Literature Analysis

- **Are You There God? It’s Me, Margaret**

- By Judy Blume

- 149 pages

- First published in 1970

- Margaret Simon is a soon to be twelve year old who just moved to Farbrook, New Jersey from New York. Margaret has to cope with a new school and new friends while entering the delicate stage of puberty. With one Jewish parent and one Christian parent, Margaret feels the need to be like her friends and identify with only one religion. Periodically Margaret addresses God privately asking for help adjusting to her new life and to help her with the change into womanhood.

- Geared towards 11 to 13 year-old girls

- Fiction

  Author Judy Blume accurately conveys the trials and tribulations of puberty and adolescents. She discusses the many different ways adolescents change, physically, cognitively, emotionally and socially through her main character Margaret Simon. Margaret Simon is a perfect example of a preteen encountering puberty and the changes that go along with it.

  **Physical Development**

  Adolescents begin puberty anywhere from age eight to 16. According to Judith L. Meece, author of *Child and Adolescent Development for Educators*, the normative age of
puberty is between ages 10 and 12 for girls. (Meece, 2002: 95) Meece says the first sign of puberty for girls is breasts or the appearance of pubic hair. (Meece, 2002: 96) Margaret spends a significant amount of time worrying that her physical appearance will not reflect her age. She constantly checks in the mirror to see if her breasts have grown or wonders when she will get her period. Margaret tells the reader, “I stood naked in front of the mirror. I was starting to get some hairs.” (Blume, 1970: 81) but was disappointed when she did not notice a change in her bust. Margaret, when asked by a neighborhood girl to run around in the sprinklers was nervous when revealing her flat chest, she said, “I left my polo on until the last possible second. I wasn’t about to let her see I wasn’t growing yet.” (Blume, 1970: 6) Blume makes sure that Margaret finds other friends that are also on their way to becoming women. When Margaret finds some girlfriends and joins the secret club, they promised to tell each other everything and do bra checks regularly. Margaret tells us they do breast exercises, “She made fists, bent her arms at the elbow and moved them back and forth, sticking her chest out way out. She said, “I must – I must – I must increase my bust.” ” (Blume, 1970: 46) The young girls all worry that they will not develop and be teased for not having breasts.

Another incident when Margaret worries about her lack of developing physically is when she is attending her first real dinner party with her class. She did not want to be teased by some of the boys in her class so she, “shoved three cotton balls into each side of [her] bra…“Well, so what if it was cheating [she said to herself], probably other girls did it too. I’d look a lot better, wouldn’t I? So why not!” ” (Blume, 1970: 82)

Aside from breast growth, Blume also points out body odor as another physical change that girls go through. Margaret tells us, “On March eighth I was twelve years old.
The first thing I did was sniff under my arms, the way my mother does. Nothing! I didn’t smell a thing. Still, now that I was twelve, I decided I’d better use deodorant, just in case.” (Blume, 1970: 110) Margaret confronts an issue that most girls have to deal with at some point.

**Cognitive Development**

Margaret is a very bright girl and a good role model for many young girls. Her cognitive development seemed right on track with her age. Jean Piaget’s developmental stage for 11 and 12 year olds and onward is called the formal operational stage. This stage is where adolescents are able to think abstractly, they are able to think about things that are not present, or things that they have not experienced. This is the stage where they can start to make predictions about the future. Margaret demonstrated her ability to reason when she experienced a presentation about menstruation, called “What Every Girl Should Know.” At the end of the presentation Margaret thought, “It was like one big commercial. I made a mental note never to buy Private Lady things when and if I ever needed them.” (Blume, 1970: 97) Margaret is aware of the effect of media on young people and their influence over what brands to buy.

Margaret is able to think abstractly about religion which is another sign of Piaget’s formal operational stage. She is able to recognize that choosing a religion is a difficult decision, one that should not be made lightly. (Blume, 1970: 143) Choosing a religion is talking about something that is not concrete, therefore Margaret is thinking about something that is not tangible.

In letters to her Grandma, Margaret uses sarcasm a characteristic of adolescent’s language. Between ages nine to adolescents, children learn more complex abstract terms.
They learn how to utilize different language genres as well as how to be ironic, persuasive, literary and metaphorical. (Meece, 2002: 260) Teens grow not only in writing but in language as well.

**Social and Emotional Development**

During the time of puberty the body goes through physical and hormonal changes, often resulting in a change in emotional development. Emotions can range from happiness, fear, anger and anything in between. Also adolescents are spending a significant amount of time with peers rather than parents. This shift towards a new support system can affect the child’s social and emotional development. Margaret is entering Kohlberg’s conventional moral reasoning level. She “accepts and obeys society’s rules for right and wrong behavior even when there is no punishment or reward. [She also] look[s] to others, especially authority figures, for guidance, and obey rules to please others and to gain their approval.” (Meece, 2002: 466) Margaret is easily influenced by her friends and peers, which most adolescents do. Margaret conforms to the status quo and looks for social approval. In class, the new teacher gives a test, and as a way to frustrate the teacher, the students decide to not put their names on the test. Margaret studied and knew she would get a good grade, and knew that cheating was wrong, but did it anyway because she did not want to be the only one. She wanted her classmates’ approval, so she did not write her name on her test.

Meece said as children evolve into adolescents, aggression becomes an issue. Aggression moves from instrumental to hostile with age. (Meece, 2002: 454) Margaret is not an overtly aggressive person, but she does participate in relational aggression where she tries to hurt the person or the person’s relations. When Margaret accuses Laura
Danker of going behind the A & P with Moose and Evan, she is trying to hurt Laura by making her feel bad about herself. However, when Laura tells her that rumor is false and the difficulties with being physically developed haunt her everyday, Margaret is able to see her perspective and feels terrible for what she has said. Margaret recognizes her mistake and says, “Are you there God? It’s me, Margaret. I did an awful thing today. Just awful! I’m definitely the most horrible person who ever lived and I really don’t deserve anything good to happen to me. I picked on Laura Danker. Just because I felt mean I took it all out on her. I really hurt Laura’s feelings.” (Blume, 1970: 119-120) Margaret not only feels bad for what she said, but she also realized that it is hard to be the biggest student in the class and that a lot of rumors are made up about Laura because of her size.

In the Stages of Social Perspective Taking, Margaret would be at level three or four. Level three is between the ages 10 and 15 years old. Meece says, “Children are able to see there own, another person’s, and their mutual perspectives from the viewpoint of a third person. That is, the adolescent can step out of the immediate interaction and consider how a teacher, parent, or peer might view each individual perspective as well as their mutual perspective.” (Meece, 2002: 439) In the case with Laura Danker, she was able to realize that Laura may not feel comfortable in her own skin. Level four is where adolescents are able to understand a larger societal idea or belief. This is demonstrated when she accepts that she has a paternal Jewish Grandma and a set of maternal Christian grandparents.

According to Meece, “adolescents desire more closeness and intimacy with friends. Friendships are characterized by intimate self disclosure and provide an important source of support. During adolescents, teenagers begin to use their friends
more than their parents as their trusted confidants.” (Meece, 2002: 461) Margaret tells her girlfriends things that she would not tell to her mom. When she was with a friend they purchased sanitary napkins, but she did not tell her mother about them. In the book, one of Margaret’s new friends says, “Oh, listen, Margaret…on the first day of school wear loafers, but no socks…I want you to join my secret club and if you’re wearing socks the other kids might not want you.” (Blume, 1970: 13) This is a clear example of when friends start to replace the parent. Meece says, “Conformity to peer norms and expectations tends to be greater in early adolescence that in childhood. Young adolescents are most susceptible to peer pressures perhaps because of their greater concerns about social acceptance at this age.” (Meece, 2002: 462) Margaret wants to be in the secret club and wants to be accepted, so she wears her loafers despite her mother’s blister warning.

According to Eric Erikson stages of psychosocial development, Margaret would be in the identity vs. role confusion stage. Erikson said between the ages of 10 to 20, “adolescents must find out who they are, what they value, and a direction for their lives.” (Meece, 2002: 379) Margaret searches for God and her religion. She loves and values her family, but she struggles with two conflicting religions and grandparents. (Blume, 1970)

**Major Themes**

The major themes in this book are sexuality and religion. Blume deals with a young girl coming of age and finding her own in the world while trying to identify herself with one religion. This book is a must-read for all preteen girls. Any girl entering puberty will have questions concerning changes in their body and social life, and this book directly confronts many of those questions and concerns.
Diversity

Margaret moved from New York to the suburbs in New Jersey. She moved to a fairly white neighborhood. Unfortunately this book is a little out dated and does not deal with diversity or diverse issues. There was a little religious diversity, when Margaret tries to find her religion; she experiments with the Jewish Temple and Church.

Accessibility

This story is accessible to all girls because they all go through the physical and emotional changes. However, this book does take place in middle to upper class white suburban America, so it can be difficult for girls in poor neighborhoods to identify with some of the issues brought up. For example a girl in a poor neighborhood might not know what to expect at a dinner party.

Child-reader’s opinion

A girl may not like this book because it is outdated. Sanitary napkins are not the same as what they use to be. This book also confronts the physical changes, and described menstruation and how it feels to get a period the first time. These issues may make girls feel uncomfortable. On the other side, girls may love the book because it may help them to understand the changes they are going through. Margaret is an easy character to like and to relate to. In my opinion, girls would love this book. It is clear, entertaining and educational.

My opinion

I loved this book. I feel that it should be modernized to fit a wider rage audience and that girls can go to the store and see what a sanitary pad looks like. When I first read this book as a young girl I had not seen sanitary napkins, so when I read the description
of one, it made me even more confused. Reading it now I realized it does not allow girls of different races, ethnicities, and backgrounds to understand the situations and events that take place. I feel that it is made for a small audience of white middle to upper class girls with a two parent home. Still for a coming of age story that deals with the important issues it is well done and a timeless classic.
References
