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Experimenting with adulthood: liminal play in young adult literature.

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Experimenting with Adulthood:
Liminal Play in Young Adult Literature

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Abstract

Play is an unavoidable element of literature intended for younger audiences. Many scholars have taken up the task of describing, analyzing, and criticizing displays of play in young adult (YA) literature. Involved in discussions of play are the concepts of performance and innocence. Another way of examining play is through the characters' state of liminality. Their in-between status provides them with the possibility to push against social expectations, escape the realities of their daily lives, and subvert authority figures. Because characters occupy both childhood and adulthood in terms of societal expectations, they possess some positive and some negative qualities of both categorizations. This study analyzes Paul Zindel's *The Pigman*, Benjamin Sáenz's *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*, Jenny Han's *To All the Boys I've Loved Before*, Patrick Ness' *The Rest of Us Just Live Here*, Nicola Yoon's *The Sun is Also a Star*, and John Green's *Turtles All the Way Down*. These texts, while all contemporary, tackle several social and personal issues through various subgenres, including historical fiction, romance, and magical realism. My argument is informed by, and builds upon, relevant scholarship on childhood, adolescence, play, performance, liminality, and innocence. Bakhtin's carnival theory also informs the ways in which adolescent characters subvert their authority figures through their play. Through specific examples of language play, experimentation with drugs and alcohol, and romantic performance, it can be argued that liminal, adolescent play invites characters to test the boundaries and enjoy the privileges of adulthood.

Lay Summary

This study examines how play and liminality appear in young adult literature. Play involves elements of pretend, performance, and nonsense, and liminality describes the state of being in between. In this case, adolescent characters are in between childhood and adulthood. These liminal characters use play to explore their surroundings, subvert authority figures, and come to have a deeper understanding of themselves as burgeoning adults. Additionally, this essay incorporates, and builds upon, relevant scholarship regarding both children's literature and young adult literature, specifically regarding play. Broken into three sections, I look at play in terms of language play, experimentation with drugs and alcohol, and romantic performance. These elements come together to show that liminal, adolescent play allows teenage characters to experiment with adulthood while also incorporating innocence and childhood.

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Introduction

"This train is a Magic Fucking Train speeding me from childhood (joy, spontaneity, fun) to adulthood (misery, predictability, absolutely no fun will be had by anyone)" (Yoon 2017). Daniel, the character in *The Sun is Also a Star* who so astutely compares the subway train to the end of his childhood, holds the opinion that childhood has an ending. He believes at some point he will cease to be a child and he will only be an adult. For him, that moment is hurdling towards him as he travels to his college admissions interview. Daniel does not consider the concept of liminality. There is no in between for Daniel; there is only a binary. He associates childhood with "joy, spontaneity, fun" and adulthood with "misery, predictability, absolutely no fun will be had by anyone" (43) His, and maybe most people's version of childhood revolves around play. When a child becomes an adult, they forsake their right to play, to have fun, and to enjoy life. Play, however, does not discriminate by age. While most adults do have responsibilities that limit how much they can play, is does not ceases to exist once a person reaches adulthood. Their play may be altered, but it does not disappear altogether.

Liminality describes the state of being in between. In his *Keywords for Children's Literature* essay, Micahel Joseph asserts, "liminal has two common usages when coupled with being. The primary one, implying a person or character experiencing liminality, liminality… often pendant to the phrase 'liminal existence'" (139-140). Young adult (YA) literature consistently portrays characters that find themselves in the ambiguous time where they struggle to identify themselves as adults or children. Many scholars agree on this fact. Children's literature researcher Kimberley Reynolds describes childhood as specifically ambiguous and says it is hard to define the boundaries of childhood, adolescences, and adulthood. Whether a bildungsroman or not, the central character, and many side characters, will go through some

degree of change before the end of the story. This change does not mean they have officially left childhood and entered adulthood, though, that is unless there is an epilogue that showcases the adult characters. For the most part, however, YA novels end with the characters having resolved some crucial problem or scenario, but they are still very much liminal because they have not become fully adult. As Marah Gubar states, "There is no one moment when we suddenly flip over from being a child to being an adult" ("Risky Business" 454). They have learned lessons and they have grown, but they are still children in some ways. Even when a novel is not explicitly didactic, the characters themselves have learned from their experiences with play.

Daniel associates childhood with fun; he claims all fun will end with the advent of his sudden thrust into adulthood. He relishes in the idea of play. He does not want to forfeit play for a life focused on a career or settling down. Children are encouraged to be playful, so it is logical for YA literature to grapple with themes of losing that playfulness. However, while characters in YA novels may express anxieties over their impending adult life, they still enact play, often attempting to sever themselves from their parents, and other authority figures, in the search for freedom. Patricia Runk Sweeney asserts that parent-child relations require separation as the children grow older (40-41), which brings about problems and the freedom to grapple with those issues. In fact, throughout *The Sun is Also a Star* Daniel encourages Natasha, his female counterpart, to escape her problems through play. As they push against parental and societal expectations, they sing karaoke, travel across the city, miss school, and fall in love, all of which involve some elements of play. What they look for is power and autonomy in their own lives, and they are not alone in that quest. Every character examined in this study searches for agency in some regard with play being one route to grasping that goal.

Adolescent play and liminality are intricately intertwined due to how both qualities inform the nature of adolescence. Members of this age group are not yet adults, so they still have the freedom and the opportunities to take risks and chances for the sake of entertainment and fun. However, they must also think about their futures and the impeding adulthood that may limit opportunities for play at times. Daniel and Natasha display how authority figures will place expectations on teenagers, but how they also have chances to subvert that authority still without, at least in Daniel's case since he comes from a fairly established immigrant family, major repercussions. Natasha's experience as an undocumented immigrant from Jamaica facing deportation highlights what happens when circumstances force a teenager into adulthood earlier than maybe she should be. Her instances of play threaten her chances of staying in America, though there was ultimately nothing that could have been done about that because of governmental red tape. In fact, her playful acts are still subversive due to how they allow her to continue pursuing a path to staying in America, which is something neither her parents nor the various government agents think is possible. Daniel's play day allows him to explore careers and loves that his parents would not approve of. Because adolescent play is liminal, they have the chances to act impulsively and irrationally, or seek other options, where adults would rather make more traditional choices.

Wrapped up in the idea of play is the concept of performance. Gubar incorporates the idea of performance into her theory of the "kinship model" of childhood. She writes about the degree to which play influenced the emergence of professional children's theater ("Risky Business" 452), which proves how integral performing is to the idea of childhood. Amy Pattee's "Between Youth and Adulthood: Young Adult and New Adult Literature" cites Gubar's kinship model and extends it by saying claiming that young adults are performers and producers in their

realities (227). Of course, this is complicated by the fact that adult authors create these realities, but in the context of the novels the characters often find agency in their performances of language, partying, and romances. Their liminal existence opens the opportunities for them to perform as adults, while also staying in the realm of play and innocence of children.

Innocence is a state of unknowingness that many young adults feel as they start to come into their own identities as adults. The liminal stage of development can be confusing because of the mix of lack of knowledge and the desire for more knowledge. Gubar asserts that innocence is considered, possibly incorrectly, one of the defining features of childhood ("Innocence" 123), and Perry Nodelman declares that texts about childhood will focus on the unknowing innocence held by children (77). Then, texts about young adults will focus on the intermediary stage where innocence begins to fade in favor of adult knowledge. Sometimes this is helpful, as in *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* because it helps Aristotle relieve some of the anger he feels regarding his father's past and his brother's imprisonment. In other cases, it can be detrimental, like *To All the Boys I've Loved Before* because Lara Jean loses her innocence when she comes to understand how cruel people can be when they are jealous after Peter's ex-girlfriend spreads rumors about Lara Jean and Peter having sex in a hot tub. A conversation about play and liminality would not be complete without acknowledging the role of innocence in motivating some playful actions.

Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque provides assistance in examining the play of adolescents because it describes the ways in which characters will behave when provided with an opportunity to subvert their normal roles. Lynn E. Cohen uses carnival theory, mainly Bakhtin's ideas in *Rabelais and His World* (1984) and *Problems of Dostoyevsky's Poetics* (1984), to analyze the behaviors of preschool students, but many of her ideas are

transferable to YA literature and the play found there. One thing she notes is Brian Sutton-Smith, a play theorist, "views play as imaginative, spontaneous, unpredictable, flexible, and powerful. These same features also define Bakhtin's notion of carnival and, indeed, make play from the Bakhtinian perspective inappropriate in the eyes of some adults precisely because play is not rational and it escapes adult control" (Cohen 177). Adolescent play falls under the same umbrella: it possesses these qualities, which makes it hard for authoritative adult characters to accept. Employing the Bakhtinian framework of the carnival invites a deeper analysis of how the characters are taking on roles when they play for the purpose of rebelling against their normal roles in life. This idea also presents the notion that child-like play may tend to be more unwieldy and dangerous in the sense that it is irrational at times. Cohen quotes Sutton-Smith again, saying, "When children play, they sometimes engage in chaotic experiences that include a loss of control, surprise, and disequilibrium" (qtd. 184). Very few examples from the chosen texts will revolve around an absolute loss of control; they will, however, display liminality by mixing this lack of impulse control that Bakhtin accounts for with adult themes and actions.

This study will examine how various YA novels explore liminal play and what that allows characters to perform and experience in their adolescent state. Woven throughout is a discussion of subversion and the complexities of being an adolescent character who is still beholden to adult-established rules. Additionally, this essay attempts to prove that play is essential to defining adolescence as a state of being. Without play, adolescents lean more towards adulthood due to the decisions they are making and how they reason through those decisions, though a few of the adult characters within the novel provide instances of play also. Play reintroduces childhood and allows teenage characters to maintain their impulsivity and irrationality in a safe environment that invites exploration of the self. Play showcases self-

realization in YA literature as it is often through instances of play where the characters learn about themselves and how they want to fit in their world.

This essay is divided into three parts that examine a different aspect of young adult play. Each section relies on close readings, scholarship, and cultural analysis to demonstrate the potency of play in the texts. Section one delves into the intricacies of the language play of adolescents through the analysis of games that rely on language, cursing, and self-deprecating humor, all three of which are features of teenage language use to varying degrees. The second section examines the usage of drugs and alcohol and how they either inhibit or prohibit play depending on context, excess, and usage. The final section focuses on romance and play, with specific attention to performance and what influence adulthood has on the adolescent perception of romance.

The books selected for this study are mostly contemporary in nature with a wide publication range. Paul Zindel's *The Pigman* (1968), the oldest novel in this research, shows that the concepts of play and liminality allowing for a deeper understanding of characters is not a recent development. Considered one of the earliest YA novels, *The Pigman* is a precursor to contemporary YA literature, and as such, sets the stage for many of the observations made about the other novels. The other analyses will focus on Benjamin Sáenz's *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* (2012), Jenny Han's *To All the Boys I've Loved Before* (2014), Patrick Ness' *The Rest of Us Just Live Here* (2015), Nicola Yoon's *The Sun is Also a Star* (2017), and John Green's *Turtles All the Way Down* (2018). These books represent a glimpse at the diversity the YA genre has come to be known for. Characters run the gamut of immigration status, sexual orientation, mental health stability, and class. Regardless of

background, the characters all exhibit play in various ways that prove liminality and play work together for the purpose of self-exploration.

The Pigman focuses on John and Lorraine, two fifteen-year-olds who pull a prank on their elderly neighbor, Mr. Pignanti. The result of the prank is John and Lorraine become increasingly closer to Mr. Pignati. Through shopping trips and zoo visits, the three come to find comfort and support in each other, something none of them have at home. John's father is overbearing and expectant of his son who aspires to be an actor and does not try in school. His mother is a one-dimensional character that only revolves around cooking and cleaning, which annoys John immensely. Lorraine's mother is a home health nurse who has a phobia of men, which she attempts to pass along to her daughter. Mr. Pignati, a widower, lives alone and relishes the company of the two teenagers until they betray him by throwing a party at his house while he is hospitalized. Romance, drinking, and language play permeate this novel, and careful examination of these two main characters show how important a secluded space is for the purpose of play, as well as the involvement of language at constructing performative identities. Examples of play throughout Zindel's novel showcase how important they are to characters exploring their burgeoning adult identities in a somewhat safe space, although consequences are not non-existent.

Following in the footsteps of *The Pigman*, Sáenz's *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* tells the story of Aristotle and Dante as they try to figure out their romantic feelings for each other, as well as how they fit into their families. In this case, however, the novel follows two boys as they come to terms with their sexuality and how that forms their identities. Told from Aristotle's point of view, the novel focuses mostly on his internal struggle with his sexuality and his confusion over not comprehending his father's pain after the Vietnam

War and the reasons his brother is in prison. Dante's parents are open with him, but his trouble comes when he is more accepting of his sexuality and faces abuse and discrimination from the community. Their friendship weaves together their complex emotions and circumstances to evaluate gay identity in the southwest during the 1980s. The boys play with romance, substances, and language in order to experiment with their desires. Their tendency to seek out aspects of adulthood with the innocence of children further demonstrates how liminality and play are intricately interwoven for the sake of serving as a precursor to adulthood.

Unlike Aristotle and Dante who often suppress their romantic feelings through play, Lara Jean and Peter Kavinsky's relationship in *To All the Boys I've Loved Before* is the epitome of romantic play. After Lara Jean's love letters get mailed out when they were supposed to stay private, she and Peter start a fake relationship in order to distract from Lara Jean's feelings for her older sister's ex-boyfriend and to make Peter's ex-girlfriend jealous. Through their several months long fling they realize they do have actual feelings for each other. With romance being the main theme of the novel, Han's book thoroughly demonstrates the ways romance and play rely on each other in YA literature. Through their performance of a romance they highlight how play often idolizes adulthood depictions of romance but deals with it through play because of the way they attempt to enact romance through constructed scenarios.

The Rest of Us Just Live Here is set in a town where cliché fantasy plots from YA literature take place but focuses on the regular students who are not involved with those "indie kids," which are caricatures of the characters from the YA fantasy genre who are typically eclectic and get chosen to save the world from unknown forces. Mike, Mel, Henna, and Jared strive to finish their senior year of high school before the indie kids blow up the school. While love and substance consumption appear in this novel, the writing foregrounds their wit and social

awareness through their language. In a self-deprecating way, this novel employs humor to explore the state of being liminal and trying to understand what happens after high school ends. The language throughout the novel is often sarcastic and facetious and provides examples of how adolescents use language to comment on their own mental instability and the social scenarios in which they find themselves.

Nicola Yoon's *The Sun is Also a Star* covers a single day where Daniel and Natasha meet, fall in love, and then are eventually separated. Daniel, an aspiring Korean-American poet, spends the day trying to get out of a university interview and Natasha, a Jamaican teenager with a penchant for scientific thinking, tries to stop her family's deportation. Their play revolves around riding around New York City and ignoring their respective problems. Subversive themes weave themselves throughout the novel due to the way Daniel and Natasha use their play to push against their parents' desires. Additionally, as the day goes along, they fall more in love with each other. Their romance serves as play since it helps them avoid their problems and remove themselves from the real world, even if only for a short time. Both Daniel and Natasha showcase how liminality troubles their decision making, especially when they have to make decisions that will impact their adult life but avoid those choices through play.

Lastly, *Turtles All the Way Down* explores Aza Holmes' mental health. Though not overtly, the language in the novel potently shows how language play displays liminality because, like *The Rest of Us Just Live Here*, the characters use sarcastic language to assert their opinions about their surroundings. Aza and her friends' sarcasm highlights their awareness of social structures and hierarchies and how they use humor to comment on their place in the system. Aza's best friend, Daisy, specifically uses her wit to point out how her position in a lower-class family is unequal to those around her.

Overall, these six novels give a glimpse at the wider selection of YA literature, though it in no way covers every aspect of the genre. This essay looks at the characters in their novel and examines their play to make the point that adolescent play provides characters a means by which to explore and experiment with adulthood through romance, substance consumption, and language, the characters exhibit how they can be subversive and push against the authority figures in their lives. Additionally, play is often informed by innocence or will make the character less innocent as it introduces them to new aspects of adulthood. The concepts of adolescent liminality and play are complex and speak to the larger notion of how authors represent teenage character in literature intended for teenagers. Gubar writes about how critical writing about YA literature can be prescriptive in many ways ("Risky Business" 451). Analyzing play is not immune to that fact, so it is important to not claim that the representation of play in YA literature is the only representation. It is, however, one way of examining how authors present play to their audiences. Childhood and adulthood are not two boxes to be forced into, and YA literature works to create characters where this in-between space is presented as a space to play and experiment with different identities and modes of expression.

Language Play

Language play permeates young adult fiction, especially contemporary texts. All novels rely on language to create meaning and tell a story, and YA is no exception. Language constructs many emotions for characters, humor being important to the conversation of play. Authors allow adolescent characters to play with language in order to cope with troubling situations, counter friends or adult figures, as well as foster a sense of joviality and comradery between characters. One easily observable outcome of employing language play is how other characters react to a

statement or joke with laughter being one of the most obvious reactions. The subject of jokes may provide insight into the liminal state of adolescents. Stereotypical teenager jokes poke fun at minorities, disabilities, political issues, and adult themes. But the fact that teens, and some adults though not often in the selected texts, talk about these topics through joking implies their unease with them. They must rely on childlike humor to cope with something that may be confusing or troubling for them. Another aspect of language play is the degree to which adolescent characters use curse words to test boundaries. Often in a joking manner, teen characters will explore a more adult vocabulary for humors sake or for challenging authority figures. This subversive use of language results from adolescents using their liminality to their advantage. They use their language to fight against "the powers that be" and play, which are qualities more often associated with childhood. However, the level to which they can express themselves through language, which varies from person to person, and the words they choose to incorporate in their vocabulary, allows them to view themselves as burgeoning adults. They can subvert authority figures and seek an expressive outlet with their language, which gives them some freedom and independence.

Cohen's application of Bakhtin's carnival theory focuses quite a bit on how the subjects use language in their play, which can be extended to adolescents and their own use of language for in their liminal state they still hold to some of the qualities of childhood play she describes. She quotes Bakhtin, saying, "They grant the right not to understand, the right to confuse, to tease, to hyperbolize life; the right to parody others while talking, the right not to be taken literally, not to be oneself " (qtd. in Cohen 183). Through their experimentation with language, teenagers can act as other than themselves, as is evident in *The Pigman* when they attempt to adopt new personas in a realistic way, but ultimately fail. They can also comment on social

standings, like the characters in *Turtles All the Way Down.* Characters experiment with their language, creating jokes and employing sarcasm in order to escape their everyday lives and provide social critique. As is evident in *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*, cursing and unsavory language also becomes a means of subversion. Aristotle and Dante know their parents don't appreciate profanity, so when they are alone, they choose to use it in rebellion. The characters are liminal in their language play because they must have a certain social awareness to comment on authority figures, but also in the way they acknowledge their language as a feature of adulthood that they may or may not have access to yet. Ultimately, through the lens of Bakhtin's idea of carnival, novels explore how YA characters are liminal in their language play, which allows them to operate as authority figures in their own personal circles while maintaining a fun, playful aspect of childhood through their language.

Language Games

Zindel's *The Pigman* explores language play in a direct way through the "telephone" marathon John and Lorraine play with their friends. The point of the game is to pick a random number from the phone book, call it, and see how long you can keep the answerer on the line (Zindel 21). Lorraine's turn at the game first puts them in contact with Mr. Pignati. She introduces herself as Miss Truman with the Howard Avenue Charities (25), so already she presents herself as older than fifteen, her actual age, for the sake of a game. She uses as fake British accent to mask her voice, but also possibly to sound older. Additionally, before she can even explain what her "charity" is or why she is calling she bursts out laughing. The combination of pretending to be someone she is not and coming up with a fake charity on the spot is too much for her and she almost loses the game then. To cover up her mistake, she tells him, "there's nothing funny, Mr. Pignati… it's just that one of the girls… here at the office just told me a joke,

and it was very funny" (25-26), and then guides him back to her "serious business" (25-26). The irony of calling their fake charity "serious business" may be the most intriguing piece of language play she uses during this game. There is nothing serious about making prank calls and attempting to get people to talk for long amounts of time, but that is serious business to Lorraine. In order to fully adopt her persona, she must convince Mr. Pignati that she is a legitimate charity worker with an actual foundation to which he can donate money. If she were to call it something other than "serious business" he may not be fooled by her verbal game. Her chosen character of a charity worker demonstrates the tension between her game and the performance she must give to win the game. A child seems more likely than an adult to make a prank phone call, but an adult persona is the best choice for keeping a real adult on the line. Lorraine takes part in the game of a child but, by creating a persona through language, succeeds by acting as an adult. This becomes important in the novel because John and Lorraine maintain their fake position as charity workers for almost half of the story. It allows them to spend time with Mr. Pignati, which is not exactly charity, but serves as an escape for the three of them in different ways. Through her performance as a charity worker, she opens up the possibility for herself and John to perform a type of charity work in spending time with Mr. Pignati, though they ultimately play throughout the entire process, which leads to a kind of self-realization.

John and Lorraine purposefully use their language to craft new characters for themselves, which is overtly play, while *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* demonstrates how adolescents use language for play even when the words being said are not particularly funny or interesting. Aristotle watches it hail outside when Dante tells him they need to "have a conversation" (Sáenz 103). A back and forth commences where the boys ask each other questions about their favorite colors, favorite cars, and favorite songs. Before they start

Aristotle asks, “Is this like a game?” to which Dante replies “yes” (103). This is not a typical conversation, especially one for friends who have already known each other for a while. When Aristotle asks what he is being interviewed for and Dante says the position of best friend, he responds “I thought I already had the job” (104). While they have decided their impromptu interview, which relies on language, is their game, the riskier example of language play comes after the interview has ended. After Aristotle compliments Dante on his potty mouth because he calls Aristotle an “arrogant son of a bitch,” Dante says, “sometimes don’t you just want to stand up and yell out all the cuss words you’ve learned?” to which Ari responds, “everyday” (104).

The cussing started as a form of play because Dante was being sarcastic with Aristotle over whether or not he was already his best friend, but it transitions into a meta conversation about how adolescents use language to express themselves. In a novel where the two main characters often battle with anger and how-to best deal with their emotions, language play is one outlet they have. However, they still view cussing as a wrong they should not commit. Their liminality is evident in how they view profanity; they know the words, but they are not yet in a position where they can use them. One exchange between Dante and his mother explain why the boys may view cussing as an activity to be performed just in the presence of peers:

> “Nothing. It’s just that that most smart people are perfect shits.”
>
> “Dante!” his mother said.
>
> “Yeah, Mom, I know, the language.”
>
> “Why is it you like to cuss so much, Dante?”
>
> “It’s fun,” he said.
>
> Mr. Quintana laughed. “It *is* fun,” he said. But then he said, “that kind of fun needs to happen when your mother isn’t around.” (Sáenz 42)

Throughout the novel both of their mothers chastise them for their occasional cursing. They desire to use their knowledge of offensive language to express themselves; they act subversively because they know their mothers would disapprove of their language choice. Their sarcasm sheds light on the true problem, which is they cannot express themselves as they would like due to their liminal existence as adolescence.

Sweeney's article about self-discovery in M.E. Kerr's novels explains the importance of satisfaction with the self in YA literature. She writes, "and in every instance, in [Kerr's] work, the recourse is the same: one must take charge of one's own life" (Sweeney 38). Through the language games described above, the characters come to have a better understanding of themselves. Even in *The Pigman*, through the language game they play John and Lorrain come to have a deeper understanding of their connection to each other and Mr. Pignati. Aristotle and Dante use language to understand their friend better, to have a deeper knowledge of each other. Through coming to know the other they come to terms with their own sexuality. Their cursing also contributes to their idea of self in relation to their parents. Both examples hint at the characters' impending adulthood because, while not crucial, it is helpful to be comfortable with oneself as an adult. These four characters use language to explore adulthood and come to self-realizations about themselves.

Social Commentary Through Language Play

One use of humor in YA literature is for the purpose of commenting on social structures and authority figures. As Bakhtin explained, the carnival allowed participants to mock and subvert their authority figures (Cohen 181). Several characters display this social commentary through jokes and sarcasm. In YA literature, adults tend to either comply with the structures put in place over them or they discuss them in either a complaining or constructive manner.

Lorraine's mom in *The Pigman* is constantly complaining about her patients and worrying over the way men will treat Lorraine. Both sets of parents in *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* understand the struggles their sons will face as young gay boys in the 1980s, but they do not use humor to discuss such topics. Aristotle's father does use jokes when talking about the government, however, which breaks the pattern of adult complacency. Their parents also use humor when talking to their children. Parents do not use humor in their language the same way their adolescent children do, but they are not completely void of comedy in their discourses. The liminal nature of adolescence allows characters room to understand and critique their social standings without the potential to cause such harm as an adult might in a public display of disapproval.

John Green's 2017 novel *Turtles All the Way Down* highlights how young adults comment on social hierarchies, like wealth and status, through somewhat macabre humor. Aza's mother is a widowed high school math teacher, but even then, they still live in a house and Aza has her own car even though it belonged to her father before he died. Aza's best friend Daisy, on the other hand, is of a lower class and lives in an apartment where she shares a room with her younger sister. Davis, a wealthy friends Aza knows from summer camp, lives in a mansion and has several employees who work there. Daisy is less than enthused at Aza's evaluation that Davis is overwhelmed by his staff, saying, "Indeed, Holmsey, however does one bear the pain of overenthusiastic servants?" (Green 50). Instead of blatantly critiquing Davis with serious observations, she uses sarcasm to point out how privileged he is. Though sarcasm is sometimes complicated to read in printed literature, the context of this conversation clarifies Daisy chooses it for this musing. Instead of blatantly pointing out Davis' privilege, she uses sarcasm to ridicule him for not appreciating what he has. Daisy subverts the expected discourse surrounding a peer

that has servants. One might expect her to be jealous or speak wishfully about having servants of her own. Rather, she points out how Davis' feeling of being smothered by his servants could be seen as ungrateful. Her statement makes her feel self-satisfied and causes Aza to laugh, so it clearly had the response she wanted. Liminal humor means she observes the unfair structures around her and talks about them in a way that gives her the satisfaction of displaying her own intelligence. Bakhtin connects humor and language to authoritative structures and discourses, which parallels the examples above. Cohen quotes education scholar Carol D. Lee, saying, "Lee describes carnival as serving a ritualized response to authoritative structure 'in which humor serves to undermine authoritative dominant discourses'" (Cohen 192). The way Daisy uses language to critique Davis' position does just this: she undermines the discourse about privilege and wealth. She is not content with her standing and uses her language, in a playful manner, to express this.

Aristotle's father provides an example of an adult using his language for social commentary, which shows adolescent humor does parallel the adults in their lives. In a conversation Aristotle has with his mother where he calls her a fascist, he says his father calls Ronald Reagan a fascist, to which his mother replies, "don't take your father's jokes too literally, Ari. All he's saying is he thinks President Reagan is too heavy-handed" (Sáenz 68). Being a veteran of the Vietnam War, Aristotle's father understands the impact presidential actions can have on a person's life, and through this short exchange between Aristotle and his mother, it is evident the comments are meant to be humorous. At least Aristotle's mother sees them that way since she calls them jokes. Aristotle mimics his father by using the same terms as his father uses for his jokes. This example of an adult using humor similarly to the teenage characters displays how humor does not end with childhood and, in fact, may become an influence on those around

them. Aristotle's father, and Aristotle himself by mimicry, uses sarcasm similarly to Daisy. The use of sarcasm points towards an ability to think critically, with humor, about the systems that are a part of adult life.

Self-Deprecating Humor

Adolescents occasionally use humorous language to poke fun at their own mental instability, fears, and shortcomings. As with using language play to comment on social hierarchies, this self-deprecating humor relies on the fact that adolescents are aware enough of their own place in the world and can then cope with deviating from the norm through expressive language. That is, ultimately, what these different uses of humorous language do for the characters: it provides them with an expressive outlet. In a way, the teenage characters create a discourse about their own well-being that puts them in control of how they, and others, talk and think about their own personalities. Cohen explains how Bakhtin saw authoritarian discourse as creating one's own sense of subjectivity (Cohen 189), but not every character is able to control their impulses through a healthy discourse. Specifically, some of the characters struggle with their mental health and use language play to cope or fight back against the social stigma created by more dominant discourses. Aza's OCD is so overwhelming she ends up missing weeks of school after a hospital stay, and Mikey in *The Rest of Us Just Live Here,* though never hospitalized, seeks comfort and reassurance from his friends and family about his mental health. These two characters' language helps them talk about their struggles while also not succumbing to a harmful pattern of thinking that it should not be talked about. But mental health is not the only topic teens use humor to cope with. As mentioned above, YA characters run the gamut of income levels, immigration status, sexual orientation, as well as having parents with varying

degrees of involvement in their child's life. All of these could potentially lead to a character employing humor as a means of critiquing their own personality or situation.

Self-deprecating humor is not always self-reflection. It can also come from a friend and be a symbol of their close friendship. Mikey and Jared in *The Rest of Us Just Live Here* display this in how they make fun of each other's circumstances, but not in a way that is detrimental to each other's well-being. In fact, it usually makes them feel more understood as they have someone who can help them in times of need. Early in the novel, Mikey tells Jared how he thinks his OCD is worse again and he worries he might end up going crazy. Jared responds, "at least it'll piss off the senator" and then they both laugh (Ness 22). The senator, Mikey's mother, is obsessed with her public image and her children's mental health is vulnerable to criticism during the election cycle. Jared does not diminish Mikey's feelings that he might be going crazy, in a way he even confirms them as possible. He does point out the bright side of the possibility, though, when he highlights how it would make the senator mad. In this particular instance, Jared does not try to convince his friend he is not suffering, which may invalidate his concerns and mean Mikey would choose not to talk to Jared about it again in the future, but he approaches it with humor. Through looking for a humorous outlet for Mikey's anxieties, they show their bond and their closeness as friends.

Jared helps Mikey see the potential for subversion through his OCD, which, similar to the concept of using humor for social critique, involves an awareness of what the authority figures desire from young people. Through language, there can be a more pointed intent behind the play that is not as easily expressed in physical or other types of play. When a character makes a joke about another character or a situation, they are intentionally calling out the issue even when they use humor to do so. For example, Jared's father competes against Mikey's mom for state senator,

so they are both aware of how their public image impacts their parents' respective campaigns. Additionally, some of the characters are of legal voting age (Ness 67), which means they must start making decisions about their political involvement. By referring to his mom as "the senator" Jared is highlighting the fact there is an adult realm of politics that he and Mikey only somewhat fit into. Their liminality is evident in how they know their personalities and their choices will impact their parents' political aspirations, but they choose to subvert that in the way they use humor to comment on their perceived short comings. This verbiage represents the complicated relationship Jared feels with Mikey's mother. He chooses not to call her "mom" or "mother" as some close friends do with friends' parents. He doesn't even call her "Mrs. Mitchell." To call her by her title "senator" shows he views her more as a senator than a mother figure. As teenagers they can be aware of this awkward developmental stage where they can take care of and provide for themselves but are still beholden to their parents' lives and the wishes they have for them.

Liminal word play invites teenagers to react to tragedy by way of humor and they can express their worries and fears, without always being serious. In fact, it seems more common to cope with hardships through humor and joking because it helps ease the pain of what happened. Nathan, the new kid at school in *The Rest of Us Just Live Here,* experiences this when a student dies during his first week at school and some people suspect he might be the killer. He says, "a kid dies my first week" then glances at the others at the table before saying, "not that that's in any way suspicious" (Ness 32). Nathan knows about the rumors, so he makes fun of them by acknowledging how unfortunate it is that he moved to town only days before someone gets murdered. Not only does he use humor in the face of tragedy, something a young person may do to distract from the fear they feel at the event, but he brings it back on himself to comment on his

fabled involvement. In this instance, self-deprecation works in conjunction with a community tragedy to present an opportunity for Nathan to use humor as a coping mechanism.

Self-deprecating humor is another way of fighting against a sense of helplessness with a given situation. Sweeney writes, "what is important is that characters feel the freedom to fiddle with what may seem unchangeable, to recognize that they are never really 'stuck' unless they choose to be" (Sweeney 39). Mikey easily feels stuck in his OCD; that is one of his biggest concerns. Towards the beginning of the novel he shows Jared his hands, which are "wrinkled and cracked," and that starts a conversation about his worsening OCD.

> "I washed my hands seventeen times this morning after taking a piss before history class."
>
> Jared exhales a long, long time. "Dude."
>
> I just swallow. It's loud in the silence. "I think it's starting again."
>
> "it's probably just the pressure of everything," Jared offers. "Finals, your massively unrequited love for Henna-"
>
> "Don't say unrequited."
>
> "… your massively *invisible* love for Henna…"
>
> I hit him on the arm. It's friendly. More silence. (Ness 21)

It is important for Mikey that he does not feel stuck in a loop, and a healthy, though humorous discourse, makes that possible. Both Jared and Miceky acknowledge that his feelings for Henna are unreciprocated and might be causing part of his stress. In an attempt to distract him from the severity of his OCD, Jared directs him to something that he can make fun of even if it may contribute to his problems. The humor, even if it is deprecating, helps him evaluate the cause of his mental state.

Conclusion

Humor displays an adolescent character's liminality through their use of it to play games and create pretend scenarios for themselves, how they use it to comment on their own circumstances in a social hierarchy, and how they focus their humor on themselves and their friends as a means of self-deprecation. This tendency for humor to stand in for a serious conversation about mental health or unfair social structures indicates that these characters are liminal; they are aware of the issues and wish to discuss them, but they still revert to a child-like humor instead of facing them head on. Djenar et al (2018) describes how humor and jokes serve as a community builder between adolescents. Through using humor to talk about more serious subjects, they forge a bond and a community that revolves around supporting each other, even if that bond is unconventional. Adulthood functions, in part, because people act as a part of a community. Characters get a taste of adulthood when they work together to form their own unique communities through their language play.

Drugs and Alcohol in Play

Contemporary YA literature often attempts to be realistic, or as close to realistic as possible when adult authors are crafting the fictional tales within the texts. Gubar talks about the difficulty of describing adolescent nature in texts produced completely by adults: "namely, that adult discourse that claims merely to describe what children are like can in fact exert a prescriptive effect. In other words, it can function as a self-fulfilling prophecy" ("Risky Business" 451). Play is not immune from this treatment. Specifically, the use of alcohol and drugs in stories about underage characters could be read as representing the author's view as a representation of adolescent usage of drugs and alcohol. While there may be the problem of

modeling an example that is not “age appropriate” for their teen audiences (DiCicco 80), authors still create instances where, much like some realities, the young participants rely on alcohol or drugs for an escape from their daily lives. In many instances, once they have escaped those lives they can then play, as they see fit, to explore their boundaries. Playing with drugs or alcohol often leads to another form of play, but the choice to include them, almost using them as a sort of lubricant for play, reveals the importance of cultivating a mindset that allows for nonsense and exploration. Heyman and Shortsleeve relate nonsense to innocence (166). Alcohol simultaneously demolishes and comes from innocence; characters can no longer go back to before they had the drink, but it also brings them into a new innocence where they are the newcomers to adulthood. This is especially crucial when adolescent play is read as a precursor to adulthood where the characters explore elements of growing up and may need assistance in feeling comfortable during new experiences.

An analysis of a teenage character’s consumption of illicit substances will place their liminality on display. While still under the legal drinking age, characters will always be towing the line between legality and illegality, as well as childhood and adulthood. While intoxication often leads to play, it is also a display of play. Alcoholic substances are often off limits to the characters and enjoying them is another way adolescent character test boundaries as they come into adulthood. This section examines *The Pigman*, *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*, and *The Rest of Us Just Live Here* to demonstrate how drugs and alcohol interact with play, or produce play, and how the liminality of the characters invites them to partake in alcohol as a precursor to play or as a means of adopting elements of adulthood.

<u>Substances enabling play</u>

Alcohol and drugs foster adolescent to play for several reasons. Substances provide a way for the teen characters to rebel against social norms or authority figures. Underage substance use is typically discouraged by adults, so the act of partaking demonstrates how adolescents are still beholden to rules set by someone other than themselves and they desire to push against those boundaries. Alcohol and drugs provide an escape from everyday pressures and expectations. When allowed to think and act freely, the characters are more likely to play. Substances also limit the control they have over their actions and thoughts; the characters can experiment in ways they may not when sober. Texts like *The Pigman* and *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* display these characteristics and show teenagers using alcohol as an escape that creates space to play. Being in between childhood and adulthood invites them to test the outcomes of using alcohol as a social lubricant.

John and Lorraine in *The Pigman* often partake in libations to escape from their troubled home lives and enact play. As with romance, space is an essential element because they would not have the access to such substances at their own homes. Maria Sachiko Cecire, in her book *Space and Place in Children's Literature, 1789 to the Present,* quotes Yi-Fu Tuan saying, "space implies a certain freedom, while places offer security" (2). The characters occupy spaces when they drink, but they also create spaces for themselves to enjoy the drinking. John sometimes visits a graveyard so he can drink by himself out of view from his parents (Zindel 70). More prominently, he and Lorraine both use the space of Mr. Pignati's house to partake in alcohol. Not knowing they are underage high schoolers, he gives them wine when they come to collect the "charity" check for their fake charity. In every subsequent visit they accept his offers for drinks. In this example, drinking does not lead to drunken play, but they drink as part of the adult persona they create. When they first arrive at Mr. Pignati's house he offers them homemade

wine, and John replies, “that’ll be just fine, don’t you think Miss Truman?” (40). Over the phone they constructed a game involving adult characters, and as such they can consume alcohol. They should not be able to, because in reality they are fifteen-year-olds, but when acting as adults they take advantage of adult privileges, and Mr. Pignati’s kindness, to drink alcohol. A child-like desire for fun and games created the ruse, but their ability to present themselves as adults allows them to reap the benefits of being of legal drinking age.

An interesting outcome of John and Lorraine’s scam against Mr. Pignati is how they use the money from him to buy beer. This is John’s idea and Lorraine objects, but he ultimately gets his way and they buy the beers at the gas station (Zindel 51)**.** In a way, their play becomes cyclical in this moment: they played a prank to get money and that led to more alcohol that John uses as play. The drive for alcohol may not be the entire reason John maintains the game, but it is an aspect that he enjoys. The second time they visit Mr. Pignati’s house, he immediately offers them wine again (78), and this pattern continues even after he has found out John and Lorraine are fifteen years old. In a childlike way, John plays and uses games to get alcohol, which is intended to be limited to adults. With his troubled home life, his desire for alcohol may highlight his wishes to be treated as an adult. His parents give him little respect or credit when it comes to his goals of being an actor (74). His liminal state of being allows for this possibility that he could use a game, something more closely associated with childhood, for the purpose of acting like an adult when he does not have that option in his home life. Because there is not a definitive cutoff between childhood and adulthood, but rather a gradual shift, he can use aspects of both identities as an adolescent.

Lorraine partakes in the alcohol, like John does, but she also has a more guilty conscience about using Mr. Pignati’s money to buy alcohol. Even at the party she drinks, but not with the

same enthusiasm John does. This could be because Lorraine's mother does not drink, at least Lorraine does not tell the reader if she does. This difference in parenting may cause their different opinions of consuming alcohol. After they con Mr. Pignati out of his money and John buys the beer, Lorraine writes, "I just stared at [John] drinking his beer and waited to see how long it would take him to feel guilty" (Zindel 51). While she is not morally opposed to drinking, evidenced by how she accepts wine from Mr. Pignati on their second visit (78), she does disapprove of using their fake personas to get money for beer. This may be attributed to the fact that her mother has engrained in her that she should not be reliant on men. In many instances, her mother's warnings impact Lorraine's hesitancy to enact play as John does. This is especially evident in regard to her romance, but still present in her feelings towards alcohol. In a discussion where her mother tells her she took some soup from a patient, Lorraine writes, "I can't tell you what she'd do if *I* ever took anything" (54). Her mother insists on their self-reliance, which in turn limits Lorraine's ability to play. Where John's liminality causes him to push back on the structures in place above him, Lorraine's desire to please her mom overrides some of her playfulness to make her second guess her actions.

Aristotle and Dante use alcohol and marijuana as a means of exploring their identities and searching for meaning when they struggle to find it in everyday life. First, Aristotle drinks in his truck, both in his driveway and in the desert, when he feels overwhelmed by his parents and the lack of information he receives from them regarding his father's and brother's history. Throughout the novel Aristotle plays by drinking in a response to his unease at his innocence because he yearns for a knowledge he cannot have. He needs space away from authority figures, and Dante at times, to inhibit his mental functions. This often leads to him experiencing some type of self-realization, about his past and present, or using language to make a joke about his

predicament. After drinking with Gina and Susie**,** Aristotle says, “One time, they had beer. They offered me some. Okay, I had some beers with them. It was fine. It was ok” (Sáenz 197). This comes after Dante left for Chicago and Aristotle feels confused about their friendship and what it means, which shows how his confusion leads him to drinking. Additionally, he still struggles with the reason his brother is in prison and why his father will not talk about the war. Gubar writes, “innocence is all about what you lack (guilt, guile, knowledge, experience) or what you cannot do” (“Innocence” 121). Aristotle’s innocence revolves around him not having the history of his family, and he aims to lose that ignorance through alcohol. Due to his often-suppressed emotions, it can seem like he is not playing, but he uses drinking as an escape from his problems. For example, he goes to the gas station and convinces someone to buy him beer. He then sits in his truck and says, “I got this idea into my head that if I chugged the first two or three beers then maybe I’d get a good buzz” (Sáenz 207). In this instance, Aristotle runs away from his suppressed emotions and plays with alcohol as a numbing agent. He no longer wants to feel any sadness or anger, so he drinks instead. Aristotle plays in the sense that he is running away from his problems and doing that through drinking beer. He struggles with still feeling like a child due to his relationship to his parents, and he handles this through drinking. His liminality is on display through this play because he wants to transition into a knowing state of adulthood but cannot. His resolution comes later in the novel when his father invites him to have a beer and talk about the war together, which then removes some of his childhood innocence and invites him to experience his own emotions (345)**.**

Aristotle plays with drinking as a way to understand his own sexuality. Drinking allows him to ignore his feelings. Though not playful in the traditional sense that he aims for silliness or games but play in the sense that he runs away from his feelings. Once Dante moves to Chicago,

Aristotle believe he might have feelings for an older girl at his school named Ilena. The afore mentioned scene shows him using alcohol as an escape from his feelings about Ilena as well as his other complicated feelings. An acquaintance, Charlie Escobedo, visits his house and offers to buy them dope. Aristotle refuses, to which Charlie responds, "You're gay, *vato*, you know that?" Aristotle counters, after some confusion, with, "Yeah, I'm gay and I want to kiss you" (Sáenz 205). Charlie leaves and Aristotle thinks about how he had some beers with Gina and Susie and how Dante drinks, which cause him to wonder what it would be like to get drunk. He procures beer from the corner store then sits in his truck and thinks, "I was experimenting. You know, discovering the secrets of the universe. Not that I thought I'd find the secrets of the universe in a Budweiser" (207). There is so much Aristotle does not understand about his feelings for Dante, Ilena, or his family. His innocence on these subjects drives him to play with substances in case that might cause him to either understand or forget. The innocence of his childhood meets with his desire for knowledge and culminates in adolescent play through consuming alcohol.

Dante drinks and smokes marijuana in Chicago as a way of exploration, but he does so in a different setting than Aristotle. Dante goes to parties and turns into a social drinker. In his letters to Aristotle he describes the parties he attends, analyzes his consumption, and what his parents might think; at one point he writes, "Everyone has parties around here. My dad thinks it's great that I get invited" (Sáenz 175). In a previous letter he says, "I went to a party and had my first beer. Well, three beers really. I got a little bit high. Not too high, but a little bit" (173). Cecire writes about how space constructs the freedom to experiment without watchful eyes (2); Dante needs a space to drink and explore, which then leads to his musing about his feelings towards girls and his parents. After telling Aristotle about the drinking and the smoking, he writes, "The pot thing and the beer thing, it was just one of those things that happens at a party.

Not such a big deal when you think about it. Not that I'm going to have this discussion with my mom. My dad, either" (174). Novelist and children's literature scholar Alison Lurie writes, "the subversive message operates in the private rather than the public sphere, the author takes the side of the child against his or her parents" (9). Sáenz shows Dante being successfully subversive with his partying because he gets away with activities that he actively says he would not tell his parents. He understands how his actions are subversive and go against the wishes of his parents. His parents clearly worry about his safety in well-being since he is not allowed to ride the El at night (172). At the party he fits into the norm, but every adolescent at that party could be using the atmosphere as an opportunity to test boundaries and experiment. Dante's liminality gives him a sense of independence where he makes his own choice to drink, but still feels beholden to his parents and their expectations of him. He uses play to explore freedom and independence, which results in him using his newfound freedom even if it may go against his parents' desires.

Dante's attendance at parties and the subsequent play contributes to his understanding of his sexuality. Aristotle's drinking is complicated, and he rarely overtly analyzes his drinking as being about his romantic feelings for Dante. Dante, on the other hand, writes in his letters about how he feels kissing a girl. In one letter he tells Aristotle how he drank vodka and orange juice because he decided "beer is not for him" (Sáenz 175) before explaining that he found himself talking to a girl named Emma. After they kiss, Dante writes, "I'm still thinking about that kiss. She gave me her number. I'm not sure about all this" (176). The drinking and the kissing are all part of his play while he examines himself and tries to determine his identity. He feels the need to understand himself, to solidify his identity in a way. The parties are a specific way he can explore adulthood – socializing, romance, independence – in a somewhat controlled environment. Many things can still go wrong at a party, but they typically feature orchestrated

chaos where someone like Dante can experiment with his feelings about himself and others. Through play, specifically in a place that welcomes drinking, he comes to understand himself a little better, though he has in no way found the steady sense of self he seeks.

Together, Aristotle and Dante go to the desert to smoke weed while their parents are bowling one night, which displays how they used the facets of independence they had to seek out freeing experiences. This act is punctuated by a conversation where they compare themselves to bad boys. Dante buys weed from his coworker, and as he and Aristotle drive to the desert Aristotle says, "You're a bad boy" and Dante responds, "You're a bad boy too" (Sáenz 271). Their sense of what is "bad" depends on their parents; they know they should not be smoking in the desert, but they do so anyway. A thunderstorm starts after they have finished smoking, so they both undress and run around in the rain (272). Being high meant they thought less about the consequences of playing during a thunderstorm. They find other ways to be "bad," like Dante's disdain for shoes throughout the novel, but it is less evident than their use of drugs. Regarding beer, Aristotle eventually confesses to his mother: "I drink beer sometimes… I'm not an angel, Mom. And I'm not a saint. I'm just Ari" (320). Their perspective of themselves revolves around parental expectations for their children, but they go against those willingly in order to play. They have a child-like desire for fun, but that element of themselves also causes them to look to their parents as to how to categorize them. However, they have enough freedom as young adults to still revolt in certain ways, specifically through drugs and alcohol.

Drugs and alcohol give teenage characters the opportunity to subvert authority in a way that subtly invites them into adulthood. Play comes in when the characters use the altered state of mind to think about their identities and to make choices they might not make when sober. As is evident with John and Lorraine, role play may involve drinking if that is typical of the

constructed character. Aristotle and Dante showcase how drinking is a form of escape and manner of searching for self-identity. The play becomes important because it functions in different ways: sometimes alcohol will invite play, other times it will be part of the play.

Alcohol, Reality, and Adopting Adulthood

While there are many instances in these two novels of drugs and alcohol encouraging play, they will also sometimes corrupt play to the point where it cannot be performed properly. *The Pigman* provides more examples of this, though there are a few in *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* as well. In these instances, alcohol, or drugs, has led to play that is then troubled by the fact that alcohol does have some negative impacts on young consumers. The effects would present themselves in a consumer of any age, but in conjunction with adolescent play they become more apparent. The young characters use mood altering substances as an escape from real life, but when real life interrupts their play it prohibits their play. Often, the alcohol-enhanced play becomes out of hand, which then introduces consequences and the play must cease. These two novels show how substance consumption exists in moderation, but also how it can quickly spin out of control in the wrong circumstances.

In the case of John and Lorraine, they throw a "cocktail" party where there is lots of drinking, mixed with confused romantic feelings. The night starts out fine enough, but once Mr. Pignati's house gets damaged and Lorraine's feelings get hurt, the drinking only further hinders their ability to handle the situation. In one of John's chapter where he writes about the party, he notes, "It wasn't bad for a cocktail party" (Zindel 157). The fact that they call it a cocktail party shows how they intended the night to be mature and sophisticated, but the party quickly lost that tone and became unwieldy when more people show up and more alcohol gets consumed. On the same page he notes "the beer was holding out pretty good. Most of the girls were drinking wine,

but Melissa Dumas had drunk too much" (157) John readily acknowledges excess is possible in a setting without much control. Eventually, people start tearing up Mr. Pignati's late wife's clothes, breaking his collection of pigs, and trying to steal his belongings. What seems to begin as an excuse for a social drinking party turns into a destructive mess very quickly. When Mr. Pignati comes home early from the hospital, John's only reaction is to pass out. Whether this is from the drinking or the stress of the night is uncertain. However, the night would not have happened without John's drive for acceptance and popularity. Additionally, the state of the house strains Mr. Pignati's health even more after his heart attack. The relationship between the three of them can no longer be care-free and happy like it was before because John and Lorraine have betrayed Mr. Pignati's trust. They only focused on how they could use him and his home to play without thinking about the consequences of their actions.

Aristotle and Dante never have such an extreme moment where the clash of alcohol and real life stops their play, but Aristotle's father creates a situation where Aristotle drinks, not for the purpose of play, but rather as a more solidified act of adulthood. One of the reason Aristotle seeks escape is because he does not understand his father's silence about the Vietnam War; the lack of connection between them drives him to drinking in case it helps him understand. Having a beer ceases to be playful when he drinks with his father:

> I didn't know if I was supposed to drink from it or just stare at it. Maybe it was all a trick. My mom and dad walked into the kitchen. They both sat down across from me. My father opened his beer. Then he opened mine. He took a sip.
>
> "Are you ganging up on me?"
>
> "Relax," my father said. He took another drink from his beer. My mother sipped on her wine. "Don't you want to have a beer with your mom and dad?"

> "Not really," I said. "It's against the rules."
>
> "New rules," my mother said.
>
> "A beer with your old man isn't going to kill you. It's not as if you haven't had one before. What's the big deal?"
>
> "This is really weird," I said. I took a drink from the beer. "Happy now?" (Sáenz 345)

This example displays how changing the reason for drinking removes some, if not all, of the playfulness from the action. Real life, meaning finally gaining the knowledge he desires, collides with Aristotle's escapist activity to create a moment that is explicitly not play. His comment of "this is really weird" confirms his understanding of this moment as abnormal for his drinking habits. Usually he drinks alone or with a select group of peers. Unlike John and Lorraine who take drinking to the extreme and that is what ends their play, Aristotle's parents make the conscious decision to welcome him into adulthood in this way. They allow him to drink, the adult activity he had already been experimenting with, and turned it into a family unifying action instead of a solitary destructive action. As mentioned above, Aristotle's troubles come from his discomfort with his own innocence. This encounter with his parents provides him with the knowledge, and the alcohol is symbolic of the step they have taken as a family in their new aim for clarity.

Both of these instances display how alcohol can, and will, end play in situation where it is used in excess or when it is adopted in a different setting. Additionally, drinking cannot be play when it is a symbolic transition into adulthood. Though Aristotle is far from being a full adult after that conversation with his parents, he does have a richer understanding about his family history. When real life intervenes, play halts. Both John and Lorraine and Aristotle experience

what it is like when drinking transcends play and moves into the realm of reality, though they experience it in different ways. However, both novels point towards alcohol, both the benefits and the consequences, being a symbol of adulthood that adolescents can play with in the intermediary period.

Conclusion

Alcohol is colloquially referred to as a social lubricant. In the case of these specific YA novels, it serves that purpose while also transcending to something more significant. In an attempt to understand themselves better, the characters partake in drinking, and in Aristotle and Dante's case drugs, for the sake of self-realization. Some of their actions comes from a desire, whether overt of not, to rebel against authority figures. Additionally, they also see drinking as a privilege of adulthood, that they experiment with as part of a persona. The fact that substances can numb the senses is also important, especially in Dante's case where his innocence causes him confusion and heartache and alcohol numbs that pain. Overall, liminal play mixes with alcohol and drugs in YA literature for the purpose of engaging with new activities that bring about enlightenment of the self and also gives the characters a taste of adulthood.

Romantic Play

Introduction

Drugs and alcohol demonstrate liminal play in YA literature, and those two facets of play point directly towards another kind of play: romance. Though the first two do not always lead to romance, they do in many cases. Romance is a central figure in the YA genre, whether the genre is contemporary, historical, fantasy, or science fiction. Each novel examined in this study revolves around a romance in some regard: John and Lorraine back away from their feelings for

each other; Aristotle and Dante come to terms with their sexuality in order to act upon their romantic interest; Lara Jean and Peter construct a fake relationship; Mike and Henna have are in a "will they, won't they" romance; and Daniel and Natasha fall in love over the course of one day; Aza and Davis have a short-lived relationship themselves. It is hard to imagine a YA novel where there is not a romantic plot line. Since all roads seemingly point to romance, a logical conclusion is that play will also end in, or function as, romance. Not only does play lead to romance, but romance is often an act of play itself.

Adolescent romance functions as play when the characters do not understand the seriousness that accompanies human emotions and boundaries. The degree to which romance must be serious can be debated: must it always carry the weight of a long-term relationship or is short-term pleasure sufficient? If either outcome is encompassed in romance, the ways in which adolescent characters use romance as a form of play must be defined. Romance becomes playful in several situations. First, romance is play when used as an escape from regular obligations. As Sweeny notes when referring to identity, "What is important is that characters feel the freedom to fiddle with what may seem unchangeable, to recognize that they are never really 'stuck' unless they choose to be" (39). Romantic play gives characters a time and a place to explore who they really are. Additionally, romance acts as a type of performance, which is another way of playing. Childhood as a performance is not a new concept (Gubar "Risky Business" 455). This extends to YA literature where several actions, not just play, could be read as performative since the characters are typically reaching for some audience or another. In this sense, romance is a form of performative play because the characters not only act in character for each other, but also for those around them. Lastly, romance and play are seen in how adolescent characters idealize romance. One example is Lara Jean in *To All the Boys I've Loved Before* because she is unable to

look at her relationships through unbiased eyes because she knows exactly what she wants romance to look like. In at least these three ways, and also many others, liminality invites them to pursue romances without the seriousness of an adult relationship.

Like with drugs and alcohol, romance demonstrates a more adult feature of adolescence. Romance requires teens to make decisions that require maturity and level-headedness, but because they may be experiencing these feelings for the first time, they do not always approach them with such poise. This mixture of serious decision making, which is often approached with a lack of experience, is indicative of their liminality as adolescents, however, the subject matter is more adult in nature. The characters cannot be expected to have all the answers or make all the right decisions, but part of their growing up means they must try, and often fail. This is how the characters use their liminality to explore adulthood from a safe distance: they experiment with adult themes when they are still young enough to learn from mistakes or consequences. The characters in *The Pigman*, *To All the Boys I've Loved Before*, *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*, and *The Sun is Also a Star* demonstrate these characteristics of play through romance.

Space and Place in Romance

One way in which romance allows teenage characters to play is it provides a space where they can experiment with their emotions and their identifies. However, because adolescents are still under the supervision of parents or other guardians, they require a secluded space to enact their romances. Cecire's *Space and Place in Children's Literature, 1789 to the Present* highlights the importance of young characters finding spaces that are removed from those of the adult characters in order to create fantasy. While adolescents utilize these spaces for many activities, such as drinking and exploring their language boundaries, when it comes to romance,

these spaces are particularly important. Under adult supervision, they would not have the ability to explore their new feelings. However, without the presence of adults, teenagers act as their own authority, which tests their moral compasses. Instead of having the presence of an adult to instruct them in how they should behave or act, they are left to themselves to discover how far is too far in their romantic endeavors. Their liminal state means they have some of the tools necessary for traversing romantic waters, but may also be lacking in some ways, which requires them to revert to childlike innocence. Characters are not fully sure about their relationships and often use these spaces to negotiate their feelings, which can sometimes feel like a game in which they are participating, thus romantic spaces could also be labeled playful spaces.

The Pigman demonstrates the necessity for teenagers to have access to a space that is entirely theirs, or appears to be theirs, for the purpose of romantic activities. While John and Lorraine do not engage in their game with Mr. Pignati for the sake of using his house as a space for romantic exploration, that is eventually how they use it. They house-sit for Mr. Pignati after he suffers a heart attack, which leads them to hold a dinner party for themselves where they dress up and act as grown-ups. (Zindel 137-141). The act of dressing up clearly situates John and Lorraine's action as playful. As Bakhtin explored in his carnival theory, dressing up is crucial to playfulness and creating a setting where play is welcomed (Cohen 183). Dressing up is performative and allows them to present themselves as adults. Because John and Lorraine are still children in many ways, dress-up transitions them closer to adulthood. It also invites them to enact play since they have affectively created new characters for themselves in order to examine adulthood. John describes Lorraine as looking like "one of those unknown actresses you see on the Tv summer-replacement programs" (139). He then follows her upstairs and says, "I could hear the sound of cameras clicking away on the set" (140). John clearly buys into the fantasy that

they are grown actors in their costumes and on their "set," which is Mr. Pignati's home. Without the house, John and Lorraine would not have been able to enact this fantasy. An interesting aspect of their play is the degree to which they own the space they act in. Ownership is a very adult concept, but in essence they "play house" in Mr. Pignati's home. In addition to using his clothes for their characters, John and Lorraine take ownership of his home for their own purposes. Their liminal play allows them to understand the importance of ownership but does not require them to assume all the responsibility of having a space that is entirely theirs.

Daniel and Natasha in *The Sun is Also a Star* also demonstrate the necessity for a secluded space when acknowledging their turbulent romance. After their serendipitous meeting on the streets of New York City and subsequent flirtations, Daniel takes Natasha to *norebang*, or Korean karaoke, as part of their date. Unlike American karaoke, Korean karaoke is performed in a private room without an audience. Daniel says, "I wish I'd thought about doing *norebang* earlier. Being alone with her in a dimly lit room is a little bit of heaven (disco heaven)" (Yoon 167). Daniel and Natasha are completely out of sight from onlookers in the *norebang*, which is what leads to them kissing and almost having sex while away from others. Just like John and Lorraine, Daniel and Natasha are only able to pursue their sexual attraction to each other when they are not under the gaze of others. Away from the gaze of others, Daniel says, "Anything can happen in the breath of space between us. I wait for her, for her eyes to say yes, and then I kiss her" (169). Their liminality enables them to play and sing in a silly manner, while also acknowledging the subtext of their attraction. As such, they can mix play and romance in a removed space. Their sexual chemistry flourishes because they operate in an environment where can be playful and act upon their adult feelings.

While John and Lorraine and Daniel and Natasha seclude themselves together, Aristotle and Dante isolate themselves from each other, in addition to authority figures, in order to play in certain ways. First, Dante's brief move to Chicago with his parents and his party going gives him space to explore his attraction to both males and females. An outcome of Dante's move is he becomes isolated from Aristotle, though unwillingly. Through his letters he maintains a connection, but a little over 1,500 miles separate them, which gives them a separate domain for romantic exploration. The alcohol at the parties enables Dante to experiment with romantic attraction, but that would not be possible without the party. He writes to Aristotle, "so Friday night, I went to this party" and after talking about what he drinks he says, "somehow I found myself talking to this girl" (Sáenz 175). A teenage party is an excellent example of a liminal space; partygoers function as their own authority but still operate with innocence on several occasions. In Dante's case, he takes control over a romantic situation with a girl at the same time he is admitting he does not understand his attraction. In this way, the liminal space allowed him the opportunity to experiment and come to know more about himself as a person, and he may not have had that freedom in a space dictated by his parents. Sweeney notes about Kerr's protagonists "looking for this kind of love – love for the hidden, needy person inside of them" (Sweeney 40). Dante searches for this kind of love, but it relies on his need for self-realization. His liminal state means he can search for the person inside of him who yearns for a deeper kind of love than he finds at parties, but that is his starting point.

Aristotle, on the other hand, finds his safe space in an actual removed locale: hiding in his truck or spending time in the desert. He plays the most, in regard to romance, when he drinks with his friends Gina and Susie. Their romantic play does not directly involve each other, but through some language play they needle each other about romantic interests. After Gina tries to

interrogate Aristotle about people he has kissed, he says, “I think you want me to lean into you and give the kiss of your life” and shortly after, “You’d love to know what I taste like” (Sáenz 197). While not overtly sexual, the content of the language play is romance and sexual attraction, which further demonstrates how other types of play feed into romantic play. Alternatively, it points out how romance is an undertone of other play, even when not the center of play. In regard to space, this parent-free space encourages language play with romantic undertones. Even though Aristotle knows Gina does not want him to kiss her, they joke with each other since they have the freedom to do so. They combine language and space to talk about romance, which turns into a prodding and exploration of their feelings for the other sex. This is a part of adulthood: understanding whom one is attracted. Aristotle grapples with this, and the humorous discourse around romance is one instance of him examining himself and others.

Aristotle and Dante do have moments when they create spaces together, which leads to the exploration of their feelings for each other. When they are in Dante’s room talking about Dante’s painting, Dante suggests they kiss to see how it makes sure that Aristotle does not actually like kissing boys (Sáenz 255). Dante suggests they “try an experiment,” meaning they do not approach the subject seriously, at least at face value, but rather as a type of play. Mostly due to fear, Aristotle does not consider this a legitimate romantic interaction, but Dante does. This scene is significant because it shows them both embracing their liminality as they enact play and romance. Though the resulting kiss bothers Aristotle, it serves as a moment where he examines himself. Without a private room away from watchful eyes they most likely would not have had the courage to try this “experiment,” which would have hindered their growth and understanding of themselves.

Space is essential to romance. Gazing eyes would keep teenage characters from pursing each other romantically in several situations. This internal performance happens in a secluded place where only the couple has access to certain events. This need for space is logical because of the discomfort that comes from having a romance on display for everyone to see. It also works to forge intimacy between people, which happens after a playful moment. It is a cycle where play leads to romance, which may often lead back to play. Regardless, YA literature makes it clear that space provides adolescent characters with the opportunities to examine their transition into adulthood by giving them room to experiment with romance.

Performance and Romance

Another way liminality and playfulness involve romance is the degree to which romance is a performance put on by adolescents. Gubar cites Bernstein when asserting, "childhood is a performance," in relation to her kinship model of childhood ("Risky Business" 455) In terms of romance, performance is involved in what the relationship looks like to outsiders and also how the couple behaves towards each other. Two people in a new relationship will not expose everything about themselves in the very beginning. A framework is necessary for the involved parties to feel comfortable with each other as well as come to new realizations about themselves and their expectations for the romance. It is a process to learn about each other and at that time it may become less of a performance. More importantly for this study, the couple also puts on a performance for onlookers, since their private understandings of each other will not be public knowledge. A couple will most likely act differently around others than they do when it is just the two of them. In this way, performative romance applies to both the internal workings and the public appearance of the relationship. In terms of self-discovery or becoming aware about the realities of adulthood, this performance complicates the degree to which feelings remain intact

when playing with romance. While still exploring and testing adult romances, there seems to be a pattern of romantic play being more harmful than language play or drugs and alcohol because the involvement of human emotions.

Jenny Han's *To All the Boys I've Loved Before* demonstrates how liminality does not always protect emotions, but does still encourage self-realization, through Lara Jean and Peter's fake relationship, which is built entirely around a performance. They begin their "romance" to create the illusion they have both moved on from past relationships or attractions, but they make it clear from the beginning they will consider this a contracted agreement instead of a real relationship. Lara Jean goes to Peter's house to discuss the terms of their relationship and refers to it as a "game plan" (Han 115). They write up a contract with clauses about watching movies, writing notes, and other required activities for each other and sign it as if it were a legally binding document. While their relationship has a serious tone because of the business-like manner with which they operate, they are also an example of play since they put on a performance for the sake of those around them. One clause Peter asks to include is, "that under no circumstances can either of us tell the truth" (119). Peers at their school will watch them to scrutinize their relationship, and he understands the importance of not exposing it as a performance. Similarly, the clause dictating that Peter write Lara Jean a note every day is specifically targeted at his ex-girlfriend, Genevieve, because she disliked that he never wrote her notes (118). These two rules highlight how they want others to have a specific view of their relationship and that they want to dictate that image. In essence, it functions more as a play than a genuine show of romantic attachment. Both of them play roles for the sake of deceiving their specific audience. Indeed, their liminality allows them to approach romance through playful performance for the sake of deceiving others.

In the first place, the idea for their relationship comes from a spur of the moment kiss when Lara Jean panics at the prospect of having to talk to Josh, her older sister's ex-boyfriend, about a love letter that accidentally got mailed to him. Instead of confronting Josh, she jumps into Peter's arms and kisses him. As she kisses him, she thinks, "I hope Josh is watching. He has to be watching or it's all for nothing" (Han 87). When Peter confronts her about the kiss, she replies, "it was a dumb joke" (89). Lara Jean knew she was not seriously displaying a love, or even simple attraction, for Peter in that moment; she was performing an act to avoid resolving her conflict with Josh. The fact that she runs away from her problems in the first place is a somewhat childish action but running away from those problems by concocting a fake romance displays her liminal state of being. In this instance, being between childhood and adulthood prohibits her from handling her situation with tact. She is not yet mature enough to confront the messes she makes, and yet she desires an adult like romance. Lara Jean creates a playful situation, that involves romance, to circumvent her problems.

Her letters in and of themselves provide a separate example of Lara Jean's liminal existence in regard to romance and play and how she uses them to understand and act upon her romantic inclinations. She has childlike fantasies about falling in love and writing heartfelt letters to her love interest, and as she grows older, she must confront her expectations when the reality does not align. She does not write her letters in a playful fashion, except for the fact she does not intend for the addressees to read their letters. She says, "When I write, I hold nothing back. I write like he'll never read it. Because he never will. Every secret thought, every careful observation, everything I've saved up inside me, I put it all in the letter" (Han 1). She takes her letter writing seriously. The contents of her letters seem serious, however, throughout the novel it becomes evident that the letters were merely childhood crushes. One of the people she writes a

letter to is “Kenny from camp” (75), who was never an actual romantic prospect, as he was just a boy from summer camp. In the same way, her other letters focus on the childlike infatuation she felt for someone and rarely mentions the deeper understanding one needs to be in love. She has these childhood crushes, which she handles with a very adult expectation of love and desire. She plays by writing the letters fully aware that she does not want anyone to read them. Lara Jean almost creates a game for herself where she can express her feelings for the boys without the reality of facing rejection. Peter confronts her with this reality at one point saying, “The hell you’re not. You’d rather make up a fantasy version of somebody in your head than be with a real person” (312). Her tendency to resolve her issues, or attempt to resolve them, through an imaginative game demonstrates how a liminal state may be disruptive for a character. If she had been fully adult, or fully child, she would not have had such a mixture of approaches to understanding her feelings and desires for the boys in whom she was interested.

Performance may be the most important aspect of romantic play in contemporary YA literature. Whether it is John and Lorraine dressing up to act as adults, or Lara Jean and Peter constructing a relationship for the intent of being seen by others, performance is key. Through these performances, the characters gain insight into themselves and other, all while trying to maintain control over their emotions. In both cases, feelings get hurt when the performance goes too far, which hints that performative romance is not always constructive. It can also be damaging. However, it seems liminal play in regard to performance does highlight how exploratory and enlightening adolescence can be, even if some hardships must precede newfound understanding.

Sexual Desire and Play

When sexual desire gets introduced to adolescent romance it can almost appear to remove some of the playful elements from the moment. This fact is exhibited in *The Pigman*, *To All the Boys I've Loved Before*, *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*, and *The Sun is Also a Star*. In each novel, the characters' romances function as, or truly are, a game. However, like with an excess of alcohol, when the opportunity to act on their sexual attraction to each other presents itself, and introduces real life and its consequences into the moment, they often feel uncomfortable or must stop themselves before going too far. Each pairing must then figure out how to move on from those moments and their "status" as a couple going forward. In some cases, the playfulness continues, but in other instances acting upon their desire inhibits playfulness to the point that the relationship either falls apart or changes. Whereas some elements of romance and playfulness fully situate the characters in their liminal state of being, sexual desire tends to err on the side of the adult. The liminality of sexual desire comes, in most instances, from the characters' ages as a limitation of privacy or feeling of "readiness." As teenagers, parents, whether explicitly or implicitly, affect the morals of their children regarding sexual activity. However, with burgeoning sexual feelings accompanying maturing bodies, adolescents have desires to act upon their urges. Along with the knowledge that parents impact the morality or safety side of sex and adolescents have desires, some teens have reservations that keep them from engaging in sexual activity. This in between stage where innocence and authority police sexual bodies means the characters will attempt to find a balance between their desires and the social expectations surrounding them. Pattee writes about YA literature and how sex is included for didactic purposes and to "maintain the view that teenagers should not express themselves through their carnal desires" (qtd. in Patee 222). YA literature may police young

bodies and their sex drives, but it also presents them as playful, with play being another outlet, though sexual desire can limit play because of the consequences incorporated in the texts.

John and Lorraine's romantic encounter highlights how acting upon sexual attraction ends a playful, moment that was presupposed by performative play. They have dressed up and put on a performance as new, adult characters and are functioning in a space where they have freedom to create playful fantasies, but this all cracks when they kiss, thus acting upon their feelings for each other. When they kiss, they realize they might not be playing as much as they think they are. John says, "When I moved my lips from hers, we just looked at each other, and somehow we were not acting anymore" (Zindel 140). He acknowledges they were acting. With the costumes and the house serving as a stage, they had set themselves up as actors in a play. Finally pursuing their feelings is what breaks their trance and removes them from playfulness. Cohen writes about costumes and the ways in which preschoolers use them for play, saying, "the children use their bodies and costumes in a carnivalesque manner to parody adults" (Cohen 184). John and Lorraine may not parody, but they do adopt adult personas through costumes, which works with their liminal state of being to construct such a moment and explore their sexuality. Their innocence provided an element of safety that ends when they when they go further into their play than they may have expected. The fact that the kiss ends their play demonstrates that sexual attraction, and pursing those feelings further, inhibits playfulness in a way that dressing up and pretending to have feelings does not.

Lorraine is particularly uncomfortable with their kiss, and her mother's constant preaching about the dangers of men may be the reason she can no longer play with romance after acting on her feelings. Lorraine's parents separated around the time of her birth (Zindel 52), and it caused her mother to distrust men. Her work as a home-health nurse puts her in contact with

older men that she feels try to take advantage of her, and most her time with Lorraine is spent warning her about how men may hurt her. After the party at Mr. Pignati's home, Lorraine must explain to her mother what has taken place over the course of the novel. After explaining that nothing particularly bad happened, her mother says, "Those old men have ways, Lorraine. Sometimes they touch you, and you may not even notice what they're doing" (173). Her mother's thoughts impact her play when it comes to romance. The adult knowledge she has about how men can hurt women corrupts the fun she has with John and takes them out of the moment. Losing her innocence hinders her ability to perform romantic play.

To All the Boys I've Loved Before also features characters ending their romantic game almost as it began: both the beginning and the end involve a conversation about the status of the relationship. Lara Jean and Peter must address their feelings for each other when they go on the school ski trip and both have different expectations of what should happen at the resort. Eventually Lara Jean decides to go to Peter in the hot tub to possibly declare her love for him. She says, "That thing you brought up earlier… you caught me off guard, so I didn't know what to say. But, well, I like you, too" (Han 315). They then kiss passionately and leave the hot tub feeling as if they may have possibly entered a real relationship. The whole relationship up until this point was a performance that lacked the true emotional connection that inspires a relationship in the first place. Their make out session in the hot tub is effectively the end of this specific performance but does not halt the performative aspect of their relationship entirely. When they get on the bus the next morning, it becomes clear their classmates still watch their relationship with certain expectations. Lara Jean notes, "As we make our way onto the bus, somebody wolf whistles. It seems like people are staring at us" (318). Again, Bakhtin's carnival provides insight into a character's feelings. His theory revolves around examining the self in

relation to others (Cohen 177). Lara Jean immediately notices that even though they are not faking the feelings involved in a relationship anymore, others still watch and she must take that into consideration when acting on her own emotions. They are bound to perform by the social expectations of high school, which acts as an authority, and inhibits some of their play even as they are ending the explicit game they had concocted.

Lara Jean and Peter's classmates assume they had sex the night before, which is why they cheer the way they do as they enter the bus. Though they made out in the hot tub, that was as far as they went. That can be partially attributed to Lara Jean's innocence. In her liminal state, she approached their kiss without acknowledging how it may appear to onlookers. When Genevieve confronts her about it, Lara Jean says, "all we did was kiss. I don't know why people would even say that" (Han 320). Genevieve lies and tells her Peter has told everyone, which enrages Lara Jean. There is a more complicated motivation for Genevieve to start this rumor, but it is evident that Lara Jean and Peter's relationship is not going to escape the spotlight now that their motivation is attraction to each other and not putting on a performance for those around them. In their adolescent romance, they could experiment with the adult feelings they have with relative safety. Especially Lara Jean's innocence meant she was unwilling to go too far with Peter. Once other expect them of engaging in the more adult act of sex it corrupts their play. As with John and Lorraine, the repercussions of adult activities end play, whereas the mere presence of them does not. For Lara Jean and Peter, the performative nature of their romance enhances the degree to which expectations for adult activity can inhibit romantic play.

Aristotle and Dante's friendship is complicated by more than just their physical attraction to each other, but this attraction does present some problems when it comes to their playfulness with each other. When they are alone in Dante's room and Dante asks Aristotle to kiss him,

Aristotle hesitates at first because he still struggles with the fact that he might have feelings for Dante. They do kiss and Aristotle says, "And he kissed me. And I kissed him back. And then he really started kissing me. And I pulled away" (Sáenz 255). Immediately afterward he says, "didn't work for me" (255), but the kiss clearly impacts him. They approach the kiss as an experiment, a performance where they explore their sexuality. They do not kiss each other in seriousness, but with mixed emotions and a sense of intrigue. Dante expects this display of attraction to be genuine in a way, but Aristotle becomes uncomfortable with how authentic it becomes. His suppressed emotions make it difficult for him to acknowledge his real feelings for Dante. Though he approaches the kiss as a performance at first, once he realizes it is not a performance for Dante, he ends the experiment. Their liminality allows them to explore new, adult-like territory. However, the possibility of having to address his emotions, which would introduce an adult maturity to their romance, corrupts the play. While they can explore new territory, it also inhibits Aristotle from publicly, or privately for that matter, admitting his attraction to Dante.

Finally, the scene in *The Sun is Also a Star* where Natasha and Daniel kiss in the *norebang* is another example of romantic playfulness ending because of the characters acting on their sexual attraction to each other. After they have been making out Natasha has to stop herself because she knows kissing him more will mean becoming more attracted to him. She says, "if I kiss him anymore, it's just going to make it harder on me later. So. No more kissing" (Yoon 174). Natasha is intentional with her decision to end their play. She knows that Daniel pulls her away from her goal of stopping her family's deportation, but she also acknowledges that if that fails, she will not want to leave him once she is emotionally, and physically, attached to him. Natasha is an especially liminal character because she is acting as the authority figure in her

family, but she is also a teenager who is susceptible to romantic feelings for a boy she just met. When she goofs off with Daniel, she knows she is playing, so she consciously ends their playfulness. She tries throughout the novel to favor her adult-like mentality, but Daniel encourages her to forgo such feelings. Unlike the other couples in this essay, Natasha already acts as an adult in her family. It is not the introduction of adult responsibilities or expectations that corrupts their play, but remembering she will get deported if she does not return to her goals. She allows herself some liminality throughout the novel, and she does not prohibit it entirely after this moment, but it does display how she makes a conscious effort to perform as a child or an adult.

Sexual desire, in these novels, does not entail the characters having uncontrollable urges. Daniel and Natasha come the closest to having sex, but even Natasha controls that when she remembers what is at stake when she plays. The characters exhibit typical wants for high school relationships. They seek a connection, but when the reality of forging that connection becomes real it halts play. A serious commitment is less playful, though not entirely devoid of play, than a constructed scenario or escape from real life. When one does have a bond with someone else, they become incorporated into each other's daily lives, which would make it more difficult for the romance to serve as a form of escape. The sexual desires displayed in the above examples go unrealized when the reality of the situation becomes more apparent and the characters can no longer play without acknowledging their real feelings and the motivations behind them.

Conclusion

Language play and substance experimentation feed into romantic play in the sense that characters will use the other two as a funnel into romance. Dante's drinking leads him to kissing a girl and Aristotle's language leads him to contemplate his sexuality. Additionally, performance

and romance are almost one in the same, especially in the case of *To All the Boys I've Loved Before*. Lara Jean and Peter create a relationship that exists only to be viewed and scrutinized by others. The inclusion of romance in almost every genre of YA literature speaks to what authors think adolescent readers want. Gubar makes it clear authors are the prescriptive force in YA literature ("Risky Business" 451), so the inclusion of romance as a means of self-exploration and an introduction into adulthood highlights relies on the authors' views that it serves that purpose in real life. By modeling romantic play for their readers, authors use their characters to stress the importance of romance and attraction in understanding oneself as an adult. Romance aids the process of losing innocence and having new experiences, which centers of the transitional phase between childhood and adulthood. Characters use play to test the romantic waters, which is gently guiding them into a world that values human bonds and connections.

Conclusion

As Lorraine lies in bed after their house party, she comes to a realization: "We were just playing. *Playing*. Play. I couldn't get the word out of my mind" (Zindel 173). Her musings point to play as being an integral part of her story, and the other novels exhibit that as well. Throughout *The Pigman*, *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*, *To All the Boys I've Loved Before*, *The Rest of Us Just Live Here*, *The Sun is Also A Star*, and *Turtles All the Way Down* play serves as a mode of exploration and understanding. The liminality of the characters allows the characters to explore adulthood, which shatters their innocence. The presence of play in this way highlights how play does not end with childhood but continues into the intermediary stage and beyond. While Daniel views adulthood as the ends of all his fun (Yoon 43) he relies on the false idea that play will end. Lorraine, on the other hand, understands

the importance of play as she searches for her own self-worth and understanding. They were just playing, but they do not revert back to childlike behaviors; they explore adulthood through their play.

This analysis of play and liminality matters when one considers how these representations of play represent their real-life audience. DiCicco and Taylor-Greathouse interviewed authors about their perspectives on morals in YA literature. While they could not agree on whether YA novels have an obligation the consensus was this: “Young adult literature is guilty of only one thing – being realistic” (80). The prescriptive nature Gubar describes counters this idea that authors are merely representing what they observe or experienced themselves. Concepts of morals, realism, and authority are all constructed by adult authors, and one outlet they provide is play. Play seems to be a key force in adults understanding adolescents, which will, theoretically, produce readers who also see play as a defining force in their lives. Contemporary YA literature asks readers to be like Lorraine and always have play in their minds.

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