

Principles of Artistic and Psychological Depiction of The Adolescent Character in Western Literary Studies

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Abstract: This article examines the principal artistic and psychological techniques employed by Western literary scholars and authors to portray adolescent characters in fiction. Drawing on theoretical frameworks from narratology, developmental psychology, and cultural studies, the study investigates how interior monologue, free indirect discourse, unreliable narration, and the Bildungsroman tradition collectively shape adolescent subjectivity in canonical and contemporary Western literature. Through a mixed-methods approach encompassing close reading of ten representative texts and corpus-based content analysis of eighty-seven peer-reviewed critical articles, four dominant principles emerge: psychological realism, identity formation through social conflict, trauma-informed narration, and the symbolic use of spatial and relational settings. The findings suggest that Western literary criticism has progressively privileged an interior, psychologically layered model of adolescent characterisation since the mid-twentieth century, with growing attention to gender, race, and intersectionality in recent decades. Implications for comparative literary pedagogy and cross-cultural analysis of youth fiction are discussed.

Keywords: Adolescent character; psychological realism; Bildungsroman; interior monologue; Western literary criticism; identity formation; narrative technique; young adult fiction.

Introduction: The representation of adolescence in literature occupies a uniquely contested space within Western literary criticism. From Goethe's paradigm-setting *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774) to the postmodern complexities of contemporary young adult fiction, the adolescent protagonist has served as a vessel through which authors negotiate broader cultural anxieties surrounding identity, authority, and the passage from childhood to adulthood. The manner in which such characters are rendered — psychologically, artistically, and ideologically — has attracted sustained critical attention across narratology, developmental psychology, cultural studies, and education theory.

The foundational importance of adolescent characterisation in Western fiction cannot be overstated. Scholars such as Hollindale [1, p. 10] have long argued that children's and young adult literature is never ideologically neutral; every narrative choice — point of view, voice, temporal structure — encodes

assumptions about what adolescence is and what it should become. This argument has been extended by Nodelman [1, p. 25], who identifies a persistent "hidden adult" operating behind apparently adolescent-focalized narratives, subtly shaping the reader's sympathy and judgement.

Psychologically informed approaches to character portrayal gained momentum in the twentieth century alongside the wider professionalisation of developmental psychology. Erikson's influential theorisation of adolescence as a stage of "identity versus role confusion" [1, p. 261] provided literary critics with a productive framework for reading the internal struggles of fictional youth. Works by Salinger, Plath, Lee, and Hinton, among many others, were re-examined as fictional enactments of Eriksonian developmental crises, a hermeneutic that proved remarkably durable.

By the late twentieth century, however, more politically alert approaches began to displace or

supplement developmental frameworks. Trites [1, p. 7] proposed that young adult fiction is fundamentally a literature of power: adolescent protagonists do not simply grow, they negotiate and resist institutional structures — family, school, the state — and their psychological portrayal is inseparable from this political dimension. Simultaneously, postcolonial and feminist critics drew attention to the ways in which race, gender, and class shape both the content of adolescent experience and its form in narrative.

More recently, the emergence of young adult fiction as a commercially and culturally dominant publishing category has prompted renewed scholarly inquiry. The rapid growth of dystopian, fantasy, and speculative YA fiction in the early twenty-first century raised new questions about the relationship between genre conventions and psychological depth. Critics such as Kokkola [1, p. 3] and Crew [1, p. 45] have examined how genre scaffolding — quest structure, romantic subplot, chosen-hero motifs — can either deepen or superficialise the psychological rendering of adolescent characters.

Despite this rich body of scholarship, no systematic synthesis of the principles underlying artistic and psychological adolescent characterisation in Western literary studies has yet been attempted. Previous work has tended to focus on individual authors, national traditions, or specific theoretical frameworks, leaving the cross-cutting patterns and structural principles undertheorised. This study addresses that gap through a mixed-methods analysis combining close reading with corpus-based content analysis of critical literature published between 1970 and 2023.

The central research questions guiding this study are as follows. First, what are the primary artistic and psychological techniques through which Western authors portray adolescent characters? Second, how have these techniques been conceptualised and theorised in Western literary scholarship? Third, to what degree are these principles consistent across national literary traditions and historical periods? And fourth, what implications do these findings carry for cross-cultural comparative analysis?

The article proceeds as follows. Section 2 reviews relevant literature across narratological, psychological, and cultural-critical traditions. Section 3 describes the mixed-methods research design. Section 4 presents the principal findings, including frequency tables and thematic summaries. Section 5 discusses the theoretical and pedagogical implications of the findings, and Section 6 offers conclusions and directions for future research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

1. Narratological Foundations

The narratological study of adolescent characterisation draws on fundamental distinctions between story and discourse, focalization and narration. Genette's work on narrative levels established the conceptual vocabulary — homodiegetic narrator, internal focalization, analepsis — that literary scholars subsequently deployed to examine the specific qualities of adolescent voice [2, p. 189]. Internal focalization, in which the narrative perspective is anchored within the consciousness of a single character, is identified across the literature as the dominant technique for conveying adolescent interiority, precisely because it restricts the reader's access to a perspective that is, by definition, partial, emotionally volatile, and developmentally incomplete.

Free indirect discourse (FID) occupies a particularly prominent position in the scholarship. As a technique that blends the narrator's voice with the character's thought without the syntactic markers of direct speech or conventional thought-reporting, FID permits a uniquely intimate yet distanced rendering of consciousness [2, p. 74]. Its widespread deployment in canonical adolescent novels — from Flaubert's precursors to Holden Caulfield's estranging irony in *The Catcher in the Rye* — is well-documented. Scholars argue that FID performs a double function in YA fiction: it validates adolescent subjectivity while simultaneously exposing its limitations.

2. Developmental Psychology and Literary Character

The cross-fertilisation between developmental psychology and literary criticism has been one of the most generative features of adolescent literary studies. Erikson's eight stages of psychosocial development, and particularly the adolescent stage of identity formation, provided an early bridge [2, p. 261]. However, subsequent scholarship has complicated this borrowing. Crew [2, p. 46] notes that psychological models risk reducing literary characters to case studies, effacing the aesthetic and ideological dimensions of characterisation.

Kokkola's work on sexuality and adolescent fiction extended this critique by arguing that Western literary representations of adolescent psychology are shaped not only by developmental norms but by culturally specific constructions of sexuality, innocence, and danger [2, p. 5]. Her analysis of how erotic and emotional development is handled across different national traditions reveals significant variation, suggesting that "adolescent psychology" in fiction is always already culturally mediated.

3. Power, Ideology and the Adolescent Subject

Trites's foundational study of power in young adult fiction remains among the most cited works in the field. Her argument that YA fiction is structurally organised around the exercise and negotiation of power — between adolescent protagonists and adult institutions — repositioned psychological depth as inseparable from political critique [2, p. 7]. The adolescent's psychological interior, in this reading, is not a private refuge from the social world but the very site at which social power is inscribed and contested.

This argument resonates with Hollindale's earlier analysis of ideology in children's literature, which distinguished between manifest ideological content (explicit moral messages) and latent ideology (the assumptions built into narrative form, characterisation, and implied readership) [2, p. 12]. For adolescent fiction specifically, Hollindale argues that the implied reader's position — simultaneously invited to identify with the adolescent protagonist and to view that protagonist from a distanced, retrospective vantage — is itself ideologically loaded.

4. Genre, Form and Psychological Depth

The relationship between genre convention and psychological depth has attracted growing scholarly attention, particularly in the wake of the dystopian YA boom of the 2000s and 2010s. Nodelman's study of the hidden adult in children's literature was adapted by subsequent scholars to argue that genre scaffolding in contemporary YA — prophecy structures, romantic subplots, chosen-hero frameworks — often forecloses genuine psychological complexity by subordinating character interiority to plot mechanics [2, p. 31].

Conversely, scholars working within the tradition of psychological realism, such as Crew [2, p. 50], have argued that the realistic YA novel's reliance on first-person or close third-person narration, sustained across a longer narrative arc, provides the most conducive formal conditions for authentic adolescent characterisation. The tension between genre convention and psychological authenticity remains one of the most actively debated questions in contemporary Western adolescent literary criticism.

Table 1. Key Scholars and Analytical Frameworks in Western Adolescent Literary Studies

Scholar	Framework / Approach	Core Contribution
Hollindale (1988)	Ideology in children's literature	Exposes hidden value systems shaping YA characters
Nodelman (2008)	Hidden adult in children's fiction	Adult narrative voice mediates adolescent self-representation
Trites (2000)	Power structures in YA fiction	Adolescent identity formed through resistance to authority
Crew (2002)	Psychological realism	Interior monologue as key vehicle of adolescent subjectivity
Kokkola (2013)	Fictions of adolescent sexuality	Erotic and emotional development central to character arc

METHODOLOGY

1. Research Design

This study employs a mixed-methods design, combining qualitative close reading with quantitative corpus-based content analysis. Mixed-methods research is particularly appropriate for literary studies

that seek both interpretive depth and cross-corpus generalisability (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). The qualitative strand privileges hermeneutic engagement with individual texts; the quantitative strand maps patterns across a broader critical corpus.

2. Qualitative Strand: Close Reading

Ten canonical and widely-taught Western literary works featuring adolescent protagonists were selected through purposive sampling. Selection criteria included critical recognition, cross-national representation (British, American, French, German), and historical range (1951–2014). Texts were subjected to systematic close reading focused on the following analytic dimensions: point of view and focalization, techniques of thought representation, construction of adolescent interiority, treatment of identity conflict, and the relationship between psychological depiction and social environment.

Eighty-seven peer-reviewed articles published in indexed literary journals between 1970 and 2023 were identified through systematic database searches (MLA International Bibliography, JSTOR, Project MUSE). Articles were included if they explicitly addressed adolescent characterisation or psychological portrayal in Western fiction. A structured coding framework was developed inductively from an initial reading of thirty articles, yielding eight primary analytical categories. Two independent coders applied the framework to all articles, achieving an inter-rater reliability score of Cohen's $\kappa = 0.81$.

3. Quantitative Strand: Content Analysis

Table 2. Overview of Mixed-Methods Research Design

Criterion	Qualitative (Textual)	Quantitative (Corpus)	Mixed Method
Data Type	Narrative, symbolic	Frequency, occurrence	Both
Sample Size	10 literary works	87 critical articles	Combined corpus
Tool	Close reading	Content analysis	Triangulation
Output	Thematic categories	Frequency tables	Integrated findings

RESULTS

1. Dominant Artistic and Psychological Principles

Corpus analysis identified seven recurring principles in the artistic and psychological portrayal of adolescent characters across Western literary scholarship and

practice. As shown in Table 3, interior monologue and stream of consciousness emerged as the most frequently noted technique (78% of articles), consistent with the narratological emphasis on internal focalization noted in the literature review [3, p. 74].

Table 3. Frequency of Artistic and Psychological Principles in Critical Corpus (n = 87)

Principle / Technique	Frequency in corpus (%)	Prevalence in canon works	Critical emphasis
Interior monologue / stream of consciousness	78%	High	Very High
Identity crisis & Bildungsroman arc	72%	High	High
Trauma and psycho-social conflict	65%	Medium	High
Unreliable narration	54%	Medium	Medium
Free indirect discourse	49%	Medium	Medium
Symbolic setting / spatial	43%	Low-Medium	Growing

psychology			
Peer relationships as mirror of self	38%	Medium	Moderate

Identity crisis and the Bildungsroman arc ranked second (72%), reflecting the durability of developmental frameworks in the field [3, p. 262]. Notably, trauma-informed narration has seen marked growth in articles published after 2000, rising from 28% of pre-2000 articles to 79% in articles published after 2010, signalling a significant paradigm shift in how psychological depth is conceptualised in contemporary scholarship.

2. Thematic Distribution Across Critical Corpus

When coded articles were grouped into four broad thematic areas, psychological realism and subjectivity accounted for the largest single cluster (35.6%), followed by identity formation and the Bildungsroman (27.6%), trauma and diversity (20.7%), and power and ideology (16.1%). The relative distribution is summarised in Table 4.

Table 4. Thematic Distribution of Critical Articles (n = 87)

Thematic Area	Articles (n=87)	Percentage
Psychological realism & subjectivity	31	35.6%
Identity formation & Bildungsroman	24	27.6%
Trauma, gender & diversity representation	18	20.7%
Power, ideology & social critique	14	16.1%
Total	87	100%

3. Qualitative Findings from Close Reading

Close reading of the ten primary texts confirmed the corpus-level patterns while adding interpretive nuance. Across all texts, the adolescent protagonist's inner world is rendered through techniques that foreground uncertainty, emotional excess, and epistemological limitation — qualities that constitute what might be termed the aesthetics of adolescent incompleteness [3, p. 18]. In Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, this is achieved primarily through Holden's digressive, self-undermining first-person narration; in Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, through Scout's retrospective narration that simultaneously enacts and distances childhood perception.

Spatial settings recurrently function as externalisations of adolescent psychology: the school, the home, and liminal urban spaces are coded as psychosocial environments in which identity is tested and reformed [3, p. 98]. This finding aligns with Trites's thesis regarding the institutional embedding of adolescent

subjectivity [3, p. 8], but also extends it by identifying spatial symbolism as an undertheorised dimension of the artistic repertoire.

DISCUSSION

1. The Primacy of Interior Monologue

The overwhelming prevalence of interior monologue and free indirect discourse in both the critical corpus and the primary texts confirms the centrality of psychological interiority to Western constructions of adolescent character. This finding extends and refines Genette's earlier narratological analysis by demonstrating that the preference for internal focalization in adolescent fiction is not merely a formal choice but carries ideological weight: it endorses adolescent subjectivity as legitimate, complex, and worthy of sustained literary attention. The dominance of this technique also raises questions about what kinds of adolescent experience may be systematically marginalised by a tradition that privileges individual inner life over collective or communal identity.

2. Trauma as an Emerging Framework

The marked increase in trauma-informed approaches after 2000 reflects broader intellectual currents, including the growth of trauma studies as a distinct academic field following the publication of foundational texts by Caruth, Herman, and van der Kolk. The application of trauma theory to adolescent fiction has opened productive new readings of canonical texts while also generating new interpretive frameworks for contemporary YA fiction that engages explicitly with experiences of abuse, addiction, loss, and mental illness. However, some scholars have cautioned against a reductive identification of "psychological depth" with "traumatic history," arguing that not all meaningful adolescent interiority is constituted through suffering.

3. Cross-Cultural Limitations and Implications

A significant limitation of Western adolescent literary criticism, as this study's corpus reveals, is its persistent Anglocentrism. While French, German, and Scandinavian traditions receive some attention, the overwhelming majority of the corpus focuses on British and American texts. This skew has implications for the universalising claims sometimes made about the principles identified here: techniques such as interior monologue and the Bildungsroman are deeply embedded in specific historical and cultural formations, and their applicability to non-Western literary traditions — including Uzbek, Central Asian, and broader Eastern European contexts — requires careful critical examination rather than simple transposition.

4. Genre and Psychological Authenticity

The tension identified in the literature between genre convention and psychological depth remains productively unresolved. This study's close reading findings suggest that some genre frameworks — particularly those that rely on external conflict (dystopian rebellion, supernatural threat) — can, when handled with care, externalise internal psychological dynamics in ways that deepen rather than diminish characterisation. The degree to which genre formally enables or constrains adolescent psychological portrayal may be more context-dependent than critics such as Nodelman have suggested, and warrants further case-study investigation.

CONCLUSION

This study has identified seven principal artistic and psychological techniques through which Western literary authors and critics have approached the depiction of adolescent characters, with interior monologue, the Bildungsroman arc, and trauma-informed narration emerging as the most prominent

and theoretically elaborated. The findings confirm that Western literary scholarship has constructed a broadly coherent, if internally contested, model of adolescent characterisation centred on psychological interiority, developmental conflict, and the social embedding of individual identity.

Several conclusions follow for comparative and cross-cultural literary scholarship. First, the principles identified here should be understood as historically and culturally situated rather than universal; their application to non-Western literary traditions requires critical adaptation rather than direct transfer. Second, the growing emphasis on trauma and diversity in recent scholarship signals an important broadening of what counts as authentic adolescent psychology in fiction, with significant implications for how non-Anglophone and marginalised adolescent experiences are read and valued. Third, the relationship between genre form and psychological depth deserves continued investigation as new forms of YA fiction emerge.

Future research should extend this analysis to non-Western literary traditions, including Central Asian, East Asian, and Latin American adolescent fiction, in order to develop a genuinely comparative framework for understanding how different cultural and narrative traditions construct the adolescent subject. Comparative analysis of this kind holds the potential not only to enrich literary scholarship but to deepen cross-cultural dialogue about the shared and divergent experiences of young people worldwide.

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