin digging their graves as soon as they are born?" (Thoreau, *Walden* 971).

Government" 956). Of course, voting is a transparent practice. It requires that we trust in who we vote for to push forward our ideas. However, perhaps that trust is not enough when it comes to true resistance. Though voting is often regarded as a form of political activism, Thoreau argues that true political resistance requires the individual to stand on the front line for their convictions, an act which is not only transparent, but also deeply vulnerable.

Philosopher and author Judith Butler's *Precarious Life*, a contemplation on American sociality in the aftermath of 9/11, embraces this idea of social vulnerability within the context of our nation's heightened newly recognized susceptibility to violence and loss. Discussing the act and implications of mourning, she poses the question, "Who "am" I without you?" (Butler 22). Butler suggests a definition of grief that encapsulates both the pain of losing another and the uncertainty of losing the part of oneself that was once tied to the person lost. This tie to another, this link between one's own selfhood and someone else's selfhood is reminiscent of the ideas proposed by Emerson and Thoreau.

Though vulnerability emerges in Butler's writing in reaction to national tragedy and loss, she does not maintain vulnerability as an inherently tragic concept. Rather, she acknowledges that life is, as the title of her books suggests, is precarious by nature, and that vulnerability is a necessary aspect of the human condition. So, too, then is social connection as a response to vulnerability. Allow oneself to get close to others despite the inevitability of loss effectively shift the meaning of vulnerability to one that is, in fact, empowering and beautiful. According to Butler, human vulnerability involves a willingness to feel trust, empathy, and compassion for others. She writes, "If we have lost, then it follows that we have had, that we have desired and loved, that we have struggled to find the conditions of our desire" (Butler 20).

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*Before I am my self I am daughter, sister, friend. I am woman. Yes, woman.  
A cries-during-scary movies-sleeps-with-the-lights-on-wears-cherry-lip -gloss woman. A love  
poem, pink daisy, hand-stitched broken heart woman. A push-up bra, shaving scar, broken nail  
woman. A looks both ways before crossing the street woman. A walks to the car with keys  
between her fingers woman. A never accepts a drink from strangers woman. A dead bolt the  
hotel room door woman. A bitch-faced, bloody knuckled, glassy eyed, battle wounded woman.  
Before I am my self I am human.  
Fragile. Delicate. Vulnerable.*

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### III. Contemporary Young Adult Literature

But in the adolescent novel, protagonists must learn about the social forces that have made them what they are. They learn to negotiate the levels of power that exist in the myriad social institutions within which they must function, including family; school; the church; government; social constructions of sexuality, gender, race, class; and cultural mores surrounding death.

– Roberta S. Trites, 1998 <sup>18</sup>

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The YA literary genre is gravely misunderstood in today's literary and popular culture. Many modern readers (most notably adult) regard contemporary YA literature<sup>19</sup> as “trashy,” “cheap,” or “just plain dumb” (Crowe, "What is Young Adult Literature?" 122), for its glorification of the trivial, sometimes corruptive, aspects of adolescent life (Crowe, "The Problem With YA Literature" 146). This critical misinterpretation of YA literature is rarely challenged. Even within scholarly conversations, contemporary YA literature is hardly considered worthy of discussion.<sup>20</sup> When literature is not discussed, it cannot be defined. The YA literary genre is of course identified by its most obvious characteristics; for instance, its young audience or its use of adolescent narrators. However, few adult readers possess a clear conception of the YA genre beyond its target readership and narrative mode. To explain this gap in YA literacy, we must scrutinize the socially embedded derogation of the YA genre.

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<sup>18</sup> From Roberta S. Trites's *Disturbing the Universe: Power and Repression in Adolescent Literature* (1998), ch. I, p. 3.

<sup>19</sup> For the purpose of this Thesis, ‘contemporary’ YA literature includes only YA novels that were published after 2000.

<sup>20</sup> This excludes older YA novels, which are now revered as ‘classics.’ Examples include Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations* (1861), Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island* (1883), and Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) (Crowe, "What is Young Adult Literature?" 120).

Language used to describe the stages of life from infancy to adulthood is equally as ambiguous as the YA genre itself. Cultural identifiers of age exclude adolescents from consideration, either grouping them with young children or labeling them with the derivative title of “young adult,” which implies an intermediate and enigmatic reality (Crowe, "What is Young Adult Literature?" 120).<sup>21</sup> Defining YA literature is therefore far more demanding a task when we cannot agree upon what, beyond age, constitutes a young adult.<sup>22</sup> The truth is that adolescence is, itself, an enigma. As adolescents explore the world around them, their social identities remain fundamentally uncertain. Referring to this uncertainty as something that is, in fact, vulnerable, YA literature suggests ambiguity to be an essential component of adolescent self-discovery. As YA authors argue, embracing one’s innate vulnerability allows the self to discover its connection to and awareness of others who are equally vulnerable.

Today’s adolescents exist within a vague limbo between the intellectually pure child described in Emerson’s writing and the irreconcilably domineering adult of the modern world. As burgeoning social citizens, adolescents hold with them the experience, knowledge, and rational independence necessary to practice self-governance. However, their autonomy is often stifled by the man-made laws of adult sociality. The personal convictions of the adolescent are therefore determined by, and expressed at the will of a restrictive social infrastructure. This not the case, however, in the contemporary YA novel, which actively refutes the forced immaturity of modern adolescence.

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<sup>21</sup> From this point forward, ‘young adults’ will be referred to as ‘adolescents.’ ‘Young Adult literature’ will continue to be notated as “YA literature” throughout the remainder of the Thesis.

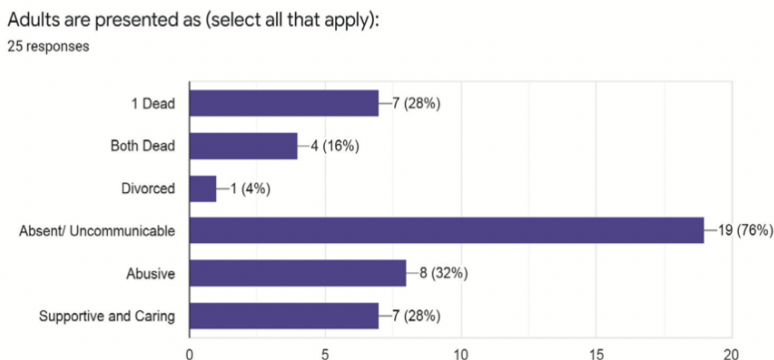
<sup>22</sup> For the purpose of this Thesis, ‘young adult’ describes people between the ages of 12 and 18.

As young children develop into adolescents, they inevitably encounter peers, teachers, family members, and social institutions that challenge their freedom to construct an independent identity. The earliest social interactions for most adolescents appear within their families. From the moment a child is born, parents become the backbone of the child's personal development. This is not to say that parents necessarily dictate their children's personhood, but that the child must adopt their parents' conceptions of the world before they can learn to reject or accept them within the context of their own convictions. If considering Trites's social power, the friction between the adolescent and the parent becomes paramount to the adolescent's self-discovery. For this reason, the absence of parental characters from early YA novels<sup>23</sup> is a point of intrigue for many YA literary scholars.

According to Julie Just, a writer for *The New York Times*, the early 2000's marked the beginning of a slow transition from the popularized orphan trope in YA literature to novels centered around family relationships. Just comments that, in early YA fiction, "The hero's parents are more likely to be absent or dead than cruel or incompetent" (Just). In fact, author Amanda Marie Rioland presents a graph that depicts the breakdown of various parent-child relationships in a sample of 25 popular YA novels (all published within the last 10-20 years):

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<sup>23</sup> 'Early' YA literature, as opposed to 'contemporary' YA literature, includes YA novels that were published before 2000.



(Rioland 2).

Early YA novels either intentionally removed or neglected parental characters in order to make space for the independence and relative autonomy of their young protagonists. This is particularly (and currently) true of dystopian novels, where the presence of parental authority may shatter the illusion of freedom necessary for a protagonist to roam their dystopian universe. Before the 2000's, very rarely did a YA author depict an adolescent character asking their parent for permission to embark on a life-altering adventure (Goldstein). While these 'orphan' novels certainly comply with Trites's conception of the YA novel as a facilitator of social power, they leave something to be desired in terms of their relatability to the common reader.

Contemporary YA's conception of the self seems to follow a similar structure to Emerson's and Thoreau's. YA authors therefore places the adolescent self at the intersection of radical independent and social cognizance. These authors embed Renaissance ideas within a contemporary framework of American society and adolescent culture. Evaluating existing conceptions of vulnerability and resistance, what distinguishes contemporary YA's theory of adolescent selfhood is its duality. Contemporary YA novels present the adolescent self as one that is simultaneously obedient and defiant.



Contemporary YA author Ivan E. Coyote writes of their experiences as a queer youth in a series of non-fictional short stories titled *One in Every Crowd*. The first story in the series presents Coyote's exploration of their bodily autonomy as it relates to the gender binary. "No Bikini" describes Coyote's first attempt at discerning their social power. As a young child, their eager gender curiosity inspired them to test the boundaries of binary appearances. They chose to swim without a bikini top, knowing that others would assume them to be a boy. The story begins, "I had a sex change once, when I was six years old" (Coyote 18). Of course, a reasonable reader understands that Coyote's topless swim lesson does not *really* constitute a physical transformation like a surgical sex change does. However, hidden within this opening sentence is the latent assertion of gender (and thus sex, to those who cannot distinguish between the two) as a socially constructed concept. Whether or not Coyote actually underwent a surgical sex change did not matter if people at the pool still believed, based upon their limited interpretations of gender, that they were a boy.

When Coyote's mother asked furiously, "How many people have you lied to?" (Coyote 20), she exposed an underlying incongruity within binary thinking. In response, Coyote thought to themselves, "I hadn't lied because no one had asked." (Coyote 20). The gender binary, like all modes of limited social analysis, operates under the assumption that there can be no exceptions to a pre-determined blueprint of the self. It fails to account for the ever-evolving mystery of complex selfhood, particularly throughout the transformative years of adolescence. To use Emerson's language, Coyote was a child—pure, unadulterated. In theory, then, they should not yet have possessed an awareness of the corrupt binaries of matured society. Yet, six-year-old Coyote had already learned to expect their mother's heteronormative attitude. They were right; they

hadn't lied because no one had questioned the gender identity of a child wearing swim trunks and flaunting a bare chest.

This lack of ignorance ultimately fueled Coyote's social power. Behind the bulwark of the gender binary, Coyote was allowed to experiment with their own self-image. This exploration of the self is inherently vulnerable, as it goes against the accepted rules of civilized society. Coyote's vulnerability was therefore a choice, one made with an awareness of its social consequences. They describe their decision not to wear a bikini top as a "charade" (Coyote 19), clearly and intentionally toying with oppressive and heteronormative expression. Referring to their own curiosity as a charade implies that it is not only temporary, but that it is also driven by a desire for reaction. One can certainly assume that Coyote was too young at the time of the story to examine the sociopolitical roots of their language. However, remember that Coyote writes "No Bikini" in retrospect, embracing a Thoreau-like approach to examining the self in relative form.

Coyote knows now, and may have known then, too, that their inclination toward gender queering was far from a charade. They write, "The water running over my shoulders and back felt simple, and natural, and good" (Coyote 20). Phrases like simple, natural, and good suggest young Coyote's self-awareness, wherein they could identify and articulate how they felt and what, specifically, made them feel that way. A child with such a strong sense of self and social consciousness does not use the term charade without premeditation. Young Coyote was only able to have this experience because of their carefully crafted social manipulation. As we have already noted, Coyote was not oblivious to the harsh realities of gendered optics. Rather, they were acutely aware of the way in which the social implications of binary thinking allowed their self-indulgent exploration to slip between the cracks. Coyote's vulnerable decision therefore relied entirely upon others' biased assumptions. By including their mother's less inspiring

reaction, Coyote reminds their readers that this “no bikini” moment, while cathartic, is not always so accessible. A truly vulnerable existence is only awarded to those willing to actively and repeatedly try and fail to exploit their social power.

Though Coyote writes *One in Every Crowd* as a memoir, their words echo throughout the entire queer community, whose struggles to define themselves in a heteronormative world are intrinsic to their developing identity. To emphasize the universality of their experience, Coyote writes, “The Lions pool where I grew up smelled like every other swimming pool everywhere. That’s the thing about pools. Same smell. Doesn’t matter where you are” (Coyote 18). Immediately, Coyote’s character becomes a young queer archetype (one which is defensibly missing from most other literary genres). The Lions pool (much like Thoreau’s pond in *Walden*), is a reflective structure, within which young queer readers sympathize with Coyote’s invigorating self-discovery. The description of scent, too, is intentionally evocative. The sense of smell, one that is closely associated with memory, reminds readers of their own “no bikini” moment, a time in which they surrendered to their intuitions and unchained themselves from the binary restrictions. This unprecedented democratization of the traditional author-reader relationship lays claim to a narrative voice that is both relatable and accessible. Coyote’s notion of the self, developed during their time in swim lessons, is applicable in a world that exists far beyond the words on the page. One could argue, then, that Coyote’s memoir engages with the Emersonian belief that one can view themselves beyond the superficial boundaries of our social existence, and in doing so, unearth the parts of themselves that are deeply connected to others.

Rudine Sims Bishop, commonly known as the “mother of multicultural children’s Literature” (“Rudine Sims Bishop”), would classify the works of Coyote and Collins as window, mirror, and sliding glass door novels. That is to say that each contains a narrative voice and semantic

structure that allows young readers to see themselves and others reflected in the storyline.

Window, mirror, and glass door novels embody a form of representation that is imperative to a young reader's developing awareness of themselves within the context of their social environments. When an adolescent sees themselves accurately represented in literature, the protagonist's voice becomes their own, and an equitable theory of the self can be extracted from the page. By Bishop's standards, Coyote's memoir serves as a window, a mirror, and a sliding glass door. Writing from the perspective of an adult who has since witness the impact of their vulnerable adolescent years, Coyote demonstrates the ways in which vulnerability is a necessary step in one's absolute self-discovery.

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*Car rides to Long Island aren't so bad, at least when we get Hubba Bubba. My sister shakes me awake in the backseat as the red celestial glow of the LED gas price sign seeps through our windows. For the next thirty seconds, we sit in silence with fingers inches away from the door handles and our eyes wide. When dad finally pulls up to the pump, mom tosses a five-dollar bill across the center console, and we dart.*

*The routine is always the same. Elana guards the door with her feet spread wide and her arms folded across her chest while I pee. She asks me if I washed my hands. I lie. Of course, I have to stay in the bathroom while she pees, on account of mom's obsession with watching the news late at night. Elana reminds me that even if I was kidnapped, I'd probably talk so much they'd let me go after an hour just to shut me up. After the bathroom, we make our way through the aisles of neon Cheeto bags and sleeves of sour candy. We check the list: a Diet Coke for dad, a water for mom, and two packs of Hubba Bubba for Elana and me. We check out and go back to the car.*

*Suddenly, the stretch of leather seats between us becomes a bubble gum jungle gym. Elana and I are competing to see who can blow the biggest hot pink bubble. She pops mine and the tacky, sugary gum splats all over my face. Even though we stopped ten minutes ago, I think I might pee my pants from pure laughter. We can barely hear dad passive aggressively turning up the volume on NPR over our obnoxious, open-mouth gnawing. Elana roles out a mile-long piece of gum and snips the end with the container. We push to opposite sides of the car and latch on with our teeth, attempting to recreate the spaghetti scene from Lady and the Tramp. When we finally get to the center, she bites down, and I let her steal the bigger half. Two hours later, when we arrive at our grandma's house, we are both asleep, Elana's forehead pressed up against the window and my head nestled in her hip with two empty packs of Hubba Bubba lying in my lap.*

*Bubble gum saved us. When Elana's prom date ditched her two days before the dance, I brought her Hubba Bubba. I wiped her tears away while she explained, between smacking bites, how the other girl had dandruff and still wore ballet flats. Once, a girl spit gum in my hair at school, and Elana and I laughed over our own pack of gum as she cut it out with kitchen scissors. When I went to college, she left a bin under my bed full of gum for when I felt like coming home. Today, she sent me a photo of a pack of Hubba Bubba in her office desk drawer.*

*Sometimes, when I can't sleep, I remember those car rides to Long Island. I can still see my sister's bug eyes and runny nose as they inched toward me across our bubble gum bridge. I imagine building a road—a soft, chewy, bubble-gum-pink road—that stretches from Virginia to Connecticut. All those miles between us patched up by some sparkly candy we found under a Seven-Eleven register fifteen years ago. 385 miles, to be exact, of bubble gum paradise. And if she and I both latch onto the ends with our teeth and crawl toward the center, maybe we'll meet somewhere in the middle and share a few more laughs.*

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As demonstrated by Emerson and Thoreau, it is virtually impossible to discuss vulnerability without also addressing the robust nature of social and political resistance. Under a social structure that demands superficial conformity and denies the self of its authentic dispositions, resistance is a necessary step in pursuit of a vulnerable existence. In a state of perpetual homogeneity, however, resistance is seldom inspired. Just as Thoreau turned to solitude to award him an impartial view of the self, so too do adolescent readers seeking to uncover who they are within their latent and manifest social contexts. Of course, it is unrealistic to think that a misfit child could isolate from their families, friends, and academics like Thoreau. But what if adolescents were able to gain the same perspective from the vantage point of their own bedrooms?

Reading a science fiction novel<sup>24</sup> requires a type of social and intellectual disillusionment that is not dissimilar to Thoreau's. Dystopian fiction, arguably the most common subgenre of science fiction among adolescent audiences (Miller), transports its readers to a virtually unrecognizable, yet eerily familiar, literary world. Readers are encouraged to suspend their disbelief, to allow themselves to be engrossed in the fantastical details of a novel's fictional universe. Author Jenn Scott Curwood writes, "In order to understand science fiction, readers must imagine new worlds and ways of being" (Curwood 418). Science fiction (and dystopian fiction by extension) is an unconventional educator of the self. When removed from its social context, the state of one's dependable selfhood is placed under a microscope. Was this not Thoreau's intention when he entered Walden Woods? The dystopian novel serves as a modern-day *Walden* for adolescents. That is to say that it allows them to embrace their relativity by engaging with their social environments from a detached point of view.

Intention is of high importance when considering dystopian YA fiction. Though the central plot of the dystopian novel relies entirely on imaginary, often mythical, settings,<sup>25</sup> these settings function as a conceptual foreshadowing of the modern world. The dystopian universe is a speculative framework through which YA authors interrogate the potential consequences of existing social and existential problems. As author Caroline E. Jones explains, "Dystopian literature fits well with adolescent literature in a generic sense: both are literatures of the disempowered, the oppressed and repressed, those subject and yet resisting the hegemony of

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<sup>24</sup> Science fiction is a sweeping literary term that describes any novel which envisions new scientific or technological advancements. Dystopian fiction, along with cyber-punk and post-apocalyptic fiction, often falls under the literary umbrella of science fiction.

<sup>25</sup> Examples include Veronica Roth's *Divergent* Trilogy, James Dashner's *Maze Runner*, and Lois Lowry's *The Giver*.

their worlds—they are inherently literatures of resistance” (Jones 225). Through their impression of the modern adolescent’s social existence, these novels model and inspire acts of Thoreau-like defiance. Particularly in Young Adult dystopian literature, where authors are “more reluctant to depict the extinction of hope” than in dystopian literature for adult readers (Kay Sambell, qtd. Miller), the story must have a moral. More often than not, the moral of dystopian YA fiction derives from a fundamental sense of hope. YA dystopian fiction affirms its readers as social and political activists by asserting that, with proper use of their social power, adolescents can save their world from a dystopian future.

Modern adolescents find themselves responsible, then, for resolving the social, political, and existential dilemmas which they have inadvertently become the inheritors of. The hope which British academic Kay Sambell (as quoted in Laura Miller’s article for *The New York Times*) writes of is therefore paramount to a YA novel’s ability to galvanize its young readers. The glorification of the insubordinate hero is one strategy used by many YA dystopian authors. YA heroes serve to shape the minds of adolescent readers by modeling the triumph of their personal resistance. Trites calls on French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan’s concept of *assomption* (qtd. Trites 5) to explain why this method of defiant demonstration is so effective. Trites writes, “*Assomption*: the individual’s active assumption of responsibility for the role into which society casts her or him” (Trites 5-6). To understand the role of *assomption* in YA literature, consider Katniss Everdeen, the strong-willed protagonist of Suzanne Collins’s critically-acclaimed novel *The Hunger Games*, as a case study of dystopian YA’s rousing hero archetype.

Focalized through Katniss, *The Hunger Games*<sup>26</sup> (much like Coyote's "No Bikini") is a story of and about social power. In the world of Panem, where a decadent and exorbitantly wealthy Capitol reigns over twelve impoverished districts, twenty-four young contestants (or, as the novels call them, "tributes") compete to the death in a staged arena each year. These bloody rivalries are broadcasted throughout all of Panem, where district citizens "watch, cheer, and mourn" the needless deaths of innocent children (Curwood 419). The people of Panem lead innately vulnerable lives. That is to say that they live under a constant threat of violent retribution.<sup>27</sup> The annual Hunger Games, a symbol of the Capitol's vicious authority, enforce a level of social obedience that literally molds the individual's perception of themselves in relation to other vulnerable prisoners of the Capitol.

Yet, in a society as tightly regulated as Panem's, *true* vulnerability (that is, the embodiment of one's most authentic and socially-connected self) is nearly impossible to achieve. Panem society is governed by competition. The individual is inherently selfish and savage-like, their social relationships driven by animalistic principles of survival. These standards, as constructed by the Capitol, turn murder to sport and admonish compassion as a socially acceptable response to suffering. They personify the radical individualism which Emerson and Thoreau so deeply detest. When Katniss defies the Capitol's terms of sociality, she discovers within herself a source of autonomous social power. As Emerson would suggest, however, this autonomy does not come from the vicious and self-indulgent murders endorsed by the Capitol.

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<sup>26</sup> Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games* is the first (and nominal) novel in her dystopian trilogy. For the purpose of this Thesis, however, I will discuss *The Hunger Games* independent of its two succeeding novels.

<sup>27</sup> As Katniss explains, the Games were implemented as punishment after the citizens of Panem staged a failed uprising against the Capitol (Collins 18).



Rather, it stems from Katniss's staunch refusal to kill in the arena. In recognizing the humanity within her fellow tributes, Katniss finds herself deeply entrenched in Emerson's anti-imperial social spirit. When Rue, a tribute from District 11, is brutally murdered, Katniss adorns her body with flowers. Collins writes,

I can't bring myself to leave her like this. Past harm, but seeming utterly defenseless. To hate the boy from District 1, who also appears so vulnerable in death, seems inadequate. It's the Capitol I hate, for doing this to all of us... I want to do something, right here, right now, to shame them, to make them accountable, to show the Capitol that whatever they do or force us to do there is a part of every tribute they can't own. That Rue was more than a piece in their Games. And so am I. (Collins 236-7)

If we understand the purpose of the Games to be the abolition of individuality amongst Panem's youngest, most vulnerable citizens, then Katniss's actions defy the Capitol by asserting the humanity of every tribute. She highlights the authentic selfhood of the individual, the piece of every person that cannot be owned or domineered. Framing death as something that is both tragic and constitutes honor, Katniss changes the way that the people of Panem understand the Games, and in turn, holds both the Capitol and the spectators accountable. Her use of Nature as guidance for this act of resistance is not lost on readers who have grown to recognize the relationship between Emerson's, Thoreau's, and Collins's works. The colorful flowers used to cover Rue's body serve to ground them both in the Natural world and its intensely connective forces. This moment marks the first time in the novel that readers observe vulnerability at its true capacity.

Katniss's resistance, in the form of vulnerability, is eventually met with a small, yet rather significant, unraveling of Panem's competitive society. Katniss and Peeta's romance in the

arena reveals the benevolent nature of the people of Panem, the humanity that has long been suppressed by the authority of the Capitol. After their first kiss, Katniss thinks, “Surely, [the people of District 12] are excited about Peeta and me, especially now that we’re together. If I close my eyes, I can imagine their shouts at the screens, urging us on” (Collins 289). Though spectators are intended to root for the complete demolition of social and romantic alliances, it is evident to Katniss that the people of Panem can and will sympathize with her will to protect the person she loves. When both Katniss and Peeta eventually leave the arena alive, the nation’s concept of isolated selfhood is inevitably tarnished.

In an exclusive interview with Suzanne Collins and her publisher, David Levithan,<sup>28</sup> Collins reveals her inspiration for the novel. While flipping through channels on the TV, Collins went from mindlessly watching reality TV to watching footage of the war in Iraq (Collins 381). It was then that she decided that *The Hunger Games* would be her next attempt at portraying the just war debate.<sup>29</sup> Rooted in her own personal convictions, Collins set out to write a novel that encouraged, even urged, young readers to follow after their own and to consider the ways in which their complacency contributes to the problem. In the words of Susan Dominus, Collins’s novel is an “overt critique of violence” (Dominus). The novel and its subsequent sequels make warfare “deeply personal, forcing readers to contemplate their own roles as desensitized voyeurs” (Dominus).

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<sup>28</sup> This interview can be found in the special anniversary edition of Collins’s *The Hunger Games* (2018).

<sup>29</sup> As Collins explains it in her interview, “Just war theory had evolved over thousands of years in an attempt to define what circumstances give you the moral right to wage war and what is acceptable behavior within that war and its aftermath” (Collins 382).

Though this interview provides a scholarly perspective to the novel's relevance to current events, the question remains; how does Collins draw her adolescent audience in? How does she entice young readers who may not understand, or even be aware of, the just war theory? Though not all (or perhaps any) adolescent readers can identify with a world like Panem, they can undoubtedly relate to a world in which the social order is cut-throat and rooted in a merciless hierarchy. Modern adolescence is itself a kind of dystopian warfare. The years of late-middle and early-high school are a "viper pit" (Mills), one in which the adolescent's only goal is to survive. The consequences of not fitting in are, of course, far less dire than in Collins's novel. And yet, to an adolescent, whose life revolves around identity construction, they appear to be life or death. Laura Mills refers to the Games as "a fever-dream allegory of the adolescent social experience" (Mills). As she explains, the Games "lack that essential quality of the totalitarian spectacle: ideological coherence" (Mills). Their rules are completely arbitrary and consistently changing. Tributes are trained as celebrities and are showered with expensive gifts and food before they inevitably embark on a barbaric killing spree. Adolescence seems to follow this very same structure. Elusive social standards force adolescents to engage in an uncivilized game of social survival in which their honest selfhood is actively suppressed.

*The Hunger Games* can certainly be studied independently. However, to ignore the fact that it is the first novel in a trilogy would be to misjudge the purpose of the novel as a whole. At the conclusion of the novel, Katniss's work is far from over. *The Hunger Games*, much like "No Bikini," presses on the importance of persistent defiance in pursuit of a truly Emersonian selfhood. Katniss undergoes a *Walden*-like experience, one which relies upon her intention to rejoin Panem's society with a deeper understanding of herself and those around her. Her use of social power, though significant, does not end when she leaves the arena. Thus, resistance, as

Collins and Thoreau understand it, is an infinite cycle of vulnerability and self-exploration. As Katniss remembers her father telling her as a young girl, “As long as you find yourself, you’ll never starve” (Collins 52).

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*When you come home from college for Christmas break, everything is different. Your closet is empty. Well, not exactly empty. It has become a graveyard of old clothes. The sweaters that you decided were even too ratty to wear to your 7 a.m. lectures. The jean shorts that, when you tried them on in August, hugged your waist so tight that your stomach spilled over the waistband like waves in a tsunami. You discover your old band t-shirts, drenched in mascara tears and Walmart perfume, and you laugh at how childish you once were. You try to squeeze into your old prom dress as beads of sweat drip down your spine. You swear to yourself that the zipper must be broken. Putting on these clothes feels like putting on a costume. Like pretending to be somebody else.*

*Later that night, you get into bed. Your sheets still reek of the Victoria’s Secret body spray you wore every day in the ninth grade. You start to suffocate under clouds of peppermint and warm vanilla. When the lights are off, you look around your room. You begin to notice things that never bothered you before—a crack shaped like a lightning bolt where the wall meets the ceiling, the sound of your blinds knocking incessantly against the windows, a coffee ring on the surface of your white desk. They begin to eat away at you. You wonder how you had lived with them for so long.*

*To distract yourself, you think about that fact that this is the first time sleeping in your childhood bed since losing your virginity. You remember doing laundry the morning after, embarrassment oozing out of every pore as you watched your blood-stained sheets thrash in circles in the communal washing machine. Your bed at school has seen parts of you that your bed at home never will. Somehow, this feels like the ultimate betrayal, as if you threw a party and forgot to invite it. You lay in bed, spine tucked, back pressed into the mattress, arms and legs tense at your sides. As if you are invading a space that is no longer yours. You are a foreigner in your own room. A woman in a room designed for a child. You slide down toward the bottom of the mattress as your head slips off the pillowcase and your feet droop over the edge of the bed that is too small for your growing body. You fall asleep.<sup>30</sup>*

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<sup>30</sup> This piece of short prose, titled “Christmas Break,” was originally written for Dr. David Stevens’s “Fiction Writing” course at the University of Richmond (Fall 2020). The piece has been edited for the purpose of this Thesis.

#### IV. Conclusion

Once perceived or imagined, the self implied doubleness, multiplicity. For what knows the awareness of the self if not the self?: division as premise and price of consciousness. I may be fixed in social rank, but that does not exhaust, it may not even quite define, who I am or what I “mean.” By asserting the presence of the self, I counterpose to all imposed definitions of place and function a persuasion that I harbor *something else*, utterly mine—a persuasion that I possess a center of individual consciousness that is active and, to some extent, coherent. In my more careless moments, I may even suppose this center to be inviolable, though anyone who has paid attention to modern history know this is not so.

– Irving Howe, 1991 <sup>31</sup>

Though the literatures of the American Renaissance and contemporary YA literatures explore the self within vastly different sociopolitical contexts, their concluding theories of selfhood are connected to one another in rather unexpected ways. Emerson, Thoreau, Coyote, and Collins each approach their interpretations of literary selfhood with an acute awareness of the world around them. Thus, the ways in which each literary period conceives of the self reveals the ever-changing landscapes of the social world. Despite shifts in political, social, and ethical norms, the self has prevailed throughout time, continuing to evolve alongside societal standards and maintaining an honest integrity to the social world and its existing preoccupations. To reconcile these differences in the self as it has changed over time, Coyote and Collins search for aspects of the Renaissance self that are still relevant today, extrapolating these ideas to fit an environment that is radically different from Emerson’s and Thoreau’s.

These aspects—namely transparency, vulnerability and resistance—act as through-line, connecting the Renaissance self to modern understandings of adolescent selfhood and identity construction. Emerson and Thoreau, writing at a time when defining the self was the only way to

<sup>31</sup> From Irving Howe’s “The Self in Literature” (1991), p. 57.

cope with America's divided society and uncertain future, found peace in knowing a connection Nature facilitates profound unity amid the nation's ambiguous politics, social norms, and moral dilemmas of the country. Through transparency, Emerson discovered the spiritual richness of embracing that which cannot be controlled and trusting in Nature's divine spirit to sustain and support the Soul. Emerson argues that Nature is the constant that the self is guaranteed to rely on. Building upon this idea, Thoreau reminds his readers that Nature's consistency allows the self to adapt to a wide range of social environments. Through resistance, Thoreau argues, the individual is able to combat new or emerging sociopolitical systems that are inherently unjust. These systems becomes a detriment to one's ability to access the spiritual purity which Nature provides. To defy society, however, is far more than an embrace of Emerson's transparency. In Thoreau's words, resistance requires that one's virtue be entirely at stake. Thoreau's writing renders a more comprehensive notion of transparency, referred to as vulnerability, one which continues to be relevant in the eyes of contemporary YA authors discovers an idea that becomes slightly more relevant to today's social world.

As Butler suggests, vulnerability is an integral part of human nature. To fear our inevitable precariousness is therefore futile. The self is only vulnerable when, as Thoreau so claims, one has put themselves at stake. In other words, one cannot lose that which they never had. Loss is therefore both inevitable and necessary. It indicates a foundation of sincerity and human connectivity. With this knowledge, vulnerability becomes something which is deeply beautiful, rather than something that must be feared.

The writings of Emerson and Thoreau have been profoundly influential in the YA genre's conception of the self. Coyote expands upon Thoreau's concept of vulnerability by involving Trites's social power in their discussion of adolescent selfhood. They write of vulnerability as an

active choice, one in which we willingly embrace the precariousness of identity construction within a world that is governed by the limitations of binary thinking. Through vulnerability and the fight against prejudice, the adolescent develops a more profound appreciation for their identity. The word fight becomes important to Coyote's view of the self as well. Coyote's writing demonstrates the ways in which vulnerability is not only difficult but also an emotionally taxing process. Social power, however, provides the individual to persevere. Vulnerability is, itself, a form of resistance by which the self unravels structures that inhibit true and honest selfhood.

Collins's work continues along a similar line of thinking. Her novel implores readers to consider resistance as an act of deeply-rooted trust. In order to effectively defy an oppressive social system, one must abandon all fear and surrender themselves to the network of our shared humanity. Acting upon one's personal convictions exposes the way in which others have allowed theirs to be defined for them. Collins's protagonist inspires a social and personal revolution amongst the citizens of Panem by refusing to conform to the Capitol's forced social structure.

Consider the words of Walt Whitman one more: "I am large, I contain multitudes" (Whitman 1356). The influence of American Renaissance literatures on contemporary YA literatures demonstrates the impressive accuracy Whitman's model of the self. According to Whitman, the self is vast. It leaves space for revision, contradiction, and a multitude of interpretations. Thus, no singular definition of the self can ever be correct. We cannot look to American Renaissance literatures for a definitive model of selfhood because it is connected to a social network which has and continues to evolve. And yet, we cannot look to YA literature for an answer, either. The evasiveness of the self is directly correlated with the world's expansion of knowledge, technology, and sociopolitical understandings. Perhaps twenty years from now YA

literature's model of selfhood will feel just as distant as the American Renaissance's. The question, then, is why we attempt to define the self at all? Why try to capture an idea that is characteristically enigmatic? Conceptions of the self throughout literary and civil history becomes the theory of the self today. One cannot be understood without the other. As Howe's scholarship suggests, the literary selfhood will forever be an incomplete concept. Therein lies the beauty of the self. Studies of the self will continue to be revised time and time again, mimicking the ongoing development of the individual throughout their social existence. Continuing to view and comment on the ever-changing model of the self therefore allows us, as readers and scholars, to gain a deeper understanding of ourselves and our roles in our social environments.



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