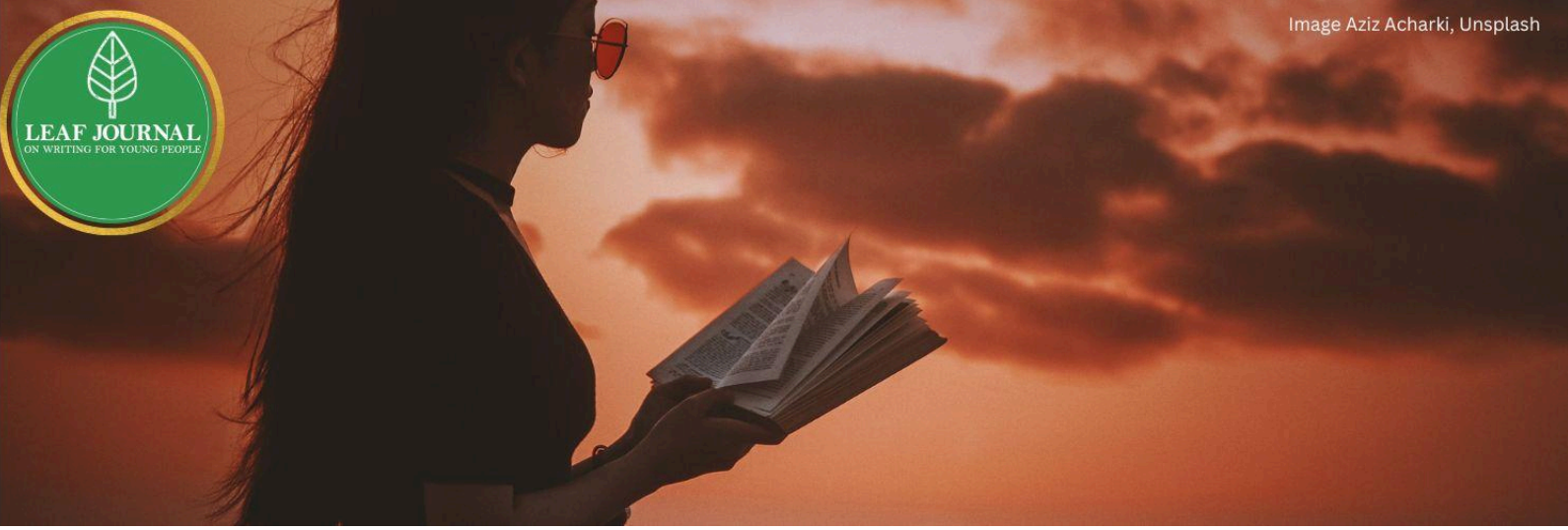

Hollingsworth, Alyssa, 'Dissociation and embodiment in Young Adult literature: What authors need to consider in the climax'
Leaf Journal, Volume 1, Issue 2, Dec 2023
Conference Proceedings
DOI: http://doi.org/10.58091/64jp-h106
URL: https://ojs.library.lancs.ac.uk/lj/index

Dissociation and Embodiment in Young Adult Literature: What Authors Need to Consider in the Climax

Alyssa Hollingsworth

Abstract
Dissociation is a common element used in Young Adult Literature, sometimes to heighten drama, complicate decisions, or add obstacles for the protagonist. Dissociation can be understood as a process of removing yourself from the present. Though milder forms of dissociation are harmless and even useful—such as daydreaming—it can become detrimental in its extremes (Winfrey and Perry 171). Trauma is often at the heart of a dissociative response. Though there are places in a story where dissociation is a useful narrative tool, its use can also be (and often is) counterintuitive. This is especially true in books that use dissociation as a main part of climactic action. If trauma is at the core of detrimental dissociation, embodiment is at the center of an ending that hopes for healing. This paper looks at the neurological and psychological roots behind dissociation and embodiment, and the way Young Adult writers can take mindful consideration as they choose how to position their character in the climax.

Keywords: *dissociation; trauma, Young Adult*

*

This is a transcript of a paper given at 'On Writing for Young People Conference 2023'
Proceedings are non-peer reviewed.

Introduction

This research is drawn from my PhD dissertation, *Breaking the Curse: Retelling a Folk Fairytale to Explore Trauma and Healing in Novels for Young People.* My contextual analysis focuses around examples drawn from my work-in-progress, titled *The Wasting Curse*, a young adult novel that retells an Orcadian folk fairytale. For the purposes of this paper, some plot context is needed: I have two protagonists, Kit and Wesley. Near the beginning of the novel, both protagonists are cursed. Kit's spirit is placed in a body that is not her own (think *The Goose Girl*). Wesley is enchanted so that every night he unwillingly travels to the Hidden Lands—a kind of fairy realm—and dances until near dawn.

It was in the process of developing Kit and Wesley's relationship with trauma and dissociation that I began to notice the ways writers for young people sometimes use these elements for their dramatic flair rather than with intentionality about psychological realities. Though my dissertation spends most of its time talking about trauma and healing, for the purposes of this discussion I will be focusing on dissociation and embodiment. I am pleased to share some reflections here, and hope they will be useful for writers and readers alike.

What is dissociation?

Dissociation can be understood as a process of removing yourself from the present. Though milder forms of dissociation are harmless and even useful—such as daydreaming—it can become detrimental in its extremes (Winfrey and Perry 171). On a physical level, when a person dissociates the brain "prepares the body for injury" by slowing the heart rate and releasing endogenous opioids to minimize pain (Perry 50). These heroine-like substances kill "pain and produce a calming sense of distance from one's troubles" (203). At its most extreme, dissociation can lead to a complete bodily shutdown through fainting (Winfrey and Perry 118).

Dissociation can also manifest in a more general sense of "feeling lost, overwhelmed, abandoned, and disconnected from the world" (der Kolk 114). We see this in my work-in-progress, *The Wasting Curse*, when the female protagonist Kit dances with her abuser, the king: "My muscles move to the song, taking me toward him, lifting my arm and turning me" (40). The use of the passive voice (the muscles are doing the action, not the character) will frequently draw criticism in a writing workshop. But here, the passive voice is intentional to show Kit's state of dissociation.

My male protagonist, Wesley, has a form of dissociation that is more pronounced, with attached memory loss. This is notable in his inability to remember more than fractured moments of his time under enchantment. He reflects, "It's like trying to recall a dream you've already forgotten. Snatches of feeling—dread, fear—and

the vaguest of sensations" (136). Dissociation makes it difficult for the brain to record memories in a clear, sequential way (der Kolk 216). Instead, moments are split and isolated to make a traumatic event more bearable. Because the brain processes these memories as fragments, they cannot be assimilated into the past. They remain charged with feeling, and the body responds as if the trauma is happening currently. This can cause problems in personal and professional functioning (216). This is true of Wesley's experience. His inability to remain present while under enchantment causes him bodily harm and puts other characters in danger.

But memories can be integrated. Splintered minds can learn to keep the past from straying into the present (der Kolk 217). In the scene where Kit is forced to dance with her abuser, she becomes conscious of the witnesses around her and she anchors herself in the now with concentrated breathing: "I inhale, slow and deep. *One*, *two*, *three*, *four*… and exhale. I can afford to stay sharp this time" (41). Other methods—such as Emotional Freedom Techniques (EFT) and Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR)—can be used to signal that a character is reintegrating themselves in a healthy way. Unfortunately I do not have time here to expand on these methods, but they are worth researching for authors that are keen to find healthy alternatives for their characters.

Positioning the Character in the Climax

One major plot point in *The Wasting Curse* required particular care: When would Kit switch back to her original body? In my early plans to rework the folk fairytale, I intended to have the curse break during or even after the climax. This is fairly common in curse-breaking narratives: the young adult novels *Thorn* by Intisar Khanani (2020), *Echo North* by Joanna Ruth Meyer (2018), and *Hunted* by Meagan Spooner (2017) all have a curse break as part as their thematic climax or dénouement. These three books also made intriguing use of dissociation in the climactic action of their stories.

Hunted uses dissociation during the climax to create a sense of the magical. The protagonist enters the scene in a magic-drugged fog: "Dimly the sound [of ice cracking] made her think of a half-lost memory… She [tried] to sort out memory from dreams, reality from story" (Spooner 342-347). This impacts her ability to use memory to overcome the challenges of the climax. Because she is not embodied, it takes her three attempts to become enough in her body to solve the challenge of her final confrontation with the antagonist. First, after touching a feather, her memory is stirred: "'Eoven,' she said, struggling to remember. 'I am here for Eoven.'" (347). Second, it is the antagonist's use of her name: "But her name, the word *beauty*, it rang in her thoughts and her eyes flew open… She remembered" (347-348). Finally, she seeks to reconnect with her body: "[She] forced her hands to tighten, intending to drive her own fingernails into her palms to jolt herself from the […] spell. Instead she found one of her hands was full, and when she looked down she remembered she was still holding her father's bow" (348). While this protagonist does end up embodied before she claims her climactic action, the dissociation used to get her there places her in a passive

stance.

This use of magic to erase or fog memory is a common form of dissociation in fantasy novels, and can be seen even more starkly in Kristin Cashore's *Graceling* (2009) where, like *Hunted*, the protagonist enters the climax in a magic-fog. This time, the protagonist takes her climactic action "not because she knew [the antagonist] must die. Not because she remembered the truth of [her lover's secret]. But because she remembered [he had a secret]… which would hurt him in some horrible way she felt deeply but didn't remember" (416-417). In the instance of *Graceling*, the protagonist is not embodied when she acts. She becomes a vehicle of the plot, doing what she does because the plot requires it while almost entirely dissociated from the motivation behind her actions.

Compare with Joanna Ruth Meyer's *Echo North* (2018). In this climax, the opposite is true. The protagonist realizes that she has been disconnected from a vital memory for the entire book, and in a powerful scene she is fully integrated with a part of herself she never knew she was missing. She says, "I remember, I remember what I shouldn't be able to: I have lived my life twice over" (Meyer, 558). She enters the final action more fully herself than perhaps in the entire book and is entirely present for her climactic decisions.

As in examples above, authors sometimes use dissociation to create extra obstacles between a character and their objective. This is seen in *Thorn*, a retelling of *The Goose Girl*. The protagonist has been in the body of her maid for the majority of the book. But during the climax, the protagonist is further separated from her physical form by being transformed into the antagonist's likeness for the final battle. She assumes this likeness solely for the reason of testing her romantic interest's goodness. This dissociative action removes the protagonist very far from her true form and shifts the focus of the climax from her character arc to the prince's, because the question of the climax becomes: Will he attack her because she looks like his family's enemy? It is a puzzling narrative decision in an otherwise excellent book.

Thorn, with its body switch curse, is the closest to my retelling. But though *Thorn*'s prince breaks his family's curse in the climax, the protagonist's curse does not break until afterward (when she is restored to her true body). She becomes yet another protagonist who is not fully herself in the climactic part of her own story.

There is a crucial psychological aspect the authors are not considering: healing—or becoming your truest, best self—can be made more difficult when you are not in your own body. Dr. Van der Kolk points this out in *The Body Keeps the Score* (emphasis his): "In order to find our voice, we have to be *in* our body—able to breathe fully and able to access our inner sensations" (331). A protagonist not fully in their body is not in a position to access their true voice. Without self-awareness, an extra block is added in their journey to healing. Even in healing practices that face inward—such as guided imagery, hypnosis, and meditation—one primary desired outcome is to rewire the *physical* brain of the patient (Nakazawa 192). A body that has experienced trauma "often has been storing up physical and muscular tension" from a

lifetime of fight, flight, or freeze (177). If a person is to recover from that trauma, they must do so with some involvement of their own body and consciousness. It is only by creating a stronger connection with their body that a patient can tangibly "wake up joy" (196). This is an especially important concern during a novel's climax.

Author Doug TenNapel summarizes a typical positive story's structure succinctly as: first act (protagonist's flawed current situation), second act (the protagonist becomes who they are meant to be), and third act (confirmation of change) (35:21 - 47:08). Importantly, the third act *confirms* a change that has already taken place. Kit breaks her curse because she has *already* forgiven her body and its role in her past. Wesley earns his freedom because he *already* put aside his harmful motivations in order to help someone else. K. M. Weiland puts it, "The climax is where your character proves that he really is a changed person" (para. 2). This interpretation of narrative structure mirrors the psychological underpinnings of placing a person in a strong position for healing. The character entering the climax has already undergone a significant change and now is proving to the reader that they are a new person. In the same way, a recovering individual might already have hit a milestone in their journey before they showcase their new strengths and coping techniques. The character and the individual both are solidly placed in their developing identity. They enter the biggest moment of conflict ready to use all they have learned.

The importance of inhabiting one's body as a part of healing, and the narrative structure of providing evidence of change before proving it, altered my thoughts around *The Wasting Curse*'s climax. I became aware that Kit would have to be restored to her true self before she could face her final challenge. By breaking the curse before the climax, I would put her in a position that would best showcase her ability to overcome her trauma.

Conclusion

Trauma can often trigger dissociation. A mindful representation of both trauma and its effects provides young readers with a fictional example of how these difficulties are experienced and, perhaps, overcome. The trick is to keep a focus on story *and* psychological reality. By using my research in psychology, I was able to develop a scientifically-informed representation of trauma and dissociation in my creative work, and I hope that by applying a similar research curiosity you can do the same in yours.

Works Cited

Cashore, Kristin. *Graceling*. Clarion Books, 2009.
Khanani, Intisar. *Thorn*. Hot Key Books, 2020.
Meyer, Joanna Ruth. *Echo North*. Page Street Publishing Co., 2019.
Nakazawa, Donna Jackson. *Childhood Disrupted: How Your Biography Becomes Your Biology, and How You Can Heal*. Atria Books, 2016.
Perry, Bruce. *The Boy Who Was Raised as a Dog: And Other Stories from a Child Psychiatrist's Notebook*. Basic Books, 2017.
Perry, Bruce, and Oprah Winfrey. *What Happened to You?: Conversations on Trauma, Resilience, and Healing*. Flatiron Books, 2021.
Spooner, Meagan. *Hunted*. HarperTeen, 2017.
TenNapel, Doug. "Doug TenNapel speaks at the Art Institute Inland Empire." Vimeo, uploaded by santosh oommen, 9 Jan. 2010, https://vimeo.com/8640621.
van der Kolk, Bessel. *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*. Penguin Group, 2014.
Weiland, K. M. "Creating Stunning Character Arcs, Pt. 14: The Climax." *Helping Writers Become Authors*, 18 May 2014, https://www.helpingwritersbecomeauthors.com/character-arcs-14/.

Author Biography

Alyssa Hollingsworth was born in small-town Milton, Florida, but life as a roving military kid soon mellowed her (unintelligibly strong) Southern accent. Wanderlust is in her blood, and she's always waiting for the wind to change. Stories remain her constant. Alyssa received her BA in English with an emphasis in Creative Writing from Berry College and her MA with honors in Writing for Young People at Bath Spa University. She is currently a PhD candidate with her dissertation titled *Breaking the Curse: Retelling a Folk Fairytale to Explore Trauma and Healing in Novels for Young People*. She is represented by Amber Caraveo at Skylark Literary. Her award-winning debut *The Eleventh Trade* and her second book *The Invisible Boy* were published by Roaring Brook/Macmillan (U.S.) and Piccadilly Press (U.K.).