



Exploring Jason Reynolds's *Long Way Down* As Young Adult Literature: A Genre Criticism

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Abstract. This research explores the classification of Jason Reynolds's *Long Way Down* as Young Adult literature through the lens of genre criticism, focusing on its narrative structure, adolescent voice, and thematic depth. Utilizing theoretical frameworks by Nilsen and Donelson as well as Mertz and England, the research identifies core characteristics of Young Adult literature such as youthful perspective, rapid plot progression, and engagement with real-world issues, embedded within Reynolds's verse narrative. This research employs a qualitative descriptive approach through close reading and textual analysis, examining Will Holloman's internal struggle during a 60-second elevator ride that symbolically descends into questions of identity, grief, revenge, and the moral consequences of violence. Set within a marginalized urban environment, the novel portrays how systemic racism, toxic masculinity, and constrained agency impact adolescent development. Structural and stylistic elements, such as the free-verse format, fragmented cadence, staccato lines, and ghostly encounters, are analyzed to reveal how the novel both aligns with and challenges Young Adult literary conventions. The findings suggest that *Long Way Down* not only fulfills the essential traits of Young Adult literature but also expands the genre's boundaries through its poetic form and layered social critique. By integrating genre theory and literary analysis, the study highlights how Reynolds's narrative reflects a complex portrayal of adolescence shaped by cultural and communal expectations. Ultimately, *Long Way Down* exemplifies the evolving nature of Young Adult literature, bridging poetic experimentation with urgent, socially grounded storytelling and affirms its relevance as a genre that speaks directly to the emotional and ethical dilemmas faced by today's youth.

Keywords: Adolescent perspective, Genre criticism, Young Adult Literature

INTRODUCTION/PENDAHULUAN

Genre is a powerful way to make sense of literature, helping readers and scholars understand how authors make specific creative choices in telling their stories (Bawarshi & Reiff, 2010, as cited in Pramesti, 2015). Genre is "much more than just a category or classification – it is a powerful interpretive tool that helps shape meaning in a text" (Duff, 2014). It groups works with similar themes, styles, or storytelling techniques, providing a framework for analyzing and engaging with literary works. However, genres are not rigid; they evolve over time, merging and overlapping as new cultural and intellectual

trends emerge, reflecting the dynamic nature of literature. As Geertz noted, this “blurring of genres” opens new possibilities for understanding literature and culture (quoted in Duff, 2014:33).

One genre that has gained significant attention in contemporary literary studies is Young Adult (YA) literature. YA literature serves as a bridge between childhood and adulthood, providing stories that explore the challenges, experiences, and emotions unique to adolescence. Reid defines YA literature as “books that adolescents would probably like and be able to relate to” (Pramesti, 2015). YA novels often address themes such as identity, friendship, family, and the pressures of growing up, offering readers stories that reflect their realities and struggles. Pattee (2017) emphasizes that YA literature both constructs and reflects the idea of adolescence, capturing the complexity and intensity of this stage of life.

YA literature has developed into various subgenres, including YA fantasy, YA romance, and YA verse novels. Verse novels, in particular, employ poetry rather than traditional prose, creating a rhythmic, compact, and intimate reading experience. This format allows young readers to connect quickly with characters and emotions, capturing thoughts and feelings in a raw and immediate way. Verse novels make complex themes more accessible, allowing readers to experience stories on a deeply emotional level, and mirroring the rapid and often chaotic thoughts characteristic of adolescence.

Long Way Down by Jason Reynolds is an example of a YA verse novel that blends impactful themes with a distinctive verse format to explore grief, revenge, and the weight of choices. The novel follows a 15-year-old protagonist, Will, who grapples with his brother’s recent murder and his desire for revenge. As he descends in an elevator, he encounters ghosts from his past who challenge his plan, each stop serving as a moment of reflection on the cycle of violence affecting his community. The elevator becomes a symbolic space for Will’s internal struggle, illustrating the high-stakes, moment-driven structure common in YA literature, where external conflicts connect to personal growth and realization. Campbell explains that the central theme of YA fiction is becoming an adult and finding the answer to the question “Who am I and what am I going to do about it?”, highlighting how the resolution of external conflicts in YA literature often aligns with the protagonist’s journey toward shaping their adult identity (quoted in Nilsen and Donelson, 2009:31).

Reynolds’s *Long Way Down* embodies the characteristics of YA literature through its verse format, relatable themes, and authentic teen voice. The novel’s exploration of grief, violence, and choice, presented from a teenager’s perspective, captures the realities many young people face within their communities. Bucholtz (2002:533) asserts that “youth are cultural actors whose experiences are best understood from their own point of view”, emphasizing the importance of centering youth perspectives in cultural narratives. By portraying Will’s confusion, fear, and anger, Reynolds allows young readers to see their struggles reflected in his story.

This research will identify and analyze the characteristics of Young Adult literature in *Long Way Down*, exploring how Reynolds’s novel reflects genre conventions while engaging its readers. By examining these characteristics, this study aims to reveal why *Long Way Down* is considered a YA verse novel, demonstrating how it offers young readers a story that is honest, impactful, and deeply connected to their experiences. Based on the statement above, the research question can be formulated:

1. What are the characteristics of Young Adult literature in Jason Reynolds’s *Long Way Down*?

LITERATURE REVIEW/ TINJAUAN PUSTAKA

Young Adult (YA) literature is characterized by its focus on adolescent experiences, often exploring themes of identity, growth, and societal challenges through accessible narratives and relatable protagonists (Nilsen & Donelson, 2019). This genre is not static but evolves through cultural and social influences, functioning as a "social contract" between writers and readers to address contemporary issues (Duff, 2014). According to Reid (as cited in Pramesti, 2015), YA literature resonates with adolescents by reflecting their challenges and emotions, making it a vital medium for exploring complex social realities.

Long Way Down by Jason Reynolds employs a verse format to capture the emotional intensity of adolescence, aligning with Coats' (2020) emphasis on emotional authenticity in YA literature. The novel's use of a youthful protagonist, Will Holloman, and its exploration of grief and systemic violence mirror Nilsen and Donelson's (2019) criteria, which include fast-paced plots, diverse characters, and a focus on adolescent concerns.

Genre theory, as outlined by Bawarshi and Reiff (2010), provides a framework for analyzing *Long Way Down* by identifying how its narrative structure, verse form, and thematic depth adhere to and expand YA conventions. The novel's compressed 60-second elevator ride narrative exemplifies Nilsen and Donelson's (2019) observation of urgent, high-stakes YA plots, while its verse style enhances accessibility, as noted by Coats (2020). Mertz and England (as cited in Elmore, 2017) highlight YA literature's focus on social issues like systemic racism and poverty, which *Long Way Down* addresses through Will's encounters with ghosts, reflecting Ramdarshan Bold's (2019) emphasis on YA's relevance to marginalized communities.

The narrative structure of *Long Way Down* aligns with Devitt's (2021) concept of emotional mediation, where ghostly interactions serve as a mechanism for Will to process grief and question toxic masculinity. This approach complements Bawarshi and Reiff's (2010) view of genre as a tool for psychological depth and moral ambiguity, allowing the novel to challenge traditional YA boundaries while remaining rooted in adolescent perspectives. By integrating these scholarly frameworks, this study uses genre criticism to map *Long Way Down*'s narrative elements, character roles, and social commentary, illuminating its role in redefining YA literature.

METHOD/METODE

This study uses a genre criticism approach to analyze Jason Reynolds's *Long Way Down* within the framework of Young Adult (YA) literature. Genre criticism offers a structured and theoretical way to explore how a literary work conforms to, challenges, or redefines genre conventions (Bawarshi and Reiff, 2010). It focuses on genre as a fluid and evolving concept shaped by cultural, social, and literary contexts (Duff, 2014). This approach helps to examine how *Long Way Down* embodies and innovates within YA literature through its themes, narrative style, and verse format, emphasizing how these elements position the novel within the YA genre while reflecting its ongoing evolution.

This study uses qualitative research. Qualitative research aims to deeply understand texts, themes, and cultural contexts by applying theoretical frameworks and analytical tools (Hughes, 2015). It is designed to investigate the significance and complexity of *Long Way Down* through the systematic collection and analysis of non-numerical data, enabling the researcher to interpret how the narrative resonates with YA audiences and illustrates genre characteristics.

The data source of this study is Jason Reynolds's verse novel *Long Way Down*, published in 2017 and consisting of 306 pages. The data are in the form of quotations carefully selected from the verses in the novel that reflect YA literature characteristics, including adolescent perspectives, fast-paced plot, emotional intensity, and themes of grief, revenge, and personal growth. The verse format in the novel, with its concise and emotionally charged language, offers valuable material for analyzing how form enhances the thematic and emotional layers of the narrative.

The data collection process begins with thoroughly reading *Long Way Down* while highlighting important verses related to the research topic. These selected passages are then categorized based on their relevance to YA literature characteristics as outlined by Nilsen and Donelson, and Mertz and England.

The data analysis unfolds in four stages: first, identifying textual elements such as themes, characters, and narrative style that reflect YA literature characteristics; second, analyzing how these elements align with or challenge YA genre conventions; third, relating these findings to established frameworks of YA literature to justify the novel's categorization; and last, drawing conclusions on how *Long Way Down* affirms its position as a YA verse novel while contributing to the genre's evolution.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION (HASIL DAN PEMBAHASAN)

A. Adolescent Character Traits

1. Youthful Protagonist

The Young Adult genre thrives on a relatable teen protagonist, and *Long Way Down* centers on 15-year-old Will Holloman, whose youth anchors the narrative. Will presents himself with profound emotional openness:

“MY NAME IS / Will. / William. / William Holloman. / But to my friends / and people / who know me / know me, / just Will. / So call me Will, / because after I tell you / what I’m about to tell you / you’ll either / want to be my friend or / not / want to be my friend / at all. / Either way, / you’ll know me / know me.” (Reynolds, 2017:6).

This verse reveals adolescent traits through his self-conscious tone and concern with social perception. The repetition of “Will. / William. / William Holloman.” reflects a teen’s exploration of identity, torn between his formal name (used by family) and “just Will” (preferred by peers), highlighting his desire to define himself apart from familial expectations. This duality underscores the adolescent struggle between self-perception and external judgment.

Will’s direct address (“So call me Will”) and anticipation of polarizing reactions (“you’ll either / want to be my friend or / not”) reveal his need for acceptance and anxiety about judgment, common in adolescence. The poetic form—short, fragmented lines and enjambment like “not / want to be my friend”—mirrors his halting, vulnerable thought process, emphasizing youthful uncertainty. Thematically, this sets up Will’s journey of self-definition amid his community’s “Rules” and his brother’s death, a tension between personal desires and external pressures that defines the adolescent experience. His raw, conversational voice aligns with Young Adult literature’s focus on authentic teen perspectives, making Will a relatable protagonist shaped by his youth and environment.

“THE MIDDLE DRAWER CALLED TO ME / its awkward off-centeredness / a sign that what was in it / could / and should / be used to / set things straight. / I yanked and pulled and / snatched and tugged at / the drawer until it / opened / just more than an inch. / Just wide enough for my / fifteen-year-old fingers to / slither in and touch / cold steel.” (Reynolds, 2017:50).

This verse illustrates how Will Holloman's youth shapes his impulsive decision to take Shawn's gun, driven by a fifteen-year-old's emotional intensity and inexperience. The personification of the drawer "calling" to Will reflects an adolescent tendency to imbue objects with emotional significance, while its "awkward off-centeredness" mirrors his inner turmoil after Shawn's death. His belief that the gun "could / and should / be used to / set things straight" reveals a black-and-white mindset typical of teens, viewing complex issues like revenge as simple solutions.

The phrase "fifteen-year-old fingers" ties Will's age to his actions, emphasizing his youthful inexperience in handling a gun's consequences. The frantic verbs—"yanked," "pulled," "snatched," "tugged"—capture the impulsive, emotion-driven energy of adolescence, while "cold steel" contrasts his emotional heat, hinting at the dangerous path ahead. The poetic form, with short lines and enjambment ("could / and should / be used to"), mirrors Will's rapid, unreflective thoughts, and the spacing around "fifteen-year-old fingers" underscores his youth as a key factor.

2. Diverse Social, Economic, and Ethnic Condition

Young Adult literature often features characters from diverse social, economic, and ethnic conditions, reflecting the complex realities teens navigate and offering relatable perspectives (Nilsen & Donelson, 2019; Elmore, 2017). In Jason Reynolds's *Long Way Down*, this trait shines through Will and the ghosts: Shawn Holloman, Buck, Dani, and Frick, who, despite their shared African American identity and urban neighborhood's challenges, hold distinct social and economic roles. From a grieving teen to a street hustler, an innocent victim, an aspiring artist, and a mentor, these characters highlight varied experiences within their community, embodying Young Adult's focus on diversity (Cart, 2016). This variety of roles enhances the novel's impact as a meaningful Young Adult narrative for young readers who are trying to understand the dynamics within their communities.

Shawn Holloman

"I'M ONLY WILLIAM / to my mother / and my brother, Shawn, / whenever he was trying / to be funny. / Now / I'm wishing I would've / laughed more / at his dumb jokes / because the day / before yesterday, / Shawn was shot / and killed" (Reynolds, 2017:7). This verse highlights Shawn's adolescent humor and role as an emotional anchor in a socio-economically challenged urban community. Shawn's playful use of "William" to tease Will reflects a common adolescent trait of using humor to strengthen sibling bonds, especially in under-resourced environments where older siblings often provide emotional stability. The "dumb jokes" reveal Shawn's youthful, carefree nature, contrasting sharply with the economic and social instability of their community, where gun violence abruptly ends his life. Will's regret—"wishing I would've laughed more"—emphasizes Shawn's role as a source of joy, a vital dynamic in ethnic minority families facing systemic hardships. The abrupt shift to "Shawn was shot and killed" underscores the harsh reality of their urban setting, where economic deprivation fuels violence and social codes demand loyalty. The poetic form, with short lines and a stark break after "Now," mirrors the sudden loss, reflecting how Shawn's adolescent spirit is cut short, shaping Will's perspective in their shared community.

Buck

"sharp and sharklike. / Then turned around / so that I could see the / back of his T-shirt. / A silk-screened photo. / Him, squatting low. / Middle fingers in the air. / And

a smile made / of triangles. / RIP BUCK YOU'LL BE MISSED 4EVA" (Reynolds, 2017:81).

This verse captures Buck's adolescent defiance, shaped by the social and economic pressures of Will's urban, ethnically diverse community. His "sharp and sharklike" smile and T-shirt image—"squatting low" with "middle fingers in the air"—exude a bold, anti-authority stance, reflecting the adolescent need to assert dominance in a violent, resource-scarce environment where bravado earns status. The "smile made of triangles" conveys a playful yet jagged persona, tying his identity to standing out in a community where toughness is vital. The tribute "RIP BUCK YOU'LL BE MISSED 4EVA" marks his death, a common fate for teens in this setting, and underscores his lasting legacy of loyalty and rebellion. The short, choppy lines mirror Buck's abrupt, defiant energy, while the capitalized RIP emphasizes his tragic end, showing how his adolescent traits, molded by social and economic realities, influence Will's view of courage and retaliation.

Dani

"ME AND MY FRIEND DANI / as kids. / Eight / years old. / No-knee'd jeans and / hand-me-down T-shirt / from Shawn. / Flower dress, / shorts underneath / for Dani, / who hung from a monkey bar / tongue hanging from her mouth / like pink candy. / The sun shining in my eyes. / The sunshine in hers." (Reynolds, 2017:127).

This verse captures Dani's adolescent trait of innocence, set against the social and economic hardships of Will's urban, ethnically diverse community. At "eight years old," Dani's "flower dress" and "tongue hanging from her mouth / like pink candy" evoke a carefree, playful spirit, a universal mark of youth persisting despite violence and scarcity. Her practical yet expressive style—dress with "shorts underneath"—reflects creativity born of necessity in economically strained areas. Will's "hand-me-down T-shirt / from Shawn" signals shared economic struggle, yet Dani's vibrant "sunshine in hers" eyes symbolizes a hopeful perspective, resisting their environment's pressures. The short lines and vivid imagery mirror this fleeting joy, while the contrast between "my eyes" and "hers" highlights Dani's role as a beacon of innocence, anchoring Will in a community shaped by ethnic identity and economic lack. Her memory foreshadows her tragic fate, underscoring the vulnerability of adolescent purity in their dangerous world.

Frick

"RIGGS AND SHAWN WERE SO-CALLED FRIENDS, BUT / the best thing he ever did for Shawn / was teach him how to do a Penny Drop. / The worst thing he ever did for Shawn / was shoot him." (Reynolds, 2017:54).

Though not naming Frick directly, this verse frames the adolescent trait of aggression, embodied by his implied role in Shawn's death. As a Dark Suns gang member, Frick represents the social pressure on youth in Will's community to assert power through violence—an expectation shaped by economic desperation and ethnic tensions. The contrast between teaching Shawn a playful "Penny Drop" and ultimately killing him reveals the duality of adolescent bonds in such environments, where friendship and betrayal coexist. Frick's aggression reflects the impulsivity and survival instincts common in under-resourced, minority communities, where gang affiliation becomes a response to limited opportunities. The poem's sharp juxtaposition and clipped lines mirror the sudden shift from camaraderie to violence, underscoring how social, economic, and ethnic forces shape destructive adolescent roles—framing Frick's ghost as a cautionary figure in Will's journey.

3. Independent Thought, Action, and Conflict Resolution

In *Long Way Down*, Will Holloman's journey encapsulates the struggle of independent thought and action in a community where "The Rules" dictate responses to loss, reflecting the harsh realities of urban adolescence shaped by social and economic pressures. Will's decision to follow these rules, driven by the absence of parental guidance and a self-imposed mandate to resolve conflict through vengeance, highlights the autonomy and burden placed on young individuals in under-resourced environments. "The psychological trauma of gun violence may lead some children to arm themselves 'for protection,' or desensitize them so that they feel less hesitation about engaging in violent acts." (Garbarino et al., 2002:74). The novel's verse form amplifies the emotional weight of Will's choices, with short, fragmented lines mirroring the fractured lives of youth caught in cycles of violence. Through encounters with ghostly figures in an elevator, Will grapples with his resolve, revealing the tension between personal agency and the inherited codes of his community.

"THE MIDDLE DRAWER CALLED TO ME, / its awkward off-centeredness / a sign that what was in it could / and should be used to / set things straight. / I yanked and pulled and / snatched and tugged at / the drawer until it opened / just more than an inch. / Just wide enough for my / fifteen-year-old fingers to / slither in and touch / cold steel." (Reynolds, 2017:50)

This verse captures Will's autonomous decision to retrieve Shawn's gun, a pivotal act of agency driven by the adolescent impulse to take control in a chaotic urban environment. The "middle drawer" symbolizes a hidden truth, its "off-centeredness" reflecting the skewed moral compass of a community where economic hardship and social codes like "The Rules" dictate justice. Will's action, described with tactile verbs like "yanked," "pulled," and "snatched," underscores the urgency and independence of his choice, a common trait among adolescents navigating loss without adult guidance. The phrase "set things straight" reveals Will's belief that vengeance restores order, a mindset shaped by the social strain of a neighborhood where loyalty to family and community overrides systemic solutions. The poetic structure, with short lines and enjambment, mirrors the tension and haste of Will's decision, emphasizing how economic instability fuels impulsive actions among youth, leaving Will to bear the weight of a decision that could perpetuate the cycle of violence.

"AND I'M GLAD I FOUND IT, / because I'm gonna need it, / I explained. / Shawn's dead now. / No need to tiptoe around it. / ... / But I know it was the / Dark Suns. Riggs and / them. Had to be. / ... / I'm about to do what / I gotta do. What you woulda done. / I squared. / Follow The Rules." (Reynolds, 2017:96-97)

This verse captures Will's resolute commitment to resolving Shawn's death through violence, a self-driven choice shaped by the adolescent need to assert agency in a community where social codes override systemic justice. His declaration, "I'm glad I found it," referring to the gun, reflects a grim determination, common among urban youth who see weapons as tools for restoring honor in economically strained environments. The phrase "I squared" conveys a physical and emotional bracing, a hallmark of adolescence where young people adopt tough personas to navigate social pressures. Will's belief that it "had to be" Riggs and the Dark Suns, despite lacking evidence, highlights the impulsive certainty of youth, amplified by the economic instability and social loyalty that define his world. The verse's direct, confrontational tone, with short, declarative lines, mirrors Will's unwavering resolve, yet the ghostly presence of Buck hints at the consequences of such actions, a tension central to urban adolescent experiences.

4. Depictions of Characters Reaping Consequences

In *Long Way Down*, it portrays the tragic consequences of adhering to “The Rules” through the fates of the ghosts who visit Will Holloman in the elevator, each a victim of the violent urban code they once followed. The ghosts: Shawn Holloman, Buck, Dani, and Frick, embody the repercussions of their actions, serving as cautionary figures for Will as he contemplates avenging Shawn’s death. Their deaths, rooted in the social and economic pressures of their under-resourced community, align with Mertz and England’s depiction of characters reaping consequences, where choices driven by systemic constraints lead to inevitable outcomes. The novel’s verse structure, with its stark line breaks and haunting imagery, amplifies the weight of these consequences, warning Will of the cycle of violence that threatens to claim him.

Shawn Holloman, Will’s older brother, meets his end adhering to “The Rules,” his death a direct consequence of the retaliatory violence embedded in their community’s code.

“AND THEN THERE WERE SHOTS. / Everybody / ran, / ducked, / hid, / tucked / themselves tight. / Did what we’ve all / been trained to. / Pressed our lips to the / pavement and prayed / the boom, followed by / the buzz of a bullet, / ain’t meet us.” (Reynolds, 2017:13)

This verse captures the moment of Shawn’s shooting, highlighting the normalized violence in their urban environment, where survival tactics are instinctive yet insufficient. The phrase “did what we’ve all been trained to” reflects the social conditioning that binds Shawn to a life where violence is both expected and inescapable, a consequence of living by “The Rules.” His death, described as leaving him “like a piece / of furniture left outside” (Reynolds, 2017:24), underscores the dehumanizing cost of this loyalty, warning Will of the futility of vengeance.

Buck, Shawn’s mentor and a former gang member, reaps the consequence of his violent lifestyle, his death a result of initiating others into “The Rules.”

“I REMEMBER / when I gave / that thing to Shawn, / Buck said, / He was around your age. / Told him he could hold it for me. / Taught him how to use it too. / Taught him The Rules.” (Reynolds, 2017:95).

This verse reveals Buck’s role in passing down the gun and “The Rules” to Shawn, an action that perpetuates the cycle of violence and ultimately contributes to his own death. The phrase “taught him The Rules” underscores Buck’s complicity in the community’s violent code, a choice driven by the social pressure to prove toughness in an economically strained environment. His ghostly presence, marked by the “RIP BUCK” T-shirt (Reynolds, 2017:81), signifies the consequence of his mentorship, warning Will that initiating violence leads to a deadly end

B. Narrative Characteristics

1. Point of View

In *Long Way Down*, Jason Reynolds employs a first-person, verse-driven narrative perspective through the protagonist, Will Holloman, to vividly capture the raw, unfiltered consciousness of an adolescent grappling with grief, vengeance, and moral conflict. This narrative choice aligns with Nilsen and Donelson’s (2019) concept of a youthful point of view, which emphasizes the immediacy and intensity of teenage experiences. The verse format, with its fragmented structure and emotional rhythm, mirrors the chaotic and urgent nature of Will’s thoughts, embodying Mertz and England’s (2017) depiction of an adolescent point of view that foregrounds emotional authenticity. Coats (2020) further supports this, noting that young adult literature often prioritizes emotional truth, allowing readers to connect deeply with the protagonist’s inner turmoil. Will’s voice, steeped in

the vernacular of his urban environment, conveys both his vulnerability and the societal pressures shaping his decisions, making his perspective a powerful lens into the adolescent experience.

Will's first-person perspective is introduced early, establishing his voice as both confessional and defiant, reflecting the adolescent struggle to assert identity amidst chaos: "DON'T NOBODY / believe nothing / these days / which is why I haven't / told nobody the story / I'm about to tell you. / And truth is, / you probably ain't / gon' believe it either / gon' think I'm lying / or I'm losing it, / but I'm telling you, / this story is true. / It happened to me. / Really. / It did. / It so did." (Reynolds, 2017:5)

This opening verse sets the tone for Will's narrative, capturing his adolescent consciousness through a conversational, almost pleading tone that seeks validation from the reader. The repetition of "nobody" and "believe" reflects his isolation and the skepticism he anticipates, hallmarks of a youthful perspective as described by Nilsen and Donelson (2019), where adolescents often feel misunderstood. The short, jagged lines mimic the urgency and fragmentation of his thoughts, aligning with Coats' (2020) emphasis on emotional authenticity by exposing Will's raw vulnerability and determination to be heard.

2. Narrative Style

In *Long Way Down*, Jason Reynolds employs a verse format characterized by its rhythmic, fragmented style and blunt dialogue, aligning with Mertz and England's (Elmore, 2017) observation of young adult (YA) literature's directness in exposition, dialogue, and confrontation. The novel's poetic structure, with its stark line breaks, enjambment, and concise phrasing, mirrors the urgency and emotional intensity of Will Holloman's internal conflict as he contemplates avenging his brother Shawn's death. This format, as noted by Coats (2020), enhances accessibility for teen readers by distilling complex emotions into vivid, digestible imagery and rhythm, making the narrative immediate and impactful. The verse's fragmented style and direct exchanges amplify the tension of Will's elevator journey, capturing the psychological weight of his choices and the haunting presence of the ghosts who confront him.

The verse format's rhythmic and fragmented structure mirrors Will's fractured emotional state and the chaotic environment of his urban community. The short, jagged lines and strategic line breaks create a staccato rhythm that echoes the rapid pace of his thoughts and the omnipresent threat of violence.

"AND THEN THERE WERE SHOTS. / Everybody / ran, / ducked, / hid, / tucked / themselves tight. / Did what we've all / been trained to. / Pressed our lips to the / pavement and prayed / the boom, followed by / the buzz of a bullet, / ain't meet us." (Reynolds, 2017:13)

This verse, describing Shawn's shooting, uses short, single-word lines like "ran," "ducked," and "hid" to mimic the frantic, instinctual reactions to gunfire, embodying Mertz and England's directness in exposition. The enjambment between "the boom, followed by / the buzz of a bullet" heightens the suspense, breaking the action into fragmented moments that reflect the community's learned survival tactics. The rhythm, akin to a heartbeat under stress, makes the violence visceral and immediate, aligning with Coats' (2020) view of verse as accessible to teens by conveying complex experiences through concise, evocative language.

C. Structural Characteristics

1. Plot

In *Long Way Down*, Jason Reynolds structures the narrative within a 60-second elevator ride, spanning from 09:08:02 a.m. to 09:09:09 a.m., a duration of approximately 67 seconds, though referred to as “60 seconds” as a thematic choice by Jason Reynolds to emphasize the brevity and intensity of Will’s psychological journey. This compressed timeframe intensifies the psychological tension, weaving exposition, conflict, and an ambiguous climax/resolution into a single, breathless descent. The verse format, with its sharp line breaks, enjambment, and deliberate spacing, mirrors Will Holloman’s fractured mental state as he grapples with the decision to avenge his brother Shawn’s murder by following “The Rules” of his community, particularly Rule No. 3: revenge. This rapid pacing aligns with Nilsen and Donelson’s (2019) observation that YA literature employs fast-paced plots to reflect the urgency of adolescent experiences, engaging readers through immediate stakes and emotional intensity. The narrative also adheres to Bawarshi and Reiff’s (2019) YA genre expectations, which prioritize psychological depth, moral ambiguity, and the exploration of personal and societal conflicts within a constrained narrative arc, challenging Will to confront his choices in a surreal, high-stakes setting.

The exposition of *Long Way Down* unfolds before and during the early moments of the elevator ride, establishing Will’s grief and his intent for revenge following the murder of his brother, Shawn. The normalized violence within Will’s environment is evident when he describes waiting for the gunfire to stop before checking for victims, stating, “*AFTER THE SHOTS / me and Tony / waited like we always do, / for the rumble to stop, / before picking our heads up / and poking our heads out / to count the bodies. / This time there was only one. / Shawn.*” (Reynolds, 2017:14). This moment roots the narrative in systemic violence while exposing the cultural expectation of revenge, known as “The Rules.” Will’s resolve to follow these rules is solidified when he retrieves Shawn’s gun, reflecting his determination to kill Riggs: “*THE MIDDLE DRAWER CALLED TO ME, / its awkward off-centeredness / a sign that what was in it could / and should be used to / set things straight.*” (Reynolds, 2017:50). His premeditation is further shown when he details his plan with precise timing, stating, “*THE PLAN / was to wait for Riggs in front of his building. / ... / Then I'd pull my shirt over my mouth and nose / and do it.*” (Reynolds, 2017:69).

The conflict begins as the elevator descends, with ghosts of people who have died from gun violence entering one by one, confronting Will’s determination for revenge. The first ghost, Buck, challenges Will’s readiness to kill by repeating, “*You don't got it in you, / he repeated / over and over again.*” (Reynolds, 2017:107), planting seeds of doubt in Will’s mind. The tension escalates further when Dani, Will’s childhood friend who was killed in crossfire, appears and forces him to consider the potential consequences of his actions by asking, “*What / if / you / miss?*” (Reynolds, 2017:142). The conflict intensifies when Uncle Mark enters, forcing Will to visualize the act of murder by reenacting it, shown through the verse, “*TWO LARGE HANDS, / the largest I'd ever seen, / rushed through the cloud / hard and fast, / snatched fistfuls of my shirt.*” (Reynolds, 2017:152). Frick’s entrance adds complexity, as it is revealed that Shawn killed Frick in retaliation for Buck’s death, with Frick described as, “*This is the man / who murdered me.*” (Reynolds, 2017:242), exposing the cyclical nature of revenge and challenging Will’s belief in the necessity of violence.

The climax occurs when Shawn, the final ghost, enters the elevator and directly confronts Will, marking the peak of psychological tension in the narrative. This moment is captured when Shawn, with “eyes dull from death / but shining from tears,” finally speaks to Will, asking, “*YOU COMING?*” (Reynolds, 2017:306-307). This brief but powerful question

forces Will to confront the reality of his choices, questioning whether he will continue the cycle of violence or break it. The moment encapsulates Will's internal conflict while leaving the resolution open-ended, prompting readers to reflect on the consequences of revenge within a system governed by "The Rules."

2. Structural Conventions

In *Long Way Down* by Jason Reynolds, the elevator serves as a confined, almost claustrophobic setting that intensifies Will Holloman's moral crisis as he grapples with the decision to follow "The Rules" and avenge his brother Shawn's death. This structural choice aligns with Mertz and England's structural conventions (Elmore, 2017), which emphasize how narrative structures reflect characters' constrained choices within systemic pressures. The elevator, a literal and metaphorical descent, embodies the contained narrative described by Coats (2020) in young adult literature, where confined spaces heighten emotional and ethical tension. Additionally, Devitt's (2021) concept of structural social actions underscores how the elevator's interactions between Will and the ghosts mirror the social codes and expectations that shape his internal conflict. The novel's verse structure, with its fragmented lines and stark imagery, amplifies the elevator's role as a pressure cooker, forcing Will to confront the consequences of his intended actions.

The elevator is introduced as a confined space that traps Will, both physically and emotionally, as he descends to enact revenge. Its slow, rickety movement mirrors the weight of his moral dilemma, intensifying the urgency of his decision.

"AT THE ELEVATOR / Back already sore. / Uncomfortable. / Gun strapped / like a brick / rubbing my skin / raw with each step. / Seemed like time / stood still as I / reached out and / pushed the button. / White light / surrounded the / black arrow. / DOWN / DOWN / DOWN / DOWN DOWN DOWN / DOWN DOWN / DOWN" (Reynolds, 2017:72)

This verse captures the elevator's oppressive atmosphere, with the "gun strapped / like a brick" symbolizing the burden of "The Rules" and the physical discomfort paralleling Will's emotional strain. The repetition of "DOWN" emphasizes the descent—not just to the lobby but into the moral abyss of vengeance. Mertz and England (Elmore, 2017) note that structural conventions in YA narratives often use confined settings to reflect characters' limited agency within systemic constraints, here the urban code of retaliatory violence. The elevator's slow pace, as Will notes, "THE ELEVATOR RUMBLED / and vibrated / and knocked / around like the middle drawer, / like something off track" (Reynolds, 2017:98), mirrors his internal turmoil, aligning with Coats' (2020) view of contained narratives that force protagonists to confront their choices in isolation.

resolution.

D. Thematic Characteristics

1. Theme

In *Long Way Down*, Jason Reynolds explores the interconnected themes of grief, masculinity, and identity through Will Holloman's emotional journey in the aftermath of his brother Shawn's murder. These themes are intricately woven into the novel's verse structure, which uses stark line breaks, enjambment, and vivid imagery to reflect the raw, fragmented nature of Will's inner turmoil. The novel aligns with Nilsen & Donelson's (2019) focus on issues of physical and mental growth, as Will navigates the tension between societal expectations and personal identity during his adolescent development. Mertz & England's attention to adolescent concerns (Elmore, 2017) is evident in Will's struggle with the violent code of "The Rules," which shapes his understanding of masculinity and identity while exacerbating his grief. Devitt's (2021) concept of

emotional mediation is reflected in how Will processes his pain through encounters with ghosts, each representing a facet of his grief and challenging his adherence to a toxic masculine code.

Grief permeates Will's narrative as he grapples with the sudden loss of his brother Shawn, a pain that is both personal and communal, reflecting the systemic violence of his environment. The novel's verse format amplifies the visceral weight of his sorrow, aligning with Devitt's (2021) notion of emotional mediation, where Will's interactions with the ghosts serve as a mechanism to confront and process his grief.

“THE SADNESS / is just so hard to explain. / Imagine waking up / and someone, a stranger, / got you strapped down, / got pliers shoved / into your mouth, / gripping a tooth / somewhere in the back, / one of the big / important ones, / and rips it out. / Imagine the knocking / in your head, / the pressure pushing / through your ears, / the blood pooling. / But the worst part, / the absolute worst part, / is the constant slipping / of your tongue / into the new empty space, / where you know / a tooth supposed to be / but ain’t no more.” (Reynolds, 2017:9-10)

This verse vividly captures the physical and emotional agony of Will's grief, using the metaphor of a tooth being ripped out to convey the violent, invasive nature of loss. The “new empty space” symbolizes the void left by Shawn's death, a persistent reminder that disrupts Will's sense of normalcy. The imagery of “blood pooling” and “pressure pushing” reflects the overwhelming, embodied nature of his sorrow, aligning with Nilsen & Donelson's (2019) emphasis on the physical and mental toll of adolescent grief. Will's inability to articulate this pain underscores Devitt's (2021) idea of emotional mediation, as he struggles to process his loss within the constraints of “The Rules,” which forbid emotional expression.

2. Theme

In *Long Way Down*, Jason Reynolds confronts pressing social issues such as gun violence, systemic racism, and poverty, which shape the lives and choices of the characters in Will Holloman's urban environment. These issues are woven into the narrative through vivid imagery, stark verse, and the haunting presence of ghosts, reflecting the systemic constraints that drive the cycle of violence. The novel's depiction of “The Rules” and the “pavement galaxy” encapsulates the pervasive impact of these social issues, aligning with Mertz and England's (Elmore, 2017) assertion that young adult literature reflects current social attitudes and Ramdarshan Bold's (2019) emphasis on Young Adult's role in addressing social relevance. The verse structure amplifies the urgency and emotional weight of these issues, grounding them in the lived experiences of Will and his community.

Gun violence is a central issue in *Long Way Down*, depicted as an inescapable reality that dictates behavior through “The Rules” and claims lives indiscriminately. The novel illustrates how this violence is normalized within Will's community, perpetuating a cycle that ensnares both perpetrators and victims.

“AND THEN THERE WERE SHOTS. / Everybody / ran, / ducked, / hid, / tucked / themselves tight. / Did what we've all / been trained to. / Pressed our lips to the / pavement and prayed / the boom, followed by / the buzz of a bullet, / ain’t meet us.” (Reynolds, 2017:13)

This verse captures the chaotic moment of Shawn's shooting, emphasizing the instinctive response to gun violence as a learned behavior. The phrase “did what we've all been trained to” underscores how gun violence is a systemic issue, ingrained in the community's survival tactics. The enjambed lines and fragmented structure mirror the

abruptness and terror of the event, reflecting Mertz and England's view of social issues as deeply embedded in characters' environments. The normalization of such violence speaks to its pervasive threat, shaping Will's decision to follow Rule No. 3 and seek revenge, highlighting the social conditioning that perpetuates this cycle.

CONCLUSION/KESIMPULAN

Based on the analysis in the previous chapter, this study concludes that *Long Way Down* by Jason Reynolds fulfills the main characteristics of Young Adult (YA) literature as defined by Nilsen and Donelson (2019), and Mertz and England (Elmore, 2017). Through its teen protagonist, verse format, and themes of grief, violence, and identity, the novel reflects the emotional and social struggles of adolescence.

First, the novel presents a relatable and emotionally complex teenage protagonist, Will Holloman, who embodies traits such as vulnerability, independence, and moral confusion. His journey in the elevator, guided by ghostly figures from his life, represents the internal conflict many teens face when dealing with loss and pressure to conform.

Second, the use of first-person verse enhances the emotional impact and accessibility for young readers. The fragmented and rhythmic structure mirrors Will's chaotic thoughts and emphasizes the intensity of his feelings—grief, anger, confusion, and doubt.

Third, thematically, the story explores difficult issues that are central to YA literature: loyalty, revenge, trauma, and the consequences of violence. The presence of characters from diverse backgrounds further reflects the social, economic, and cultural realities of many adolescents, especially those from marginalized communities.

Long Way Down not only fits within the structure and style of YA literature but also offers a powerful reflection on how cycles of violence are internalized and questioned by today's youth. The novel does not give easy answers but instead invites readers to think critically about choice, identity, and the cost of silence. Through Will's experience, the novel shows that change begins with the courage to break the cycle.

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