ENGL 3840, Adolescent Literature
Homework Assignment 5 Answer Key

Note: This homework is based upon your reading of pages 66-71 in Sara K. Day's “Power and Polyphony in Young Adult Literature: Rob Thomas's Slave Day.” Where possible, I have quoted directly from the text in order to show you where you could have found the answers. You were not obligated to quote directly from the text, and you could certainly have answered these questions in your own words. However, whether you quoted directly or paraphrased Day's text, you would need to cite your source. In fact, many professors would mark most of these answers as including plagiarism. In the future, whenever you take an idea from a text – whether you quote it directly or paraphrase it – you MUST give credit to the author by using parenthetical documentation. It is better to over cite than to under cite. If you do not understand how to cite sources, it is high time that you learned. Go to the Purdue OWL or to the writing lab here at WMU or buy a style guide.

1. Day begins by citing the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, a noted 20th-century narrative theorist. Describe what Bakhtin means by the term “polyphony.”

As Day notes, “Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of polyphony” involves “the mutual influence and interplay of multiple voices” (66).

2. According to Day, what is one of the most important goals for an author who uses multivoiced narration?

“Because one of the most common and important goals of polyphony is to portray the development of characters’ identity and subjectivity, multivoiced narration is in many ways particularly applicable to young adult literature, a genre defined by its protagonists’ maturation, increasing awareness of their subjectivity, and expanding worldview” (66).

3. On the beginning of page 67, Day describes the features of first person and third person single focalized narration. Describe both.

First person and third person single focalized narration “employ one focalizer through whose eyes the events are presented and perceived. In both of these conventional narrative forms, the focus on a single consciousness allows for a comprehensive development of one character’s growth and subjectivity” (67).

4. In a 2-3 paragraph response, explain critic Michael Cadden’s concern about the use of first person or single focalized third person narration.

Michael Cadden is concerned that “by employing an all-too-reliable young adult's consciousness, the YA novelist often intentionally communicates to the immature reader a single and limited awareness of the world that the novelist knows to be
incomplete and insufficient” (qtd in Day 67). Echoing Perry Nodelman and Maria Nikolejava’s ideas on the relationship between the author/character/reader, Day observes that Cadden worries about how “young adult fiction is inherently double-voiced, as the perspectives or beliefs of both the adult author and the adolescent narrator may find expression in a given work” (67). Further, Cadden notes that “When an adult writer speaks through a young adult’s consciousness to a young adult audience, he or she is involved in a top-down (or vertical) power relationship. It becomes important, then, that there be equal (or horizontal) power relationships between the major characters within the text so that the young adult reader has the power to see the opposing ideologies at play” (qtd in Day 67).

5. According to Day, how does the use of multivoiced narration help solve the problem that Cadden has identified with first person or single focalized third person narration?

As Day notes in response to Cadden’s concerns regarding the power dynamics inherent in text with first person or single focalized third person narration, “While singly-voiced novels can of course portray the horizontal power relationships to which Cadden refers, multivoiced narration allows for a more thorough investigation of ‘opposing ideologies’ and demonstrates the ways in which the various points of view influence and are influenced by each other. Indeed, this interest in the ways that voices exist in concert speaks directly to Bakhtin’s investigation of polyphony, which is his term for the situatedness of language, understood generally as the representations of and relationships between a variety of voices and discourses” (67).

6. In Day’s view, why is multivoiced narration a particularly useful way to put forward stories that deal with marginalized groups? (Note, Day uses the term “hegemony,” which refers to the consolidation of power by a person or group).

As Day suggests, “by providing explicit reminders that no voice—and no identity—exists in a vacuum, novels with multiple narrators effectively illustrate and elucidate the interplay of power and influence; this quality has made multivoiced narration a particularly effective tool for authors investigating repressed or disenfranchised groups” (68).

7. As part of her argument, Day mentions critic Gordon E. Slethaug’s ideas regarding the relationship that needs to be in place between the two or more narrators who appear in a multivocal narrative. Describe that relationship and explain why Slethaug feels it to be so important.

As part of her argument, Day cites Gordon E. Slethaug’s idea that “that the destabilization of authority that marks multivoiced narration requires that ‘each narrator’s voice must be positioned against the preceding one so that one voice transgresses, reconsiders, and rewrites another’ (19). Within a multivoiced
narrative, then, the authority possessed by each narrator must be understood in the context of all of the surrounding narratives; although such considerations do not remove or deny narrative authority, they necessitate an understanding of how that authority is mitigated and challenged by the system of narratives that surround it” (68).

8. After describing Trites’ ideas about adolescent literature and power, Day focuses in the second paragraph on page 69 on the way that power often works in a high school setting. Describe Day’s major points.

According to Day, power in a high school setting, smaller breakdowns of power exist, as young people identify themselves (or are identified with) sub-groups based upon economic, intellectual and social factors. As Day notes, “within those groups power structures remain prevalent, as cliques or groups of friends frequently include one or two people who dominate or have power over the others. Therefore, an adolescent must not only be aware of his or her place in the explicit hierarchy of a school but also remain attentive to his or her position within the smaller social power structures that permeate the adolescent experience” (69).

9. As part of her discussion of the history of multivoiced YA novels, Day describes some of the first texts in the format that appeared in the 1960s. Describe the features of these early texts.

Citing both Zindel’s *Pigman* (1968) and Cormier’s *The Chocolate War* (1974), Day notes that early multivoiced YA novels, “often share a common concern with investigating the ways in which each narrator’s access to power influences and is influenced by his or her location within a larger system of power” (70).

10. As part of her discussion of the history of multivoiced YA novels, Day discusses the “split narrative,” a form that Green and Levithan use in *Will Grayson, Will Grayson*. Write a description of the features of a split narrative, according to Day.

As Day describes it, “split narratives, in which the narrative is divided evenly between two characters, usually employ first-person and frequently boy-girl pairs” (70).