



## *“The guy who wrote Romeo and Juliet”: Shakespeare and Young Adult fiction*

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In one of the first scenes of the film adaptation of *Percy Jackson and the Lightning Thief* (2010),<sup>1</sup> Percy, the demi-god son of Poseidon born from the pen of Rick Riordan, is attending an English class. His teacher, Mrs. Dodds, writes a line from *Othello* on the blackboard: “I understand a fury in your words, / but not the words” (4.2.33-4). Then she asks her students: “what was Shakespeare trying to convey in this line from *Othello*?” When Percy looks at the blackboard, what he can see are only jumbled words, owing to his dyslexia. In that very moment, Percy fails to comprehend what Shakespeare wanted to convey but merely notices the furious gaze of his teacher. Later on, when Mrs. Dodds reveals her real identity, he understands what the line means: indeed he can see a fury, when he realizes that his English teacher is actually Alecto, one of three implacable mythological furies sent in disguise to kill him. This episode contributes to enhancing the centrality of Shakespeare in American Young Adult fiction (commonly abbreviated as YA) and the teenagers’ familiarity with the act of reading Shakespeare in class. In the US Shakespeare is a constant fixture, “a mainstay in the curricula of America’s schools and colleges, and the value of reading his work is still assumed” (Vaughan and Vaughan 2012: 2); at different stages of their education, teenagers are required to engage not only with the works of the Bard but

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<sup>1</sup>The film is based on the homonymous novel published in 2005, which is the first installment of the pentalogy *Percy Jackson and the Olympians*. The episode I discuss here is not included in the novel but was added in the filmic version.



also with their modern revisions. In the universe of Young Adult fiction, one can find numerous examples of adaptations and transnarratives for young readers, graphic novels and historical fiction set in the Elizabethan era, modern retellings exploring the Bard's influence on modern lives, featuring Shakespearean characters alongside vampires and zombies. The intersections between these two poles has been investigated from several perspectives:<sup>2</sup> discussing the intertextual connections, the creative process of revision and appropriation, thus defining how the Bard is reimagined and adapted for young readers. Nevertheless, not much critical attention has been attributed to the investigation of the act of reading and interpreting Shakespeare in young adult novels.

The present paper explores three American YA novels, published between 1999 and 2012, in which teenagers engage with Shakespeare's works. For the characters, reading is a formative experience that alleviates their pain, enables them to externalize their feelings, and to develop emotionally, psychologically and socially, while experimenting "through the trials and tribulations of characters like them" (Galda and Liang 2007: 140): texts are related to the lives of the young protagonists, questioned, challenged, moralized and used as a lens through which one can examine the teen world.

#### 1. THE THERAPEUTIC USES OF LITERATURE: *THE PERKS OF BEING A WALLFLOWER*

The first case is Stephen Chbosky's *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (1999). The book is a popular coming-of-age epistolary novel which was banned as controversial from some American school reading lists and high school libraries, owing to its explicit contents in relation to sex, drugs, homosexuality, abuse, abortion and suicide. The protagonist is Charlie, a 15-year-old boy who writes letters to an unknown recipient. In his missives he describes his first year at high school as a freshman and his experience with his peers, in particular his best friends Patrick and Sam. Charlie shows signs of post-traumatic stress disorder and social anxiety: he is introvert, over-sensitive and has difficulties in bonding with most of his schoolmates. As a matter of fact, he relies on defense mechanisms to protect himself from some traumatic childhood experiences (Bodden 2016: 48), which re-emerge in the form of flashbacks.

He has a penchant for reading and writing: as he admits, he likes to read books twice, and aims at becoming a writer. His passion does not go unnoticed. His advanced English teacher, Mr Anderson (Bill), who soon becomes his mentor and confident, assigns him extracurricular books to read and write reports about. Reading serves as a sort of bibliotherapy for Charlie, based on the assumption that "a reader lives a thousand lives before he dies. [...] The man who never reads only one" (Martin 2011: 452). Reading is associated with the notion of self-improvement: therefore, each book is a step in his self-growth. Charlie constructs his own meanings by connecting the

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<sup>2</sup> For the most articulated and recent contributions see Isaac (2000), Miller (2009), and Rokison (2013).



stories read to issues in his life, and face fictitious characters and their difficulties before approaching his real-like peers.

The novel is punctuated by cultural references to an array of cultural pursuits: one can identify how theatre (Charlie and his friends are involved in the staging of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*), music (Pink Floyd, Jim Morrison, Nirvana), films (*Dead Poets Society*, *The Graduate*, *The Producers*) and books “relate to events in Charlie's life” (Bean 2016: 257). These are the books whose impact seems to have been most pervasive:

I gave Patrick *On the Road*, *Naked Lunch*, *The Stranger*, *This Side of Paradise*, *Peter Pan*, and *A Separate Peace*. I gave Sam *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *The Catcher in the Rye*, *The Great Gatsby*, *Hamlet*, *Walden*, and *The Fountainhead*. Under the books was a card that I wrote using the typewriter Sam bought me. The cards said that these were my copies of all my favorite books, and I wanted Sam and Patrick to have them because they were my two favorite people in the whole world. (Chbosky 1999: 194)

Charlie's reading list is variegated: it includes American classics, coming of age novels, a memoir, a philosophical novel, and children's fiction. The only exception, among a number of prose works mainly American, is *Hamlet*, which unexpectedly enters the short list of Charlie's favourite books. In April, in a difficult moment of his life in which the inability to act restrains him, his teacher assigns him this Shakespearean tragedy. The boy fails to communicate with the girl he is dating, is unsure about the steps to be taken and haunted by bad sensations: “something really is wrong with me. And I don't know what it is” (1999: 137).

April 18, 1992

Bill gave me *Hamlet* to read for the break. He said I would need the free time to really concentrate on the play. I guess I don't need to say who wrote it. The only advice Bill gave me was to think about the main character in terms of the other main characters in the books I've read thus far. He said not to get caught up thinking the play was “too fancy”. (1999: 134)

Among all the works Charlie is asked to read, *Hamlet* is by far the oldest and apparently the furthest from him. His mentor's claim about it being ‘fancy’ seems to imply that the story is fictitious but not as far-fetched as one would imagine. As Isaac argues, “*Hamlet* seems like an especially ripe text for revision by young adult authors: the themes embedded in this single play serve as a virtual catechism for the field of adolescence” (2000: 66). After more than four hundred years, this character can be as enriching and enlightening as Holden Caulfield or Jay Gatsby, whose stories are supposedly closer to Charlie's experience.

I have spent the whole vacation reading *Hamlet*. Bill was right. It was much easier to think of the kid in the play like the other characters I've read about so far. It has also helped me while I'm trying to figure out what's wrong with me. It didn't give



me any answers necessarily, but it was helpful to know that someone else has been through it. Especially someone who lived such a long time ago. (1999: 137)

Charlie is aware that books are not supposed to provide answers but may stimulate self-examination and help him make sense of his own life. The lesson he learns from *Hamlet* is that what he is experiencing is not unique. Seeing some of his anxieties converted from a personal conflict into a universal experience is presumably liberating and comforting for him. We may wonder why Charlie's teacher assigned him *Hamlet*. What was the point? Bill chose books which may offer Charlie "strategies for confronting, understanding, and managing" his personal problems (Aubry 2006: 1). As the story unfolds, we realize that the similarities between the prince of Denmark and the young protagonist are not limited to his incapability to act. Like Charlie, Hamlet "struggles most with a construction of a sense of self" (Rokison 2013: 147). They both have to cope with the issue of suicide, for instance. Charlie is shocked by the death of his best friend Michael who killed himself. On the other hand, the teenager has some difficulty in relating to his female peers and is unable to enjoy even a basic level of intimacy with girls, while all the other boys of his age are experimenting with sex. It is an unexpected moment of intimacy with a girl, which triggers Charlie's breakdown. He remembers the traumatic events repressed as a child when his favourite Aunt Helen abused him. Finally, against all odds, Charlie manages to react and starts to overcome his trauma. His strength stems from his friendship with Sam and Patrick, his family, Bill's support and guidance, and the books, songs, plays and films that have accompanied his growth and the development of a new and more mature self-awareness. Each of them has been a lesson to be introjected following his mentor's tenet: "try to be a filter, not a sponge" (Chbosky 1999: 165). As a matter of fact, as Charlie confesses, he tends to identify himself with characters and develop personal connections to the text: "It's strange because sometimes, I read a book, and I think I am the people in the book" (1999: 28). Charlie experiences a spontaneous phenomenon of identification that the researchers Geoff Kaufman and Lisa Libby defined as "experience-taking" (2012). On the one hand, this may hinder the development of a personal identity, since it only occurs when people "forget about themselves and their own self-concept and self-identity while reading" (Grabmeier 2012) or are unable to recognize the distinction between life and literature. On the other, as it happens to Charlie, the identification with characters like Hamlet may have a positive outcome: he finds in the stories he reads a wide palette of thoughts and emotions that he can "identify with, learn from, and apply" to his own life (Shechtman 2008: 26). Yet Charlie finally comes of age only when he starts forging his own identity after the assimilation of the lessons learnt from characters such as Prince Hamlet or Holden Caulfield, and manages to make "attempts to sketch alternative modes of living in affect, social change, and adolescence" (Carrillo-Vincent 2013: 130).



## 2. IS THE FAULT IN OUR STARS?

Shakespeare has been inspirational for the most influential YA writer, John Green. The title of his sixth novel, *The Fault in Our Stars*, is indebted to a line from *Julius Caesar*, in which Cassius tells Brutus: "The fault, dear friend, is not in our stars, / but in ourselves, that we are underlings" (1.2. 141-2). The Bard informs the narrative at multiple levels. The protagonists are two star-crossed lovers: Hazel Grace Lancaster, who tells her own story with mild cynicism, humour and raw honesty, is a sixteen-year-old terminal cancer patient, while Augustus (Gus) Waters is an ex-basketball player and ex cancer patient. The two teenagers meet and fall in love during their attendance of a support group.

As in the case of *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, *The Fault in Our Stars* "could be said to thematize and to problematize age appropriate reading" (Reimer and Snell 2015: 12). Hazel is obsessed with a made-up novel around six hundred pages long entitled *An Imperial Affliction*, written by an imaginary writer called Peter Van Houten. This book rises to the status of the Bible for her, since its plot parallels her own life (the protagonist Anna is a cancer patient like her). Unfortunately Hazel's favourite novel is interrupted abruptly in mid-sentence, presumably in a bid to signal the death of Anna, the narrator. The identification with Anna leads Hazel to wonder how the parents of the protagonist will cope with her death and, at the same time, what her own parents will do. Once August reads this story, he feels frustrated like Hazel and manages to start an e-mail correspondence with Van Houten to get answers about how the story actually ends.

The following extract is a part of Van Houten's reply to Augustus's e-mail. Remarkably his reply, addressed to an adolescent, is resonant of Shakespearean echoes and quotes, ranging from *Romeo and Juliet* to *Hamlet*. Van Houten assumes his reader to be well-versed in Shakespeare so that the citations are a common terrain for reflection and debate. The writer himself is presumably a keen reader of the Bard, and his cynicism and skepticism originate from his own experiences which are tested "against the experiences offered in the text[s]" (Rosenblatt 1968: 142). As Hazel and Gus realize later, *An Imperial Affliction* is an autobiographical novel in which Van Houten relives the long illness and the death of his own daughter. It is this tragic event that mediates the author's interpretation of Shakespeare.

Dear Mr. Waters,

I am in receipt of your electronic mail dated the 14th of April and duly impressed by the Shakespearean complexity of your tragedy.

Everyone in this tale has a rock-solid hamartia: hers, that she is so sick; yours, that you are so well. Were she better or you sicker, then the stars would not be so terribly crossed, but it is the nature of stars to cross, and never was Shakespeare more wrong than when he had Cassius note, "The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars / But in ourselves." Easy enough to say when you're a Roman nobleman (or Shakespeare!), but there is no shortage of fault to be found amid our stars. (Green 2012a: 111-12)



For Van Houten, Hazel and Augustus's story has Shakespearean tragic proportions. Without mentioning their titles, the writer makes references to two plays in which fate and free will are thoroughly debated, namely *Romeo and Juliet* and *Julius Caesar*. The cynic writer openly expresses his dissent from Cassius's words and questions them, since they cannot be applied to Hazel and Augustus. Cassius supports the classical view condensed in the motto "homo faber fortunae suae", which holds anyone responsible for their own actions and their consequences. Hazel and Augustus, instead, have little margin for manoeuvre, they are not masters of their own destiny. They cannot be held responsible for their disease and the death sentence pronounced against them. Their only way to exert their free will is resisting and living their life to the fullest. Like the star-crossed lovers from Verona, they are "fortune's fool[s]" (*R&J* 3.1.131) doomed to die young. In their case the fault was in their stars, in their unfavourable fate.

Then Van Houten moves to Shakespeare's Sonnet 55, whose themes enable him to develop his cynical reflection on oblivion, Augustus's main fear. The boy feels the urge to perform some heroic action before his death, something memorable to make his life worth living. "Almost everyone is obsessed with leaving a mark upon the world" Augustus says "Bequeathing a legacy. Outlasting death. We all want to be remembered. I do, too. That's what bothers me most, is being another unremembered casualty in the ancient and inglorious war against disease. I want to leave a mark" (Green 2012a: 86). Van Houten continues along this line of reasoning, by quoting from Sonnet 55 to blame Shakespeare for his deceitfulness about the immortalizing power of poetry:

While we're on the topic of old Will's insufficiencies, your writing about young Hazel reminds me of the Bard's Fifty-fifth sonnet, which of course begins, "Not marble, nor the gilded monuments / Of princes, shall outlive this powerful rhyme; / But you shall shine more bright in these contents / Than unswept stone, besmear'd with sluttish time." (Off topic, but: What a slut time is. She screws everybody.) It's a fine poem but a deceitful one: We do indeed remember Shakespeare's powerful rhyme, but what do we remember about the person it commemorates? Nothing. We're pretty sure he was male; everything else is guesswork. Shakespeare told us precious little of the man whom he entombed in his linguistic sarcophagus.

You do not immortalize the lost by writing about them. Language buries, but does not resurrect.

I digress, but here's the rub: the dead are visible only in the terrible lidless eye of memory. (Green 2012a: 112)

As Van Houten remarks, the eternizing power of poetry has effect only on its creator, not on the person commemorated. His blunt and disenchanting vision is opposed to Augustus's view, who desperately tries to defy oblivion and be remembered. Yet here is the Hamletic rub: Gus has to accept that the dead are eternized only "in the terrible lidless eye of memory" or, rather, in the "mind's eye" (1.2.184), as Hamlet puts it.



Unfortunately Van Houten's email does not explain how *An Imperial Affliction* actually ends, so Hazel and Augustus make a trip to Amsterdam, where the novelist lives, to interrogate him. While there, the protagonists visit Anne Frank House. Green makes implicit connections between Hazel and Anne and reveals the latter to be "instrumental to [her] development" (McLennan 2016: 117). As in the case of Van Houten's e-mail, the interaction with the Shakespearean text is always on a textual basis:

we saw pages of Anne's diary, and also her unpublished book of quotations. The quote book happened to be turned to a page of Shakespeare quotations. *For who so firm that cannot be seduced?* she'd written (Green 2012a: 204)

The quotation from *Julius Caesar* (1.2.306) is contained in *Favourite Quotes Notebook*, kept by Anne while in hiding. Here Green multiplies the perspectives on Shakespeare. This line expressing Cassius's doubts about Brutus's incorruptibility reveals the universality of Shakespeare's words and their adaptability to multiple historical contexts. If for Anne Frank it presumably evoked the Nazi propaganda as a weapon of mass seduction, for Hazel the meaning is quite literal. She has stood firm so far: thinking of herself as a grenade ready to blow up and hurt everybody around her, she has kept all people, apart from her parents, at a distance, in a bid to prevent them from suffering for her death. Now Hazel realizes that she has been seduced by Gus's hopefulness and perseverance and she wants to spend the time left with him, even if a relapse will kill him in a few months.

The book closes with some paragraphs of Hazel's eulogy written by August before his death. His words express his views on life and on his relationship with her. She reads these lines after Augustus's death and gives a posthumous reply, by pronouncing the very last words of the novel, "I do"

What else? She is so beautiful. You don't get tired of looking at her. You never worry if she is smarter than you: You know she is. She is funny without ever being mean. I love her. I am so lucky to love her, Van Houten. You don't get to choose if you get hurt in this world, old man, but you do have some say in who hurts you. I like my choices. I hope she likes hers.

I do, Augustus.  
I do.  
(2012a: 313)

If on the one hand Hazel is affirming the acceptance of her own choices, on the other her words foreground another kind of acceptance. As John Green explained, Hazel and Augustus's romance has the complexity of a Shakespearean tragedy, but a less woeful ending. "I do" represents marriage vows: "Shakespeare's comedies end in marriage and his tragedies in death", explains Green, "and I was rather fond of the idea that my book could end (symbolically, at least) in both" (Green 2012b). *The Fault in Our Stars* may be said to be about "how one identifies, lives in, and uses stories" (Reimer



and Snell 2015: 13). The novel offers multiple perspectives on Shakespeare, all filtered by the characters' personal lives: at the same time, Green questions classic assumptions such as the eternizing power of poetry and the importance of remembrance, and portrays two young star-crossed protagonists who contradict Cassius's tenet, since the fault is actually written in their stars.

### 3. ROMEO AND JULIET: A CAUTIONARY TALE?

According to the sales figures of the Folger Shakespeare Library Editions, the most popular plays for teenagers in 2014 and 2015 were *Romeo and Juliet*, the top seller, *Othello*, *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and *Julius Caesar* (French 2016). The young lovers from Verona are "ubiquitous figures in popular and mass-marketed culture", argues Buhler (2002: 43), and the most recurrent Shakespearean characters in YA fiction. Numerous couples are portrayed as heirs to Romeo and Juliet: besides Hazel and Augustus, Bella and Edward from Stephanie Meyers's *Twilight Series* and Katniss and Peeta from Suzanne Collins's *Hunger Games* have taken a place in the pantheon of the YA universe. The latest examples of contemporary Romeo and Juliet are Alex and Lena, two acute readers of the Shakespearean tragedy in Lauren Oliver's *Delirium* (2011), the first installment of the homonymous dystopian trilogy.<sup>3</sup> The two adolescents live in Portland in a totalitarian system in which love is considered as a destructive disease called *amor deliria nervosa*. All 18-year-old citizens have to undergo a mind-altering surgery, called cure, which deprives them of their ability to love and to create connections with other individuals. The government, moreover, has banned several literary works, from novels such as Baum's *The Great Wizard of Oz* (1900) or Dickens's *Great Expectations* (1861) to poetry, while others, like *Romeo and Juliet*, have been classified as cautionary tales.

In Huxley's *Brave New World*, Shakespeare has been radically banned for similar reasons. "His works (especially the tragedies)," claims Booker, "evoke the kind of strong passions that the World Government, in the interest of 'happiness' seeks to suppress" (1994: 174). In the novel the literary opus which shapes John the Savage's outlook on the world is an old copy of Shakespeare's complete works. He cites from them dogmatically, equating them to the Holy Scriptures. In some characters such as Romeo or Ferdinand from *The Tempest* he sees reflections of himself:

The Savage was reading *Romeo and Juliet* aloud – reading (for all the time he was seeing himself as Romeo and Lenina as Juliet) with an intense and quivering passion. (Huxley [1932] 1991: 188)

Unlike Huxley's novel, in *Delirium* the Shakespearean tragedy has not been banned but listed as a cautionary tale, a genre that plunges us back to the Victorian past. Accordingly, the unpleasant fate of the two lovers should work as a warning to

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<sup>3</sup> The trilogy is made up of *Delirium* (2011), *Pandemonium* (2012) and *Requiem* (2013).





the consequences of supposedly disreputable actions. It is worth considering that one of the sources for Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* was Ovid's story of Pyramus and Thisbe, literary ancestors of the protagonists. The Bard was an avid reader of Arthur Golding's English translation of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (1567), in which the story of the two Babylonian lovers is moralized so that it assumes the traits of a cautionary tale: "The piteous tale of Pyramus and Thisbe doth containe / The headie force of frenetick love whose end is wo and payne" (The pitiful tale of Piramus and Tisbe contains the powerful force of frantic love whose end is woe and pain, 1999: 109-10). Still the government's strict moral intransigence fails to overpower the leads since in this dystopian novel the effect is overturned. Many critics agree that, for a young audience, dystopias themselves function as cautionary tales meant to awaken their consciousness to dangerous tendencies. The portrayal of *Romeo and Juliet* as a story not to emulate here inverts the notion of cautionary tale and turns it into a paradigm, a powerful *exemplum* which transforms Lena and Alex in two contemporary lovers from Verona.

The affinities between the two young protagonists of Oliver's novel and the star-crossed lovers are blatant, even though Oliver does not portray a mere Romeo-and-Juliet scenario. At the beginning of the novel, Lena is about to turn eighteen and has to go through a coming-of-age ritual called Evaluation Day:

"What are some of your favorite books?" "Love, War, and Interference, by Christopher Malley," I answer automatically. "Border, by Philippa Harolde." "And *Romeo and Juliet*, by William Shakespeare." (Oliver 2011: 38)

Lena has carefully rehearsed how to deliver her answers in a bid to comply with the evaluators' expectations. While the first two books mentioned are made-up novels, only Shakespeare's play actually exists. Interestingly, these literary works are all labelled as books. Like in *Brave New World*, the tragedy is thus deprived of its performative nature and turned into a tale to be read, as if witnessing its theatrical performance might awaken the same obsessive love that afflicted Romeo and Juliet. Yet, during the interview, Lena unconsciously confronts the world "afresh through the filter of Shakespeare's poeticized world" (Smethurst 2008: 100) and provides a personal interpretation of the story:

The evaluators nod, make notes. *Romeo and Juliet* is required reading in every freshman-year health class. "And why is that?" Evaluator Three asks. *It's frightening*: That's what I'm supposed to say. It's a cautionary tale, a warning about the dangers of the old world, before the cure. [...] "It's beautiful. Instantly all four faces jerk up to look at me, like puppets connected to the same string. "Beautiful?" Evaluator One wrinkles her nose. There's a zinging, frigid tension in the air, and I realize I've made a big, big mistake. The evaluator with the glasses leans forward. "That's an interesting word to use. Very interesting." "Perhaps you find suffering beautiful? Perhaps you enjoy violence?" "No. No, that's not it." I'm trying to think straight, but my head is full of the ocean's wordless roaring. [...] "I just mean . . . there's something so sad about it. . . ." I'm struggling, floundering, feeling like I'm



drowning now, in the white light and the roaring. Sacrifice. I want to say something about sacrifice, but the word doesn't come. (Oliver 2011: 38-39)

Lena sees in *Romeo and Juliet* the depiction of love as the supreme form of sacrifice. Yet in this phase the concept is not fully grasped but only foreseen by the character. She has not time to develop this idea since her test is abruptly interrupted by the unexpected intervention of the Invalids, a resistance movement of people excluded from society. They release a herd of cows into the laboratories as a form of protest against the dangers of the cure. While leaving the room, Lena notices Alex, a good-looking guy winking at her. As she finds out, he belongs to a different world: he is over 18, has not been cured, and has joined the resistance. A metaphorical wall divides them, like the one separating those who live in the city from the Invalids in the Wilds: an electric fence as high and hard to climb as the walls in Juliet's orchard.

"Romance is the primary means of rebellion for Lena in *Delirium*" (Day, Green-Barteet, and Montz, 2014: 194). It is Alex who introduces Lena into a world of new emotions and to the literary works banned by the government, like Shakespeare's poetry.

He clears his throat and begins to read Shakespeare's Sonnet 18, "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?". I close my eyes and listen. The feeling I had before of being surrounded by warmth swells and crests inside of me like a wave. Poetry isn't like any writing I've ever heard before. I don't understand all of it, just bits of images, sentences that appear half-finished, all fluttering together like brightly colored ribbons in the wind. It reminds me, I realize, of the music that struck me dumb nearly two months ago at the farmhouse. It has the same effect, and makes me feel exhilarated and sad at the same time. (Oliver 2011: 351-2)

Lena hears poetry for the first time in her life and is overcome by sensations she had never felt before. When she learns that the poem was written by Shakespeare she is bewildered:

Shakespeare?" This name I do recognize from health class. "The guy who wrote *Romeo and Juliet*? The cautionary tale?" Alex snorts. "It's not a cautionary tale," he says.

"It's a great love story." "They banned poetry years ago". (Oliver 2011: 351)

For both *Delirium* and *Brave New World* literature works as "a powerful humanizing force" (Booker 1994: 175), a concept that is explored in Oliver's novel in which people are not prevented from reading Shakespeare's tragedy, but encouraged to read it as a negative exemplum. The government is fully aware of the influence and power of Shakespeare's words and tries to exploit them as a vehicle for its own restrictive and repressive vision. This is more explicit when we read the incipit of Chapter 25, in which Oliver directly cites from the play (*RJ* 3.5.11):



*I must be gone and live, or stay and die.*

—From the cautionary tale *Romeo and Juliet*

by William Shakespeare, reprinted in *100 Quotes to Know for the Boards*, by The Princeton Review (Oliver 2011: 468)

Shakespeare's tragedy has been misread and integrated in the government's propaganda apparatus of propaganda, made up of pamphlets and books like *The Book of Shhh* or *100 Quotes to Know for the Boards*, written and compiled to manipulate the people's reading and condition their minds. From a narrative point of view, Lauren Oliver uses the quotation to parallel the lovers' situation with the one of the two protagonists. This chapter actually portrays Lena's inner dilemma. Here the character seems to be experiencing Romeo's difficulties in making up her mind. Lena may either run away with Alex and live, or stay, which implies being cured and deprived of all her feelings and so being emotionally dead. Like Romeo, she resolves to leave, but their attempt is frustrated. Only Lena manages to leave Portland, while Alex sacrifices himself to make her escape: he is then captured and presumably killed. Unexpectedly Alex's capture reminds her of her evaluation test and of the story of *Romeo and Juliet*; only then she fully realizes that Alex embodies the notion of perfect love she has found in the play since he sacrifices his life for hers.

Alex is still standing on the other side of the fence, beyond a flickering wall of smoke and fire. He hasn't moved a single inch since we both jumped off the bike, hasn't tried to.

Strangely, in that moment I think back to what I answered all those months ago, at my first evaluation, when I was asked about *Romeo and Juliet* and could only think to say beautiful. I'd wanted to explain; I'd wanted to say something about sacrifice. (Oliver 2011: 518)

Like *Juliet*, Alex is thought to be dead but actually he was imprisoned in a place called the Crypts. He reappears out of the blue at the end of the second installment, *Pandemonium*, when Lena has assumed a new identity and has become a different person. Unlike her Shakespearean counterpart, Lena decides to survive in spite of Alex's presumed death. She is determined to honour the memory of Alex and show that his death was not in vain. The words she pronounces at the end of the novel pave the way for her development as an individual and as a rebel against the authoritarian government:

You can build walls all the way to the sky and I will find a way to fly above them. You can try to pin me down with a hundred thousand arms, but I will find a way to resist. And there are many of us out there, more than you think. People who refuse to stop believing. People who refuse to come to earth. People who love in a world without walls, people who love into hate, into refusal, against hope, and without fear.

I love you. Remember. They cannot take it. (Oliver 2011: 520)



In the following volumes of the trilogy Shakespeare and his works are no longer mentioned explicitly. When Lena and Alex meet again, at the end of the second installment, nothing is left of their Romeo and Juliet allure. Their past selves are dead and they are two different people: they are hurt, worn-out by hunger, brutality, isolation; they reconcile only at the end of the series, when they have overcome the juvenile and superficial phase of their romance, and have developed as individuals who can give a contribution to a new social order in which walls are pulled down, divisions erased and books and ideas no longer banned. Nevertheless, the Shakespearean image of the wall runs as a *leitmotiv* through the trilogy, changing shape and form: from an electric fence to a massive wall, symbols of all the divisions and struggles of our contemporary society such as the Berlin Wall or, in more recent times, the barricades on borders against waves of migrants. The conclusion of the trilogy stands as a passionate plea for freedom, equality and unity, a universal prayer running through the centuries:

Take down the walls.

That is, after all, the whole point. You do not know what will happen if you take down the walls; you cannot see through to the other side, don't know whether it will bring freedom or ruin, resolution or chaos. It might be paradise or destruction.

Take down the walls. (Oliver 2013: 430)

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

Books may help us discover who we are, what we believe in, and what we can be, but very few literary works have had such a pervasive impact as Shakespeare's plays, which still speak to us and to younger generations so powerfully after 400 years. "We keep returning to Shakespeare", argues Harold Bloom, "because we need him; no one else gives us so much of the world most of us take to be fact" (1998: 14). Each novel discussed portrays a different reading approach to Shakespeare's texts, and shows that young adult fiction may teach the ability to read critically (McLennan 2016: 117). Reading the Bard is turned into a universal experience, which is one of the aspects that have made his appeal endure so long. "The job of reading", Green claims, "is to use stories as a way into seeing other people as we see ourselves" (Smith 2015). Reading *Hamlet* enables Charlie to experience the connection with another human being who has had similar difficulties, and to develop a sense of reality that help him interact with his peers. Then the references to *Julius Caesar*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and the *Sonnets* in *The Fault in our Stars* enrich the debate on free will and fate which characterizes the novel and shows how the understanding and interpretation of the Bard may be filtered and shaped by personal experiences. Finally, the protagonists of *Delirium* find in the tragedy of the lovers from Verona a set of values that encourages them to react and rebel so that the play works as "something like a training manual on how to overcome the dilemma, reverse the damage, and start anew" (Hints, Basu, and Broad, 2013). For all of them, Shakespeare is much more than "the guy who wrote *Romeo and Juliet*".



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