

Laurie Halse Anderson: Complexity in *The Impossible Knife of Memory*

Complexity in Young Adult Literature

In *Teaching Reading with YA Literature: Complex Text, Complex Lives* by Jennifer Buehler, Chapter 2 looks at Young Adult Literature and Text Complexity and gives 8 different elements to think about to help analyze the complexity of a text:

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| Complexity of Style | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Language • Structure • Other stylistic elements |
| Complexity of Substance | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Character • Setting • Literary devices • Topics and themes • How the book is put together |

Examples of complexity in *Impossible Knife of Memory* by Laurie Halse Anderson

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|-------------------------|---|
| Complexity of Style | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The idea of then and now is explored through Anderson’s text structure and italicization. (Example: Ch. 5) • Looking at PTSD: “His soul is still bleeding. That’s a lot harder to fix than a busted-up leg or traumatic brain injury.” (107) • Metaphors/Similes: “The wind is a lion, jaws open wide.” (182), “Dad’s voice rumbled like far-away thunder.” (11), “...seconds, one after another, watching them drop like heavy rocks down a deep well.” (23) • Personification: “Death deals the cards.” (12), “I needed to hear the world but didn’t want the world to know I was listening” (5) |
| Complexity of Substance | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hayley struggles with all relationships in her life. These struggles are tied to her lack of parental support and consistency. • Hayley’s inner life is as well-constructed as the outer narrative. • All supporting characters within the novel are developed and have a story arc of their own. • Laurie Halse Anderson uses memory as an antagonist in the story. • In addition to memory, fear, addiction, death, and family are big ideas that are explored in the novel. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ “I didn’t like admitting it, but the truth was that my memories were starting to surface.” (178) ○ “I swallowed the fear. It’s always there –fear—and if you don’t stay on top of it, you’ll drown.” (6) ○ “They’d find his weed. What else? Were all his guns legal? What if they brought in a drug-sniffing dog?” (340) ○ “I try to ignore Death, but she’s got her arm around my waist, waiting to poison everything I touch.” (301) ○ “Note: ‘family’ does NOT only mean a biological unit composed of people who share genetic markers or legal bonds, headed by a heterosexual-mated pair. Family is much, much more than that.” (3) ○ “Is it still called a ‘family room’ after your parents split up?” (177) |

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Other questions that could be asked while reading to find complexity in YAL (Examples from *Teacher Reading with YA Literature*, Buehler 36-37)

- *Language*: Are the sentences artfully constructed? Are the words carefully chosen? Does the author incorporate figurative language or poetic expression? Can we hear voice in the writing?
- *Structure*: How is it built in terms of form and structure? How do other elements such as titles and subtitles, vignettes and interludes, shifts between past and present, or multiple points of view work together to service the whole?
- *Other Stylistic Elements*: Are there other distinct elements in the text?
- *Character*: What is there to explore in terms of the character's thoughts and feelings; conflicts and contradictions; struggles, growth, and change?
- *Setting*: How does the author bring us into the world of the story? What details help us to see, hear, and imagine this place?
- *Literary Devices*: How does the author use literary or cultural allusions, intertextual references, dialogue, internal monologue, metaphor and symbolism, magical realism, or repetition to build meaning?
- *Topics and themes*: What questions does the book ask? What ideas does it explore? What is at stake for teen readers in this book?
- *How the book is put together*: How effective is the interplay between plot layers and thematic layers?

Discussion Questions/Writing Prompts for *The Impossible Knife of Memory*

Complexity can also be increased by the characteristics of the reader (such as motivation, knowledge, and experiences) and task variables (such as purpose and the complexity generated by the task assigned and the questions posed). Here are some examples of discussion questions or writing prompts that could be used in classrooms or with independent readers who are reading *The Impossible Knife of Memory*.

- Hayley classifies all people into two categories: freaks & zombies. What does Hayley's idea of the world show us about her outlook on life?
- How does Laurie Halse Anderson use the idea of THEN and NOW throughout the novel to build on the theme that memories are a very complex part of life?
- Drowning is a motif throughout the novel.
- How does Laurie Halse Anderson show the reader that Hayley's father is suffering and found addiction without using those words?
- How did the inclusion of Hayley's romantic relationship with Finn help move along the story and Hayley's transformation? Do you feel that Hayley's story arc would have been the same without Finn in the story?
- How was the setting an integral part of the story? How did Hayley returning to her deceased grandmother's home propel the story?
- Trish is one of the most complex characters in the book because there are many different Trishes shared with us throughout the story: Trish then, Trish now in reality, and Trish now in Hayley's mind. How did Laurie Halse Anderson develop each of these different characters to show the reader a full picture of Trish?

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