



Adolescents Daydreaming about Mending the “Dislocated World”¹

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Abstract

Adolescence is a moratorium period given by the modern society to young people to prepare for the tasks of adulthood. Our society, however, seems to be more and more impatient towards adolescents. In the course of the 20th century reference books and professionals tended to depict young people as delinquent, selfish, abusive, irresponsible and deviant. My present study aims at the deconstruction of the “black legend” of adolescence, and show adolescents’ efforts to cope with their future tasks.

I analyze some fiction stories written by Hungarian adolescents. I suggest that these stories reflect on adolescents’ identity crisis and serve as a tool for identity construction. The protagonists of these stories, depicted as Mary Sues, fulfill the function of identity projects. I also point out that these stories follow the narrative structure of monomyth (identified by J. Campbell) which is a universal pattern for telling stories about journeys in the deep layers of the psyche and psychological growth. The monomyth structure grants for the psychological authenticity of the stories and also reports us about the authors’ progress in the way of solving identity crisis.

I conclude that adolescents are creative by nature, and tend to speculate on mending the “dislocated world” while fighting on the “right side”. They tend to envision themselves as morally good and competent adults and are prepared to assume relevant and meaningful social goals.

Keywords:

adolescence, black legend, identity crisis, Mary Sue, monomyth

Adolescents in the globalized world

Adolescents of our days are “natives” of the globalized world² since they were and have been raised in a technologically developed, and a more or less integrated environment in economic and cultural sense. In social terms they face fundamentally different challenges and possibilities than their parents’ and grandparents’ generation, who were “immigrants” to the globalized world. In psychological terms adolescents as individuals must adapt to the altered conditions as well as complete their

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²This is supposed to be an allusion to Prensky's (2001) terms, the “digital natives” and “digital immigrants”.



developmental tasks (also referred as life tasks). By adaption I mean the effort to find proper answers to the existential question how to fit in (or stay outside) the social and cultural settings of the globalized reality. The developmental tasks, though also socially determined and existentially motivated, originate from the inborn urge to grow up and elaborate one's personal and social identity.

The way how the individual crosses the threshold of adulthood went through fundamental changes during the centuries (Larson and Wilson 2004). In ancient times just like in contemporary tribal societies the young members of the community aspiring for adult status underwent an initiation process (Markstrom 2011). In feudal societies adulthood was reached without posing questions about the members' future social roles and profession, since these were determined by the social affiliation of their family of origin. Peasants' descendants would become peasants while nobles would follow their ancestors' fashion. There were only some social mobility channels: soldiers, priests, teachers and physicians seemed to have above-average freedom of choice about their future profession.

Industrial development posed new issues in terms of identity. Individuals gradually gained more and more freedom in their choices concerning their future life, but parallel to this they assumed an increased personal responsibility as well. This process reached its peak in modern postindustrial societies due to the unbelievably high standard of technological development (Benson and Pittman 2001). Becoming an adult is not exclusively a community matter anymore but also the individual's personal struggle. One has to make efforts to elaborate his or her identity, assume social roles and make decisions about his or her future profession. This effort is called the identity crisis.³ Western societies offer free choice of vocations, life styles, value systems and world views for their members, so there are plenty of options before the young people (Benson and Pittman 2001; Larson and Wilson 2004). Waterman (1982 p. 345) states that "The greater the range of identity alternatives to which an individual is exposed prior to or during adolescence, the greater the likelihood will be of undergoing an identity crisis."

The "black legend" of adolescence

³ The term was first coined by Erik H. Erikson in the 1950s.



Modern western societies show a Janus face toward young people. On one hand they offer more or less unlimited possibilities – this, however implies a long preparation period for the challenges of the future. Adolescence, in this sense, is a moratorium period, a long and gradual transition from childhood to adulthood – a generous donation by the society.

On the other hand western societies impatiently urge adolescents to grow up⁴ and fit in the category of “normal people”. From this viewpoint adolescents seem “abnormal”, behave unexpectedly, and need prevention or even cure to heal them. Theorists of different origins and professional commitments, like G. Stanley Hall (1904) and Anna Freud (1999) consented that adolescence was a biologically determined stormy period, a “developmental disturbance” (Lerner 2005). This view best manifested in Ernst Kretschmer’s (1959) work in which the famous physician registered a number of really serious disturbances of his adolescent patients (Vikár 1999). On this basis, adolescents were considered psychotics to some extent, or, at least, neurotics. Psychologist, sociologists, and other practitioners depicted young people as delinquent, selfish, abusive, irresponsible and deviant. They emphasized the “risks” and “dangers”, and constructed long lists of symptoms to prove the pathological nature of this period. As Lerner et al. (2005 p.4) point out “for about the first 85 years of the scientific study of adolescent development, the field was framed almost exclusively by a deficit perspective about this period.”

This is the discourse that I call the “black legend”⁵ of adolescence. In my paper I would like to contribute to the deconstruction of this legend and point out that normal adolescent development has more to do with art and creativity than to psychopathology.

Life tasks in adolescence

⁴ Not only adolescents but also young children experience this urge. Symbolically it appears in clothing: even newborn babies can be dressed up like adolescents, two year old girls as adult women. The other side of the coin is that the social urge of maturation stops at young adulthood and from that time on people lack the social promotion to become mature adults.

⁵ The term (*La Leyenda Negra*) comes from the 16th century referring to the propagandistic views that aimed at discrediting Spain and the Spanish people for colonizing the American continent (Juderías, 2003; Powell, 2008). The term in a broader sense means a discourse full of negative bias, a purposeful distortion of the facts.



On their way to adulthood adolescents go through radical transformation in biological, sexual, cognitive and social terms. It is indeed a hard labor for the individual to keep step with the changes. This is what we call life tasks in adolescence. Theorists differ in the length of the task lists they provide, still all consent that the following items are unavoidable for the sake of development: 1) emotional separation from parents, 2) gaining control over the changed body, 3) integrating sexuality into the whole personality, 4) construction of personal identity, 5) construction of social identity.

As a result, adolescents must develop a new body and self-image. Beyond that, they are to construct a more mature and relevant representation of the world around and plan a fashion of life that is meaningful and valuable.

Though all these tasks inseparably pertain to future identity, in my present paper I will focus only on those that have the most to do with identity crisis. I will present an indirect method by which identity crisis can be detected and analyzed. This method is based on the investigation of some creative products made by adolescents. But first I must show the connection between adolescents and daydreaming, as well as daydreaming and creativity.

Professional daydreamers

Daydream is a form of “mind wandering” that starts when we switch our attention from the externally produced information stream to the internally produced one (McMillan et al. 2013). Adolescents, due to the urge of their life tasks, especially the elaboration of identity, often find themselves submerging in this altered state of consciousness. Based on the high frequency of switches between mental states, adolescents can be considered “professional” daydreamers. Though even most recent studies focus on the “costs” of these kinds of mental wanderings, and, as McMillan et al. (2013) point out, attribute them to the failure of cognitive control, I join the minority of theorist who suggest that one can enjoy some inevitable personal benefits in the course of daydreaming. I rely on Singer’s (1966, 1975) term, the “positive constructive daydreaming” which implies a playful, wishful imagery, and playful, creative thought (Singer and McCraven 1961; McMillan et al. 2013). Schooler et al. (2011) add, that this form of daydreaming serves some adaptive functions among which future planning is significant.



The group of adolescents I involved in my research are “average” Hungarian adolescents (23 girls and 7 boys) who differ from their peers in only one feature: their daydreams tend to manifest in stories authored by them. Starving for positive feedback, these creative young people publish their stories on the web and share them with friends and other envisioned readers. I was curious what these stories tell about the teenage authors as well as the identity crisis which they are supposed to struggle with.

I found that the authors were tirelessly engaged in planning their future self by creating a (same gender) protagonist and putting him or her into fictional situations. These heroes tend to face serious challenges, have a hard work to complete their mission, while enjoying a rich network of social relationship. They always fight on the “right side”, and commit themselves to higher values like honesty, love, faithfulness or bravery. Their mission is usually of great dimensions: saving the world from evil or mending it by hard work (see later in details).

These features suggest that via these fictional settings the authors imaginatively prepare for an envisioned meaningful life. In the course of their daydreams adolescents fulfill wishes and successfully solve basic human problems that they might face in future reality. These daydreams are heroic and messianic in nature, rather than pathological or deviant. No one visualizes himself or herself as delinquent, selfish, abusive, irresponsible and deviant. This finding corresponds with Baird et al.’s (2011) claim that positive constructive daydreaming serves as the anticipation and planning of personally relevant future goals. In more general, we can state that positive constructive daydreams contribute to constructing and assuming identity as well as appropriate the demand for a meaningful life.

General features of the stories

Stories written by adolescent authors are of different length (25-300 pages). Though the majority of them remain unfinished, the author’s intention to write a novel, rather than a short story, is usually clear.

The stories share lots of common features with fairy tales, myths, and utopias. Some are adventure stories, others belong to the genre of science fiction or fantasy. They are all film-like: the authors tend to depict backgrounds, movements, facial expressions and the outlook of the figures so precisely, that readers feel as if they were watching a movie.



In many cases the stories are placed in an alternative universe where the laws of physics may differ from that of the Earth, but human nature remains unchanged. In some stories fictional creatures like orks, demons, fairies or vampires also play an important role: they either help or impede human endeavors and tangle in mazy relationship with the human heroes. Some authors engage in investigating human nature through hybrid heroes, who, besides their outer mission, fight also inside with their non-human halves.

Not surprisingly, most stories share the “separation from the parents” motif. Some protagonist are orphans, who had lost their parents long before the story started. Some parents had been brutally killed by some evil forces or disappeared at the beginning, leaving grief in the heart of the hero. As in fairy tales, some protagonists of these stories voluntarily leave their homes due to a call for mission.

Let me share one more general finding here that has not too much relevance; I just found it interesting. Girl novelists tend to pay close attention to their protagonists’ personal hygiene: girl heroes often take a shower before or after a trying round, while boy heroes never bother with things like these.

From an esthetical point of view only a few of these works are promising in literary sense. In other words, not all the authors are talented, but it does not prevent them from being psychologically authentic, which is the most important point from our perspective. Let me show how “ungifted” writers can create something worthy of attention.

Mary Sue in the novels

“Mary Sue” is a term in literary criticism referring to an over-idealized protagonist who is depicted so perfect that it loses authenticity. Needless to say, works operating with Mary Sues cannot apply for the “esthetically valuable” title. In the course of my research I concluded that young novelists, while envisioning their wished self, tend to create protagonists that meet the criteria for Mary Sue (Bálint 2011).

So how are these protagonists characterized in the stories? First of all they tend to possess a perfect outlook: young man are tall and handsome, young women are enviably beautiful with their long shiny hair and thin girlish bodies. They dress according to the latest fashion displaying a genuine sense of taste. As for social skills,



these heroes enjoy exceptional popularity and prestige among peers, who highly admire and appreciate them.

Born or selected for special missions, these Mary Sues prove strong characters and persistent in their pursuit for goals. They bravely start invading the unknown and face their evil enemies. Meanwhile they show true openness to new experiences and really care for their own development.

The most distinguishing feature of these protagonists, however, is, that they possess some special well-developed skills or even supernatural abilities. It usually takes some time and effort to master these abilities that tend to emerge unexpectedly in beginning of their teenage years, and the protagonists make a good use of them when facing challenging trials. The awakening new skills might offer us a psychological interpretation: they symbolize the bodily changes and the sexual awakening in adolescence.

Though Mary Sue is one of the most serious mistakes a creative writer can commit, it still fulfills an apparent psychological function in case of adolescent novelists (Bálint 2011). Mary Sue stands for the adolescent novelist's identity project, the wished future self, the ideal future personality. It reveals not merely the honest wish but also the psychological effort to attain a developmental goal. Mary Sue in this sense is not at all a mistake but a sign of the normal, healthy development. (The opposite of Mary Sue, an evil or incompetent protagonist, on the other hand, would be worthy of concern.)

The hero myth in the novels

Investigating the structure of the texts we can realize that these stories follow the narrative structure of the monomyth, identified by Joseph Campbell (2004, first published in 1949). The monomyth is a universal pattern for telling stories about journeys in the deep layers of the psyche and about psychological growth. It is the basic structural pattern of the ancient hero myth. The mythological hero, as well as the protagonist of adolescents' novels, gets a call, hesitates for some time, but then starts to take the journey, meets his mentor, fights his greatest enemy, triumphs, and then returns to share the boons of his experiences with other people. During the way the hero goes through an overall transformation (a kind of death and rebirth,) that symbolizes psychological maturation.



But how did this pattern get into the Hungarian teenagers' novels? The monomyth structure may originate from the inherent human mythopoetic capacity, as C. G. Jung called this universal human ability, or simply from the well-known Hollywood movies that often follow this pattern, or even from both sources.

The monomyth structure, argues Campbell (2004), grants for the psychological authenticity of the stories. It models crisis, or, more precisely, the coping with crisis. It is not at all surprising that adolescents facing identity crisis articulate their psychic experiences in the symbolic language of myth. They authentically report about their inner journey when telling stories about teenage heroes who realize new powers in their bodies and find themselves selected for a grandiose mission. The missions cover seemingly different aims, such as saving the world from a catastrophe or from evil forces, finding roots, parents or lost memories, solving a mystery, revealing a secret, fulfilling a prophecy or winning a race, still they have a lot in common. All the pursued goals symbolize the inner crisis and the pursuit for transformation, maturation and consequently a meaningful future life. Needless to say, the protagonists tend to complete their mission successfully⁶ which reflects the healthy anticipation of the successful outcome of the crisis.

As I mentioned before, there are only a few completed novels in my sample, and this is a general phenomenon in the case of adolescents' novels. The incompleteness thus raises the need for some reflections. Getting stuck at a point of the story indicates a psychological impediment. Classical hero myths tell us about a completed journey, but adolescents are still on their way. They might anticipate the next step but they can authentically report only about the sections that they have already passed over. So the point in the monomyth structure where the story gets stuck, shows where the adolescent stays in the course of his or her identity crisis (Bálint 2011, 2014).

This assumption was confirmed by another research on adolescents' novels carried out in 2013. I examined six different stories written by two authors (all girls at this time) in different periods of their teenage years. Though age and getting along with identity crisis do not strictly correlate in general, the individual's progress weighted against his or her own development can be detected when observed longitudinally.

⁶ In the case of the unfinished stories the depiction of the triumph is absent for obvious reasons. But even unfinished stories anticipate the successful outcome by providing prepared and dedicated Mary Sues.



The results showed that the older the adolescent was, the further she got with the monomyth structure of her story, compared to her previous stories (Bálint 2013).

All these suggest that adolescents' novels authentically report on the authors' identity crisis. They may also suggest that psychologically authentic stories are born in the midst of crises.

The "positive" conclusions

At the end of my paper let me draw some positive conclusions from the above findings. The first one is that adolescents are creative by nature. The second one is that adolescents' novels are the manifestations of the imaginative processes that follow the construction of identity and report about the passed and anticipated stages of their authors' identity crisis. The third conclusion is that adolescents tend to speculate on mending the "dislocated world" while fighting on the "right side." They highly appreciate some existentially significant values. Beyond all these, they envision themselves as morally good and competent adults.

All these reveal adolescents' authentic efforts to become precious members of the society who care for personally relevant things and lead a meaningful life. They are prepared to assume adult social roles and pursue social goals. This is why I suggest a new approach to adolescence via which we consider adolescent crisis not merely from the side of "dangers" and "deficits" but from the true preparedness and inclination for self-development and social service.

I hope that with this argumentation I can contribute a bit to the deconstruction of the "black legend" of adolescence, and the construction to a new discourse that might perhaps be labeled the "white legend."

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