Single Cycle Degree programme
(D.M.270/2004)
in European, American and Postcolonial
Languages and Literatures

Final Thesis

An Enactivist Approach on Contemporary Serial YA
Speculative Fiction: J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter*,
Cassandra Clare’s *The Mortal Instruments* and
Suzanne Collins’s *Hunger Games* as key studies

Supervisor
Ch. Prof. Pia Masiero

Assistant supervisor
Ch. Prof. Simone Francescato

Graduand
Sara Ballasso
Matriculation Number 847234

Academic Year
2017/2018
Table of Contents

Introduction ........................................................................................................................................... 3

1. THE ENACTIVIST APPROACH AND EXPERIENTIALITY IN NARRATIVE ............................................. 6
  1.1 The Experientiality of Narrative: a summary of Marco Caracciolo’s work ...................................... 7
  1.2 What is enactivism? ....................................................................................................................... 10
    1.2.1 Differences Between First- and Second-Generation Cognitive Science .............................. 10
    1.2.2. Enactivism .......................................................................................................................... 13
  1.3. Levels of Experiential Background ............................................................................................ 16
    1.3.1 On Representation and Expression ....................................................................................... 16
    1.3.2 What is the Experiential Background? .................................................................................... 20
    1.3.3 Levels of Bodily Experience and Perception ......................................................................... 24
    1.3.4 Level of Emotion .................................................................................................................... 27
    1.3.5 Level of Higher-Order Cognitive Functions ........................................................................... 33
    1.3.6 Level of Socio-Cultural Practices ......................................................................................... 41

2. SERIAL YA SPECULATIVE FICTION ........................................................................................................ 50
  2.1 Cross-overs ..................................................................................................................................... 50
  2.2. YA and Speculative Fiction .......................................................................................................... 52
    2.2.1 What do we mean by YA? ....................................................................................................... 52
    2.2.2 YA Literature: Origins ........................................................................................................... 54
    2.2.3 YA genres and themes: speculative fiction from the 20th century to .................................. 58
        contemporaneity .............................................................................................................................. 58
  2.3 Narrative Situation: Eliciting an Emotional Bond Between Text and Reader ................................ 63
    2.3.1 Recurrent Tropes and Structures ......................................................................................... 63
    2.3.2 Narrative Techniques ............................................................................................................. 75
    2.3.3 Emotional Style ....................................................................................................................... 83

3. YA SPECULATIVE FICTION THEMES: POLITICS, IDENTITY AND ETHICS THROUGH SYMBOLS........ 93
  3.1 Myth, Folklore and Legends: The Use of Symbols ........................................................................... 94
    3.1.1 Panem et circenses: Let the Games Begin! ............................................................................. 95
    3.1.2 Heaven and Hell .................................................................................................................... 99
  3.2 Construction of Identity: “It’s our choices that show what we truly are” .................................... 106
  3.3 Ethics: Omnia Vincit Amor ............................................................................................................ 125

Conclusions ........................................................................................................................................... 138

Works Cited ........................................................................................................................................... 140
Introduction

This work argues that the cognitive theoretical approach called enactivism may be the most appropriate to interpret contemporary Young Adult (henceforth YA) serial speculative fiction. My original contribution to the rich debate on YA speculative fiction concerns the specific slant I propose which complements the many different perspectives already existing, from feminist, to socialist, to religious, posthumanist, to name a few; all of these perspectives take into consideration mostly one particular theme at a time, and the link between YA production and children’s literature. I argue that an enactivist perspective can provide an explanation for the increasing diffusion of these narratives among young adults but especially among adults, thanks to the focus on the interaction between text and reader, and also between readers and their contemporary environment; starting from this last interaction, also a multiplicity of themes usually conveyed by these narratives can be explained. In particular, I will analyze three case-studies that have become popular in the last two decades: J.K. Rowling’s Harry Potter saga, Cassandra Clare’s The Mortal Instruments esalogy and Suzanne Collins’s Hunger Games trilogy.

I start from an explanation of Marco Caracciolo’s work concerning the enactivist approach in literature: in chapter 1, I refer mainly to his The Experientiality of Narrative, which provides the reader with the basic tenets of enactivism applied to literary texts. To put Caracciolo’s work in perspective, I will first map the origins of cognitive studies, distinguishing between the first and second generation of cognitivists, and then I will focus on the enactivist approach in the theory of cognition. The enactivist approach focuses in particular on the interaction between subject and object: I agree with Caracciolo’s claim that, in literature, enactivism may help to explain readers’ affectional response and interpretation of narratives.
Thus, I explore Caracciolo’s notion of “experientiality”, which considers the reading experience in its structure and apply it in narrative analyses. I will then proceed with a synopsis of Caracciolo’s concept of “experiential background” and its four interconnected levels: the bodily-perceptual, the emotional, the level of higher-order cognitive functions and the level of sociocultural practices. We will see how they work and why all of them have influences on readers’ experiences of narratives. In particular, we take advantage for the analyses that follow of concepts such as consciousness-attribution, consciousness-enactment, sympathy, empathic concern, primary and secondary intersubjectivity.

In chapter 2, I present YA literature and speculative fiction considering their origins, narrative techniques and the empathic bonds that these kind of narratives typically establish with readers. We are going to see the influence of Bildungsroman on YA literature: some examples of Bildungsroman and some details on the origins of this production are functional to define the genre and to look more closely at the themes and plots of these narratives. Then I follow with the analysis of our case studies looking at them through the different levels of the experiential background: I discuss the engagement of readers’ bodily-perceptual level thanks to the authors’ narrative choices – in particular, I focus on recurrent tropes and structures of the genre. I will discuss then also the emotional language that help readers to experience deeply these narratives, and the narrative devices that work on the level of higher-order cognitive functions.

In chapter 3, we investigate more in detail the engagement of the level of higher-order cognitive functions thanks to the large employment of metaphors and symbols. In this way, I introduce also a deeper analysis of themes, and then I will conclude my thesis by exploring the interaction between readers’ outer level of experientiality – that of sociocultural
frameworks – and the ethics conveyed by our case-study narratives. All along these explorations, special attention will be given to the characterization of protagonists, antagonists and other important figures – such as guides and the protagonists’ parents.

The analyses that structure this work aim at demonstrating the potential that these largely symbolical narratives may have in exposing readers of different ages to important ethical issues. Studies on enactivism have begun relatively recently, and the research may of course be broadened. Hopefully this work succeeds at paving the road for further readings along this critical trajectory.
1. THE ENACTIVIST APPROACH AND EXPERIENTIALITY IN NARRATIVE

Imagine you are hungry, and it’s that kind of hunger that forces you to get up from bed at one o’clock in the morning because it is so painful to disturb your sleep. You feel pangs in your stomach, you have just dreamt about a delicious lunch. This is a situation that everybody can understand because everybody feels hungry at least a couple of times a day, it’s part of our living bodies: our body sends a message to our brain – and we immediately know what’s happening.

Now, think about a description of a character’s hunger in a book: the narrator tells us readers that the protagonist was hungry, really hungry, and watching that sandwich on the table was making him hungrier; but then he heard some steps behind him, he turned, and what he saw made him feel a twitch in his stomach that had nothing to do with his hunger. Then the chapter interrupts, leaves us with a cliff-hanger and we need to turn the page to know what happened next – or worse, if it is the epilogue of the book, we need to wait for the next book to be published to know what is going on.

What could the protagonist possibly have seen?

It’s easy for us readers to understand what’s happening when the narrator describes the sensation of hunger, because of its natural cause, it’s a physical perception: every human experiences it more or less in the same way. It’s less easy to try and understand what could happen next: the description of a twitch in our stomach reminds us of something we could have experienced in our lives, maybe when seeing the person we like, maybe when seeing somebody we are afraid of – that old aunt that mistreated us, or a much worse case, like a robber, or a killer – or somebody we are embarrassed to see because we wronged them, or because s/he wronged us; there is more than one direct possible explanation. A reader might
have thought firstly that the protagonist has seen something to be happy for, another one might have thought that what the protagonist has seen is something dangerous. It depends on her/him, and also on what happened before in the book: if it’s a romance, the former possibility may be more accurate; if there is a lot of surprising plot twists the reader is more prepared to the latter, for something terrible, or thrilling. However, we will come up with a possible explanation, we will try to fill the gap with the tools we have: what we have learnt from other stories, what we have learnt in real life, what we know about this kind of books. It’s a process that takes into consideration the different layers the reader is made of: first of all, her/his body, without which perceptions couldn’t be immediately understood; the emotions the reader knows about, which s/he might have experienced or just have heard about; the cognitive functions the reader possesses, to understand what s/he’s reading; the historical, social, economic context in which the reader lives, that has shaped her/him, and to which s/he gives a sense to. All of this is strictly connected to what literary scholar Marco Caracciolo calls “experientiality”; I am going to explain what it is, along with Caracciolo’s studies on literary cognitivism, in this chapter. Also, and more importantly, I am going to explore a cognitive approach called “enactivism”, fundamental in Caracciolo’s work The Experientiality of Narrative, and essential for my own reading of the books.

1.1 The Experientiality of Narrative: a summary of Marco Caracciolo’s work

Marco Caracciolo studied at the University of Bologna and received a PhD in Cognitive Literature in 2012. His studies on the phenomenology of narrative led him to some interesting

---

results, exposed in numerous articles and in one book, which is the principal source for the analysis that will follow in this thesis: *The Experientiality of Narrative: An Enactivist Approach*\(^2\). He is mainly interested in the dynamics of interpretation and readerly engagement with characters: he takes into consideration the value of experience in the act of reading, that is to say the importance of each reader’s life experience in understanding, be influenced by and giving meaning to what s/he reads.

In the Introduction of *The Experientiality of Narrative: An Enactivist Approach*, Caracciolo presents his project as the attempt to answer the question “why do stories offer themselves, at least sometimes, as experiences to be undergone (and attributed to characters)?”\(^3\). He describes then the tools he uses for his project, that come from the theory of narrative and by the work of philosophers of mind. The main aspect he takes into consideration from the theory of narrative is the analysis of psychological processes, both of fictional characters – along with the narrative strategies an author needs to employ in order to present them – and of readers – those which underlie their engagement with texts. As regards the work of philosophers of mind, Caracciolo considers two notions that have always been among the principal objects of their investigation: the already mentioned *experience*, and also the concept of *consciousness*. He explains that now that cognitive science is becoming an influential area of investigation, empirical evidence on consciousness’ way of working can be provided. There is space for new theories, and cognitive researchers and philosophers of mind have developed a new interest in this kind of research. These notions are also at the center of Caracciolo’s investigation.

\(^2\) Caracciolo, *The Experientiality of Narrative*, p. 3
\(^3\) Caracciolo, *The Experientiality of Narrative*, p. 3
Then Caracciolo exposes the sources he uses for his research: the first one is the work developed during the 1990s by philosophers of mind – and he cites Searle, Dennett, Hutto, among others – and the second is “[...] the new wave in cognitive science that goes under the name of enactivism” (4); we will return to these sources in detail later on.

This is, “in a nutshell”, how Caracciolo summarizes his book:

[...] I will take advantage of all these ideas in my study of the experiential dimension of narrative (“experientiality”, as I will call it), insisting on the situated embodied quality of readers’ engagement with stories and on how meaning emerges from the experiential interaction between text and readers. In a nutshell, I will argue that stories offer themselves as imaginative experiences because of the way they draw on and restructure readers’ familiarity with experience itself. I will say that engaging with stories can be an imaginative experience to account for the difference between engaging with the world and engaging with narrative, but I do not think there are two kinds of experiences in a strong sense: what characterizes an experience, any experience, is its structure—and this structure seems to straddle the divide between the real world and fiction. (4)

The “experiential dimension of narrative” cannot be separated, along with the embodiment of the reader, from a reader’s engagement; in fact, they are part and parcel of the reading experience itself, even if this kind of experience is “imaginative”. The focus here is on the structure of experience, be it imaginative or real.

One other important aspect that Caracciolo explores, and that I need to take into consideration in my analysis, is that of the background. Talking about readers’ engagement he says:

---

4 Caracciolo is talking about four of the five principal ideas that constitute the basis of the enactivist approach, explained in the enactivist manifesto (2010, 37) written by Ezequiel A. Di Paolo, Marieke Rohde, and Hanne De Jaegher: sense-making, emergence, embodiment and experience.
Moreover, this engagement is always projected against what I will call the “experiential background” – a repertoire of past experiences and values that guide people’s interaction with the environment. The way we deal with the world and with other subjects is always dependent on the history of our “structural coupling” (as the enactivists would say) with the world. (4)

Caracciolo here introduces a basic concept of the enactivist approach – *structural coupling* – which refers to the interaction between subject and object, and on which we will return later. Having in mind Caracciolo’s vocabulary and his purpose, we can proceed in exploring his work – Part I and, partially, Part II – more in detail, from the origins of enactivism to a theory of experientiality.

1.2 What is enactivism?

1.2.1 Differences Between First- and Second-Generation Cognitive Science

First of all, we must have clear in mind what cognitive science is: as Caracciolo defines it in the introductory paragraph “Cognitive Science is the umbrella discipline that turns on the study of the mind/brain, embracing philosophy of mind, psychology, neuroscience, artificial intelligence (AI), linguistics, and anthropology” (16). As we can see, it is an interdisciplinary discipline that brings together a multiplicity of approaches and interpretations for the same matters, that allow to broaden the analysis and come to in-depth results.

The emergence of cognitive science goes back to the 1950s, and, as Caracciolo points out, “there is a close link between the emergence of cognitive science in the 1950s [...] and the dawning of cybernetics in the same decade” (16): he is referring to the so-called “computational approach”, based on the metaphor of the “mind as a computer”, an idea elaborated by first-generation cognitive science. The second-generation cognitive science
approach was developed later – around the beginning of the 1980s: it corresponds, according to Psychology Professor Eleanor Rosch, Philosophy Professor Evan Thompson and biologist Francisco Varela⁵, to “enactivism”. Enactivists typically reject the “mind-as-a-computer” theory.

Caracciolo delineates then the differences between the two approaches. The computational approach – as its name evidences – corresponds to the idea that “the mind/brain is a computational device” (16). Caracciolo goes on saying that “According to this view, cognition is the manipulation of abstract symbols (or mental representations, as they are called), which have a propositional, language-like form” (16): this means that, according to first-generation cognitive science, human cognition works like computers’, since they function quite in the same way, that is to say, based on representations, that are nothing but chains of symbolic structures. Caracciolo uses the words of some of the most “ardent advocates of the computational model” (16) to explain their view; he points out, for example:

“[…] Stephen Kosslyn’s (see, e.g., Kosslyn, Thompson, and Ganis 2006) claim that mental images – despite their sensorial content – are actually stored in symbolic form. Likewise, the visual images we see on a computer screen are never directly manipulated by the machine: all a computer can do is to process a sequence of 0s and 1s stored in its memory.” (17)⁶

The problem with this view – and I agree with Caracciolo when he explains it in the lines that follow this passage – is that it bypasses the hermeneutic capacity our brains have, that is the ability of making-sense of things; if we ask a computer to do abstract, rule-based activities, it can accomplish its task thanks to its aptitude of processing 0s and 1s, but if we ask it to

⁵ E. Rosch, E. Thompson and F. Varela are the authors *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience*, published in 1991; this book introduces the enactivist approach in cognitive science.

⁶ Caracciolo, *The Experientiality of Narrative*. 
understand the meaning of a text and explain it, the computer can’t do it. Caracciolo adds that he knows these are problems that may be overcome with the advancement of technology in the future, but he underlines also that this difference between computers and the human mind is something radical: the way they work is not the same.

This difference is fundamental to explain why second-generation cognitive scientists reject the concept of representation defined by computational theorists of mind, since it goes “hand in hand with the old-age idea that the mind is the mirror of the world (objectivism)” (18). Caracciolo explains that enactivists not only reject this cognitive theory, but they reject also its opposed theory of subjectivism – according to which it’s the mind that constructs the world. Here, an important observation enters our discourse:

[However,] Varela, Thompson, and Rosch challenge both positions on philosophical grounds: building on the Buddhist doctrine (typical of the Mahayana tradition) of the “codependent arising” of subject and object, they argue that all attempts to ground our knowledge either in the self or in the world are misguided. Rather, we must find a “middle way” between the two poles of subjectivism and objectivism. The authors suggest to look for it in the simple interaction between an organism and its environment. Unlike computers, organisms are not defined by “external mechanisms of control (heteronomy),” such as instructions and programming languages, but by their “internal mechanisms of self-organization (autonomy)” (1991, 139–140). It is through the interaction (which the authors term “structural coupling”) between the organism and the environment that the organism’s environment constitutes itself as such. In turn, the organism is constituted (both ontogenetically and phylogenetically) by the history of its structural coupling with the environment that it helps co-fashion. (18)

In this quite long passage, Caracciolo depicts the necessity of a “middle way”, and a middle way can be found in the concept of enactivism.
1.2.2. Enactivism

Before applying the enactivist theory to the study of literature, we need to start from the very beginning and consider the origins of enactivism: the term refers to the theory in biology which explains the interaction between an embodied subject and the environment that surrounds it, that is to say, the enacting – shaping – of an environment on the part of a subject, and the simultaneous influence that a given environment has on the same subject. As far as the enactivist theory is concerned, Environmental Philosophy Professor Christopher J. Preston writes in *Grounding Knowledge: Environmental Philosophy, Epistemology, and Place*:

Since an organism’s environment is always lent shape by how he or she perceives it, the organism does not so much experience an external environment as have one of his or her own. Environments are enacted by organisms as they go about their daily activities. This deeper revisioning that enactivism requires suggests there is a more general story to be told about how to look at the relationship between organism and environment that reaches beyond anything in cognitive science and epistemology. (50)

This theory is an alternative to the “standard adaptationist interpretation to Darwinian evolutionary biology” (Preston 50), according to which the subject evolves in order to adapt to the environment that surrounds it, and it is an environment that just generates challenges and problems for the survival of the subject. The theory applies from the micro-level of cells to the macro-level of the embodied subject. As Preston affirms, “According to Varela,
enactivists have to call into question the idea that information exists ready-made in the world and that it is extracted by a cognitive system” (49)\(^{10}\): again, the investigation is about the importance of *interaction* in the process of cognition.

It was the enactivist manifesto elaborated by Research Professor Ezequiel A. Di Paolo, researcher Marieke Rohde and philosopher and cognitive scientist Hanne De Jaegher that provided “five highly intertwined ideas that constitutes the basic enactive approach” (*The Experientiality of Narrative*, 4), and these are “autonomy, sense-making, emergence, embodiment and experience” (*Horizons for the Enactive Mind*, 37)\(^ {11} \); the same are quoted by Caracciolo, who affirms that he will “take advantage” of them – except for autonomy – for his theory of experientiality.

We can see how these concepts are at the basis of the enactive approach, since we know the origin of the term, and why it is effective in cognitive science. But why considering enactivism a good approach for literary cognitivism?

The answer to the question is provided by Caracciolo in *The Experientiality of Narrative*, along with the explanation of his method of analysis:

I will therefore adopt an approach close to what Marie-Laure Ryan has called the “convergence method,” which “consists of quoting scientific research in support of more or less independently developed theses concerning the reading process” (2010, 487). Overall, what enactivism does for my argument is provide an integrative theoretical model: its focus biological unity emerges from a nexus of interactions with portions of its environment. The details of these interactions—their distinctive *dynamics*—matters, especially insofar as they bear on the particular way in which the organism is embodied. This is because details of an organism’s embodiment determine structures and properties in the environment that bear on the organism’s flourishing.” From “Introduction: The Varieties of Enactivism”, Topoi, 2017.

\(^{10}\) Preston, C.J. *Grounding Knowledge: Environmental Philosophy, Epistemology, and Place*.

on experience, embodiment, and interaction underlies all of my claims about readers’ engagement with narrative. (8)

There is a reason why Caracciolo talks about a theoretical model and it is the same for his speaking about underlying structures in narrative texts: the level of “generality” (7) of the model is sufficient to account for many types of narrative text:

[…] the tension between the story and the experiential background of recipients is, arguably, at the core of any form of narrative interaction. At the same time, my model can accommodate historically and culturally circumscribed modes of reception and interpretation via particular shapes this tension can take. The experiential background of recipients includes the sociocultural contexts that frame their encounters with narrative, and literature constitutes one of these contexts: the upshot is that the recipients who share the same background practices will respond to a story within the boundaries defined by those practices (even if they do not respond in exactly the same way). Therefore, some aspects of my argument explore particular configurations of the network of experientiality—configurations that may be specific to modern and contemporary narrative practices […]. (7)

We will take advantage of the enactivist theory applied to literature, considering in depth all the levels of experientiality that Caracciolo analyzes, in order to apply them also to our thesis. We proceed now in exploring in detail the concept of experiential background and the readers’ engagement with narrative text, before considering the meaning they come up with thanks to their interaction with texts.
1.3. Levels of Experiential Background

Humans beings’ way of understanding the world is connected with how they grow up and what they experience in life; needless to say, each single person has a different life experience: despite the fact that each of us has the same physiological necessities, the same organs and the same tissues, each of us is different from the others and what we experience in our lives renders us unique. Think about this: if you had lived in the rural area outside London during the 17th century, would you have been exactly the same person you are now? Of course not. How would your education, your life expectancy, your interests have affected your character, your emotions? Every single accident of our lives, along with our choices, had a part in shaping who we are, our characters, our tastes, what attracts us and what engages us: this is an enactivist perspective on life. Now, let’s restrict our focus on an enactivist perspective in narrative: how does the reader interact with narrative texts, given her/his life experience, that is different from everybody else’s experience? On what readers’ engagement with narrative texts depends?

1.3.1 On Representation and Expression

It is worth introducing the discourse on the levels of the experiential background with an explanation about the enactivist perspective on narrative texts and the expressive devices employed by authors to engage readers with their stories.

Stories are often seen – as specified by Caracciolo – as “representational artifacts” (29)\textsuperscript{12}. Indeed, an author represents something through her/his words, but it is to be clarified that

\textsuperscript{12} Caracciolo, The Experientiality of Narrative.
the term *representation* here must not be understood in the *computational sense*, because this would mean to refer to first-generation cognitive science’s *mental representations* (see par. 1.2.1). Readers’ are invited to think about a storyworld that is not their real world, in which they do not exist, and to imagine to live an *experience*: the product of the process is something more than a representation. According to an enactivist perspective, the concept of *representation* is overcome; we talk about, as Caracciolo does, a “more-than-representationalist approach” (30): the narrative text is not the representation of an experience, but rather “the representation of an *event* in which a person (e.g., a fictional character) undergoes an experience” (30). This experience may mean something to a reader, something different to another one: it depends on the interaction between the narrative text and the reader. As explained by Caracciolo:

> Representation works by referring to object-like entities (such as events, people, and things), while experience is a complex texture created by people’s biological make-up and past experiences; it has to do not just with *what* is experienced, but with the *how*, with the ways in which people respond to the world. (30)

Thus, the ways in which an author can convey experiences – not just representations – matters. These ways are a matter of *expression*: it is the link between *what* is represented and *how* it is represented; it is at the basis of the concept of *experience* when it comes to narrative.

Let me explain the concept with an example: if an author describing a disgusting scene wrote “That man was throwing up”, would your sensation in reading be the same as that you would feel in reading about a detailed and in-depth description of the color of the vomit, the smell
in the air and the sounds the man does? And how would you feel if the scene involved a spectator being covered with the man’s vomit and then it turned out that the spectator covered with that man’s vomit was you?

I take advantage once again of Caracciolo’s words in briefly explaining this kind of involvement:

Note that, despite being triggered by a representational mental state [...], our response is not—in itself—representational. What is remarkable about this phenomenon is the way mental and semiotic representations can draw on a level of our engagement with the world that is pre-linguistic and non-representational. (38)

This focus on the result on the reader’s part is important in underlining the strength of readers’ responses, and it is connected not just to their embodiment, but also to their emotional sphere. It’s not just a matter of representation, it’s about an experiential feel. Also, try to remember the words “pre-linguistic” and “non-representational”, as we will go deeper in explaining these aspects later.

As Caracciolo precisely sums this discourse up,

In sum, representation and expression are different layers or aspects of the same process of engaging with texts. Language is inherently representational, because it asks interpreters to think about—or direct their consciousness to—mental objects like events and existents. But it is also experiential, because it can express experiences by constantly referring back to the past experiences of the interpreters, and by inviting them to respond in certain ways. (38)

How can authors “invit[e] them to respond in certain ways”?  

13 Here we consider just the descriptions that involve our senses in perceiving a scene that prompts our disgust. See more on the details in literary descriptions in Kuzmičová (2012).
Before answering the question, it is necessary to be more specific about *representation* – talking from an enactivist perspective of analysis on stories – and consider characters’ representation: narratologists have always been interested in the representations of characters’ experiences, rather than on readers’ understanding of these representations. Are characters’ experiences *representable*, if we consider the meaning of *representation* we explained before? No, they are not, in fact, their actions are representable, but the experiential quality needs something more to be explained, and before arriving to this explanation, we must consider the means through which authors can invite readers to respond in certain ways and evoke a possible experiential feel on readers’ part.

Authors can invite specific readers’ responses through expressive devices that may trigger their interest, immersive reading, empathy. These devices work on different levels. The first one is the *story level*: different genres, different plots, but also different events in stories, may attract readers because of different reasons “because of evolutionary, cultural or personal predispositions” (42). “Evolutionary”, as the word itself suggests, refers to the physiological, natural kind of response that may be triggered in readers thanks to the “universality of [the] emotional reaction” (42). This means that when it comes to basic emotions – anger, fear, disgust, sadness, joy – the experiential feel of the reader maybe varies in intensity, but in the majority of cases it will include the same kind of response. We have discussed about expression before, and this is fundamental at the story level (even though, it is fundamental also at the discourse level, as we will see in due time): the way events are represented influences readers’ response. This depends on their cultural context (think about the spread of determined types of stories in history, from Medieval morality tales to orphans’ stories in the 19th century) and on their personal experience (children are more likely not to be interested in romance stories because it is something that is not part of their life yet), in
particular if that experience “has shaped their self-concept or understanding of themselves” (43). Secondly, there is the level of the discourse: the narrating instance, focalization, style, richness of description, authorial comments, etc. affect readers’ engagement due to personal or psychological reasons – think about studies on the effectiveness of psychonarration\textsuperscript{14} to enhance readers’ engagement. And finally, the third level is that of narrative structure: playing on the temporality of events can stimulate those “narrative universals”\textsuperscript{15} that render a story interesting, that are suspense, curiosity and surprise – elements that don’t belong just to narrative, but also to reality\textsuperscript{16}.

Thus, having all of these elements of narration in mind, we can return to our necessity of defining the experiential quality of narration, so our analysis proceeds in looking deeply at the interaction between the reader and narrative texts, starting from the experiential background, the layers that constitutes each individual – different from any other – reader.

1.3.2 What is the Experiential Background?

“Think of any normal slice of your waking life: You are eating a meal, taking a walk to the park, writing a letter, making love, or driving to work. In each case the condition of possibility of the performance is an underlying Background competence” (195)\textsuperscript{17}: this is how philosopher John Searle presents the idea of a personal background, a set of characteristics and abilities that constitute each individual’s personality. When Searle talks about “performance”, he means every act, thought and speech that the individual does or expresses: everything we do

\textsuperscript{14} Cf. Dorritt Cohn’s *Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction.*
\textsuperscript{16} See more in Caracciolo’s *The Experientiality of Narrative,* p. 44.
in our life, when we rationally choose and when we instinctively react, is someway conditioned by a combination of some factors that are at the basis of our sensorimotor set-up and other emotional and sociocultural factors that influenced us during life. The same functioning, on the enactivist account, is true for readers’ engagement with narratives, starting from the point I underlined in par 1.3.2 about underlying structures, structures of reality are repeated in narratives, and this, along with readers’ personal experiences, triggers the experiential feel in them. Going further into this analysis, I must add that it is the “emotional stance” that gives to the structure the possibility of affecting readers. Caracciolo claims that:

On the enactivist account, our emotions are pre-reflective, embodied evaluations of a situation—a claim that collapses a traditional distinction in first-generation cognitive science: that between the cognitive, inferential “appraisal” and the bodily “arousal” that co-occur in emotions, with the “arousal”—the affective component—being caused, as a side-effect, by the appraisal (see Scherer, Schorr, and Johnstone 2001). By contrast, for the enactivists emotions involve responding to situations that have a bearing on the organism’s well-being. [...] We respond emotionally to an event because we feel that it puts at stake a fundamental value such as our own well-being—or that of the people we are attached to. (55)\textsuperscript{18}

Let’s put it another way with an example. Katniss Everdeen volunteers as a tribute for the most dangerous and bloody challenge of all times, the Hunger Games, when she hears that her little twelve-year-old sister has been sorted for the Games:

Effie Trinket crosses back to the podium, smooths the slip of paper, and reads out the name in a clear voice. And it’s not me. It’s Primrose Everdeen.

\textsuperscript{18} Caracciolo, \textit{The Experientiality of Narrative}. 
One time, when I was in a blind in a tree, waiting motionless for game to wander by, I dozed off and fell ten feet to the ground, landing on my back. It was as if the impact had knocked every wisp of air from my lungs, and I lay there struggling to inhale, to exhale, to do anything. That’s how I feel now, trying to remember how to breathe, unable to speak, totally stunned as the name bounces around the inside of my skull. Someone is gripping my arm, a boy from the Seam, and I think maybe I started to fall and he caught me. [...] And then I see her, the blood drained from her face, hands clenched in fists at her sides, walking with stiff, small steps up toward the stage, passing me, and I see the back of her blouse has become untucked and hangs out over her skirt. It’s this detail, the untucked blouse forming a ducktail, that brings me back to myself. “Prim!” The strangled cry comes out of my throat, and my muscles begin to move again. “Prim!” I don’t need to shove through the crowd. The other kids make way immediately allowing me a straight path to the stage. I reach her just as she is about to mount the steps. With one sweep of my arm, I push her behind me. “I volunteer!” I gasp. “I volunteer as tribute!” (20-22)

We read about Katniss’s immediate physical reaction, her inability to breathe and make sense of what is happening; then we see her realizing what is actually going on, and her reaction is to take her sister’s place in the Games to spare her almost sure death. This reaction of the protagonist to the event is determined by physical, emotional and cognitive factors. Thus, let’s see what is this background Caracciolo speaks of. He defines it in this way:

Indeed, the background—the experiential background, as I will call it—is not an undifferentiated whole, but a field that is variously and continuously shaped by the biological make-up, culture, social positioning, and personal experience of every individual. Therefore, we may draw a line between levels or “regions” of the background, each of them containing experiences of a markedly different kind. Since every experience—including story-driven experiences—can resonate with and produce a feedback effect on different regions of the experiential background, it is crucial to get the relationship between these regions right. (57)
Caracciolo’s scheme\textsuperscript{19}, reproduced in Figure 1 on the next page clarifies what he is referring to.

\textbf{Fig. 1:} Caracciolo’s representation of the experiential background, divided in levels. Embodiment is, in his definition a “biological, cognitive, and existential condition”, so, as such, stretches from the center to the limit of the scheme.

\textsuperscript{19} Caracciolo, \textit{The Experientiality of Narrative}, Fig. 2, p. 58.
1.3.3 Levels of Bodily Experience and Perception

To explore the concept of experiential background in detail, let us start from the first of its constituents: the level of bodily-experience. Caracciolo places it at the center of the scheme, as we can see in Figure 1, because all the other levels depend on this one: our body is the first mean through which we come to know the world. All our experiences are filtered firstly by our body. Besides, bodily experience includes the sensations of pain, proprioception and kinesthesia. While we all know what pain refers to, the other two concepts are to be described more in detail: they are both kinds of “awareness”; proprioception refers to the kind of awareness linked to our being conscious of the parts of our body – we know where our arms and legs are, without the necessity of checking with our eyes – while kinesthesia is about the “consciousness of our body in motion” (57)20.

In a phenomenological and enactivist framework, proprioception and kinesthesia are closely bound up with pre-reflective consciousness, since the body structures experience right from the start: “The body is not a screen between me and the world; rather, it shapes our primary way of being-in-the-world” (Gallagher and Zahavi 2008, 137). (57)21

This is what Caracciolo writes about proprioception and kinesthesia, and we notice the use of the expression “pre-reflective consciousness”; this concept refers to what philosophers Shaun Gallagher and Dan Zahavi22 call the “mineness” of an experience, that is the idea that what I

---

20 Caracciolo, The Experientiality of Narrative. Caracciolo adds a note here, to make a reference to Guillemette Bolens’s The Style of Gestures (2012), where she explores the concept of kinesthesia for literary analysis.
21 Caracciolo, The Experientiality of Narrative.
experience belongs to me even though I don’t reflect upon it, that is to say, before giving meaning to it, before reflecting on it. In Caracciolo’s words,

[...] embodiment is a biological, cognitive, and existential condition: from the materialist perspective of modern science all of people’s emotions, deliberations, memories, imaginings, and concepts—in short, all mental phenomena—depend on biochemical processes that are physically realized in our living bodies. (58)

More than this, these processes of ours shape all the other levels of experientiality: if it is through our body that we come to know the world, it is firstly through our body that we give meaning to it. Again, the idea of interaction emerges: it is the interaction between ourselves and the environment that we experience because of our being embodied. It is true that we don’t physically experience what we read in narratives, but it is also true that we imaginatively experience it, and – as explained – embodiment is at the core of experience. When we read a text, and we are told, for instance, that we are on a beach, and this beach is described as warm, with hot fine sand, and there is nobody around; that we can look at the sea and see that the water is blue, and clear, and warm too; that there is a group of dolphins swimming not far from us, we may have almost the perception of the temperature on our skin and of dolphins swimming in front of us. This is generally known as “sensory imagination”, and it is, as Caracciolo defines it, “a non-representational (experiential) “side effect” of a representational mental state [using the term representational in both cases in the sense we explained in par. 1.3.1]” (93): it means that through a mental state represented, we feel something. This feeling is personal; the representation of the beach is not identical in the minds of all readers: it is connected to the experience of each reader – using the term experience including all levels of experientiality, from our bodily experience of having been
on a beach or at least felt some degrees of temperature that may be defined as “warm”, to our idea of “beach” generated by growing up in a certain State in the world or by our travels, facts that brought us to see certain kinds of beaches.

Thus, the level of bodily experience is strictly connected with that of perception: since we have a body, we perceive an environment; since we perceive an environment, we enact space and the quality of this space around us. Caracciolo talks of “structural similarity” when he links the way of working of perception and enactment imagination: “it has its roots in the active, embodied, evaluative nature of perception and enactment imagination alike; it has little to do with their content, since imagining is enacting seeing, not seeing a picture-like mental image” (99). When he says “enacting seeing”, he refers to the ability humans have of responding to a text by activating what enactivists call “sensorimotor patterns”, or the schemes of movement of the different parts of human body. The feedback that sensorimotor patterns involve, is the explanation of the close bond between bodily and perceptual experience. Readers are able to enact narrative space through this kind of simulation, and they can do it even in the absence of specific filtering characters.

The reader enacts the space around her/him thanks to the re-activation of her/his past experience; s/he knows it because someway s/he “felt” it before.

When the description of a space is filtered through a character’s consciousness, readers can follow this character’s perspective on the space, and they enact her/his perspective. So, as Caracciolo underlines,

The problem with the idea that readers adopt the character’s perspective is that it can seem to reify the character’s experience by presenting it as an object that pre-exists the reader’s interaction with the text. On the contrary, I would argue that the character’s perspective can only be simulated, or rather enacted, by the reader while reading. (104)
It is not about the character’s experience, it’s about readers’ experientiality, the tension between what s/he experienced and what s/he’s reading. Characters’ experiences do not stand by themselves, but they exist thanks to readers’ enactment of these experiences (see par. 1.4.1, on representability of characters).

1.3.4 Level of Emotion

Making a step further – or better, going a level up – we encounter the level of emotion. Emotions, like perceptions, are linked to the area of “feeling”: they are, from the enactivist perspective, pre-reflective, embodied responses of our organisms to external inputs. Caracciolo writes that “We respond emotionally to an event because we feel that it puts at stake a fundamental value such as our own well-being – or that of the people we are attached to” (55): emotions involve some kind of almost automatic evaluation, and this evaluation precedes language and thought (animals can show emotions and they can’t think and talk). It is, as Canadian philosopher and social theorist Brian Massumi writes in “The Autonomy of Affect”, “intensity”:

An emotion is a subjective content, the socio-linguistic fixing of the quality of an experience which is from that point onward defined as personal. Emotion is qualified intensity, the conventional, consensual point of insertion of intensity into semantically and semiotically formed progressions, into narrativizable action-reaction circuits, into function and meaning. It is intensity owned and recognized. (88)

---

23 Caracciolo, The Experientiality of Narrative.
Scholars generally distinguish between basic emotions – happiness, sadness, anger, fear, disgust and surprise – and non-basic emotions: the first group is thought to be the result of evolution, since they belong to all cultures, while the second group is influenced by social and cultural factors that modulated them (the idea of love, for instance, or of spirituality).

When we read, emotions may be triggered by textual cues – that are responses to the way narrative discourse is set, or generated by the engagement with fictional characters. I make another distinction on this point, and do the consequent analysis of vocabulary as far as the subject is concerned, before mentioning the techniques authors may dispose of in order to trigger emotions in readers: when readers react as feeling for characters, we talk about sympathy, while when they react as feeling as characters, we talk about empathy: while sympathy is “(an expression of) understanding and care for someone else's suffering”, empathy is “the ability to share someone else's feelings or experiences by imagining what it would be like to be in that person's situation”. Let me make this point clearer with an example: when a reader reads about a character crying and feels pity for him, s/he is being sympathetic; but when a reader reads about a character crying and s/he starts to cry too, s/he is being empathetic.

I want to make some observations that reach beyond the synopsis of Caracciolo’s book we are undertaking. First of all, historically, the terms empathy and sympathy weren’t distinguished, in fact, the former didn’t exist at all. As regards the origin of the term empathy, it was coined at the beginning of the twentieth century, and it derives from the German word

---

25 Paul Ekman worked on facial expressions, and from his work comes this generally accepted categorization of basic emotions. See Emotions Revealed: Recognizing Faces and Feelings to Improve Communication and Emotional Life. 2003.
Einfühlung, coined by the aesthetcian Theodor Lipps. Contemporary research on empathy is important to our analysis because it intersects the areas of psychology, neurology and philosophy and enters the discourse of cognitive science. Scientific research on empathy, in particular, is being carried out nowadays, and methods to test empathic reactions have been developed a lot in the last thirty years; neurologists and cognitivists are trying to explain mechanisms in our brain that generate this kind of response – with experiments such as measurements on changes in heart rate, skin conductance, or facial reactions of the person who’s being analyzed – and narratologists applied this research in their studies too. Why is it important to delineate the difference between empathy and sympathy in an enactivist context?

The answer is, because empathetic and sympathetic engagement have different results in the interaction between text and reader.

A work on this subject that is worth mentioning is that of Suzanne Keen, American Professor who coined the term narrative empathy, referring, clearly, to empathy applied to narratives; she is aware that the experience of emotional contagion triggered by reading can be as intense as that triggered by a real situation: at the beginning of her book Empathy and the Novel, Keen defines empathy as “a vicarious, spontaneous sharing of affect, [which] can be provoked by witnessing another’s emotional state, by hearing about another’s condition, or even by reading” (4). In “A Theory of Narrative Empathy”, she makes us infer that sympathy is part of empathy, and no vice versa in her quotation of Vernon Lee’s The Beautiful:

> [...] empathy enters into “imagination, sympathy, and also into that inference from our own inner experience which has shaped all our conceptions of an outer world, and given to the

---

27 See more in Keen, “A Theory of Narrative Empathy”, Narrative, Volume 14, October 2006, The Ohio State University Press, pag. 209; see also Lipps, Zur Einfühlung.
intermittent and heterogeneous sensations received from without the framework of our constant and highly unified inner experience, that is to say, of our own activities and aims” (68). (210)

Not only Lee explains sympathy as part of the empathetic process, she also refers to the “unified inner experience” of the individual, rendering this definition explicative of the emotional level in the enactivist conception of the individual, in an epoch when enactivism in literature wasn’t even theorized.

Keen also affirms in “A Theory of Narrative Empathy” that “The possibility that novel reading stimulates mirror neurons’ activation can now, as never before, undergo neuroscientific investigation. Neuroscientists have already declared that people scoring high on empathy tests have especially busy mirror neuron systems in their brains” (207). When Keen says “mirror neurons”, she is talking about neurons that fire both when an individual acts and when the individual observes the same action performed by another. Thus, the neuron "mirrors" the behavior of the other, as though the observer were her/himself acting.

Also Maria Nikolajeva explains the emotional narrative engagement, in Reading for Learning, mentioning the importance of humans’ mirror neurons as Keen does, and referring to the work of cognitive critics to affirm the enactivist point of “mediated experience”:

Fiction creates situations in which emotions are simulated; we engage with literary characters’ emotions because our brains can, through mirror neurons, simulate other people’s goals in the same manner as it can simulate our own goals, irrespective of whether these “others” are real or fictional. Cognitive critics mentioned earlier, such as Zunshine (2006,2012), Keen (2007), Vermeule (2010) and Hogan (2011), purport that the reason we can engage with fictive characters is a connection between the mediated experience of the text and emotional experience stored in the brain.” (83)28

Thus, we go further in explaining this kind of engagement, returning to Caracciolo: he calls sympathy and empathy for characters respectively “consciousness-attribution” and “consciousness-enactment”. Consciousness-attribution happens because readers don’t just attribute mental states to characters, they attribute mental states that have a “qualitative aspect”, which means, a full consciousness, to characters. This happens on the basis of signs that are external to characters – such as their gestures, their language of speaking and thought – which, as remarks Caracciolo, “we take as expressive of an experience” (114): the way representation is expressed matters as regards consciousness-attribution and our emotional contagion. Moreover, consciousness-attribution is an unavoidable consequence of humans’ way of understanding others’ gestures and words as expressive of their personality – or, consciousness – that is not based primarily on reasoning.

On the other side, consciousness-enactment, as the word itself signals, means that the reader “enacts” the experience that s/he attributes to a character; it’s not just attributing a consciousness to a fictional character: in fact, note that the fictional consciousness does not exist in itself, but rather it originates from the interaction between the text and the reader. If you erase the interaction, the character is just a representational artifact. Caracciolo specifies also that consciousness-enactment is a “cumulative process” (124), which means that the more you go on reading, the more you meet textual cues that lead you to a more defined sense of a character’s consciousness; there are two factors at work in this sense: the first is the “degree of similarity or consonance between our story-driven experience and the experience we attribute to the character” (124), the second is “the level of detail [...] of the textual cues” (124). They are both self-explanatory, and it is clear why empathy – consciousness-enactment – is enhanced in these ways: these are characteristics that lead to
an immersive reading – that happens when the reader is completely involved in the book and shares experiences with characters deeply, experiences that s/he attributed to them.

Finally, returning to the discourse on the instruments authors dispose of in order to trigger an emotional contagion in the reader, there are some narrative techniques that should be mentioned; Keen writes:

Narrative theorists, novel critics, and reading specialists have already singled out a small set of narrative techniques—such as the use of first person narration and the interior representation of characters’ consciousness and emotional states—as devices supporting character identification, contributing to empathetic experiences, opening readers’ minds to others, changing attitudes, and even predisposing readers to altruism. (213)

I will specify later the effects – different from mere empathy – that she talks about; for now, let’s list the techniques found by Keen: the point of view, the nature of the mediation between reader and author (including the person of the narration), internal/external perspective on characters. Among those listed by Caracciolo, there are consciousness tags such as proper names or pronouns, and then punctuation, focalization – again – or layout choices: all of these techniques range from the level of words to the level of text. A specification must be made on the techniques for rendering consciousness, given the importance consciousness-attribution and consciousness-enactment have in our argument: scholar of German and Comparative Literature Dorrit Cohn calls those techniques quoted monologue (the direct quotation of a character’s discourse), psycho-narration (the description of a character’s mental discourse made by the narrator), and narrated monologue—she explains it as “[...] the technique for rendering a character’s thoughts in his own idiom while maintaining the

---

29 Keen, “A Theory of Narrative Empathy”.
30 It is generally called free indirect discourse.
third-person reference and the basic tense of narration” (494). This means that, with the use of these two last techniques, the reader is nearer to the character’s consciousness by directly following her/his thoughts; a lot of theorists have agreed upon the fact that narrated monologue has strong effects on the empathetic concern of readers, and that is the main reason for it. See in 2.3.3 how these techniques are employed in our three case studies and how they affect readers’ emotional responses.

To end this discourse on the level of emotion and moving on to the next level, I refer to Caracciolo’s words once again: “All in all, readers’ emotional responses to fiction arise from the complex interplay between the representational instructions of the narrative (and in particular the characters and the situations in which they are involved), its expressive form, and readers’ own background” (66). Let’s see more in detail the “instructions of narrative” and the “expressive form” in the next section.

1.3.5 Level of Higher-Order Cognitive Functions

“Higher-order cognitive functions are abilities such as long-term memory, propositional imagination, conceptual thought, language and narrative understanding” (59), explains Caracciolo about the third level of the experiential background (see figure 1). He is referring to those abilities that depend on a combination of genetic factors and development during time due to exercise and external opportunities – again, the result of an interaction. All of these functions allow the individual to approach narratives and be able to make sense of the words, sentences, plot developments, use of techniques in texts: they are the basic connection between the text and the reader, the point of contact that renders the interaction

31 See more in Cohn, Transparent Minds: Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction, 494-495.
possible. Notice the remarks Caracciolo does in order to explain the way the level of higher-order cognitive works and interacts with the others:

“Firstly, it is by harnessing higher-order cognitive skills that stories can invite us to simulate lower-order experiences: through readers’ linguistic comprehension, narrative provokes reactions that are cognitively more basic than language itself—for example, mental imagery or emotional responses.” (66)

This means that emotional engagement is possible thanks to higher-order cognitive functions. This, because, as we have already verified, the text in itself is a representational artifact, it doesn’t contain emotions: they are experienced by the reader thanks to her/his interaction with the text.

Secondly, not all stories put the same amount of strain on our cognitive capacities. Some of them pose significant challenges for recipients’ linguistic and narrative understanding—challenges that may be used by authors to create specific effects: for example, to streamline recipients’ enactment of a character’s mental state or condition. (66-67)

The effort for our brains varies from one narrative text to another: this may depend on our abilities or on the choices of authors, or on a combination of both. For example, children’s narratives are usually easy to understand at a basic level of cognition, since their abilities are less developed than adults’ and their experiences more reduced; we will explore these difference later.

“Thirdly, stories, by exercising interpreters’ higher-order cognitive skills, have the potential for enhancing them in important ways—for example by alerting readers to the values that are implicated in situations (see Walsh 2007, 106; Boyd 2009, 192–193)” (67):
making sense of values we find in texts depends on our cognitive skills, and the impact on readers can be strong (see paragraph 1.3.6 about values and impacts on readers more in detail). For now, I am going to explore some aspects of higher-order cognitive functions that will be particularly helpful in the development of my thesis, from metaphorical language to theory of mind, from distinctions on readers based on their age to that based on their experience. Caracciolo doesn’t amplify much on this level of the Background, but we need to do it in order to proceed with our analysis.

I want to focus mostly on language, since it is the primary ability we have to develop in order to understand discourses, be them narrative or not; besides, “There is some evidence suggesting that language affects our perceptual capabilities” (Caracciolo 60). One famous example regards the perception of colors and their discrimination: different cultures have different names for colors, some of them more than one word for the same color or slightly different shades of the same – see the example provided by Winawer about the Russian ways to say “blue”32, while in many ancient cultures words for this color were absent33. “Linguistic processes are normally involved when people engage in all kinds of seemingly non-linguistic tasks […]” (Winawer et al., 2007, 7784): brain’s signals are the same for humans, reactions may be different. It’s the interaction of different levels of the Background again: the level of perception interacts with the level of higher-order cognitive functions – connected on its part to the next level, the socio-cultural – resulting in the production of different behavioral responses.

Focusing then on narrative texts, narrative techniques denote the effort of the author in conveying her/his intents: this can happen through a certain use of language. We explored

33 See anthropologist Brent Berlin and linguist Paul Kay’s Basic Color Terms: Their Universality and Evolution (1969) and Paul Key et al.’s World Color Survey (2009).
narrative techniques in paragraph 1.3.4, in particular modes to render characters’ consciousness; also characterization, style of the discourse, narrative voice, pace of the action, etc. are principal features that belong to the linguistic area of scope. But, in particular, let’s think about a peculiar feature that enables, in Caracciolo’s words, the enacting of “qualia”, that are “the intrinsic, ineffable properties of experience” (105): metaphorical language.

Caracciolo writes in section 4.4 of Part II that “Through metaphors and similes,¹⁶ the reader is invited to imagine experiences “both of acting and of being acted upon” (Hutto 2006b, 52) and to associate them with the target experience, thus being provided not with the experience itself, but with a good approximation of it.” (106): that is to say, even though the reader is not experiencing in reality what is depicted in the narrative text, the association with something s/he experienced in reality renders a sense of “what’s it like” to experience it. This comes in different levels, given the difficulty of the metaphor to be understood, the experience of the reader, and so on.

To use Karen Coats’s words, “A metaphor is a comparison of one thing to another based on similar attributes, and whether we are aware of it or not, we use them all the time, especially when we are trying to reach across the gap from sensual experience to linguistic expression” (126)³⁴. Since we will take up the discourse on metaphorical language more in detail also in chapter 3, let’s focus for now on readers’ cognitive development. There is a physical limit – set by age – to the development of cognitive abilities, that may vary also depending on the subject. Anyway, there’s one concept that comes to our help in order to render clearer how

---

³⁴ Coats, The Bloomsbury Introduction to Children’s and Young Adults Literature. 2018. Coats’s areas of interest are Children’s Literature, Literary Criticism and Pedagogy of Children’s Literature. She works at Illinois State University.
people develop in this sense, and it is explained by Coats in her *The Bloomsbury Introduction to Children’s and Young Adults Literature*:

Somewhere between ages three and five, children develop an early version of **Theory of Mind (ToM)**. **ToM** [original emphasis] is the ability to imagine that other people have intentions, beliefs, desires, and knowledge that may be different from your own. It’s called a theory because it’s not visible from the outside so it requires some cognitive abilities before it comes online. (67)

It’s easy to understand why ToM is important to our discourse on narratives too: developing this kind of ability readers are able to understand other people’s intentions and emotions, and, vice versa, reading about fictional characters helps readers to develop this ability. As Coats continues on the following page:

[Another] skill a child needs in order to understand **ToM** is how to read gesture and other visual and auditory clues to emotion. Emotions are internal, but they are expressed **multimodally**, through gesture, posture, tone of voice, etc. sometimes these cues are accompanied by a direct verbal expression of the emotion, but sometimes they require inferences. The ability to make inferences from gesture and other nonverbal signs is key to a robust **ToM**. Stories help children develop **ToM** because they are able to associate words that describe feeling states with episodes that trigger them and gestures that typically accompany them. (68)

Higher-order cognitive abilities are connected to emotions for the simple fact that humans’ brain is a whole: communication between areas that concern feeling, thinking and doing is continuous, and, as you can’t divide parts of one single body and let them act on their own, in the same way you can’t divide a brain and let single parts act on their own, either. The same is true for the levels of the Background: there’s more than one, connected with the others,
that act together for a result, and the result comes thanks to the interaction of each level with the environment in which the subject grows.

Adding one more point to the discourse on textual features and theory of mind, I want to highlight another trait that will be useful to our analysis later, namely, the plot. Usually, narratologists divide between character-oriented plots – that are more introspective narratives, focusing on the growth of characters and their personal dimension – and action-oriented plots – that focus more on the events depicted; action-oriented plots are generally said to be simpler, since characters’ psychology is not analyzed in great depth, and more readable for children, who engage easily with stories because of action and because they are not yet interested in people’s psychology. Besides, they have to be educated, so, through action, ethics and moral are explained in texts written for them. But is it entirely true? Children for sure can’t understand characters’ psychology as adults can, but maybe they can enhance their abilities to do so, as we said before, through engagement with narratives and action-oriented plots that let them develop theory of mind. Nikolajeva writes:

[…] action-oriented children’s literature with multiple protagonists, […] appear less of an educational device and more of a means to afford and encourage theory of mind. […] Typically, with a superficially action-oriented novel we do not even notice the mind-reading we engage in, since we focus on external events. This is a good example of engaging with fiction on different levels and through different interpretative codes. Doubtless we read for the plot (Brooks 1984), applying the pro-aeretic code in Barthes’s terminology (Barthes 1974). Yet since plots are based on characters’ actions, we cannot help wondering about their minds, their beliefs, and their motivations. (139-140, my emphasis)
Therefore, also action-oriented plots can have a deeper dimension, *more layers*, something that emerges firstly because of our natural development of reading abilities, then with a different kind of mental effort.

There is then a range of age that goes from about 14 to 22, that cannot be defined as either children or adult age; the higher-order cognitive functions of people belonging to this range, are not those of children nor entirely of adults, and neither their experience. We will explore the definition of this group – that is deemed now as Young Adult – in the next chapter, but for now let’s say that the transition from one range of age to another entails some changes in people’s cognitive abilities that is worth underlining. Thanks to the use of language and the other higher-order cognitive functions, readers can experience the same narrative text on different levels depending on their different cognitive abilities, the evolution of theory of mind, on the way the story plot is set, or on readers’ range of age.

We must add also another way to distinguish readers in categories, in addition to that of age, that is the division between *novice* and *expert* readers\(^\text{35}\): this, because, for example, there are older readers whose reading experience may be less prolific than some younger readers’. Nikolajeva describes an expert reader as “an *abstract, hypothetical recipient of a literary text who possesses a capability of realizing to the full extent the potential afforded by the text*” (15) while “A novice reader lacks such capability” (15). I adopt this distinction too because it is important also to our discourse on the levels of experientiality. Nikolajeva says also that the distinction is gradual – in a continuum from the novice reader to one end and of expert reader on the other end.

Novice readers’ characteristics are the following\(^\text{36}\):

\(^{35}\) It's the division adopted by Nikolajeva, and it was described by Marianne Wolf (2007).

- **Limited real-life experience** and encyclopaedic knowledge (which comes from education);
- **Limited experience mediated by fiction**;
- **More intuitive and less rational responses from external factors**;
- **Less developed attention skills and memory to process and connect lived and mediated experience**;
- **Limited capacity to distinguish between fact and fiction**;
- **Limited capacity for causality, prediction, problem-solving and decision-making**;
- **Limited theory of mind, empathetic and linguistic skills**;
- Zero mastering of **figurative language**;
- Clear sense of self not yet developed;
- **Limited system of belief and values**.

The result in reading for novice readers is that, for them, “external stimuli take the “low” affective path rather than the “high” reasonable one” (Nikolajeva 85), so they are more likely to rely on their immediate emotional responses and to give reduced interpretation to text, independently from texts being character-oriented or action-oriented, being written for a younger audience or an older one, needing more or less developed theory of mind to be understood deeply. Besides, due to all the characteristics listed above, they are also more likely to experience the so-called “similarity identification” (*Empathy and the Novel*, Keen, 2007) – that is to say, a negative kind of empathy, with no boundaries between fictional character’s emotions and personality and themselves as readers, and with no detached exercise of judgement about characters and their actions – rather than empathy – see par. 1.3.4.
Keeping this in mind, we are able to move to the last level of the experiential Background in our analysis – the level of socio-cultural practices.

1.3.6 Level of Socio-Cultural Practices

The level of socio-cultural practices is always in development, and it is maybe the most permeable of all levels. I said “permeable” because it’s the most external of the levels of the experiential background: we are constantly exposed to external stimuli that may have an important impact on the other levels – perceptual, emotional, of higher-order cognitive functions – and thus on our personality as a whole. We are born in a given place at a given time we didn’t choose, to a family and in a society we didn’t choose either: all these factors deeply influence our growth. First of all, let’s see what is this socio-cultural framework that characterizes our interaction with the environment that surrounds us.

As said before, we are born in some place at some time that we didn’t choose, and these accidents have a clear impact on who we are: growing up in a tribe in central Africa in the 14th century entails different outcomes on our personal development than, for instance, growing up in one of the first colonies that will become the United States in the 17th century, from bare necessities of life, and, consequently, way of seeing the world, to food habits, language, tastes in music, in clothing, romantic interests etc. Besides, we have different opportunities: a child born in a country of the Third World during a war who has lost his parents will worry about how to survive in nature, while a man born to a rich family, who attended the most renowned schools and met well-educated people, may choose a life-project that includes a good career, a loving family and a house of property in a wealthy neighborhood. While the domestic sphere sets the first attributes for a child – education, but also her/his abilities
thanks to opportunities of development and simply her/his genetic code –, the public sphere which s/he enters while growing up, gives her/him inputs and stimuli that contribute to shape the person s/he will become, with values, interests, ideas, intentions; all of this is gained through experience.

“[…] even basic perceptual and emotional experience has some socio-cultural plasticity” – Caracciolo claims – “such that it can be put to various uses by cultures embedded in different narrative scripts, and so on” (61): here the interaction, not only of levels of experiential background with the environment, but also of the socio-cultural level with the other levels, is explained; it means that our way of seeing the world – a mixture of our bodily perceptions, emotions and higher-order cognitive functions – is influenced by what we see in the world around us, but the reverse is also true. Caracciolo continues:

> Although our evolutionary history and genetic make-up are fundamentally similar to those of any other human being, we are also “developmentally open,” in Goldie’s (2000, 98) phrase: evolution and neurobiology leave ample room for changes that occur through exposure to the environment, and especially to culture. (61)

These changes he speaks about are products of the so-called, in neurobiology, “neuroplasticity”, which is the ability of the brain of constantly changing, thanks to external influences such as habits, learning and, of course, experience. Although there are limits to these changes, as we can see, the level of permeability is quite high. As Caracciolo concludes, “experience is open to—and can be penetrated by—socio-cultural practices, but it cannot be constructed all the way down, because it has a firm grounding in our bodily make-up, which in turn depends on our genome and on our evolutionary history” (62).
Going a little deeper in this analysis, what are the elements that constitute socio-cultural practices? We have talked about habits and experience, but a specification is to be made about values. Values are products of societies, due to evolution, place and time: if values for a society in the pre-historical era were survival, agricultural inventiveness and hunting ability, in the 18th century were more about scientific development and Enlightenment “products” – such as the value of individual freedom. Individual response to external inputs, as we have said also about the emotional level, is not just reactive, but also evaluative: we give meaning to what surrounds us, and these meanings are to us values. In Caracciolo’s words again, and to sum up this argument, “Indeed, values are whatever an organism places significance on, because of evolutionary and cultural predispositions” (63). They are related to emotions too, that developed over time since these predispositions changed. Now we can talk also about “non-basic emotions” (see also par. 1.3.4): distinguished from anger, fear, happiness, sadness, disgust and surprise, non-basic emotions are products of societies, and they are related to the values we spoke of. For instance, the idea of “spirituality” is not just an idea, it is a sentiment – both feeling and emotion – deeply felt for an individual; but if spirituality in men and women who lived 5000 years ago was related to the emotions felt facing a fire or a thunder, spirituality for contemporaries involves the idea of “god” from ancient times to Eastern philosophy to Western traditions, it is influenced by all of these and the more time passes, the less the idea gets simple. I’ll quote Caracciolo to make a reference on an attempt at mapping values in contemporary societies by Owen Flanagan in *The Really Hard Problem: Meaning in a Material World* (2007), which I find interesting in order to examine in depth this argument:
Drawing on Nelson Goodman’s classic *Ways of Worldmaking* (2001), Flanagan isolates what he calls a “Goodman sextet” comprising art, science, technology, ethics, politics, and spirituality. It is by tapping into these six conceptual spaces, Flanagan argues, that we can “make sense of things, orient our lives, find our way, and live meaningfully” (2007, 12). Each individual traces a highly complex—indeed, unique—trajectory through these spaces, as a result of both individual choices and group pressure. Flanagan views this process as a creative gesture, a “psycho-poetic performance that is made possible by our individual intersection, and that of fellow performers, with the relevant Space of Meaning” (2007, 14). (63)

This discourse on values and meanings is deeply connected with narratives; as products of their time, narrative texts convey values – being authors conscious or not – and, as each subject does with her/his environment, influence readers and are given meanings by them thanks to their interaction: “[...] experientiality depends on stories’ involvement in the larger experiential project of one’s life—on their being embedded in (rather than embedding) experience by recruiting the values that emerge from our structural coupling with the world” (Caracciolo 54).

Each individual is unique, and growing up in the same socio-cultural context obviously doesn’t mean to read narratives and have the same reading experience – as we already know, experientiality is constituted of different levels – but surely sharing the same socio-cultural framework results in similar responses from certain perspectives, for example, ideas on non-basic emotions (see previous page).

Reader-response and possible-world theorists have conceived the experiential background as the “cultural encyclopedia” (Eco 1979) or “repertoire” (Iser 1978) readers use to integrate textual information with extra-textual knowledge. But note that this “filling in the blanks” is not just a matter of conceptual knowledge; it involves being familiar with what is at stake in human experience, what it means to be in love, despondent, ill, what is desirable and what is
not, what people should and should not do in certain situations—the things children learn both through experience and through a constant exposure to culture. All stories arise from and are projected onto this background of experience, but each of them does it in a different way. (Caracciolo 64)

With these words Caracciolo sums up the relationship between narratives and the last level of the experiential background of our analysis. We now have to go deeper in facing the discourse on values from the perspective of societies interests.

The first one is surely the transmission of ethics and morality: since humans began to communicate, storytelling has been part of them and of their communities; stories have always been a tool to express themselves, and the necessity of having rules to live in communities manifested through this tool in different ways over time. Civilizations that hadn’t had the wheel have existed, but civilizations that don’t recount stories won’t ever exist. Ancient myths narrated that humans who sinned of hubris were punished by the gods; 18th-century German macabre fairy tales passed the idea that each disobedience, be it on a child’s part or on an adult’s, indistinctly, has terrible consequences; orphan tales pushed to have care and pity for those kids who had nothing, and highlighted their innocence too (often displaying their death): literature, and in particular popular literature, has always tried to present the necessities of societies, thus morality and ethics depended on place and time. It’s, again, about the socio-cultural framework.

Some particular sort of didacticism emerges from children’s literature: children are the future of societies, so they have to be educated; this, through the employment of different genres. One example of genre that has always been believed to be good for young audiences is the fairy tale, because of its typical flat characters who represents in general good and bad, the hero and the villain; but Nikolajeva points out:
Traditional fairy tales are a genre uncritically included in children’s literature although they were never originally intended for a young audience. It is claimed that fairy tales are suitable for children because they have explicit morals and a clear-cut distinction between good and evil, right and wrong. [...] The fairy-tale hero, with whom we are supposed to empathise, does not undertake right actions because he has high morals, but rather because the plot design demands such actions. He has no other choice than to act the way he acts. Since fairy tale heroes are usually flat, they act bravely but they are not necessarily presented as brave. Few of their actions may be judged as noble. They have a concrete goal, set by someone else. [...] (182)

She says that fairy tales were “never originally intended for a young audience”: clear-cut distinctions between “good” and “bad” are not a fine element of discrimination when it comes to decide what is literature for children, but it isn’t also to decide what is, more in general, educational. Although literature specifically intended for children’s education wasn’t born until around the Medieval Age37, when it developed, it did with a peculiar focus on moral intentions, and a problem with these intentions is, as in the fairy-tale case, and independently from the implied audience38, that a clear-cut distinction between good and bad sometimes is highly relative. Anyway, as far as the ethics of our case-study narratives is concerned, the discussion will be deepened in chapter 3.

When we talked about theory of mind, we recognized the importance of cognitive exercises: readers – in particular novice readers and children – need narratives that challenge their abilities, making them question ethical choices without giving a clear unquestionable answer. Of course, when it comes to younger audiences some models are requested, since

37 See more in Karen Coats’s *Bloomsbury Introduction to Children’s and Young Adults Literature*; in Chapter 1 she delineates the history of children’s and teenagers’ literature from the pre-historical era to contemporaneity.  
38 “Implied audience” refers to the group of readers that the writer imagined would receive the text when s/he wrote it. See more about audiences in Rabinowitz, “Truth in Fiction: A Reexamination of Audiences”, on *Critical Inquiry* (1977).
the permeability of the socio-cultural level of the experiential background is higher during this range of age; I agree with Coats when she writes about children’s and young adult’s necessity of positive representations:

Children are diverse in intelligence, temperament, experience, and interest, but are all capable of learning given the right approach, and all need positive representation in literature and other media in order to understand their embeddedness in human communities and to realize their full potential as individuals. Moreover, there is a time between childhood and adulthood that is distinctly different from either, and thus deserves its own attention as a stage of life. (*Bloomsbury Introduction to Children’s and Young Adults Literature* 35)

This doesn’t mean that didacticism *tout-court* is the best model to give good inputs for the socio-cultural framework; it means that good models of characters’ choices are useful in education.

Characters may display also contradictory traits in their characterization: this renders them – those described as heroes as well as those intended to be villains – more human, and empathy towards them is usually easier, since we can understand them better. This is an issue deeply analyzed by Keen, and also by Caracciolo[^39]; empathetic skills – thus, theory of mind – are enhanced thanks to this kind of characterization because judgement about characters is not so easy as it would be in stories where heroes act “right” and villains act “wrong”, perspective-taking on more characters is encouraged and our way of seeing the world may be deeply influenced by this cognitive exercise.

This doesn’t depend mostly on the genre; it depends more on narrative choices:

The vast majority of purely entertaining literature would seemingly lack ethical dimensions, even though it may carry some potential for them. Domestic adventures, especially in narratives with episodic plots, rarely involve serious ethical questions. There is little room for ethical issues in the innumerable books about children or cute anthropomorphic animals putting on their clothes, taking a bath or going to bed. Still, arguably, an innocent domestic adventure may involve obeying or disobeying rules, being fair or unfair towards other as well as doing or failing to do one’s duty. Most such stories feature reward or punishment accordingly; they may have two or more contrasting characters who act right or wrong. (Nikolajeva 180)

All kinds of stories have the potential to convey values, and the interaction between text and reader may give birth to a lot of different feedbacks. As written by Caracciolo,

[…] stories can have a feedback effect on interpreters’ experiential background at this level by inviting them to revise—in a more or less self-conscious way—their views and outlook on the world. Narrative can affect people not only imaginatively and emotionally, but also cognitively and culturally, providing, in Eileen John’s phrase, a “source of cognitive stimulation” (2005, 331).¹⁹ (67-68)

This “source of cognitive stimulation” may result in what John Gibson calls “literary humanism”, that is “the conviction, however imprecise and pre-theoretical, that works of literary fiction can illumine reality” (Fiction and the Weave of Life 13). That narrative can enhance our capabilities in real life is a debated argument, but recent research in neuroscience seems to confirm that the increase in cognitive skills given by literature includes also empathetic skills. I am not a neuroscientist, however, for the purpose of our analysis these premises are sufficient.
Let’s think about the themes in our contemporary times: differently from the era of the Western colonization, the rise of civil rights movements during the last century influenced literature, and now artistic production in this field includes gender, ethnicities, anti-conformist issues, and more. When, for instance, *The Cabin of Uncle Tom* by white female author Harriet Beecher Stowe came out in 1852, it was revolutionary and had a deep impact on its contemporary society; today, the discourse on race in literature displays a century of development – just see how the number of writers of different ethnicities, not just white authors who speak about other cultures, has increased.

Although my discourse concerns primarily written narratives, it must be specified that narratives in different medias are interested by these. The last decade has seen the flourishing of movies and TV series that pose serious questions about the ethics of Law, about female empowerment – see recent Netflix™ productions like *Glow* –, about race discrimination and affirmation of identity – from Blaxploitation movies of the Seventies like *Super Fly* (1972) to recent drama movies like *The Help* (2011) –, about violence and the now acceptable reaction against those who exercise it, and so on. Individuals evolve, societies evolve, and the way they face issues and tell ideas and stories evolve too; different genres help to convey different ideas, different modes speak to different people. However, it’s the interaction between the experiential background of individuals and the environment they live in that produces experiences, and this means enactivism is a *good* approach for literary criticism in general.

But is there any particular kind of text for which enactivism is the *best* approach for literary critique, in order to understand themes, narrative techniques, audiences’ preferences and so on? I will discuss this in the next chapters.
2. SERIAL YA SPECULATIVE FICTION

Books are part of the environment that surrounds and influences us, as they are products of people, responses to their necessities, tools of communication. It means that when we read a book we interact with it, we establish a bond: we interpret it in our own personal way, and we are influenced by it for different reasons and in many different ways. What is that influences us? What are the characteristics that help to establish bonds with narratives?

In this chapter I am going to talk about the origins and characteristics of serial young adult (henceforth YA) speculative fiction. We will explore the features of this production referring in particular to three case studies that have become highly popular during the last decade, and can arguably be considered representative for their categories: J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* saga, *The Mortal Instruments* esalogy from Cassandra Clare’s *Shadowhunters Chronicles* and *The Hunger Games* dystopian trilogy by Suzanne Collins. These works will be analyzed then according to an enactivist perspective. I would argue that this specific theoretical perspective may provide an explanation for their increasing diffusion – among both youths and adults – thanks to the focus on the interaction between text and reader, and also between readers and their contemporary environment. How do these interact in different ways with people of different ages? Through which narrative devices?

2.1 Cross-overs

Literary genres are not clear-cut categories: if the story tells about a magical realm where the hero dies in order to save the kingdom, will it be awarded as *tragedy* or as *fantasy*? If a story

---

40 See more in section 2.2, and, for more historical details, see Coats’s *Bloomsbury Introduction to Children’s and Young Adult Literature.*
is written in rhyme and narrates the adventures of a young boy travelling around the world, will it be better to award it as a poetry book or as adventure literature?

So, before starting with a closer analysis we have to make some distinctions. Our case-studies are usually considered cross-overs, as the majority of contemporary YA production: they are blends of different literary genres, books that feature recognizable structure-schemes, tropes and themes from different genres and subgenres. These blends are useful instruments to convey themes through different metaphors; we will see this employment of theirs in due time, for now, let us try and define how genres are blended in these narratives.

The *Harry Potter* saga – using Mendlesohn’s categories\(^{41}\) – is both *intrusion* and *portal-quest* fantasy. *Intrusion* refers to the introduction of fantastic elements in the real world, as it happens at the beginning of each book, for example the appearance of the owls to bring letters to Harry in *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* (1998) or the presence of the Knight Bus in London in *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* (1999); these books transmute into portal-quests when the protagonist enters another world and has to accomplish a task every time he goes back there: in Harry Potter’s case finding the monster of the Chamber of Secrets, facing the prisoner escaped from Azkaban and so on. The *Harry Potter* series is also structured as school-novel: one book narrates the protagonist’s adventure during the course of the school year.

Then, *The Mortal Instruments* esalogy may be defined as an *intrusion fantasy*, since it is set in the real world and magical elements can’t be seen by mundane\(^{42}\) people, and neither by the protagonist until she is introduced to the Shadow World by those who belong to it; another

---

\(^{41}\) Farah Mendlesohn distinguishes between different types of fantasy, that are the *portal-quest, immersive, intrusion* and *liminal* fantasy; each of them displaying different specific features for the same genre. See more in Mendlesohn’s *Rhetorics of Fantasy*, 2008.

\(^{42}\) Mundanes is the term used in Clare’s *Shadowhunters Chronicles* to refer to people that don’t know and can’t know about the Shadow World, that is to say, about magic, magical creatures and other dimensions.
subcategory for this genre is *urban fantasy*, due to the setting in contemporary New York, although in the third and sixth book the protagonists travel through portals and enter other worlds: here the story shifts to *portal fantasy*. It features also traits of gothic, like the presence of demons (even though they are more similar to monsters than to traditional religious demons) and of elements belonging to different religious traditions (angels, monsters, particular weapons etc.). The third story taken into analysis is a dystopia, and as such it can be seen as an *immersive* fantasy, since the invented world has rules of its own and we as readers share with the protagonists a set of assumptions about this world. As Mendlesohn specifies, “The immersive fantasy is that which is closest to science fiction; as such, it makes use of an irony of mimesis, which helps to explain why a sufficiently effective immersive fantasy may be indistinguishable from science fiction: once the fantastic becomes assumed, it acquires a scientific cohesion all of its own” (xx); it is mimesis, but not of our own reality.

2.2. YA and Speculative Fiction

2.2.1 What do we mean by YA?

YA refers to the literary production that features protagonists whose age is comprised between about 15 and 20\(^43\). This production is generally supposed to be also addressed to readers of that age – and opinions about the range may slightly shift; there are critics that consider YA books aimed at 12-year-old readers. But this supposition isn’t true, and as a matter of fact, many contemporary writers of this kind of stories claimed they had not this

\(^{43}\) In the last decade also the tag “New Adult” came out, referring to the range of age between around 21 and 26, featuring themes like youths’ life away from home, sex, drugs and characters that are starting to build their own life.
group of people in mind as their principal audience when they wrote their books; they were just writing their stories. Cassandra Clare, for example, writer of the *Shadowhunters Chronicles* (2007—still going on), answered the question “Why teen books?” with:

Why not teen books? More seriously, when I started out writing City of Bones, I didn’t think of it as young adult, just as a fantasy novel. The characters simply happened to be teenagers. At some point I was approached by a publisher who was interested in the book, but they wanted me to “age up the characters” and make them adults. I toyed with the idea for a while, but I knew it wouldn’t work. I wanted to tell a story about characters at that crucial life stage just between adolescence and adulthood, where your choices determine the kind of person you’re going to be rather than reflecting who you already are. (Cassandra Clare Official Website, section *My Bio*)

Moreover, also sales demonstrate that readers interested in this production are not mainly youths, in fact the majority of them are older than 18. For example, Valerie Peterson writes:

By some market estimates, nearly 70% of all YA titles are purchased by adults between the ages of 18 and 64. Of course, some of those are parents but, assuming that the majority of *actual* young adults are old enough to make and do make their own book purchases, a lot of "non-young adults" are reading those teen books. (“Young Adult and New Adult Book Markets”)

See also what Michael Cart writes on “From Insider to Outsider: The Evolution of Young Adult Literature” about this subject: “Suddenly [, from the 90s,] the traditional 12–18 range was no longer broad enough, for if “young adults” were getting younger, they were also getting older.

---

44 You can find it at www.cassandraclare.com.
45 Section: Book Publishing; www.thebalancecareers.com. 2018. You can find in this article, and in the following quoted, written by Cart, also more information on common features of YA and NA books. See also “What are YA books? And who is reading them?” on *The Guardian* by Imogen Russell Williams.
Since the mid-'90s, the upper parameter of “young adult” has been pushed beyond the traditional cutoff age of 18 and now includes readers as old as 25” (95). So, audience is a critical point talking about the definition of the term – and not the most important defining element of this production. Anyway, it does not matter for the sake of our analysis: we are going to see why in the following sections.

As far as typical features are concerned, the main characteristic of these books is the presence of protagonists that face difficulties and crises – related mostly to their growth, identity and ethical choices – and develop gradually. For instance, while Harry Potter starts his adventures as a wizard when he’s eleven, and grows up during the course of seven books (one for each year at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry), Clary Fray turns sixteen at the beginning of City of Bones, and we follow her development as Shadowhunter – mythical warrior with human and angelic blood – during the course of almost a year, but depicted in six books. One other common feature for YA books is the high emotional stakes; think about the constant tension of Katniss while she is in the Arena, when people get killed at any time; or the complicate relationship between herself and Peeta, that changes over the course of the three books. We will see later why and how these features engage readers of different ranges of age.

2.2.2 YA Literature: Origins

Firstly, we need to take a look at the origins of YA production. The first type of novel that has a lot in common with what we now call YA literature is the Bildungsroman, which features the growth and development of the protagonist, and her/his approach to personal maturity; it’s about the description of the internal process that leads an individual to become entirely
her/himself, through difficulties, struggles, experiences. It is a product of its time: during Enlightenment, education for youths and young adults was a priority, and the integration in society their final goal; during Romanticism the focus shifted to the interior development of the individual. Thus, literary classification developed as society developed: famous examples of books that belong to the European Bildungsroman tradition of the end of 18th and the 19th century are Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*46 (1795-96), Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847) or Dickens’s *David Copperfield* (1850), in which the protagonists have to face the battles of their youth against the background of the societies in which they live and grow up: these books end with the protagonists’ happy endings, which correspond – in their contemporaneity – to their successful integration in society and the achievement of their personal goals; meanwhile, in the American tradition we can find, to cite one of the most famous examples, Louise May Alcott’s *Little Women* (1860), the narration of four sisters’ lives during the Civil War, their first loves, their adolescence and growth.

As far as the origin of the term is concerned, “adolescence” comes from the Latin verb “adolescere”, which means to mature, to become established; as Coats specifies, “It didn’t come into popular vocabulary in reference to people, however, until the publication of American psychologist G. Stanley Hall’s two volume study called *Adolescence: Its Psychology and its relations to Physiology, Anthropology, Sociology, Sex, Crime, and Religion* in 1904” (30): it’s an interdisciplinary discourse, and it is worth mentioning for the analyses it presented, but also “engendered strong critique” (30).

As pointed out in the previous chapter47, literature has the power to influence readers and change something about them, like their comprehension of the world, points of view on deep

---

46 In English: *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship*.
47 See par. 1.3.6, p. 38-41.
issues, enhancing empathetic skills and theory of mind. I quote one of Coats’s meaningful passages on literature addressed to youths:

Contemporary literature for young people shares with [those] early texts the idea that memorable poetry, fantasy quest narratives, and melodramatic realism are useful vehicles for conveying the ideology of a culture to its readership. Whether we seek to save our children from a biblical hell or from the hells of climate change and social bigotry, we have never meant to simply entertain our children through their literature; we always wanted to make them better.” (21)

She uses the term “ideology”, which is quite the same concept of “socio-cultural scaffolding” (59) Caracciolo refers to: values, conventions, beliefs and so on. This is linked again with the didactic perspective mentioned before; but this analysis doesn’t include all the meanings that can be attributed to this literary tradition. The so-called Progressive Era, or post-industrial revolution period, saw the necessity of a growing attention to social problems due to the industrial and economic situation, the rejection of Social Darwinism, and the consequent development of social movements (see, for instance, the Suffragettes): progressivists saw in the protection of the individual’s rights the overcoming of a worse period, and providing a safe environment could address social problems like violence, racism, class warfare and so on. The individual reacts to the environment while the environment influences her/him and gives opportunities to change, and in this environment also ideas on education changed: boys and girls of the middle class during the beginning of the 20th century began to be educated differently, breaking the scheme of man/social sphere and woman/domestic sphere, according to which girls were educated by mothers at home and reached the social sphere just to be married to a man and start a family, as was costume until the Victorian Age. This is maybe the first moment of flourishing of YA literary production as we know it now, and it may
coincide with the developing of a “peer culture”: boys and girls went to school together, learn to live in a society with their peers, discovered new necessities to face concerning the definition of their identities, their role in society and in the world, their relationships with peers and with adults. The permeability of the last level of an individual’s experiential background – that of the socio-cultural practices – allows influences that let youths understand their possibilities and make choices for their future.

As Coats explains:

In the early days of the twentieth century, then, the relative optimism and faith in human progress that had characterized Western civilization since the European Enlightenment allowed for the development of a literature that allowed children to engage in unfettered imaginative play and encouraged adolescents to proceed confidently into the future. Oh, sure, there were social injustices to be addressed, but if one just had pluck, determination, and a group of hardy chums, one could entertain great expectations. (31)

During the 20th century, since studies on psychology and human behaviors, as well as a growing focus on the individual’s psychological dimension more than on her/his role in society developed, the Bildungsroman acquired a deeper psychological dimension; for instance, from *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) by James Joyce to J.D Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951) and Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road* (1957) four decades passed: the style and forms of writing clearly changed along with the development of societies. Modern YA classification – as we know it today – started around the 1950s-60s, and in particular it was marked by S. E. Hinton’s *The Outsiders* (1967), which features a darker side of adolescents that was missing in previous works; this is also the period when research on adolescence, due

48 It was published in serial form in 1945-6 and as a novel in 1951.
to the development of Western society, began to emerge. However, what does not change over time is that YA literature in general employs young characters in order to thematize their interior development using their actual biological growth, the period of discovery of themselves, the beginning of a process that won’t end until the end of life and the most turbulent stage of the same process, their understanding of the world they live in and their adaptation or reaction to life in their contemporary society. So, where feisty and intelligent Jo March fights to protect her family, to do something good for children’s education, and to become a writer, sensitive and emotional Holden Caulifield wanders around New York meeting people, reasoning about himself and growing up. And even when the genre changes, the focus on interior and exterior development remains: where Katniss Everdeen fights first to make her family survive and then to defeat an oppressive and violent government, Harry Potter grows up to be the one that defeats the most powerful and evil oppressor of his world, becoming a courageous and loving man.

2.2.3 YA genres and themes: speculative fiction from the 20th century to contemporaneity

The beginning of the 20th century marked the flourishing of YA literature: after the social development of this era, it came a period that put peace at stake; as Coats notes, literary production reflected this: “On the pages of children’s and adolescent literature, the empire was flourishing. New worlds were waiting to be discovered. Battles were glorious. Dragons were conquerable. Villains were easily thwarted. It truly did seem to be something of a golden age. And then came the world wars” (31). YA production after this period emphasizes struggles against “evil” and the research on youths’ part to find instruments not just to grow
up as better people, but also to change or save the world. Narrative affordances are genres like fantasy, which, with difficult quests and evil enemies, shows the possibility of fighting, choosing love rather than power or war – think of Dumbledore’s supreme teaching, which Harry Potter has learnt growing up and uses against Lord Voldemort in the final battle⁴⁹ –, or dystopias, which, through the advancement of technology and negative forms of governments in the future, display the necessity of taking a personal responsibility to resist and change the system – see for instance Katniss’s choice of not accepting any kind of dictatorship⁵⁰.

In more recent years, genres like fantasy and dystopia are often blended into slightly different forms, taking the shape of cross-overs – narratives featuring elements from different traditions – and, through the use of symbols and metaphors on reality that these blends allow, tend to convey meanings like the importance of individual choices, the power of love, the greatness of self-sacrifice, the necessity of equal rights for everyone to live in peace: responses to social necessities in a world that has seen two World Wars, globalization, affirmation of profit as a value, of terrorism based on people’s ignorance, and an increasing number of conflicts for supremacy, money, or powerful weapons.

Cross-overs are usually included under the umbrella term speculative fiction; it groups together genres of non-mimetic narrative fiction, and a lot of their hybrid subgenres – from fantasy, science fiction and horror, to dystopia, ghost stories, post-apocalyptic fiction, alternate history, fractured fairy tales, and so on. It includes, in its contemporary most accepted definition, narratives that depart from everyday “consensus reality”, and tries to convey a sense of wonder typical of fantastic stories: Harry Potter could have been the

protagonist of a school-novel series, but the presence of magic is fundamental to the story, both for the plot and the imaginative exercise the reader needs to do in order to get caught by the story. It must be said that speculative fiction is not defined by clear boundaries, but by its resemblance to archetypes, which take elements from different traditions: *The Mortal Instruments* esalogy includes angels and demons from different religious traditions, but the demons resemble more to fantastic monsters and must be defeated by the heroes, and the heroes have some of the characteristics of traditional fairy tales heroes like bravery, recklessness, aptitude to self-sacrifice, but also clear round personalities typical more of romances or *Bildungsroman* novels.

Around the 1940s, the term “speculative fiction” was first proposed as a subgenre of sci-fi, but then expanded, and now – in particular since the 2000s – it is used not just in the field of literature\(^{51}\), but for diverse forms of different narrative media. Indeed, speculative fiction has not been defined in a rigorous way, and it is this lack of taxonomic clarity\(^ {52}\) that accounts for why speculative fiction is still highly debated for not being much useful as a tool to categorize narrative texts, a procedure which usually involves a consideration of generic boundaries. Besides, this broadness explains why journals like *Mythlore, Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts, Studies in the Fantastic* and others usually don’t employ this term as a category, and also why, likewise, we can’t find entries on speculative fiction in most genre-focused encyclopedias and companions. However, an enactivist perspective is particularly convenient to analyze texts of YA speculative fiction since its multimodal features allow for a nuanced

---

\(^{51}\) See the attempts to define speculative fiction as a literary genre by writers like J. Merril (see, for instance, *SF: The Year's Greatest Science-Fiction and Fantasy* (1959) or M. Atwood [see, for instance the preface to *In Other Worlds* (2011)].

\(^{52}\) It is pointed out and explained in *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* (D’Ammassa, 2011).
analysis centered on the interaction between readers and texts gives different meanings to these narratives, and we are going to see how.

The elements the three YA speculative fiction case studies have in common – other than recurrent tropes of the genres and the presence of adolescent protagonists – are the use of powerful metaphors, which pave the way for a strong cognitive exercise and an easier reception of meanings and values; a highly emotional tone, which engages the reader on both the bodily-perceptual and emotional level; and a direct language with some colloquial expressions, which make the narration entertaining and usually speeds up its pace. Through these tools, they speak of individuality, society problems, personal choices and search for identity, and for this reason appeal to both adults and youths. They also stand as representatives for the principal subcategories of YA speculative fiction: a saga, a collection of chronicles and a dystopic trilogy.

The *Harry Potter* saga\(^{53}\) is composed of seven books, each of them narrating the adventures of the protagonists during one year of school, and smaller quests to accomplish before the greater and last one. “Saga” is a term that comes from Old Norse language, and it was used to indicate legends about famous families’ history and the origins of Norse gods and heroes; in modern Icelandic, the term means “story”, and in Swedish also “fairytales”; it has the same linguistic roots of the English word “say”. This word assumed a broader meaning over history, and today it describes a non-realistic or epic work of fiction, a collection of adventures of the same hero/heroes. It usually concludes with a final battle or quest which leads to solve the protagonists’ trouble, and maybe to their happy ending.

\(^{53}\) Other examples of famous sagas – as we intend the term “saga” today – are Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* (1954-55), including also its prequel *The Hobbit* (1937), or more contemporary works like Black’s and Clare’s *The Magisterium Series* (2014-2018) and Kerstin Gier’s *The Ruby Red Trilogy* [originally titled in German *Edelstein-Trilogie*, (2009-2010)].
The Mortal Instruments esalogy (2007-2014) is part of the Shadowhunters Chronicles; chronicles are usually composed of different shorter series, and in each series different protagonists belonging to the same world (real or alternate) have to accomplish quests or missions; their resolution won’t bring to the end of the stories about this world, but other characters will come and be protagonists of their own story. The Shadowhunters Chronicles comprehend also smaller series like The Infernal Devices (2010-2013), The Dark Artifices (2016-2018), The Last Hours, collections of short stories like The Bane Chronicles (2014), Tales from the Shadowhunters Academy (2016), Ghosts of the Shadow Market (in progress collection), and set of companion books like The Shadowhunters Codex (2013) and some graphic versions of the novels. The Hunger Games trilogy – which includes The Hunger Games (2008), Catching Fire (2009) and Mockingjay (2010) – is a dystopia: it is nearer to the genre of sci-fi rather than of fantasy, as there is no magic, magical creatures or fantastic worlds in it; there is a strong presence of advanced technology, but people suffer from hunger, poverty, government’s violence and oppression. The protagonist is usually an outsider who is able to see the problems of his/her society and his/her role is to finally escape or destroy the wrong social order. In classic dystopias, such as Orwell’s 1984 (1949), the protagonist isn’t always able to win; in contemporary YA novels s/he – usually, not always – does. The setting of The Hunger Games is the country of Panem, which is the evolution of the U.S. after wars that destroyed the planet and made governments reorganize countries, in a dystopian future. This

---

54 Other examples of non-mimetic fictional sets of chronicles are high-fantasy literary works like C. S. Lewis’s The Chronicles of Narnia, which collect seven novels, while contemporary works with this structure are Rick Riordan’s chronicles of the demigods, which include Percy Jackson and the Olympians (2007-2013), The Kane Chronicles (2012-2014), The Heroes of Olympus (2013-2015), Magnus Chase & the Gods of Asgard (2015-2017), The Trials of Apollo (2016-2019); or Licia Troisi’s Il Mondo Emerso (2004-2014).

55 The publication of the first book of The Last Hours trilogy is programmed for 2019, but the date is still to be announced.

56 Other examples of famous narratives belonging to this type are Roth’s Divergent series (2014-2016), Lauren Oliver’s Delirium series (2011-2013) or Dashner’s Maze Runner series (2009-2016).
kind of story usually makes the reader reflect upon political oppression, rebellion, the power of authority and the necessity to think about the future.

Notice that neither all the texts of this kind of production today are necessarily a success of critique, nor particularly well-written: they are mass-consumed, a huge part of this production is made mainly to be sold, outcome of an industry-driven desire of increasing profits. They often present deeply exploited patterns, such as love triangles or a “beauty-and-the-beast” central relationship, and sometimes they clearly draw on precedent works (for instance, connections between The Hunger Games trilogy and Takami’s Battle Royale57 (1999) are quite evident); and it cannot be forgotten that the movie industry that draws inspiration on – and buys out copyrights of – these stories is making a lot of money too (franchises, as they are known, constitute a modern trend not just in YA literary production, just think about Marvel’s or DC’s comic books and movies).

How can this kind of production convey values on different layers? How is the reader capable to recognize its potential?

2.3 Narrative Situation: Eliciting an Emotional Bond Between Text and Reader

2.3.1 Recurrent Tropes and Structures

Recurrent features are typical of genre literature; they characterize narratives and are linked to genre expectations on the audience’s part: readers choose serial speculative fiction mainly to be entertained by the story and because they expect to read about great adventures. Other than entertainment, then, a deeper engagement develops thanks to an action-oriented plot,

a highly-emotional style of writing, and seriality, since readers’ curiosity make them want to know how the story ends; we start our analysis from plot and structure.

One of the main elements of these stories, largely exploited in the fantasy tradition, is the *quest*: the hero usually has to accomplish a task because the story needs her/him to do it, or s/he wouldn’t be the hero. This aspect has evolved over time: in traditional fairy tales and mythological or legendary narratives, the hero does what s/he has to do and her/his decisions are right, there’s no questioning about them; s/he has strong values – that the audience shares – and acts accordingly. In contemporary serial YA speculative fiction, characters – and in particular protagonists – are more roundly described: they evolve during the story, and this happens mainly because they are adolescents, have quite a deep psychological characterization, are flawed and make mistakes – in this they’re more similar to *Bildungsroman*’s protagonists than to fantasy tales’ ones. While legendary brave heroes like, for instance, Lugh of the Long Arm – who belonged to the ancient Irish tradition and was celebrated as a god\(^58\) – or Arthur – who became king and leader of the Knights of the Round Table, leading the defense of Britain against the Saxons, and was celebrated as the main character of the *Matter of Britain*\(^59\) – were skilled cavaliers whose role in society was to protect their people, Katniss Everdeen spends her days in the Arena trying neither to get killed nor to kill, and she’s there because she wanted to avoid that her sister had go there; Clary Fray begins her adventure to find and save her disappeared mother, and Harry Potter faces his adventures to stay with his friends and live in a castle he considers his new home, Hogwarts. These characters aren’t much heroic at the beginning of their stories, and their first quests are more something that happen to them than a burden they consciously choose out of

\(^{58}\) Irish mythology and fairy-tale tradition; see more in myths’ and tales’ collections, such as P. B. Ellis’s *The Mammoth Book of Celtic Myths and Legends* (2008).

\(^{59}\) The *Matter of Britain* is the legendary collection of stories about Medieval Britain (around 10th-13th century).
courageousness and for glory. Notice that it isn’t unusual that readers sometimes come to hate protagonists of this kind of stories, as they may show adolescent personality traits readers don’t like, or act annoyingly according to them (for instance, Katniss doesn’t know how to behave with people, both her and Harry are usually quick to anger, and Clary too often acts without thinking). It is through experience that they learn values, and with them the reader learns too; their true heroic quality all along is just acting for love. They will grow up and face quests imposed on them in order to save the world from evil or injustice, choosing these battles. If the romance mode is still evidently present in previous non-mimetic fictional works like *The Lord of the Rings* – where, for instance, Aragorn, legitimate king of the Reunited Kingdom\(^60\), displays the qualities of a traditional hero, such as courageousness, practical and strategical skills, unquestionable loyalty and chivalry, and seems to be flawless –, in these works the romance is more and more evident as we get closer to the end, after the characters have followed a path of development and performed actions of a higher level of morality and metaphorical meaning – see for example Harry’s voluntary sacrifice or Snape’s death in *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*. This kind of development usually helps to enhance readers’ T.o.M. and their ability to empathize with characters or at least engage with narratives at a deep level, since readers get to know characters similar to themselves\(^61\); it also makes them question the righteousness of specific choices and values conveyed by these story – but we will deepen this argument later.

Quests are typical of action-oriented plots – as they provide narratives with practical difficulties, struggles, clues to follow also by the reader – and prompt readers’ curiosity to

\(^60\) See J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Return of the King* (1955).

proceed in reading the story to find out how it will finish – hardly surprising, with some kind of happy ending. Harry Potter’s first quest is that for the Philosopher’s Stone, from which the Elixir of Life is produced, a potion that extends life every time it is drunk; it’s not Harry’s task – nor his friends’ Ron and Hermione – to find it or protect it: they do research on their own, they get involved in the adventure, and they find it. The challenge is structured as any typical quest: it starts from the protagonist’s learning about facts and mysteries that will lead him/her to get involved in an adventure and concludes with the protagonist’s success thanks to his acting out of generosity; Harry doesn’t want the magical object for his personal advantage, the villain – the evil Voldemort – wants it, and so he can’t have it. The protagonist risks his life at the end of the first episode of the story, but it’s nothing compared to much more dangerous and important following events, in which risks become higher and higher.

The quest is also one of the means that help to convey the value of the story, describing the way characters act: the protagonists don’t want to kill people, at most they fight to survive. Indeed, it is through quests – and since the very beginning – that the opposition between “good” and “bad” is established: each year Harry comes back and demonstrates his being on the “good” side by facing the challenges he finds on his path against the violent, power-thirsty, xenophobe, selfish “bad” side. And if the first years at Hogwarts are adventures for kids, who risk their lives because of recklessness and impulsiveness – behaviors that readers can easily understand or identify with, either because of their own age or because they have experienced that period of life before –, adventures that kids can read about and enjoy for the taste of entertainment, from a certain point on the situation changes: the protagonists gradually acquire a new conscience which helps them to stand up against injustice and take up the burden of bigger quests, in which they risk their
lives voluntarily and in order to serve a “superior good”, which is safety for humanity and for the lives of the people they love.

In *The Mortal Instruments* the situation is slightly different due to the age of the protagonists at the beginning of the story (around 16), but the structure doesn’t change: at a turning point, Clary takes up consciously and voluntarily her role, and the catalyzer in the plot is a quite traumatic event – and the same is true for Harry. The first three books of the esalogy establish the situation: they let the reader understand this world and the relationships among characters, their personalities. Then, at the end of the third book, there is the turning point: Clary creates a rune\(^\text{62}\) – which grants more strength and resistance to couples of warriors composed of a Shadowhunter and a Downworlder, in order to defeat Valentine’s army of monsters – and in doing this she chooses her role in the war. She also sees death – her love Jace’s (even though it’s temporary\(^\text{63}\)), his little brother Max’s, his old mentor Hodge’s, and at the end also her evil father’s, Valentine. Valentine sacrifices Jace – raised by Valentine as his own son – on an altar in order to conjure the Angel Raziel, the one who created the first Shadowhunter, to have a wish granted: he wants to “clean” the world from the presence of the Downworlders\(^\text{64}\) and guide – as an ambitious and visionary Nazi dictator – Shadowhunters as protectors of the Earth against “not-pure” beings. The Angel sets him on fire, since his desire is not “pure”, so then Clary manages to express the wish the Angel has to satisfy and brings Jace back from the dead.

Also while reading the *Harry Potter* saga, the reader faces a turning point after half the whole story: at the end of *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, the fourth book, Harry – who

---

\(^{62}\) Different angelic runes confer different skills to trained Shadowhunters; Clary creates runes, a skill that no other Shadowhunter has, and this new one is called Alliance, since it bonds people of different species, the kind of bond Valentine seeks to destroy.

\(^{63}\) Jace will be resurrected by Angel Raziel; see resurrection as a metaphor in fantasy in section 3.1.

\(^{64}\) See chapter 3, section 3.3.
is fourteen – faces the last task of the Triwizard Tournament in an enchanted maze, and he and his schoolmate Cedric Diggory reach a cemetery through the Portkey\textsuperscript{65} Cup that should have let them win the Tournament; but the Cup is cursed, and brings them to a cemetery where the Death Eaters\textsuperscript{66} are awaiting for Harry, in order to take his blood and do a ritual that brings Lord Voldemort – reduced to pieces of himself for fourteen years – back in his body. Here, Lord Voldemort kills Cedric; he wants to kill Harry too, but due to a strange reaction of their connected magical wands a peculiar spell is cast, Harry sees the souls of his parents talking to him, giving him courage and protection, and manages to escape through the same Portkey, bringing back to Hogwarts also Cedric’s body. This event makes Harry think about deep truths and feel new emotions: he’s connected to the villain not for his own choice, but begins to understand he will have to face his destiny and choose his role in the story. Meanwhile, readers see Harry’s parents’ at his side, to guarantee him protection: this underlines which is the real power, superior to all kinds of magic: love\textsuperscript{67}. If the first quests provide mystery and adventure for the narrative – the search for the Philosopher’s Stone and for the monster of the Chamber of Secrets, and Sirius Black’s rescue –, the following ones will be constructed in order to build up a crescent tension that leads toward the final quest: in \textit{Harry Potter and the Order of Phoenix} Harry and his friends will look for the prophecy that connects Harry to Voldemort to find it before the Death Eaters, and then there is the search for the Horcruxes (objects filled with parts of Voldemort’s split soul), in order to destroy them, and for the Deathly Hallows, that lead to the final battle.

The structure of these narratives is always pretty much the same: they start from a situation in which the protagonist doesn’t know about the world s/he belongs to; s/he comes

\textsuperscript{65} Objects enchanted in order to teleport from a place to another.
\textsuperscript{66} The followers of Lord Voldemort.
\textsuperscript{67} See the discussion on ethics in 3.3.
to know about it thanks to magical expedients and characters belonging to that world too (in Harry’s case Hogwarts letters and the half-giant Hagrid, in Clary’s mysterious symbols, peculiar creatures like little faeries, and her future boyfriend Jace); then s/he becomes part of this new reality and also covers the role of the Chosen one for the rest of the story – which is built on new sets of troubles or riddles they have to solve in order to fight the last battle. This role is another classic trope in fantasy: the difference with the Chosen ones of the earlier traditions is that these future heroes are initially reluctant to cover this position, they think they are normal people, they question their actions and their values, sometimes they are annoying, and they become conscious of their situation and role during the course of the story. In a nutshell, they are more human.

The case of The Hunger Games trilogy needs some specification: as it belongs in the dystopic genre it presents different narrative tropes: there is no magic to help and build the plot, there is advanced technology instead; there is no alternative world to be discovered – although the protagonist enters the Arena, which can be seen as a space distant from the initial reality; but both the structures of the quest and of the whole story remain, since the protagonist has a task to complete, which she didn’t choose, and comes back for other tasks, accepting her role becoming gradually conscious of what this means, and usually narrowly escaping death. Anyway, after the final battle, these protagonists don’t stop fighting; they choose to be the people they’ve grown up to be: Harry becomes an Auror, a wizard whose job is to protect the magical and muggle communities from large-scale threats (such as other bad dangerous wizards), Clary remains a Shadowhunter with her group of friends, and Katniss, who clearly won’t remain a Tribute, will fight with her nightmares about her past for all her life, and teach her children what she experienced. They learn who they are from their experiences and go on with their lives, as the reader does.
This kind of structure is called *episodic*, since there are smaller adventures that contribute to build the whole story, and at the beginning of each episode the protagonists return; *climactic*, as episodes that stand by themselves as shorter stories are added in order to reach a climax – corresponding usually to a final battle – and *cumulative*, which means new characters and problems are added gradually in order to reach the climax. However, regardless the number of books that composes the series and the way they are linked together (in series as chronicles, as a saga etc.), readers meet a turning point: from this point on, things get more complicated and the message conveyed by the story becomes more intense. This development is reflected both in the style of writing and in the adventures faced by protagonists. In *Harry Potter* and *The Mortal Instruments* this event is death\textsuperscript{68}, a difficult concept to deal with not just for youths but for everyone, the idea of loss, something that can’t be recovered, no matter the alternative world we are talking about; in *The Hunger Games*, death can be considered a recurrent element since the very beginning – in this, using Mendlesohn’s vocabulary, “ironically mimetic” world – and a fundamental part of the system that has to be dismantled eventually, so the turning point is marked by another kind of event: the destruction of the Arena, hellish symbol of everything that is wrong in Panem’s government, which marks the real beginning of the revolution (Collins, *Catching Fire*, 2009).

Recurrent features in this kind of stories are also some of the protagonists’ characteristics: Harry, Clary and Katniss have in common bravery, recklessness, a certain amount of smartness and, as already specified, they spontaneously act out of love. This is functional not only for the message conveyed, but also for the construction of the plot: recklessness usually leads these protagonists to their adventures. Their loving trait is

\textsuperscript{68} See also a discussion on its metaphorical meaning in section 3.2.
important to connect them with their families: they may not be conscious about the problems of their world, but they have been protected and deeply loved by their parents (both or one of them) and this is what gives them the strength – along with what they experience in life with friends – to become heroes. Classic fairy tales usually start from a difficult situation, which sets the development of following actions – Propp titles this first common stage of difficulty in fairy tales “One Of The Members Of A Family Absents Himself From Home” 69 –; Harry is a lonely orphan, and his parents died for him; Clary lives with a single mother, who sacrificed her life among the Shadowhunters in order to save her daughter from her evil husband; Katniss loses her father when she is a child and grows up with a depressed mother and a little sister, and it’s her the one who hunts in order to bring food to her family. It is not that far from Cinderella’s life in the step-mother house. All these situations of difficulty evolve in more complicated adventures before getting to a positive resolution in the end – different from usual “happily ever after” resolutions of the classic tradition; and the event that sets the action, here, is usually a genuine act of love: Clary joins the Shadowhunters to find Jocelyn, her disappeared mother, Katniss volunteers as a Tribute to take her sister’s place and save her from certain death in the Arena, and Harry – who is younger at the beginning of his story – has been saved from Voldemort by his parents’ sacrifice, which guarantees him protection at his uncle and aunt’s for years, and when turns older begins to risk his life each year for the people he loves. These, at the beginning, are all quests – even though not the classic “find-the-treasure”/“find-the-princess” quests. Besides, all along, the protagonists find hints to know something more about their past or to complete their tasks: as it happens in detective stories, the reader is interested in encountering the next clue and gathering all the pieces that

compose the puzzle of the story, and this pushes her/him to go on with the next chapter or the next book; it means the quest is kind of a task for the reader too, as s/he usually follows the events along with the protagonist\(^\text{70}\). As we were saying, Clary enters the Shadowhunters’ world to find her disappeared mother, and she begins to follow hints to find her: this will lead her to look for the Mortal Instruments, objects needed to summon Angel Raziel – the Sword, the Cup, that her mother mysteriously hid somewhere, and the Mirror, which has been lost for so long that its existence is questioned – before Valentine finds them. The reader follows the same path of the protagonist, so s/he makes hypotheses about where the Cup could be, what the Mirror actually is, where to find it, etc.; and, in the second trilogy that composes the esalogy, her/his guess will be about what is the plan of Sebastian, Clary’s brother, who will be the protagonist’s second evil counterpart. There are two details worth highlighting: the first is the protagonist’s evil counterpart, since binary structures are a recurrent feature in this kind of narrative (that will be discussed in 3.2); the second detail concerns the presence of magical objects/helping devices. We have named the Mortal Instruments, but other triads are important to the development of stories. For instance, the Wand, the Stone and the Cloak – the Deathly Hallows – gain to their owner the title of Master of Death: Harry Potter will gather the objects but won’t care about having them, unlike his nemesis Voldemort, who wants the Wand to be undefeatable; and Clary will take her father’s place as master of the circle to summon Angel Raziel who grants the master a wish, but she won’t care about changing the world’s nature and order. In the Arena, Tributes gain helps through sponsors – easy for those who come from a higher District\(^\text{71}\) – in order to defend themselves and defeat the other Tributes, but Katniss doesn’t want to kill others, she is focused on who is the real enemy: the

\(^{70}\) Points of view and narrators will be discussed in the next section.

\(^{71}\) Districts are the regions of Panem; the higher the district (1 and 2 in particular), the higher the possibility of victory, as they are the richest and most powerful people of all the country.
government. Magical objects and helping devices in this kind of stories convey the ideas of generosity and altruism of the protagonists, as opposed to materialism and greed typical of the so-called “evil side”. Another common and recurrent motif, linked to magical objects, is number three; it has always played an important part in history, namely the presence of the divine, from the Egyptian triad of gods Osiris, Isis and Horus, to the Greek trinity of Zeus, Poseidon and Hades, to the Holy Trinity of Christianity. As such, number three in these narratives distinguishes different characteristics associated with the divine: power – interest of the villain – is less important than other aspects of the same entity, like love and doing something good for others, values that a person acquires and which are not intrinsic to objects – magical or not.

It must be said that, even though all these recurrent motifs and structures are fundamental in order to build up a recognizable pattern and, in this way, to make of these narratives an appropriate choice for readers who look for entertainment, there is more to these stories than structure. We could go on discussing about recurrent tropes, such as love triangles, types of plots like Rags-to-Riches or Mystery or Quests, chronotopes\(^\text{72}\), characters’ struggles – internal or external – and so on, but it wouldn’t be enough to understand why serial YA speculative fiction engages both YA and adults, no matter the protagonists’ age. During the last decade, all kinds of literary approaches have been applied to these narratives in order to explain their meanings and how they work: for instance, feminism is a good approach for these books’ critique because main female characters are all makers of their own destiny and don’t wait for a cavalier to save them – Hermione Granger saved Harry’s and Ron’s lives at least once for each book of the series, and Katniss develops more attitude to

\(^{72}\) Chronotopes are fundamental to the comprehension of any story, since it is product of its environment and bounded to its time and place of production. See more in Coats, p. 264-265.
fight, less compassion, less softness – commonly known as masculine traits – than her male counterpart Peeta. Didacticism evidences moral lessons to youths – based on the unquestionability of the value of love rather than on punishment and reward, like old didactic fairy tales or Victorian novels – and the necessity of learning social values, values that also a Marxist/socialist critique would consider (from the outcomes of Clary’s constant impulse to put her life in danger for everyone she loves, to little acts of kindness and friendship, to greater symbolic discussions on social issues); also religious or mystic approaches are good for this kind of stories because of the employment of tropes like resurrection, summoning, rituals, binary oppositions and so on. An enactivist perspective takes into consideration all these aspects together, from structures, to themes, and focuses in particular on the relationship between text and reader. All the elements we’ve talked about contribute to the construction of narratives that follow the same development of readers’ real experiences: they grow up learning values, looking for their own identity, making their own choices. Structures, in this kind of stories, usually thematize experience itself; they are built on different levels, they start from experience and proceed with processing, understanding and progressing. You start from a point where you don’t know much about your abilities, your place in the world, what drives you to your goals, and finish with more than representations of factual happy endings: these narratives finish with hope. It is a kind of mental progression, which the reader experiences enacting another consciousness. We proceed in this analysis in order to see how enacting a fictional consciousness and reading metaphors is engaging at more levels of the Background, and also an exciting and useful cognitive exercise.
2.3.2 Narrative Techniques

Narrative techniques engage primarily the level of higher-order cognitive functions, as readers’ understanding of texts depends mainly on their cognitive abilities, and, in particular, on T.o.M.\textsuperscript{73} to understand shifts on viewpoints, meanings underlying metaphors and symbols, and unexpressed feelings and goals conveyed more by characters’ actions than by their words or thoughts. This level is also inevitably linked to the emotional and bodily-perceptual ones, as cognitive abilities are developed thanks to readers’ having a body and feeling sensations and emotions. We are now going to take an overview of the principal narrative techniques employed in our case studies, in order to deepen the discussion on the emotional layer later. First of all, let’s focus on the use of perspective and narrative mode.

As far as perspective is concerned, it’s a commonplace – still debated among narratologists, and also neurologists and cognitive philosophers\textsuperscript{74} – that the use of an internal perspective seems to increase the reader’s empathic concern and emotional engagement, as s/he feels closer to characters by knowing their thoughts and feeling their emotions; besides, in this way, readers are encouraged to hope for the best for the protagonists as their bond gets deeper during the course of the series, despite the characters’ flaws or mistakes. We will try and provide evidence for how this kind of perspective increases the emotional closeness and thus strengthen the influence these narratives have on readers\textsuperscript{75}.

The internal perspective may be achieved through the 1\textsuperscript{st} person narration – and this is the case of Collins’s The Hunger Games trilogy – in which readers, for this reason, are

\textsuperscript{73} See section 1.4.

\textsuperscript{74} An interesting study on this matter, which includes also an analysis on narrators’ reliability, has been developed by Caracciolo and some colleagues; see Lissa, Caspar J. Van / Caracciolo, Marco et al. “Difficult Empathy. The Effect of Narrative Perspective on Readers’ Engagement with a First-person Narrator.”, DIEGESIS, 2016. See also in section 2.

\textsuperscript{75} See more in 3.2, 3.3.
provided only with Katniss’s point of view – or through the figural situation in 3rd person narration, “in which the 3rd person narrator stays covert and reports only on a single, focal center of consciousness located in a main character” (Keen, “A Theory of Narrative Empathy”, 219) – and this is the technique employed by Clare in The Mortal Instruments, in which focalizers are mainly Clary, Simon and Jace. Rowling uses mainly figural situation from Harry’s point of view, but we can find, sometimes, flashes from an omniscient authorial point of view – for instance, Dumbledore’s arrival in Privet Drive in “The Boy Who Lived”, first chapter of Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone, or the meeting between Snape, Narcissa and Bellatrix in the chapter “ Spinner’s End” in Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince – and also a figural situation from the Prime Minister’s viewpoint in “The Other Minister”, again from Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince.

Take a look at the initial description of two of our protagonists in the first volumes of their series:

[...] Harry had always been small and skinny for his age. He looked even smaller and skinnier than he really was because all he had to wear were old clothes of Dudley's, and Dudley was about four times bigger than he was. Harry had a thin face, knobbly knees, black hair, and bright green eyes. He wore round glasses held together with a lot of Scotch tape because of all the times Dudley had punched him on the nose. The only thing Harry liked about his own appearance was a very thin scar on his forehead that was shaped like a bolt of lightning. (Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone, 14)

People always told Clary that she looked like her mother, but she couldn’t see it herself. The only thing that was similar about them was their figures: they were both slender, with small chests and narrow hips. She knew she wasn’t beautiful like her mother was. To be beautiful you had to be willowy and tall. When you were as short as Clary was, just over five feet, you
were cute. Not pretty or beautiful, but cute. Throw in carroty hair and a face full of freckles, and she was a Raggedy Ann to her mother’s Barbie doll. (*City of Bones*, 50)\(^76\)

Harry’s and Clary’s descriptions feature a lot of adjectives that make readers picture in their mind colors and shapes; but what is more relevant than precise adjectives is the way characters are focalized. The difference between the two is given by the narrator’s audibility: the narrative voice that tells Harry’s story is more overt, which means we distinguish the narrative voice from Harry because of the narrator’s vocabulary and detachment from Harry’s perspective. There are no words that make us reflect on Harry’s perspective on himself, such as evaluations, opinions, feelings. While the narrator of Clary’s story is more covert, that is to say, we have the impression to be nearer to Clary because what we read reflects more closely her point of view\(^77\). Anyway, both the characters are described in comparison with another person – Harry with his fat cousin Dudley, which highlights how skinny and small he is; Clary with her beautiful mother, which evidences her not feeling beautiful rather than her objectively not being beautiful (we infer that, as a matter of fact, they resemble each other a lot). In Harry’s description, it is specified he gets punched a lot on the nose; is it important, rather than to picture a clear and objective image of him, to make readers see him also through his living condition – bullied and with no other choice for a home –, so they engage with his point of view, and start to establish a bond with him. The same is true for Clary, since her features resemble those of her mother, but the emphasis is more on her being shorter and feeling like “a Raggedy Ann to her mother’s Barbie doll”. From the very beginning we enter these characters’ viewpoint, and their subsequent actions make the reader usually trust

---

\(^76\) Henceforth, in quoting *City of Bones*, I will refer to the 10\(^{th}\) year edition of the book (2017).

\(^77\) An external narrator is defined as heterodiegetic, as s/he isn’t a character that belong to the storyworld, even though presents a character’s perspective. See more on this in Cohn’s *Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction*.
their point of view as they evoke a sort of authenticity, acting often without thinking about consequences, and almost always – see Clary’s decision to save Simon from a hotel full of vampires or Katniss’s volunteering to save her sister – out of love, or genuine generosity, or chivalry. If we take into consideration the effect that the actions performed by these characters have on readers, we witness the entanglement of the sociocultural level of the reader’s Background with the emotional one: readers feel they can trust these characters because they don’t give proof of being untrustworthy or morally ambivalent, and act according to universally acknowledged positive values – friendship, love, kindness, spontaneity – so they are easily driven to develop a bond with them.

We have discussed the initial situations of these stories: also difficulties are known to be an incentive for readers to get attached to protagonists; see this passage at the beginning of *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone*:

> Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley’s gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley’s favorite sport: Harry Hunting. (23)

Harry is bullied, his cousin is mean to him and his friends too, thus the reader – a human being who knows (or should know) what compassion is – is pushed to root for Harry.

See also the quoted passage on Clary’s argument with her mother on coming home late and spending the holidays away from home and without friends – here empathy towards Clary is elicited, as perspective-taking is easy: all readers can relate to the situation. Maybe they don’t like the character, but they know what it feels like to discuss with parents – or with sons and daughters:
“Is this about last night?” Clary asked. “No,” her mother said quickly, and then hesitated. “Maybe a little. You shouldn’t have done what you did last night. You know better.” “And I already apologized. What is this about? If you’re grounding me, get it over with.” “I’m not,” said her mother, “grounding you.” Her voice was as taut as a wire. She glanced at Luke, who shook his head. “Just tell her, Jocelyn,” he said. “Could you not talk about me like I’m not here?” Clary said angrily. “And what do you mean, ‘tell me’? Tell me what?” Jocelyn expelled a sigh. “We’re going on vacation.” Luke’s expression went blank, like a canvas wiped clean of paint. Clary shook her head. “For how long?” “For the rest of the summer,” said Jocelyn. “I brought the boxes in case you want to pack up any books, painting supplies—” “For the rest of the summer?” Clary sat upright with indignation. “I can’t do that, Mom. I have plans— [...]” [...] “Look, go if you want to go. I don’t care. I’ll stay here without you. I can work; I can get a job at Starbucks or something. Simon said they’re always hiring. I’m old enough to take care of myself—” “No!” The sharpness in Jocelyn’s voice made Clary jump. “I’ll pay you back for the art classes, Clary. But you are coming with us. It isn’t optional. You’re too young to stay here on your own. Something could happen.” “Like what? What could happen?” Clary demanded. There was a crash. (City of Bones, 42-44)

Quick dialogues, immediate comebacks, verbs that relate to the emotional sphere of anger and resentment (“Her voice was taut as wire”, “Could you not talk about me like I’m not here?”, “angrily”, “sharpness in her voice”, etc.) elicit readers’ impression of “being there”, of immediacy. Besides, with this kind of everyday-life scenes, they relate fictional events to their personal experience by making sense of fiction.

The second principal narrative technique we need to evidence is narrative discourse. The techniques for rendering consciousness are generally called quoted monologue (the direct quotation of a character’s discourse), psycho-narration (the description of a character’s mental discourse made by the narrator), and free indirect discourse, that Dorrit Cohn defines as narrated monologue – she explains it as “[...] the technique for rendering a character’s thoughts in his own idiom while maintaining the third-person reference and the basic tense
of narration” (494). A lot of theorists have agreed upon the fact that narrated monologue has strong effects on readers’ empathic involvement, as they follow directly the mental and sentimental development of the character from a closer perspective without putting too much of a mental effort in the process; but we also know that T.o.M. allows us to understand characters’ choices, feelings, thoughts, by their actions, not just by the description of their mental states. Therefore, both quoted monologue – united with an action-oriented style – and narrated monologue can be functional to readers’ engagement with the text. Clare’s style, for instance, features a lot of dialogic scenes (quoted monologues) from the very beginning; this usually lets the reader see the situation filtered not just through the eyes of focalizers, but also through other characters’: their words may not let show through all their real thoughts and feelings, but their actions and their behaviors may serve to this. We are going to see some examples of these narrative choices.

The following scene is taken from City of Bones, the first book; Clary is discussing with her best friend Simon about him not having a girlfriend, after a girl asked her if he was single:

“Anyway, about that girl who thinks you’re cute—” “Never mind that for a second,” Simon said. Clary blinked at him in surprise. “There’s something I wanted to talk to you about.” “Furious Mole is not a good name for a band,” Clary said immediately. “Not that,” Simon said. “It’s about what we were talking about before. About me not having a girlfriend.” “Oh,” Clary lifted one shoulder in a shrug. “Oh, I don’t know. Ask Jaida Jones out,” she suggested, naming one of the few girls at St. Xavier’s she actually liked. “She’s nice, and she likes you.” “I don’t want to ask Jaida Jones out.” “Why not?” Clary found herself seized with a sudden, unspecific resentment. “You don’t like smart girls? Still seeking a rockin’ bod?” “Neither,” said Simon.

---

[78] Narrated monologue holds a mid-position between quoted monologue and psycho-narration, and Cohn explains the demarcation in this way: “tense and person separate [narrated monologue] from quoted monologue [...]; the absence of mental verbs (and the resulting grammatical independence) separates it from psycho-narration” (Cohn, 495). It must be also specified that sometimes the line of demarcation between one mode of representing consciousness and another is more blurred; they are more like tools of analysis than precise boundaries of classification.
who seemed agitated. “I don’t want to ask her out because it wouldn’t really be fair to her if I did....” He trailed off. Clary leaned forward. From the corner of her eye she could see the blond girl leaning forward too, plainly eavesdropping. “Why not?” “Because I like someone else,” Simon said. “Okay.” Simon looked faintly greenish, the way he had once when he’d broken his ankle playing soccer in the park and had had to limp home on it. She wondered what on earth about liking someone could possibly have him wound up to such a pitch of anxiety. “You’re not gay, are you?” Simon’s greenish color deepened. “If I were, I would dress better.” “So, who is it, then?” Clary asked. She was about to add that if he were in love with Sheila Barbarino, Eric would kick his ass, when she heard someone cough loudly behind her. It was a derisive sort of cough, the kind of noise someone might make who was trying not to laugh out loud. She turned around. (56)

This scene features mostly conversation; it takes not much effort to understand Simon is trying to say to Clary that he likes her, even if it isn’t specified out loud and we follow the scene from Clary’s viewpoint. The description of their attitudes is quite clear; Clary sees Simon having a “a faintly greenish” look, an indecisive way of talking, she sees him introducing discourses with expressions like “There’s something I wanted to talk to you about.” – and readers easily understand what he means, as it’s a common expression to say something difficult, and have a lot of clues to see it. Clary, on the other hand, acts like she cares about whom he could like, but without a clue of something that the reader is likely to have understood before her. Then the scene is interrupted by “a derisive cough”, a third party – Jace, Clary’s future boyfriend – who has been an observer like us readers, but highlights to us what is happening; if we don’t get it through Clary’s viewpoint, we get it from Jace’s.

Another situation like this is the moment when Simon finds Clary kissing Jace at night in the Shadowhunters Institute, where they are guested:

“Where are you going?” she asked. “Home. I’ve been here too long, I think. Mundanes like me don’t belong in a place like this.” She sighed. “Look, I’m sorry, okay? I wasn’t intending to
kiss him; it just happened. I know you don’t like him.” “No,” Simon said even more hastily. “I don’t like at soda. I don’t like crappy boy band pop. I don’t like being stuck in traffic. I don’t like math homework. I hate Jace. See the difference?” [...] Simon’s mouth thinned out angrily. “So what if Jace is a jerk sometimes? You’re not my brother; you’re not my dad; you don’t have to like him. I’ve never liked any of your girlfriends, but at least I’ve had the decency to keep it to myself.” “This,” said Simon, between his teeth, “is different.” “How? How is it different?” “Because I see the way you look at him!” he shouted. “And I never looked at any of those girls like that! It was just something to do, a way to practice, until—” “Until what?” Clary knew dimly that she was being horrible, the whole thing was horrible; they’d never even had a fight before that was more serious than an argument about who’d eaten the last Pop-Tart from the box in the tree house, but she didn’t seem able to stop. “Until Isabelle came along? I can’t believe you’re lecturing me about Jace when you made a complete fool of yourself over her!” Her voice rose to a scream. “I was trying to make you jealous!” Simon screamed, right back. His hands were fists at his sides. “You’re so stupid, Clary. You’re so stupid, can’t you see anything?” She stared at him in bewilderment. What on earth did he mean? “Trying to make me jealous? Why would you try to do that?” She saw immediately that this was the worst thing she could have asked him. “Because,” he said, so bitterly that it shocked her, “I’ve been in love with you for ten years, so I thought it seemed like time to find out whether you felt the same about me. Which, I guess, you don’t.” He might as well have kicked her in the stomach. She couldn’t speak; the air had been sucked out of her lungs. She stared at him, trying to frame a response, any response. He cut her off sharply. “Don’t. There’s nothing you can say.” She watched him walk to the door as if paralyzed; she couldn’t move to hold him back, much as she wanted to. What could she say? I love you, too? But she didn’t—did she? He paused at the door, hand on the knob, and turned to look at her. His eyes, behind the glasses, looked more tired than angry now. (City of Bones, 339-342)

Clary’s attitude towards Simon changes when he says out loud what we already knew; here the use of expressions like “He might as well have kicked her in the stomach”, “the air had been sucked out of her lungs”, “as if paralyzed” from Clary’s viewpoint make us stay focused on her emotional reaction. They all refer to physical sensations which the reader can relate to, they give a qualitative “feel” to the narration. Besides, these scenes feature a lot of verbs, which enhance action; the crescent tension is built alternating fast sentences and comebacks.
typical of a fight and, of course, a classic “rejected friend in love” situation, despite being exploited a lot for this kind of stories, tend to gain interest from readers, and engage them more and more.

There’s not much need for explanation when it comes to read people’s feelings and thoughts – or, at least, not always – if attention is payed to what they say and how they act. Our developed T.o.M. – in different grades – makes us interact with characters as we were experiencing, using one of Caracciolo’s expressions\textsuperscript{79} again, “face-to-face” interactions: while narrated monologue helps us enacting their consciousness, quoted monologue makes us understand the situation from different perspectives, and “care” about the whole story, not just about the protagonists. It’s deeply related to our emotional level of Background, as feelings and their interpretation go hand in hand.

2.3.3 Emotional Style

According to an enactivist perspective, we can say that empathic concern elicited in readers is grounded primarily on the first and second levels of what we called the Background – the bodily-perceptive and the emotional – thanks mainly to a great use of a vocabulary linked to the semantic area of perception and feeling and to a direct and sometimes colloquial style. We can see some differences in the employment of these techniques among authors of YA speculative fiction; however, it can be noticed that, at the beginning, narratives of this kind – especially when protagonists are younger – feature usually more detailed descriptions of surroundings, objects, views, that allow protagonists to enter these new worlds and readers

\textsuperscript{79} “Narrative, Meaning, Interpretation: An Enactivist Approach.”, p 367.
to create a kind of mental imagery that will accompany them until the end of the story. However, the focus is not on descriptions themselves, but on the way they are filtered, on what kind of feeling is generated in those who look at them.

Rowling, for instance, manages to use a precise and descriptive style, especially in the first books; scenes are filtered through the eyes of an eleven-year-old kid, thus it clearly is a different perspective compared to the last books, when he and his friends are sixteen/seventeen. Examples of this choice are passages narrating Harry’s first time at Diagon Alley, when “Harry wished he had about eight more eyes” (Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone, 55): it focuses on a sense of wonder, of amazement. Take a look now at what Harry sees when he enters the Great Hall at Hogwarts for the first time in his life:

Harry had never even imagined such a strange and splendid place. It was lit by thousands and thousands of candles that were floating in midair over four long tables, where the rest of the students were sitting. These tables were laid with glittering golden plates and goblets. At the top of the hall was another long table where the teachers were sitting. Professor McGonagall led the first years up here, so that they came to a halt in a line facing the other students, with the teachers behind them. The hundreds of faces staring at them looked like pale lanterns in the flickering candlelight. Dotted here and there among the students, the ghosts shone misty silver. Mainly to avoid all the staring eyes, Harry looked upward and saw a velvety black ceiling dotted with stars. He heard Hermione whisper, "It's bewitched to look like the sky outside. I read about it in Hogwarts, A History."

It was hard to believe there was a ceiling there at all, and that the Great Hall didn't simply open on to the heavens. (Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone, 93-94)

The first adjectives are “strange” and “splendid”, sign that preannounces the rest of the description, which is detailed and rich of material references; the plates are golden, the table

---

80 See more on enactment imagery in Anežka Kuzmičová’s “Presence in the reading of literary narrative: A case for motor enactment”.
at the top of the hall is long, faces look like “pale lanterns”, the ceiling is “velvety black” and “dotted with stars”: we have a clear mental image of what Harry sees, but most importantly we get an idea of the sense of wonder that takes him mainly from the first and last lines – he had “never even imagined” and “It was hard to believe”. It must be specified that the narrator is still overt (see preceding section) and remains overt until Harry reaches an age where he is able to explain himself clearly – around 15-16, thus from books 5/6 –, with a vocabulary that we can relate to more.

Clary, who is older than Harry when her story begins, has feelings related more to the area of estrangement or dark attraction rather than of wonder towards peculiar new things; there are casual remarks on her being able to see strange events on the streets at the beginning, when she doesn’t know who she really is yet – see, for instance, the following passages from *City of Bones*:


[...] Clary said, stepping around a couple pushing a toddler in a stroller: a little girl with yellow plastic clips in her hair who was clutching a pixie doll with gold-streaked sapphire wings. Out of the corner of her eye Clary thought she saw the wings utter. She turned her head hastily. [...] A man with a cane cut across her path, heading for Berkeley Street. She glanced away, afraid that if she looked at anyone for too long they would sprout wings, extra arms, or long forked tongues like snakes. (50-51)

Clary was about to reply when the door to Madame Dorothea’s swung fully open and a man stepped out. He was tall, with maple-syrup-colored skin, gold-green eyes like a cat’s, and tangled black hair. He grinned at her blindingly, showing sharp white teeth. A wave of dizziness came over her, the strong sensation that she was going to faint. (47)
She turns her head “hastily”, she is afraid of seeing strange things again, she feels “a wave of dizziness” and the sensation of fainting; differently from Harry, she isn’t comfortable in this situations.

The point is that all these words referring to their senses make us enact sensations as we were them. Embodiment comes through five senses, and even though sight is the first and immediate one, we get absorbed in this other world thanks also to the others.

Katniss hasn’t any new world to discover, magic or powers; but readers’ senses are very much involved when it comes to read her story. The language is even more immediate, as her story is not only filtered through her 1st person perspective, but it is also written in the present tense: this enhances readers’ feeling of being there. From the very beginning a kind of dark and raw atmosphere – that of a dystopian environment – is conveyed also through language; see Katniss’s description of her father’s death:

As soon as I’m in the trees, I retrieve a bow and sheath of arrows from a hollow log. Electrified or not, the fence has been successful at keeping the flesh-eaters out of District 12. Inside the woods they roam freely, and there are added concerns like venomous snakes, rabid animals, and no real paths to follow. But there’s also food if you know how to find it. My father knew and he taught me some before he was blown to bits in a mine explosion. There was nothing even to bury. I was eleven then. Five years later, I still wake up screaming for him to run. *(The Hunger Games, 5)*

Collins’s style in this series is characterized by concrete words – see, for instance, the expression “blown to bits” in reference to her father – and concision, as short lines accelerate the pace. Katniss faces events and people with a sense of cynicism or distrust, and these are conveyed by all of these narrative choices: immediate emotional reactions are stimulated in readers through words.
Also narration about romantic relationships are examples of the use these authors do of an emotional tone; the reader is able to relate to these emotions because, even if s/he hasn’t experienced them in her/his life at least once, s/he’s likely to have an idea of them and to feel something thanks to her/his being embodied. Besides, the orientation of the narrative mainly towards action rather than description or reflection keeps the “emotional stake” quite high, a technique functional to attract the reader’s curiosity on what happens next and to engage her/him at a deeper level.

Look at these first-kiss scenes:

Harry looked around; there was Ginny running toward him; she had a hard, blazing look in her face as she threw her arms around him. And without thinking, without planning it, without worrying about the fact that fifty people were watching, Harry kissed her. After several long moments — or it might have been half an hour — or possibly several sunlit days — they broke apart. [...]. The creature in his chest roaring in triumph, he grinned down at Ginny and gestured wordlessly out of the portrait hole. A long walk in the grounds seemed indicated, during which — if they had time — they might discuss the match. (Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince, 499)

In between one step and another she saw a white spark struck off something on the door: it was the knife Jace had been using to cut apples, lying on its side. She jerked hastily back to avoid stepping on it, and her shoulder bumped his—he put a hand out to steady her, just as she turned to apologize, and then she was somehow in the circle of his arm and he was kissing her. It was at first almost as if he hadn’t wanted to kiss her: his mouth was hard on hers, unyielding; then he put both arms around her and pulled her against him. His lips softened. She could feel the rapid beat of his heart, taste the sweetness of apples still on his mouth. She wound her hands into his hair, as she’d wanted to do since the first time she’d seen him. His hair curled around her fingers, silky and fine. Her heart was hammering, and there was a rushing sound in her ears, like beating wings—Jace drew away from her with a muffled exclamation, though his arms were still around her. (City of Bones 337-338)
I wish I could pull the shutters closed, blocking out this moment from the prying eyes of Panem. Even if it means losing food. Whatever I’m feeling, it’s no one’s business but mine.

“That’s exactly the kind of topic Haymitch told me to steer clear of,” I say evasively, although Haymitch never said anything of the kind. In fact, he’s probably cursing me out right now for dropping the ball during such an emotionally charged moment. But Peeta somehow catches it. “Then I’ll just have to fill in the blanks myself,” he says, and moves in to me. This is the first kiss that we’re both fully aware of. Neither of us hobbled by sickness or pain or simply unconscious. Our lips neither burning with fever or icy cold. This is the first kiss where I actually feel stirring inside my chest. Warm and curious. This is the first kiss that makes me want another. But I don’t get it. (The Hunger Games, 292-293)

In the first two scenes, the tension towards the moment of the kiss is built on a fast sequence of actions underlined by verbs of movement – like “running toward”, “threw her arms”, “without thinking, without planning it, without worrying”, “struck off”, “jerked hastily back”, “bumped”, that are useful also to enact the narrative space around us readers; the third, being told in 1st person, focuses more on the description of the character’s internal state. But notice some similarities among these passages: if from a 1st person perspective we follow closely the internal development of the character, from a 3rd person perspective we are pushed to the moment when the sequence of actions pauses and the focus is on the characters’ viewpoint. In all the three cases, with these narrative choices, the reader experiences the character’s emotions at the same time the character does. S/he’s not being narrated what the character experienced from a detached point of view, as also the passages in 3rd-person perspective, being told by a covert narrator, make her/him feel closer to the character and strengthens the empathic bond. Situational empathy – which Suzanne Keen defines as the concept “which responds primarily to aspects of plot and circumstance,

---

81 An homodiegetic narrator is usually thought less likely to enhance empathic concern or identification in readers than an heterodiegetic with internal focalization one; see arguments in Keen’s and Caracciolo’s mentioned works.
involves less self-extension in imaginative role taking and more recognition of prior (or current) experience.” (“A Theory of Narrative Empathy, 215) – is what readers usually experience with this kind of narration: it doesn’t matter how much they identify with characters or like them, engagement is stimulated through bodily-perceptual and emotional references.

The adjectives and nouns related to the area of the senses in Clare’s passage, in particular, let readers experience the scene more vividly – like “mouth [...] hard”, “unyielding”, “taste of sweetness”, “hair [...] silky and fine”, “rushing sound”, and also a metaphor often associated with a particular physical reaction, “there was a rushing sound in her ears, like beating wings; we want to point out that it’s not about the level of description, but about the involvement of the area of senses⁸².

Caracciolo sums up in a few words this process in *The Experientiality of Narrative*:

> By leveraging interpreters’ bodily-perceptual experience (the inner circles of experiential background), stories can elicit an evaluative response at the outer, sociocultural level. [...] The entanglement of socio-cultural meanings with bodily-perceptual experience in readers’ interaction with narrative space reveals that embodiment is closely bound up with socio-cultural practices. (155)

Narrative choices like those mentioned above confer a qualitative “feel” on our reading, and contribute to make readers enact another consciousness through the activation of their *peripersonal space*, which is, in Kuzmičová’s words, “the space immediately adjacent to the head, arms and legs, constrained by their instantaneous action radius” (27): reading about the

---

⁸² See also: from Clary’s perspective, *City of Ashes* pgg. 172-172; *City of Glass* pgg. 206-207, 210, 532-533; *City of Heavenly Fire* pgg.; from Simon’s perspective, *City of Glass* pgg.; from Jace’s perspective, *City of Bones* (chap 18), *City of Glass* (chap 18).
characters’ movements from their viewpoints activates in readers an experiential trace linked to their body. Furthermore, emotional traces contribute to frame our ideas on sociocultural contexts: stories can be sources to build up our ideas, for instance, of humans relations, ways to deal with serious issues like death or traumas, identity, etc. Caracciolo continues:

> While having its roots in simple forms of embodied engagement with the world, experience is profoundly shaped by emotional reactions, cognitive processes, and socio-culturally produced meanings. [...] I would go even farther that and suggest that embodiment is a reminder of the living connection between our physical bodies and the body of our culture. (Caracciolo, 158)

Our mind is able to detach from the “here and now” to enact a mental simulation and represent the situation we are reading about, but it is through our body that we are able to experience it: it is the bridge between mental simulation and experience itself. In Caracciolo’s words, this is the “fictionalization of the reader’s body”: “The relation between consciousness-enactment and the fictionalization of the reader’s virtual body can be described as follows: enacting a character’s experience at the bodily-perceptual level can prompt readers to imaginatively project themselves into the character’s fictional body” (160). Those quoted above are just a few meaningful passages, but others would be worth analyzing, from simple everyday scenes among friends to much more dramatic ones – see for instance death scenes, explained in chapter 3. There exists a chain that links perception, basic and more complicate emotions; reflections on deep subjects are triggered more easily – considerations on human rights, equality, life and death, the importance of freedom, but also of relations, of hope, and above all, of love: these themes are so dear to every human being that, even though we can’t feel the very same emotions of the characters, or identify strongly

---

83 See sections 1.3.1 and 1.3.3.
with them, we can understand their importance, the depth they touch, thanks to our being embodied individuals, humans.

The last part of this chapter regards readers’ judgements. Judgement on characters is not a narrative feature, but a reader’s response; anyway, it affects the empathic concern for characters, and even when a reader doesn’t feel empathy, nor involvement in the story, s/he makes judgements about the characters – that later may help her/him to deepen her/his engagement with the story. Judgements on characters are influenced by the reader’s identification with a character, by the reader’s personal values, experiences, choices, and so on, but also by the character’s traits and choices, and by her/his reliability. As English Professor James Phelan says in “Judgements, Progressions, and the Rhetorical Experience of Narrative”, “narrativity encourages two main activities: observing and judging” (7), that is to say, we “see” the story, we understand it, and we give meaning to it. Meaning-making is a complicated process influenced by a multiplicity of factors (as we said talking about the enactivist theory); how do judgements help to engage with the story? It is, again, a matter of Theory of Mind, empathic concern, values we hold – aspects inextricably bound one to the others: we do not need to empathize with characters to enjoy the story, but understanding their personalities, feelings and motives help us to make up a meaning out of it. We will see readers’ judgements on characters more in detail in section 3.3.

One of Coats’s quotations on the functions of fantasy as a cognitive exercise may help us wrapping up this chapter:

But perhaps a more prosaic reason for encouraging young people to read fantasy emerges from cognitive science. The simple fact is that fantasy is a necessary activity for human development, both individually and collectively. For individuals, imagining possibilities beyond everyday reality grows the developing brain like doing reps with weights grows muscles;
putting stress on existing pathways forces them to adapt, causing new neural connections between different parts of the brain to be activated and thus stimulating brain growth. (Coats, 355)

Now we can proceed and focus on the meanings readers generate starting from these narratives.
3. YA SPECULATIVE FICTION THEMES: POLITICS, IDENTITY AND ETHICS THROUGH SYMBOLS

Through speculative fiction readers are offered concrete manifestations of abstracts concepts that are usually quite difficult to grasp — for instance, good and evil. Binary oppositions, villains, magical creatures, hypotheses on our future world are all narrative affordances that make us question our understanding of the world, engaging us on multiple levels and providing a sort of “safety net” for risks: we enact mortal fights and dangerous adventures without actually living them. And yet, we experience them in some way, and by making sense of fictional worlds we make sense of our reality. It must also be said that readers’ cognitive and affective responses do not inevitably lead to tangible effects in their social context — just like empathic concern is not inevitably activated in readers; we just recognize the possibility of acquiring a deeper personal and social consciousness thanks to enacting situations that involve a determined set of values (namely, those we are going to talk about). Literary humanism — as it is called by Gibson84 — enters the discourse in this part of our analysis: values conveyed by narratives have the potential to affect readers’ way of perceiving and judging reality, and this is due to their interpretation of the narrative. As Caracciolo says,

Literary stories – and I would add, all stories, albeit to different degrees – can reveal the values that are entangled in everyday experience. They can do so through representational and expressive devices designed to direct our attention toward the socio-cultural practices that fall within the outer circle of experiential background. In other words, narrative can invite interpreters to pay attention to the cultural values implicated in our exchanges with the world in a more self-conscious way than is possible or likely during these exchanges. (68)

---

84 Gibson defines literary humanism as “the conviction, however imprecise and pre-theoretical, that works of literary fiction can illuminate reality” (13). See: Gibson’s Fiction and the Weave of Life (2007).
Thus, in this chapter we analyze rhetorical devices largely employed in YA speculative fiction, namely metaphors and symbols, and the most important themes conveyed by them. As Coats says: “This, perhaps, is the true nature of fantasy — its continuing ability to speak to young readers about the things that transcend time in storied metaphors and metaphoric stories that remain absolutely timely” (361). Fantasy is part of the broader category of speculative fiction, and we may argue that this is what it mostly offers: metaphors and symbols through which making sense of reality, that help readers to frame their own ideology and offer keys to understanding. In proceeding with the analysis, we stick to Caracciolo’s idea that “[...] stories, by exercising interpreters’ higher-order cognitive skills, have the potential for enhancing them in important ways — for example by alerting readers to the values that are implicated in situations (see Walsh 2007, 106; Boyd 2009, 192-193)” (67).

3.1 Myth, Folklore and Legends: The Use of Symbols

Our case studies display a variety of references to classic history, myths and legends, as these have always been instruments to explain reality, to give sense to natural phenomena and express values held by societies. Metaphors and symbols work primarily on the level of higher-order cognitive abilities, as they are associations made possible with the use of language; we have, nevertheless, to keep in mind the interaction between narrative and

---

85 Metaphors and symbols are often confused with each other; I will not delve into a detailed explanation of these two terms, as, for the sake of our analysis, we just need to know that while a metaphor is defined as “an expression that describes a person or object by referring to something that is considered to possess similar characteristics” (Cambridge Dictionary Online), a symbol is “a sign, shape, or object that is used to represent something else” (Cambridge Dictionary Online): this means that the metaphor links different things by referring to their common aspects, while the symbol, more arbitrarily, stands for something else. We will find examples of metaphors and symbols in our analysis; for more detailed explanations on these concepts, see Gemma Corradi Fiumara’s The metaphoric process (1995) and W. K. Wimsatt Jr.’s “Symbol and Metaphor”, in The Review of Metaphysics, Vol. 4, No. 2 (Dec., 1950), pp. 279-290.
reader on the emotional level to understand why these metaphors are effective, in particular now that we are going to see what mythical, historical and folkloristic references tell us through the narratives we are analyzing.

3.1.1 *Panem et circenses*: Let the Games Begin!

The Arena is the area where people fight to survive in order to entertain the audience, people of higher classes enjoy the show as if it were not about bloody and mortal fights among human beings, “one girl and one boy, called tributes” (*The Hunger Games*, 18) from different districts: in *The Hunger Games* trilogy, Collins clearly opted for a series of references to Ancient Rome. We are given a clue to think about this era since the very beginning, as Panem is the country where the story is set: “Panem et circenses” is the Latin phrase that refers to a famous quote written by a Latin satirical author, Giovenale: “[...][populus] duastantum res anxiusoptat / panem et circenses” (*Satira* X, circa 127 d.C.); it means that people anxiously desire just two things: bread — which stands for food — and public shows. This quotation summarizes the dystopian society of the story: during the Roman Empire, rulers assured themselves public consensus through periodic distribution of wheat and the organization of shows — inhuman fights to death among gladiators in what was called the Arena. This is the way Panem works. The problem with this politics is that people are just distracted by political action: they are given what they want and thus stay quiet, they accept authority without questioning its righteousness. This situation — which is typical of dystopias — problematizes issues like individual choices, political action, reaction against authority, and readers are called to question themselves about them: it happened in the past, is there the possibility that it may happen again? In which ways?
The name of the country — a country born on the ashes of what were the United States, after other world wars finished — is the first reference to the Roman Empire; people are divided into Districts, and Districts work in a caste-like manner: the lower the number of the District, the higher its social status and richness — they can be compared, for instance, to Roman *patrizi*\(^86\), *plebei*\(^87\) and slaves. Higher Districts (in particular 1 and 2) are those which support the system more enthusiastically, a system ruled by the people who live in the Capitol — reference to Rome itself, the capital of the Empire, and to one of the seven Roman hills. Poorer districts suffer despotism, violence (carried out in particular by the Peacekeepers, the Capitol’s soldiers), starvation, oppression. The Hunger Games, similarly to the cruel fights among gladiators, are the event that embodies all of this, and were set in the first place as a punishment for an attempted insurrection against the government. They are organized by the Capitol, but played by youths from the age of twelve to eighteen: it is the representation of the Capitol’s way of exercising power and control on society — and on its very future, youths — and the depiction of adolescence as really a period of resistance and survival.

Moreover, the names of people from the higher districts and the Capitol come from the Roman tradition as well — President Snow’s first name is Coriolanus; then we read about the stylists Cinna and Portia, the announcer Claudius, the strategists Seneca and Plutarch, the tributes Cato, Brutus and Titus, the host of the Games Caesar, etc.: all of them bear names of Roman people from higher classes. On the other hand, there are also names that draw inspiration from the natural environment, that seem more spontaneous and natural, revealing their true nature, if confronted with the pretentious ones belonging to the Capitol: Primrose, Katniss’s sister, bears the name of a little, delicate flower, and the same is true for

---

\(^{86}\) *Patrizi*: Latin for patricians, highborn people.

\(^{87}\) *Plebei*: Latin for plebeians, people who worked as breeders, farmers or merchants.
Rue, Katniss’s twelve-year-old friend in the Arena [“Rue is a small yellow flower that grows in the Meadow. Rue. Primrose. Neither of them could tip the scale at seventy pounds soaking wet” (The Hunger Games, 98). Gale, Katniss’s eldest friend, is strong and tough like the windstorm he’s associated with; Katniss, a hunter skilled at bow and arrow, is named after an aquatic plant also known as “arrowplant”.

Recurrent references that belong to the same thematic area make readers stay focused on the meanings conveyed by these narratives; in this sense, they work as sideboards. See other examples: sentences like “[...] We’ll have a real feast.” (The Hunger Games, 7), where the use of “feast” is ironic, as Gale is talking about a leftover of cheese; the use of the word “Reaping”, referring to the ceremony to draw the names of the “tributes” for the Hunger Games, considering it as a festivity as Romans did; the habit of people from Capitol of having parties where they eat endlessly and drink beverages to be eliminated through induced vomit to be able to eat again and again, as Romans of upper classes did in the ancient times. Panem relates an era whose values were those of the mos maiorum—a Latin term for “ancestors’ values”—that is to say honor, pietas, austerity, military value, respect for the Roman Law — to its dystopian version. This version is sometimes imitated: see, for instance, the example quoted above, where nobility displays all that is far from austerity and morality, or the effect of people’s exaggeration in showing their costumes, manners, habits — and it is Katniss’s description of these costumes that attracts the readers’ attention and direct their judgement:

Why do these people speak in such a high pitch? Why do their jaws barely open when they talk? Why do the ends of their sentences go up as if they’re asking a question? Odd vowels, 88 Latin term for “ancestors’ values”.
89 Latin term that refers to respect towards the gods, the family and the homeland.
clipped words, and always a hiss on the letter s... no wonder it’s impossible not to mimic them.  
*(The Hunger Games, 60)*

Besides, the above-mentioned “values” are sometimes brought to their extremes — when they are tools to push people to train for the Hunger Games and come home as proud Victors, rather than breaking the system as outlaws, when pride counts more than a human life, when winning comes before other peoples’ death. Readers are always reminded of hidden and clearer meanings through the author’s employment of metaphors and symbols, and through the voice of the protagonist herself. These tools — extended metaphors in particular, like the scheme of a dystopian Roman society that lasts through the entire trilogy — help readers to relate their abstract thinking with their real life experience. Responses to narratives of this kind are likely to contribute in the development of ideological stances. Staging the aforementioned attitudes questions their real meaning: these people are concentrated on appearing rather than on being, on traditions and rites more than on real values, and in this way of acting they lose sight of what stands behind the surface.

As Gemma Corradi Fiumara clearly sums up in *The Metaphoric Process,*

Metaphoricity is a basic mode of functioning whereby we project patterns from one domain of experience in order to structure another domain of a different kind. [...] Through our metaphoric capacity we make use of patterns which evolve out of our affectual experience in order to organize our more abstract understanding. (105)

Metaphoric and symbolic language are tools that engage all of our Background levels in conveying meanings, not just our cognitive abilities: it’s a “basic mode of functioning” for us, as by having affectual experience of something, we are able to make sense also of something else by linking the two experiences through their similar pattern.
3.1.2 Heaven and Hell

Religious traditions all around the world are full of symbolic representations; they help people to make sense of deep feelings they cannot explain, but also, like myths — and the boundary between the two often blurs — to make sense of events and phenomena. Symbols from religious traditions can be understood very widely — at least, the most famous and exploited: angels as messengers of God, demons as difficulties for people, Satan as the embodiment of everything which is bad in the world and the antagonist of God, etc. Our cultures are permeated by them: shared myths create a sort of collective imaginary.

Considering our case studies, The Mortal Instruments esalogy is the one which presents most religious references: starting from the very fact that Shadowhunters – known also as Nephilim90 – are warriors whose blood is mixed with that of Angel Raziel, we can see that demons are monsters without soul that come from other dimensions and feed on people’s vital energy by destroying them; pentacles can be used to summon demons; there are Greater Demons too, who are fallen angels, as Hebrew and Christian traditions teach — such as, for example, Abaddon (king of an army of locusts), defeated by the protagonists in City of Ashes; Azazel (demon of the deserts, Lieutenant of Lucifer), faced by some of the protagonists in City of Heavenly Fire; Asmodeus (ruler of Edom and a general of Hell's army), faced also in City of Heavenly Fire. To see these encounters in City of Heavenly Fire – last book of the esalogy and its climax), we follow five of the main characters in their journey to Edom91, a mirror

---

90 Nephilim is a term translated as “fallen angels”, “sons of God”, or “giants”. See mythical references of the Judaic, Hebrew and Christian traditions.
91 Clary, Jace, Simon, Alec and Isabelle Lightwood go there to save Sebastian’s hostages, one for each people of the Shadow World, excluding the faeries allied with Sebastian: the warlock Magnus Bane, the vampire Raphael Santiago, Luke as representative of the werewolves and Clary’s mother, Jocelyn, as a Shadowhunter.
dimension of our own that bears a name of biblical origins: it was the homeland of a people often in conflict with the Israelites. This reference mirrors the conflict between the group of allies of Sebastian, villain of the second trilogy and Clary’s brother, and the rest of the Shadowhunters — seen as the “good side”.

The presence of runes — ancient symbols charged with meanings — is to be evidenced too, as they are the language of angels and source of magic, which donates more strength and resistance and skills to Shadowhunters — although it is still nothing compared to bravery and, more importantly, love. Notice also the importance of the Instruments that provide a title for the esalogy: the Cup, which can be compared with the Holy Grail, the Mirror, symbol of reflection in both senses, and the Sword, that makes people tell always the truth. All these references give the story a sort of gothic and mythical taste — which is appealing in particular for the younger part of the audience—, bestow intriguing elements to the plot, and provide a tool to open up windows on deeper, hidden meanings, from issues such as free will and destiny, to love and power, to right and wrong.

As far as religious traditions are concerned, one last important element to pinpoint is the presence of resurrections. Resurrection is a tool that narratives such as The Hunger Games trilogy cannot employ, since rules of life cannot be altered there; in fantasy, this is possible, and it is quite exploited as a metaphor. Works like The Chronicles of Narnia by Lewis and The Lord of the Rings by Tolkien present this expedient: Aslan the lion has been compared to Christ himself, and Gandalf too. Both of them voluntarily sacrificed for other people, lost their lives and came back stronger than before: it is the symbol, like the original Resurrection in the

---

92 See section 3.2.
93 See section 2.2.
94 See Lewis’s The Chronicles of Narnia (1950-56), and Tolkien’s The Lord of the Rings (1954-55).
Bible, for the power of love and the greatness of hope — foremost messages in this kind of narratives.

As regards The Mortal Instruments, Jace is sacrificed on an altar by Valentine, who raised him for ten years, letting him believe he was his father, and then orchestrated his own fake death. Jace’s resurrection is introduced by a long reflection on humans’ hybris, that is to say, arrogance, embodied in Valentine, of feeling superior to the rest of the world, the thirst for power that leads us to mind only our own good. This representation warns us against this dangerous way of thinking, as it leads to war and death, not to a peaceful world. The whole chapter 20 of City of Glass is filled with references to the Bible, from the title of the chapter itself, “Weighed in the Balance”, to Clary’s pronouncing the words “Mene mene tekel upharsin”, Hebrew for “You have been weighed in the balance and found wanting”95.

“The Nephilim you created were a great race of men. For many years they valiantly battled to rid this plane of demon taint. But they have failed due to weakness and corruption in their ranks. I intend to return them to their former glory—”

Glory? The Angel sounded faintly curious, as if the word were strange to him. Glory belongs to God alone.

Valentine didn’t waver. “The Clave as the first Nephilim created it exists no more. They have allied themselves with Downworlders, the demon-tainted nonhumans who infest this world like fleas on the carcass of a rat. It is my intention to cleanse this world, to destroy every Downworlder along with every demon—”

Demons do not possess souls. But as for the creatures you speak of, the Children of Moon, Night, Lilith, and Faerie, all are souled. It seems that your rules as to what does and does not constitute a human being are stricter than our own. Clary could have sworn the Angel’s voice

95 These words appeared on the wall during Belshazzar’s Feast (The Bible, Daniel 5:25), interpreted by Daniel to mean that God had doomed the kingdom of Belshazzar (last king of Babylon) for his sacrilegious use of holy cups; in The Mortal Instruments, Jace explains this meaning to Simon (City of Glass, p. 60). Notice also the parallel with this scene, as Valentine makes a sacrilegious use of a holy cup.
had taken on a dry tone. Do you intend to challenge heaven like that other Morning Star whose name you bear, Shadowhunter?

“Not to challenge heaven, no, Lord Raziel. To ally myself with heaven—”

In a war of your making? We are heaven, Shadowhunter. We do not fight in your mundane battles.

When Valentine spoke again, he sounded almost hurt. “Lord Raziel. Surely you would not have allowed such a thing as a ritual by which you might be summoned to exist if you did not intend to be summoned. We Nephilim are your children. We need your guidance.”

Guidance? Now the Angel sounded amused. That hardly seems to be why you brought me here. You seek rather your own renown.

“Renown?” Valentine echoed hoarsely. “I have given everything for this cause. My wife. My children. I have not withheld my sons. I have given everything I have for this—everything.”

The Angel simply hovered, gazing down at Valentine with his weird, inhuman eyes. His wings moved in slow, undeliberate motions, like the passage of clouds across the sky. At last he said,

God asked Abraham to sacrifice his son on an altar much like this one, to see who it was that Abraham loved more, Isaac or God. But no one asked you to sacrifice your son, Valentine. (City of Glass, 492-494)

Notice the parallel between Valentine and Abraham, and the implied one between Valentine and some kind of dictator who wants to purify the world and take the place of God in deciding for the life of every souled-being96. When the Angel speaks to Valentine, he makes us reflect upon our being little and unimportant to history and the heavens, showing no mercy in understanding motives like “glory” and personal “renown”; weighed in the balance, Valentine is found “wanting”. On the other plate, Clary is weighed. Once again, we follow the scene from her perspective, and we feel the physical constrictions she is bound to suffer:

Clary couldn’t move. Could barely breathe. She could hear her own heart beating, hear the scrape of her breathing in her dry throat. [...] Clary closed her eyes. Remembering the way Jace had looked at her the night she’d freed Ithuriel, she couldn’t help but imagine the way

96 See also section 3.3, on the ethics of these narratives.
he’d look at her now if he saw her trying to lie down to die on the sand beside him. He wouldn’t be touched, wouldn’t think it was a beautiful gesture. He’d be angry at her for giving up. He’d be so—disappointed. Clary lowered herself so that she was lying on the ground, heaving her dead legs behind her. Slowly she crawled across the sand, pushing herself along with her knees and bound hands. The glowing band around her wrists burned and stung. Her shirt tore as she dragged herself across the ground, and the sand scraped the bare skin of her stomach. She barely felt it. It was hard work, pulling herself along like this—sweat ran down her back, between her shoulder blades. When she finally reached the circle of runes, she was panting so loudly that she was terrified Valentine would hear her. But he didn’t even turn around. [...] Clary had to twist and struggle to reach her hand around to the stele jammed into her belt. The pain in her wrists spiked as her fingers closed around the handle; she pulled it free with a muffled gasp of relief. She couldn’t separate her wrists, so she gripped the stele awkwardly in both hands. She pushed herself up with her elbows, staring down at the runes. She could feel the heat of them on her face; they had begun to shimmer like witchlight. (City of Glass, 488-490)

Words referred to the body and the physical pain are abundant in this passage: “scrape of her breathing in her dry throat”, “burned and stung”, “shirt tore”, “barely felt it”, “hard work”, “sweat run down”, etc.; also, references to what surrounds Clary (“lowered herself so that she was lying on the ground”, “crawled across the sand”, “reached the circle of runes” etc.) enhance readers’ feeling of “being there” as they activate their peri-personal zone97 and prepare the ground for what comes later: we see from Clary’s eyes the death of one of the people she loves most in the world, and then we see her questioning about what humans can do about real problems in the world:

She could ask for anything, she thought dizzily, anything—an end to pain or world hunger or disease, or for peace on earth. But then again, perhaps these things weren’t in the power of

97 See section 2.3.
angels to grant, or they would already have been granted. And perhaps people were supposed to find these things for themselves.

It didn’t matter, anyway. There was only one thing she could ask for, in the end, only one real choice. She raised her eyes to the Angel’s.

“Jace,” she said. (*City of Glass*, 496)

It is Clary who chooses to bring Jace back from the dead: his resurrection stands as a symbol for that weight on the balance that will not be found missing, as justice has been restored. The protagonist recognizes with humility what people can do to change the world, and with a big effort, on the other hand, demonstrates her real power. She makes us understand that demons in the world — and here readers can easily draw a parallel with the demons in their ordinary lives, such as heavy memories, difficulties, internal struggles, external conflicts — are to be fought with every day of our living in the world, with individual effort to understand their origin and to repair for them.

As far as *Harry Potter* is concerned, J.K. Rowling’s use of resurrection is slightly different, as, in this narrative, it is Harry the one who sacrifices himself, following more closely in the fantastic tradition’s steps, according to which the hero sacrifices himself for the good of everyone else. Harry goes into the Dark Forest, presents himself to Voldemort and lets him cast the “Avada Kedavra” — the mortal curse — without reacting. This choice of non-violence and voluntary sacrifice for everyone else is the key to the deepest meaning of the story: the only thing that is able to destroy death is love. See what Rowling said about this matter in an interview: “To me [the religious parallels have] always been obvious [...]. But I never wanted to talk too openly about it because I thought it might show people who just wanted the story

---

98 He does not actually die. He remains in a limbo between life and death; it is not clear where he is — even though we are told that he sees around him an alternative, whiter version of King’s Cross station — but we are inclined to interpret it as a sort of purgatory. He decides to come back to life, as Voldemort’s curse killed just his own piece of soul in Harry’s body.
where we were going.” (Adler n.p.). Rowling continued in the same interview: "[But] I think those two particular quotations he finds on the tombstones at Godric’s Hollow, they sum up — they almost epitomize the whole series.” And here she is referring to “The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death” (The Bible, 1 Corinthians 15, 20-27) and “Wherever your treasure is, there the desires of your heart will also be.” (The Bible, Mt, 6,19-21): religious references are abundant in this narrative too, and the authors’ confirmations give readers a tool to interpret the story, whether they have figured it out by themselves or not.

Consider now the following passage from The Half-Blood Prince:

It was, he thought, the difference between being dragged into the arena to face a battle to the death and walking into the arena with your head held high. Some people, perhaps, would say that there was little to choose between the two ways, but Dumbledore knew — and so do I, thought Harry, with a rush of fierce pride, and so did my parents — that there was all the difference in the world. (479)

This thought of Harry’s is a foreshadowing of the behavior he will adopt in the last part of the story; he knows that a voluntary gesture is different from being forced to do it — it is the same concept we find also in Clary’s and Katniss’s stories. These characters do not bypass the typical grown-ups’ idea that the world is not just black and white; there are issues on which they have to come to compromises: they recognize it, overcome it and choose their side consciously.

As we do in real life, we recognize in what surrounds us tools to make sense of what we are experiencing. We proceed now in seeing the ethics that stands beyond these works.

---

3.2 Construction of Identity: “It’s our choices that show what we truly are”

Adolescence is the stage of life when people begin to mature, physically, psychologically and to grow an aware sense of their own individual identity. It is also the moment of life when people develop a political consciousness, as they open up to society and begin to learn its mechanisms. This is what our protagonists deal with for most of the narratives in analysis. The growth of their personality and of their social consciousness is a key point for readers’ engagement with these books; the perception of our own identity is called into question again as we are bound to these narratives and, depending on our age and life experience, we give these texts different meanings because texts speak to us differently: younger adolescents may be focused more on becoming the “heroes” of their own stories, older youths may be concerned about choices for their future, adults may discuss about how much their past influenced their personalities, parents’ roles, or how much the Wizards’ community is afflicted by problems similar to theirs.

Identities develop during a lifetime, so, as we have seen, experience plays an important role in this game. The construction of our identity through our minds and bodies is the product of how we narrate to ourselves what happens, and what we narrate to ourselves is influenced by what we meet in life — fictional narratives included. For example, it is not uncommon in our contemporary society to hear people talking about the Hogwarts House they belong to, in order to actually discuss their own values and choices; they obviously have not really been to Hogwarts, but the reading experience had quite an important impact, and readers like thinking to have been sorted by the Sorting Hat too. Here is the rhymed passage told by Hat about students’ personalities:

100See chapter 2 on embodiment and engagement.
There's nothing hidden in your head
The Sorting Hat can't see,
So try me on and I will tell you
Where you ought to be.
You might belong in Gryffindor,
Where dwell the brave at heart,
Their daring, nerve, and chivalry
Set Gryffindors apart;
You might belong in Hufflepuff,
Where they are just and loyal,
Those patient Hufflepuffis are true
And unafraid of toil;
Or yet in wise old Ravenclaw,
If you've a ready mind,
Where those of wit and learning,
Will always find their kind;
Or perhaps in Slytherin
You'll make your real friends,
Those cunning folk use any means
To achieve their ends. (Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone, 88)

We are interested in this categorization as this reflection on identity involves us too: being a Gryffindor means we value courage and chivalry, to Ravenclaws intelligence and wisdom matter, Slytherin is the house for ambitious, cunning, determined people and Hufflepuff values loyalty, hard-work and generosity. See also Harry’s experience of the Sorting ceremony on his first evening at Hogwarts:

"Hmm," said a small voice in his ear. "Difficult. Very difficult. Plenty of courage, I see. Not a bad mind either. There's talent, A my goodness, yes -- and a nice thirst to prove yourself, now that's interesting.... So where shall I put you?"
Harry gripped the edges of the stool and thought, Not Slytherin, not Slytherin. "Not Slytherin, eh?" said the small voice. "Are you sure? You could be great, you know, it's all here in your head, and Slytherin will help you on the way to greatness, no doubt about that--no? Well, if you're sure--better be GRYFFINDOR!" (90-91)

Harry has been told by his friend Ron that Slytherins are bad, so he does not want to go there; even though this choice is an eleven-year-old’s choice based on a friend’s advice, we see that from the very beginning choices set the action and define characters during the story. At their time at Hogwarts — twenty years before Harry and his friends — Peter Pettigrew was sorted into Gryffindor and turns out to be a cowardly traitor allied with Voldemort, while Snape was sorted into Slytherin and turns out to be a tragic hero who eventually sacrifices for Harry¹⁰¹: there are examples of this kind, characters that had potentialities recognized by the Hat but acted differently during their lives; categorization is a tool to reflect upon who we are. It must be noticed that in real life our actions may evidence a discrepancy between what we believe we are and what we really are; the point for these narratives is to highlight a possibility to change through questioning about ourselves. Protagonists learn this lesson through their adventures, thus, readers with them; we are told so very clearly by Dumbledore in Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets, when commenting about the Sorting Hat’s choice:

"It only put me in Gryffindor," said Harry in a defeated voice, "because I asked not to go in Slytherin...."

`Exactly," said Dumbledore, beaming once more. "Which makes you very different from Tom Riddle. It is our choices, Harry, that show what we truly are, far more than our abilities." (245)

¹⁰¹ See Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows.
These quotations, like metaphors explained in 3.1, function as springboards. They hit readers with simple and direct words — sometimes through the voice of a mentor, sometimes through people who are mirrors for protagonists themselves (confront, for instance, Ron’s and Hermione’s reactions to Harry’s behaviors throughout the saga).

Consider then this passage by the American psychologist Jerome Bruner, who worked on the subject of identity, in “Life as Narrative”:

> When somebody tells you his life [...] it is always a cognitive achievement rather than a through-the-clear-crystal recital of something univocally given. In the end, it is a narrative achievement. There is no such thing psychologically as “life itself”. At very least, it is a selective achievement of memory recall; beyond that, recounting one’s life is an interpretive feat. (692)

> “Cognitive achievement” fits perfectly into the enactivist vocabulary; we come to understand, to reflect upon concepts related to ourselves through experience, and this achievement changes us. Harry starts from being sorted thanks also to his own choice and finishes with leaving the school at the beginning of his seventh year, to end the task Dumbledore assigned to him\(^{102}\) because he wants to make a difference: it’s his symbolical passage to maturity. Even if this journey may not mirror the path of a sixteen/seventeen-year-old person in real life, it is a symbol for people who are looking for their identity and try to find occasions to grow up during all their lives.

Going back to symbols, we have to pinpoint also the use of deaths as turning points of our case studies. As far as *Harry Potter* is concerned, we have already talked about Cedric’s death

\(^{102}\) To destroy all the Horcuxes, but also — and Harry, Ron and Hermione will discover it during the year — to find the Deathly Hallows.
in section 2.3 as an important point of the structure; now we focus on two other symbolical deaths, that are Dumbledore’s and Hedwig’s – Harry’s owl.

Heart-breaking Dumbledore’s death happens at the end of *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*, at the hands of Severus Snape; Death Eaters took Hogwarts while Harry is hunting for Horcruxes with Dumbledore, and when they come back, Dumbledore gets killed with a mortal curse, and falls from the highest tower of Hogwarts. Harry does not know yet that Dumbledore was aware he was going to die anyway, as he had contracted an illness because of a Horcrux almost a year before 103, nor that he had a pact with Snape to let him cast the curse on weak Draco Malfoy’s behalf 104. We follow the scene from Harry’s perspective, so we will come to know all of this at the end of the story, like him. This is the moment in which Harry loses his guide, thus, from this point on he will be on his own — with his friends’ support, but without someone ahead of him to point to the right way. He feels lost, he is looking for answers. We feel his loss too, and we are likely to know what being in his shoes feels like; besides, we had the opportunity to grow fond of Dumbledore too. This happens at the end of chapter 27 in *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*, while Harry’s feelings are depicted through chapter 28:

> Harry felt as though he too were hurtling through space; it had not happened... It could not have happened... [...] As they vanished through the door, Harry realized he could move again. What was now holding him paralyzed against the wall was not magic, but horror and shock. [...] Terror tore at Harry’s heart... He had to get to Dumbledore and he had to catch Snape... Somehow the two things were linked... He could reverse what had happened if he had them both together... Dumbledore could not have died... (557)

---

103 See *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*,
104 See chapter 1 of *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* for the Unbreakable Vow between Draco’s mother and Snape.
Harry is in a state of shock, but he moves because he has to do something; he hasn’t realized the whole situation yet. Again, verbs linked to the area of bodily-perception make readers feel like the protagonist, they are connected with pain and sorrow — “paralyzed”, “horror and shock” “Terror tore at Harry's heart” — and the pace of action is sped up. We feel his rage due to the whole situation when he yells at Snape for what he has done, and then desperation catches him as he sees the body of his old mentor:

> What was real and inescapable was the awful pressing feeling in his chest... [...] Harry heard Hagrid's moan of pain and shock, but he did not stop; he walked slowly forward until he reached the place where Dumbledore lay and crouched down beside him. [...] He had known there was no hope from the moment that the full Body-Bind Curse Dumbledore had placed upon him lifted, known that it could have happened only because its caster was dead, but there was still no preparation for seeing him here, spread-eagled, broken: the greatest wizard Harry had ever, or would ever, meet. Dumbledore's eyes were closed; but for the strange angle of his arms and legs, he might have been sleeping. Harry reached out, straightened the halfmoon spectacles upon the crooked nose, and wiped a trickle of blood from the mouth with his own sleeve. Then he gazed down at the wise old face and tried to absorb the enormous and incomprehensible truth: that never again would Dumbledore speak to him, never again could he help----- [...] Harry crumpled the parchment in his hand, and his eyes burned with tears as behind him Fang began to howl. (567-569)

The vocabulary is connected with the area of incredulity here. Notice the use of the recurrent image of the dead seen as a person who is sleeping, expressing the impression that who sees him imagines to be able to talk to him again. From this moment on, Harry decides to leave the school and start the hunt for the other Horcruxes on his own. Hermione and Ron, of
course, will go with him, as to represent the value of having people we love to help us during our difficult path.

Then, Hedwig gets killed by one of the Death Eaters during Harry’s transfer to the Burrow in *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* (66-67). It’s the night of Harry’s seventeenth birthday, which means he has become an adult in the Wizards’ community, so Hedwig’s death — as she had been his pet during his years at school — marks his growing up, leaving behind childhood, beginning his new adventure; after the mentor’s death, this symbolizes an important moment of passage.

As regards *The Mortal Instruments* esalogy, we focus in particular on Max Lightwood’s death scene. Clare describes nine-year-old Max’s corpse without narrating directly the scene of his murder by the hands of Clary’s evil brother Sebastian; she focuses on another kind of representation:

> There they were, the Lightwoods: Maryse with her arms around Isabelle, who was sobbing, and Robert Lightwood sitting on the ground and holding something—no, someone, and Clary thought of the first time she had seen Max, at the Institute, lying limp and asleep on a couch, his glasses knocked askew and his hand trailing along the floor. He can sleep anywhere, Jace had said, and he almost looked as if he were sleeping now, in his father’s lap, but Clary knew he wasn’t. Alec was on his knees, holding one of Max’s hands, but Jace was just standing where he was, not moving, and more than anything else he looked lost, as if he had no idea where he was or what he was doing there. (*City of Glass*, 290)

Max, as Dumbledore, is depicted through the focalizer’s viewpoint as he was sleeping. There are no words referencing to Clary’s bodily-perception of sorrow or pain; the reader is hit by the scene for the presence of the boy’s family: all members are mentioned, all of them gathered and physically united — “arms around”, holding someone”, “holding hands”. It is
like a painting: readers get the emotion through what they see. Young characters’ deaths are usually employed to represent innocence destroyed by what is evil and ruthless, and as catalyzer for the protagonists’ action, who, by reacting to these events, are awakened in their conscience. It is the same for Katniss, who sees her little ally in the Arena dying:

Her hand reaches out and I clutch it like a lifeline. As if it’s me who’s dying instead of Rue. “You blew up the food?” she whispers. “Every last bit,” I say. “You have to win,” she says. “I’m going to. Going to win for both of us now,” I promise. […]

“Don’t go.” Rue tightens her grip on my hand. “Course not. Staying right here,” I say. I move in closer to her, pulling her head onto my lap. I gently brush the dark, thick hair back behind her ear. “Sing,” she says, but I barely catch the word. Sing? I think. Sing what? I do know a few songs. Believe it or not, there was once music in my house, too. Music I helped make. My father pulled me in with that remarkable voice — but I haven’t sung much since he died. Except when Prim is very sick. Then I sing her the same songs she liked as a baby. Sing. My throat is tight with tears, hoarse from smoke and fatigue. But if this is Prim’s, I mean, Rue’s last request, I have to at least try. The song that comes to me is a simple lullaby, one we sing fretful, hungry babies to sleep with. It’s old, very old I think. Made up long ago in our hills. What my music teacher calls a mountain air. But the words are easy and soothing, promising tomorrow will be more hopeful than this awful piece of time we call today. I give a small cough, swallow hard, and begin: […] Rue’s eyes have fluttered shut. Her chest moves but only slightly. My throat releases the tears and they slide down my cheeks. But I have to finish the song for her. […] The final lines are barely audible.

Here your dreams are sweet and tomorrow brings them true
Here is the place where I love you.

Everything’s still and quiet. Then, almost eerily, the mockingjays take up my song. For a moment, I sit there, watching my tears drip down on her face. Rue’s cannon fires. I lean forward and press my lips against her temple. Slowly, as if not to wake her, I lay her head back on the ground and release her hand. (Hunger Games, 229-231)
This touching scene moves the reader for the dialogue and Katniss’s promise to win, for her tenderness — she is usually uncomfortable and not kind around people — and for the presence of symbols. The mockingjays, which will become symbol for the revolution and for Katniss herself, take up the song as they were awakening Katniss from her sorrow in order to do something. Besides, Rue constantly reminds Katniss of her sister Prim; Katniss thinks “But if this is Prim’s, I mean, Rue’s last request, I have to at least try.”: it’s not that she cares about Rue just because she thinks of Prim, rather, the importance of life itself is underlined, in particular through youths, who still lacks instruments to understand, react and fight what comes to them. Prim will suffer the same fate in the last book of the trilogy, *Mockingjay*:

First I get a glimpse of the blond braid down her back. Then, as she yanks off her coat to cover a wailing child, I notice the duck tail formed by her untucked shirt. I have the same reaction I did the day Effie Trinket called her name at the reaping. At least, I must go limp, because I find myself at the base of the flagpole, unable to account for the last few seconds. Then I am pushing through the crowd, just as I did before. Trying to shout her name above the roar. I’m almost there, almost to the barricade, when I think she hears me. Because for just a moment, she catches sight of me, her lips form my name. And that’s when the rest of the parachutes go off. (*Mockingjay*, 406)

Differently from Rue’s death scene, this one isn’t described in detail, with blood, violence and fear that were inherent to the space of the Arena. This scene is about war: in the middle of the chaos, the protagonist recognizes her sister and can’t do anything to save her. It is what marks Katniss irremediably, and from her words we feel her trauma: chapter 25 begins with her thoughts on being recovered after the fall of the Capitol, end of the battles, and the death of her sister. Short sentences, random thoughts, no dialogue with those who speak to her. But then comes the point that makes her understand that the new despotic government is
just like the old one: President Snow, ruler of the old government, says to her that the parachutes that killed her sister were ordered by the new President, Coin, in order to have Katniss finally without doubts on her side. Readers follow Katniss’ wonderings, try to figure out what has happened too; then President Coin proposes new Hunger Games with the children of the Capitol as a revenge:

Was it like this then? Seventy-five years or so ago? Did a group of people sit around and cast their votes on initiating the Hunger Games? Was there dissent? Did someone make a case for mercy that was beaten down by the calls for the deaths of the districts’ children? The scent of Snow’s rose curls up into my nose, down into my throat, squeezing it tight with despair. All those people I loved, dead, and we are discussing the next Hunger Games in an attempt to avoid wasting life. Nothing has changed. Nothing will ever change now. (Mockingjay, 432)

This passage makes readers question the true grayscale of political values at stake here, and reflect about real life too: as history teaches, powerful governments that don’t hold human life as sacred succeed one another and those who don’t break the scheme remain stuck in this mechanism. This is Katniss’s final choice when asked to execute President Snow: “The point of my arrow shifts upward. I release the string. And President Coin collapses over the side of the balcony and plunges to the ground. Dead.” (Mockingjay, 434). She has decided for herself, this time not just instinctively: she is aware of the risk of being executed for killing the President, but she believes in this way she can prevent the rise to power of another government like Snow’s.

Individual choices are an issue deeply problematized in these narratives; in The Hunger Games trilogy, it’s not just about Katniss: she comes to her conclusions thanks to what she went through, and two other characters influence her a lot. We are talking, firstly, about Gale, who
is presented from the beginning as often ranting about the unfairness of the system. Katniss comments his attitude as follows:

His rages seem pointless to me, although I never say so. It’s not that I don’t agree with him. I do. But what good is yelling about the Capitol in the middle of the woods? It doesn’t change anything. It doesn’t make things fair. It doesn’t fill our stomachs. In fact, it scares off the nearby game. (*The Hunger Games* 13-14)

And then, conversing on the possibilities of being sorted:

“So do you. And you’ve had more practice. Real practice,” he says. “You know how to kill.”
“Not people,” I say. “How different can it be, really?” says Gale grimly. The awful thing is that if I can forget they’re people, it will be no different at all. (*The Hunger Games* 39-40)

Gale is strong-headed and doesn’t reflect much about things: comparing hunting animals to killing people underlines a certain indifference to the value of human life, a cynical, practical vision of life that Katniss demonstrates to understand but doesn’t share.

Eventually, blinded by the hatred for the Capitol and its system, Gale ends up losing sight of what is to be done in order to end this same system. In fact, as a strategist for the rebels, he copies Snow’s strategies in battle and turns out to be one of the architects of the parachutes’ fall that killed Prim (*Mockingjay*, chapters 24-25). Gale provides readers with an embodiment of a black-and-white way of thinking: he is sure about what is right and what is wrong, and acts without thinking, becoming a weapon of the new government instead of ending the corrupted system.

These embodiments make readers think about all the shades of right and wrong, of acceptable compromises, by showing the development of characters and their way to
respond to external influences; Gale is the opposite of Peeta, who, by understanding the Capitol’s mechanisms, refuses to be part of them, from the very beginning:

"[...] My best hope is not to disgrace myself and..." He hesitates.
"And what?" I say.
"I don't know how to say it exactly. Only... I want to die as myself. Does that make any sense?"
he asks. I shake my head. How could he die as anyone but himself? "I don't want them to change me in there. Turn me into some kind of monster that I'm not."
I bite my lips, feeling inferior. While I've been ruminating on the availability of trees, Peeta has been struggling with how to maintain his identity. His purity of self. "Do you mean you won't kill anyone?" I ask.
"No, when the time comes, I'm sure I'll kill just like everybody else. I can't go without a fight. Only I keep wishing I could think of a way to... to show the Capital they don't own me. That I'm more than a piece in their Games," says Peeta.
"But you're not," I say. "None of us are. That's how the Games work."
"Okay, but within the framework, there's still you, there's still me," he insists. "Don't you see?"
"A little. Only... no offense, but who cares, Peeta?" I say.
"I do. I mean, what else am I allowed to care about at this point?" he asks angrily. He's locked those blue eyes on mine now, demanding an answer. (Collins, The Hunger Games 141-142)

Peeta understands the situation before Katniss, who, at the beginning, accepts the mechanism of the Games and tries to survive. She will repeat to herself Peeta’s idea of being “more than a piece in their Games”, and this will reveal helpful to understand her role. This doesn’t mean right and wrong are two opposite, distinct categories; it means that reflecting about the subtle line between them may help us to make conscious decisions in our life, decisions that have impact on our future.

See the dialogue between Katniss and Plutarch on the end of the war:
“Are you preparing for another war, Plutarch?” I ask.

“Oh, not now. Now we’re in that sweet period where everyone agrees that our recent horrors should never be repeated,” he says. “But collective thinking is usually short-lived. We’re fickle, stupid beings with poor memories and a great gift for self-destruction. Although who knows? Maybe this will be it, Katniss.”

“What?” I ask.

“The time it sticks. Maybe we are witnessing the evolution of the human race. Think about that.” (Mockingjay, 442)

Plutarch doesn’t deny how people usually behave after wars, he doesn’t speak of a fairy-tale-like happy ending; he’s concrete. However, he demonstrates to be conscious of something more, too: with his claim he seems to point to hope, which is the effect Katniss’ choice of breaking the scheme of succession of corrupted governments had on her environment; it’s the experienced voice that makes reader reflect about the influences their single choices may have on a larger scale.

One other character whose choices can be discussed is Draco Malfoy in Harry Potter. Reflecting about Draco’s development, readers question not only the impact our choices have on the future, but also on what led us to take them in the past. Draco was brought up into a rich family, who considers itself as Pureblood – which means that there is no Muggles’ blood in their ancestry. They supported the Dark Lord when he ascended, and avoided prison when he disappeared thanks to contacts with corrupted authorities. Draco was raised in this context, he was taught that Purebloods are superior to Half-bloods, Muggle-borns and all the other magical creatures; he is spoiled, and behaves like his family does. He grows up to become a Death Eater when Voldemort returns; we see how he arrived at this point, but also the difficulty with which he faces the situation: he cannot to kill Dumbledore as he was asked
by Voldemort\textsuperscript{105}, he is vulnerable, indecisive, and the main reason why he acts like he does is his cowardice. Compare this character with Harry’s godfather Sirius: he was raised in the same kind of rich racist family, but chose to become a different person by questioning himself. The situation provides an opportunity to change when they arrive at Hogwarts (although Sirius did it twenty years before): it is the representation of the passage from the environment of the family — who provides the individual with a certain ideological frame, education and opportunities — to society — where the individual is more on his/her own.

Draco is uncomfortable in the role his parents chose for him: he isn’t able to kill Dumbledore as he was appointed to do. He demonstrates he has a conscience, some sense of guilt, that is more of a weak adolescent than a ruthless Death Eater. Compare also how the two characters end: Sirius gets killed in fighting the Death Eaters (\textit{Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix}) while Draco gets saved by Harry and his friends during the final battle at Hogwarts and then manages to escape with his parents when the situation becomes critical for Voldemort and his allies (\textit{Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows}).

This discourse on individuals’ paths and choices leads us to another aspect of the narration that may make these stories attractive also for older people: the presence of controversial characters. Indeed, principal villains and heroes stand as more symbolic figures who convey values in a direct way (see also 2.3), and it is true that despite undergoing a process of growth, heroes remain the heroes of their story. But a good number of characters in these narratives are given an equal amount of qualities and flaws that enhances discussions on their being good or bad people, on their choices, on readers’ judgements on them. Notice

\textsuperscript{105} See \textit{Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince}.
that these characters are both youths and adults, but those who are adults are given a more complicated life path that explains a lot about them.

Some of these adult figures are worth analyzing, and all of them are related by the characteristic of being guides for the protagonists. To begin with *The Mortal Instruments*, let us consider Jocelyn, Clary’s mother: she’s kept hidden from Clary their being Shadowhunters for sixteen years; when Clary finds out, she feels ambivalent sentiments towards her, and hesitates to trust her at the beginning. Jocelyn explains that she hid the truth to protect Clary from her evil father. Parents may be able to understand this choice more than sons and daughters; but this is not the most difficult thing to understand about Jocelyn. In fact, she has been married to the evil Valentine, and this is an event Clary cannot understand, and needs her mother’s direct explanation. The passage that follows comes from the chapter titled “The Shadowhunter’s Tale” in *City of Glass*; the Shadowhunter is Jocelyn, who recounts her story of rebellion to a husband who turned out to be a monster and to the Circle he created for his insane purposes.

“How about starting with how you could marry Valentine? How you could have married a man like that, made him my father—he’s a monster.” “No. He’s a man. He’s not a good man. But if you want to know why I married him, it was because I loved him.” “You can’t have,” Clary said. “Nobody could.” “I was your age when I fell in love with him,” Jocelyn said. “I thought he was perfect—brilliant, clever, wonderful, funny, charming. I know, you’re looking at me as if I’ve lost my mind. You only know Valentine the way he is now. You can’t imagine what he was like then. When we were at school together, everyone loved him. He seemed to give off light, in a way, like there was some special and brilliantly illuminated part of the universe that only he had access to, and if we were lucky, he might share it with us, even just a little.” [...]

But maybe everyone in love felt that way. (*City of Glass*, 387-388)
This explanation of Jocelyn’s reminds us of simple human truths, and Clary’s last sentence is a clue for us: a sixteen-year-old who understand her own way of acting for love. Then Jocelyn goes on:

It was like being at the center of the world, with all this activity swirling around us, all this passion, and through it all I was by Valentine’s side. He never made me feel dismissed or inconsequential. No, I was a key part of the Circle. I was one of the few whose opinions he trusted. He told me over and over that without me, he couldn’t do any of it. Without me, he’d be nothing.” “He did?” Clary couldn’t imagine Valentine saying anything like that, anything that made him sound…vulnerable. “He did, but it wasn’t true. Valentine could never have been nothing. He was born to be a leader, to be the center of a revolution. More and more converts came to him. They were drawn by his passion and the brilliance of his ideas. He rarely even spoke of Downworlders in those early days. It was all about reforming the Clave, changing laws that were ancient and rigid and wrong. (389)

Here the description of Valentine reminds us of powerful dictators and the effect they have on people: through charisma, brilliance, words of revolution, passion, they demonstrate to be able to convince people of anything they want. Jocelyn says that she began to understand the truth about her husband when she discovered he wanted their friend Luke to commit suicide because he was bitten by a werewolf. She was confirmed of her suspects when she found out he had been trying secret experiments with demons’ blood on her when she was pregnant of their first son, Clary’s older brother — who becomes the villain of the second trilogy. Jocelyn justifies her actions to Clary:

It was why I did what I did. I thought it was the only way to protect you—taking your memories, making you into as much of a mundane as I could. Hiding you in the mundane world. It was stupid, I realize that now, stupid and wrong. And I’m sorry, Clary. I just hope you can forgive me—if not now, then in the future. (City of Glass, 399)
Her admission of being sorry, her recognizing her mistakes, her telling the truth, are all actions that come out of a reflection on past actions, something a parent may understand more than a youth for being in the same place, but may also help a youth to understand parents’ choices, which is quite a central argument in human life from adolescence on. We will discuss about mothers’ role in the next section, and stay focused for a moment on the development of identity: humans make mistakes, and, when they are young, they are likely to do them with more recklessness and not fully-developed consciousness. Recognizing mistakes and trying to remedy them amounts to growing up. Jocelyn organized and started the Uprising against her husband with the help of her friend Luke – who turned into a werewolf: what surrounds us may influence us, but it is our ability to decide for ourselves and taking up our responsibilities that turn us into the adults we want to be. The protagonists of these narratives demonstrate to learn from the adults they meet, from their merits but also from their mistakes.

In the *Harry Potter* saga, let us consider the figure of Albus Dumbledore. Harry’s mentor is depicted throughout six books as the confident, wise, mysterious Headmaster whom Harry trusts entirely; it is after Dumbledore’s death that we learn facts of his life that make Harry — and readers with him — question him. Eventually, readers see him as more human, recognizing his mistakes but also his regrets and deep faith in Harry and the ideal of love. In *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, during their conversation in the limbo between life and death that Harry has experience of, Dumbledore admits to Harry that he had thirst for power, and he was convinced into reprimanding his conscience and doubts, just like Jocelyn, by the person he loved most — the dark wizard Grindelwald: this makes readers question not just individual choices, but also the ideal of love. Dumbledore grew up as a

---

106 *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, chapter 35.
brilliant student who wanted glory, with an ill sister to care after — Ariana — who eventually died in a fight between Grindelwald, Dumbledore himself and his brother Aberforth. Dumbledore was convinced by Grindelwald to become Masters of Death by finding the Deathly Hallows because he felt trapped in his difficult family situation; he chose the easier way to deal with his difficulties, and as a matured adult, recognizes his mistakes — again, the same thing Jocelyn does — in telling the truth to Harry and saying he was sorry.

Here is Dumbledore’s explanation to Harry after his voluntary sacrifice to Voldemort in the Dark Forest:

> For the first time since Harry had met Dumbledore, he looked less than an old man, much less. He looked fleetingly like a small boy caught in wrongdoing. “Can you forgive me?” he said. “Can you forgive me for not trusting you? For not telling you? Harry, I only feared that you would fail as I had failed. I only dreaded that you would make my mistakes. I crave your pardon, Harry. I have known, for some time now, that you are the better man.” [...](Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows 781)

Dumbledore is depicted as looking “like a small boy”: he is not confident as usual; he is not Harry’s guide anymore, he is presented as a person that Harry loves. He underlines Harry’s qualities again and again, comparing Harry to himself: “I loved them, I loved my parents, I loved my brother and my sister, but I was selfish, Harry, more selfish than you, who are a remarkably selfless person, could possibly imagine” (784) and then ““It was the truth I feared. [...] You may call me cowardly: You would be right, Harry.” (787) He demonstrates to seek approval from Harry, in recognizing him as a better man than himself.

In the following passage we recognize in the conversation the wisdom of elders that look back and know what their life has been and the power we have to become better persons:
I had proven, as a very young man, that power was my weakness and my temptation. It is a curious thing, Harry, but perhaps those who are best suited to power are those who have never sought it. Those who, like you, have leadership thrust upon them, and take up the mantle because they must, and find to their own surprise that they wear it well.” [...]  
“Maybe a man in a million could unite the Hallows, Harry. I was fit only to possess the meanest of them, the least extraordinary. I was fit to own the Elder Wand, and not boast of it, and not to kill with it. I was permitted to tame and use it, because I took it, not for gain, but to save others from it.”  
“But the Cloak, I took out of vain curiosity, and so it could never have worked for me as it works for you, its true owner. The stone I would have used in an attempt to drag back those who are at peace, rather than enable my self-sacrifice, as you did. You are the worthy possessor of the Hallows.”

Dumbledore patted Harry’s hand, and Harry looked up at the old man and smiled; he could not help himself. How could he remain angry with Dumbledore now? [...] “You are the true master of death, because the true master does not seek to run away from Death. He accepts that he must die, and understands that there are far, far worse things in the living world than dying.”  (Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows, 789-790)

Through the last lines, readers get hit again with a great advice that has to do with what means to be human and to value courage, love, altruism over fear, power and selfishness: it is not about magic or wands, it is about life itself.

The attractiveness of being powerful and great in order to get what we want works the same for villains such as Voldemort and some of his subordinates — Pettigrew, Umbridge, the Malfoys —, for Grindelwald, for Valentine and his son Sebastian, for President Coin; but also for people like Dumbledore, Jocelyn, Gale, etc. All these characters — on the good side and on the evil side — provide readers with examples of life trajectories that took a turn or another depending on specific choices. Besides, the protagonists of the stories have the possibility of being influenced by these examples, and choose bravely and wisely their side.
3.3 Ethics: *Omnia Vincit Amor*

This section zooms in on readers’ interpretations of characters’ behaviors, since they are the most obvious places where to look for the ethical values at stake in these narratives. So far in this chapter we have discussed the employment of higher-order cognitive functions in the process of meaning-making and the subsequent results on the outer levels of readers’ Background; now we are going to see how all levels of the readers’ Background are more or less engaged in the process of interpretation of these narratives and why.

In order to do this, we have to go back firstly to the concepts of consciousness-attribution and consciousness-enactment\(^ {107} \) explained by Caracciolo: we know that they both are skills acquired from interactions that readers have in real life situations, that attribution depends on our natural interpreting bodily and verbal signs to understand other beings, and that enactment consists of an (at least partial) overlapping of characters’ experiences with our experience. Therefore, we may argue that enacting a villain’s consciousness is quite impossible: the authors of these narratives tend to stimulate readers to feel closer to the protagonists (even though without necessarily enacting their consciousness or identifying with them) by assigning to villains ethically questionable behaviors, starkly in contrast with what is supposed to be the readers’ moral\(^ {108} \). This has all to do with sociocultural practices, but also with individuals’ perceptions, emotions and ability of making sense of what is perceived. After all, as we have said, villains work as symbols.

Let’s make the argument clearer with examples: we have discussed some controversial figures who are provided with a background that may enhance readers’ understanding, empathy,

---

\(^ {107} \) See 1.3.4.  
\(^ {108} \) “Moral” is intended here in a broad sense: the set of values sharable by different cultures because of being linked with basic human rights (like freedom and the ideal of love).
sometimes also identification, because of the humanity of their traits, but this is usually not
the case for villains. In fact, antagonists may arguably be compared to dictators\textsuperscript{109} — in
particular 20\textsuperscript{th} century dictators and contemporary ones — as their personalities show a
multiplicity of traits that are strongly in contrast with the protagonists’ ones: where heroes
are interested in the common good and in acting according to shared values, villains act
mainly to acquire more and more power, in a word, for selfish ends. These last figures’
characterization cues readers’ judgements against them: we may accept discussing ideas on
forms of government, economic policies, scientific arguments, but basic human values are
beyond dispute. Besides, we have seen how readers are emotionally pushed to assume the
protagonists’ perspective\textsuperscript{110}: as a consequence, they tend to be situated away from the
villains’ deictic field.

Anyway, readers make sense out of these stories thanks to interpreting these figures’
behaviors and words, too. I underline “behaviors and words” because readers are usually not
presented with the antagonists’ thoughts, since they follow these stories, as we have just
repeated, from the good guys’ points of view\textsuperscript{111}. Moreover, as these narratives are mainly
action-oriented and feature a lot of dialogues, readers’ understanding of characters’
personalities and choices relies a lot on the interpretation of their words and actions.

\textsuperscript{109} See 3.1.2 and 3.2.
\textsuperscript{110} See 2.3.2 and 2.3.3.
\textsuperscript{111} It must be noticed that in Harry Potter’s case sometimes we are provided with glimpses of the villain’s mind,
as Harry shares with him a peculiar bond (see \textit{Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix}, \textit{Harry Potter and the
Half-Blood Prince} and \textit{Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows}); it is an expedient Rowling takes advantage of in
order to make us see something that we have to know about the story and couldn’t be seen otherwise. This is
not, in any case, an exception to the rule as the glimpses belong in Harry’s mind as well.
Caracciolo’s notion of intersubjectivity may be useful here to explain readers’ interpretations of characters’ behaviors. In particular, we will refer to the distinction between primary\textsuperscript{112} and secondary\textsuperscript{113} intersubjectivity.

In the first place, let us consider Voldemort’s attitude to killing, doing anything for power and discriminating. We interpret his thoughts and feelings from the descriptions of his behavior in given situations: even when he is not directly described, we come to know about something he does that enhances our negative evaluation of him\textsuperscript{114}. The most functional example is his way of dealing with people, his ideas on society: when Voldemort takes control over the Ministry of Magic\textsuperscript{115}, dictatorial restrictions for all those who do not support him are enacted, from curfew to the obligation of providing certificates for blood status. Muggle-borns have less rights than wizards, wizards who are suspected not to support the government are interrogated, tortured and sometimes executed\textsuperscript{116}. Magical creatures are treated like inferior beings – elves, in particular, are all supposed to be enslaved by wizards’ families; see, for instance, Dobby’s and Kreacher’s stories\textsuperscript{117}. These details may trigger in readers thoughts about the necessity of guaranteeing education and equal rights for every souled creature, well beyond the mere issue of their legitimate freedom. At the same time, readers will tend to dissociate more and more from the villain.

\textsuperscript{112} “Primary intersubjectivity enables us to grasp another person’s intentions in an embodied, online way through face-to-face interaction […]. This capability is closer to perception than to higher-order cognitive processes” (Caracciolo 142).

\textsuperscript{113} Secondary intersubjectivity consists in “[…] tell[ing] stories about the behavior of other people, evaluating it in the light of the norms and standards handed down to us by our culture” (Caracciolo 143).

\textsuperscript{114} See, in particular, Harry’s glimpses in his mind, from Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix to Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows.

\textsuperscript{115} See: Harry Potter and the Half-blood Prince and Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows.

\textsuperscript{116} See: Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows.

\textsuperscript{117} The situation of elves in particular is problematized from the beginning: Dobby, the Malfoy’s house-elf, becomes friend with Harry in Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets, and at the end of the book Harry manages to free him thanks to a stratagem. See also Kreacher’s story in Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows.
Besides, what we have said about education and equal rights is not immediate to grasp: reading about the protagonists’ attitudes make us reflect about it. For instance, Ron, as he has grown up among wizards, is accustomed to see house-elves as enslaved, while Hermione, the most sensitive and bright of the trio, questions the righteousness of this habit:

‘I’ve been researching it thoroughly in the library. Elf enslavement goes back centuries. I can’t believe no one’s done anything about it before now.’

‘Hermione – open your ears,’ said Ron loudly. ‘They. Like. It. They like being enslaved!’

‘Our short-term aims,’ said Hermione, speaking even more loudly than Ron, and acting as though she hadn’t heard a word, ‘are to secure house-elves fair wages and working conditions. Our long-term aims include changing the law about non-wand-use, and trying to get an elf into the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, because they’re shockingly under-represented.’ (Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire, 198)

This is just the first of these protagonists’ serious debates about this kind of matters, and quite a clear example. Ron’s and Hermione’s attitudes are not described in detail, but their words encourage readers’ reflections: while Hermione is always questioning what she sees and experiences, Ron demonstrates to be lazier and yet aggressive when his positions are questioned. He speaks “loudly”: the adverb reminds us of aggressiveness, of trying to affirm his position; Hermione speaks “even more loudly than Ron”, as to impose her position and not listen to him. Thus, we interpret the situation making sense of characters’ thoughts and attitudes through what we are shown (like a “face-to-face” interaction), but also receive the message they are discussing about. We are cued to recognize Hermione’s stance as the fairest between the two, despite the fact that her attitude may be a little annoying too. This is what

118 See also the foundation of S.P.E.W. (Society for Promotion of Elves Welfare) in Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire.

119 A development is shown throughout the last four books of the saga, until the moment when Ron worries about saving all the elves of Hogwarts’ kitchens during the final battle (Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows).
acquiring consciousness means: readers — along with protagonists — are indirectly invited to question themselves on their way of thinking and try to change if they realize they are wrong.

Readers’ intersubjective engagement does not concern just their interpretation of villains: another example of readers’ exercise of intersubjectivity is judging adult figures in *The Mortal Instruments*. When readers meet Jocelyn, they do it from Clary’s perspective: Jocelyn’s behavior means something to them thanks to what they have experienced in life as far as mothers’ attitudes are concerned, but it is also filtered through Clary’s feelings toward her. Then Jocelyn disappears for two books; as with Voldemort in *Harry Potter*, readers “fill the gap” between what they come to know about the Circle’s actions and what they perceived from Jocelyn’s behavior. They do it by employing personal “filters” due to their own Background: in this case, we are talking about secondary intersubjectivity. When readers meet Jocelyn again in *City of Glass*, they hear her direct explanation of what the Circle was and why they were attracted to Valentine: he actually demonstrates which is his role in the story, and readers cannot but take a stance towards the depicted political situation.

As Jocelyn tells Clary in *City of Glass*:

> When we were at school together, everyone loved him. He seemed to give off light, in a way, like there was some special and brilliantly illuminated part of the universe that only he had access to, and if we were lucky, he might share it with us, even just a little. [...] It was like being at the center of the world, with all this activity swirling around us, all this passion, and through it all I was by Valentine’s side. He never made me feel dismissed or inconsequential. No, I was a key part of the Circle. I was one of the few whose opinions he trusted. He told me over and over that without me, he couldn’t do any of it. Without me, he’d be nothing.”

“He did?” Clary couldn’t imagine Valentine saying anything like that, anything that made him sound...vulnerable. “He did, but it wasn’t true. Valentine could never have been nothing. He was born to be a leader, to be the center of a revolution. More and more converts came to
him. They were drawn by his passion and the brilliance of his ideas. He rarely even spoke of Downworlders in those early days. It was all about reforming the Clave, changing laws that were ancient and rigid and wrong. Valentine said there should be more Shadowhunters, more to fight the demons, more Institutes, that we should worry less about hiding and more about protecting the world from demonkind. That we should walk tall and proud in the world. It was seductive, his vision: a world full of Shadowhunters, where demons ran scared and mundanes, instead of believing we didn’t exist, thanked us for what we did for them. We were young; we thought thanks were important. We didn’t know.” (387-389)

It is a story of youths who, taken by their impulsiveness and passion, were tricked into trusting the clever Valentine because he understood their individual needs and offered them a Circle to be themselves: they felt freer and safer, before thinking about what they were really doing in their society. Youths understand this behavior because they can mirror themselves in Jocelyn and the others of the Circle; adults may recognize attitudes that led them to certain mistakes in their lives due to passion and impulsiveness. The protagonists of the esalogy learn from their parents’ mistakes and act differently: it is true that the old and strict Clave\textsuperscript{120} needs reforms, but this cannot be done through violence and further discrimination. Valentine founds his Circle on people’s discontent, which is, again, a typical maneuver of dictators: people trust them because they promise a radical change. The problem with these revolutions is that they are not founded on social welfare, but rather on violent opposition\textsuperscript{121}. Notice that the Clave may represent old structures like the Church’s or governments’ before reforms; the members of this organ feel someway superior to other creatures — Werewolves, Vampires, Faeries, Warlocks — and, in this sense, they are not much different from Valentine, until they

\textsuperscript{120} The Shadowhunters’ organ of government.

\textsuperscript{121} Blood discrimination is an issue of this narrative too: Valentine, like Voldemort, despises all creatures who are different from Shadowhunters, so much so that he allies with demons to try and defeat them. Another important debated issue is that of sexuality, as one of the protagonists, Alec, is homosexual and experiences difficulties for this (see in particular City of Glass, City of Fallen Angels and City of Lost Souls).
decide to form an Alliance between all creatures, make social reforms, and accept representatives for Downworlders into the Clave.

The audience is sensitized about all these social issues by following scenes that feature discussions about them and by comparing protagonists’ and antagonists’ behaviors: in this way, readers are given different opportunities to form ideas about characters and to elaborate judgements on them.

As far as judgements are concerned, Phelan’s work may be useful in our analysis once again. First of all, in the Introduction to *Experiencing Fiction*, he claims that “[…] judgments are crucial to the activation of our multileveled responses and to our understanding of the interrelations among form, ethics, and aesthetics” (6). Then he distinguishes among three types of narrative judgement:

[…], readers make three main types of narrative judgment, each of which has the potential to overlap with or affect the other two: interpretive judgments about the nature of actions or other elements of the narrative, ethical judgments about the moral value of characters and actions, and aesthetic judgments about the artistic quality of the narrative and of its parts. (7)

For the sake of our analysis, we consider especially the first two types of judgements, the interpretive and the ethical. It has to be specified that these two influence each other: we make interpretive judgements because we make meanings out of characters’ actions and dialogues, and we also make ethical judgements because we interpret these characters’ actions according to sociocultural and personal standards of value. In particular, the ethics

---

122 See also section 2.3.3 on judgements.
123 Phelan elaborates seven theses about narrative judgements; the distinction among the different kinds is Thesis number 2.
124 Phelan specifies it in his seventh thesis: “individual readers’ ethical and aesthetic judgments significantly influence each other, even as the two kinds of judgments remain distinct and not fully dependent on each other” (14).
that stands behind these protagonists’ choices includes, as we have said, social welfare, self-sacrifice, altruism, peace ideals: all values that result from people’s positive relationships. In a nutshell, the ethics of these narratives revolves around the concept of love. Thus, in this last part of our analysis, let us make some examples of passages that revolve around this ethics and enhance our positive judgement on the so-called good guys.

Love is presented in all its shapes and shades: love for friends, romantic relationships, the thin boundary between these two during the early adulthood, parental love, etc. It turns out to be the principal motif of this type of narratives, and also a theme developed to show the characters’ development, as the protagonists gradually grow going through different phases and levels of comprehension of what surrounds them. Again, the notions of primary and secondary intersubjectivity may help us unpack these concepts. In particular, we consider gestures of protection toward loved ones, as the most obvious expressions of the characters’ inner feelings and the mirror of their ethical positioning as far as love is concerned. For instance, Katniss and Peeta decide to eat poisonous berries together not to kill each other (The Hunger Games); Simon sacrifices his memory about the Shadow World and his friends to let them escape from Edom (City of Heavenly Fire). We have already talked about Harry’s will to sacrifice himself into the Dark Forest; some characters also lose their lives to save others or fight for what they believe in (see for instance “Mad-Eye” Moody, Lupin, Tonks and Snape in Harry Potter, or Cinna in Catching Fire).

Anyway, there is one particular form of love that is worth discussing, maternal love. Readers are exposed to the importance of parents’ deeds to protect their children and are invited to consider the depth of this kind of love, even when they are not able to identify with the characters: interpretive judgements on characters’ behaviors may help them to deeply engage with the narrative and to elaborate an ethical judgement. We have already talked
about Jocelyn’s decisions in section 3.2.1, but the other narratives present very similar cases.

In the *Harry Potter* saga we find a lot of examples of maternal love: first of all there’s Lily, Harry’s mother, who sacrificed her life to protect his son from Voldemort, after her husband James had already been killed. Both parents literally thrown their bodies on Voldemort to protect their child: returning again and again on this concept, circling it from the outside — in the first book we know what had just happened from the conversation between Dumbledore and Professor McGonagall — and coming nearer and nearer to the final explanation of the situation, makes of it a seminal moment which goes a long way in characterizing Harry and his deeper motive as altruistic. In that moment, Harry had been doubly marked, both by Voldemort — who, in that moment, involuntarily chose him as his counterpart — and by his parents’ love, which guaranteed him some kind of protection deeper than any magic could have done, a counterbalance for Voldemort’s evil. Eventually, the explanation comes full circle when everything that Dumbledore had guessed actually happens:

[Voldemort] had rendered his soul so unstable that it broke apart when he committed those acts of unspeakable evil, the murder of your parents, the attempted killing of a child. But what escaped from that room was even less than he knew. He left more than his body behind. He left part of himself latched to you, the would-be victim who had survived. “And his knowledge remained woefully incomplete, Harry! That which Voldemort does not value, he takes no trouble to comprehend. Of house-elves and children’s tales, of love, loyalty, and innocence, Voldemort knows and understands nothing. Nothing. That they all have a power beyond his own, a power beyond the reach of any magic, is a truth he has never grasped. (777-778)

---

125 It is mentioned by Dumbledore in *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, p. 245; by Sirius Black in *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, p. 268-271; 274-275. It is also explained at the end of *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, p. 570/576/579; in *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* from Voldemort’s point of view, p. 379-382; from Dumbledore’s conversation with Snape, pp. 741-743, 750-753, among others.

126 *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone*, chapter 1.

127 See also the explanation of the prophecy in *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, chapter 37.
See that also more direct explanations on parents’ attitudes enhance readers’ ethical judgements: what Dumbledore says about Voldemort, explains his inability to love and value “children’s tales, [of] love, loyalty, and innocence”. It was his lack of experiencing love that resulted in him becoming what he has become, and also the cause of his fall.

Also Narcissa Malfoy, Draco’s mother, is a maternal figure worth discussing: she contributes to save Harry’s life to know if her own son is still alive. She is the one who checks on Harry’s being dead after Voldemort cast on him the mortal curse, risking her life in the middle of a group of Death Eaters, and lies to the Dark Lord — the most powerful Legilimens of all times — about it (Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows, 794-795). She saves Harry with this act, and also represents the greatness and depth of a mother’s sentiment towards her child. We might have despised her at first, but this kind of gestures mitigates our ethical judgement on her.

One other good example of maternal love is Molly, the Weasleys’ mother. She became a maternal figure for Harry when he arrived at the Burrow for the first time, and took care of him every time she could. There is a good number of scenes which make readers interpret Molly’s behavior and elaborate a positive judgement on her, and, on the other hand, a negative one on her opponents (who, of course, are also the “good guys”’ opponents). Molly’s climactic scene in Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows, when she faces and kills sadistic and

---

128 Wizard able to read minds.
129 See section 3.2, p. 118.
130 For instance, in Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire (2000), we see Molly demonstrating her affection for Harry like he was a son of hers, after he saw Voldemort killing Cedric (620). Or, also, in Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows we see Harry recognizing how much Molly means to him (130).
ruthless Bellatrix Lestrange, Voldemort’s most loyal lieutenant, all on her own during the final battle (806-807).

This discourse on female figures and their behaviors and choices problematizes also the ideal of femininity in these narratives: women are characterized differently, and their being heroes does not depend on resembling actual warriors or leaving behind characteristics that are usually deemed as “feminine.” Molly is first of all a mother; she is depicted as sensitive, often worried for the members of the family but also as the strictest of the Weasleys’ parents. Her force draws principally on her being a mother, from her ability to love. Also younger female characters, such as Hermione and Ginny, demonstrate to be able to fight, to sacrifice themselves for others, while maintaining their identities and overcoming the “damsel-in-distress” scheme typical of older narratives. Andromeda Black (Narcissa’s and Bellatrix’s sister) left her Pureblood racist family to marry a Muggle; Nymphadora Tonks, Andromeda’s daughter, joins her husband Lupin in the final battle because she does not want to leave him and to avoid the fight. We are provided with negative examples of mothers too: it is what makes readers reflect upon this role, about the strength a person gains from love and the weakness derived from not being able to experience it. See for instance, in The Hunger Games trilogy, Katniss’s mother, in The Mortal Instruments, Jace’s natural mother, Céline, and in Harry Potter Merope Gaunt, Voldemort’s mother. This last one, is quite important as a figure also because she represents Lily’s opponent: Merope had been mistreated by her rude, uneducated, evil father and brother during her whole life; she then prepares a love filter for a Muggle in order to marry him. Her son is born out of fake love, and she is not able to nurture him, demonstrating to be too weak to resist the situation, to repair

---

131 Who may be seen as the opposite of Molly’s maternal love – obsessed and disrespectful.
132 See City of Glass, chapter 17.
for her mistakes. The result of her behavior is a son who turns out to be a psychopath, who never learns to love and does not care about anything in the world but himself. Then, in the end, the Hogwarts battle in itself can be described as the representation of the clash between good and evil — ending with Harry, Lily’s child, directly facing Voldemort, Merope’s child. Harry explains to Voldemort what he was never able to understand:

“[…] I’ve done what my mother did. They’re protected from you. Haven’t you noticed how none of the spells you put on them are binding? You can’t torture them. You can’t touch them. You don’t learn from your mistakes, Riddle, do you?”

“You dare -”

“Yes, I dare,” said Harry. “I know things you don’t know, Tom Riddle. I know lots of important things that you don’t. Want to hear some, before you make another big mistake?”

Voldemort did not speak, but powled in a circle, and Harry knew that he kept him temporarily mesmerized at bay, held back by the faintest possibility that Harry might indeed know a final secret...

“Is it love again?” said Voldemort, his snake’s face jeering. “Dumbledore favorite solution, love, which he claimed conquered death, though love did not stop him falling from the tower and breaking like and old waxwork? Love, which did not prevent me stamping out your Mudblood mother like a cockroach, Potter - and nobody seems to love you enough to run forward this time and take my curse. So what will stop you dying now when I strike?”  […]

“It’s your one last chance,” said Harry, “it’s all you’ve got left... I’ve seen what you’ll be otherwise... Be a man... try... Try for some remorse…”

“You dare -?” said Voldemort again.

“Yes, I dare,” said Harry, “because Dumbledore’s last plan hasn’t backfired on me at all. It’s backfired on you, Riddle.”  […]

A red-glow burst suddenly across the enchanted sky above them as an edge of dazzling sun appeared over the sill of the nearest window. The light hit both of their faces at the same time, so that Voldemort’s was suddenly a flaming blur. Harry heard the high voice shriek as he too yelled his best hope to the heavens, pointing Draco’s wand:

“Avada Kedavra!”

“Expelliarmus!”
The bang was like a cannon blast, and the golden flames that erupted between them, at the dead center of the circle they had been treading, marked the point where the spells collided. Harry saw Voldemort’s green jet meet his own spell, saw the Elder Wand fly high, dark against the sunrise, spinning across the enchanted ceiling like the head of Nagini, spinning through the air toward the master it would not kill, who had come to take full possession of it at last. And Harry, with the unerring skill of the Seeker, caught the wand in his free hand as Voldemort fell backward, arms splayed, the slit pupils of the scarlet eyes rolling upward. Tom Riddle hit the floor with a mundane finality, his body feeble and shrunken, the white hands empty, the snakelike face vacant and unknowing. Voldemort was dead, killed by his own rebounding curse, and Harry stood with two wands in his hand, staring down at his enemy’s shell. (812-815)

This is a crucial passage for different reasons: firstly, it is the final moment when the hero and his evil counterpart challenge each other. Secondly, the protagonist demonstrates his being the hero by showing mercy and trying to convince the villain to have remorse: our positive judgement on Harry is confirmed once again, and the villain remains stuck in his role because he does not change. Thirdly, Voldemort, who wanted to be the most glorious wizard of all times, the one who never died, has the most human of deaths — Rowling chooses “Tom Riddle” over “Lord Voldemort” to describe his fall, his original name over the one he chose to be the Dark Lord. Besides, it happens “by his own rebounding curse” – which implies that evil choices eventually boomerang n the person that makes them – not by the hero’s hand. Voldemort embodies what is negative in the world: differently from all the other characters, who are depicted as humans with flaws and qualities, he is a symbol in himself. Dumbledore explains to Harry more than once during the story that love is more powerful than any kind of magic or power, referring to how his mother’s love saved him and destroyed what remained of the weak soul of the villain. Thus, readers receive the same message: “Do not
pity the dead, Harry. Pity the living, and above all those who live without love” (*Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, 792).

**Conclusions**

This work aimed at providing a new interpretive perspective on serial YA speculative fiction to complement the already existing rich debate: I deem that the enactivist approach that I employed to read my case studies with its focus on readers’ experiential background and its influence on the reading experience has been quite illuminating.

I think we can say that exploring the interaction between text and reader along enactivist lines managed to give some explanation for the diffusion of the narratives we analyzed.

In conclusion, I want to quote one last time from Marco Caracciolo’s *The Experientiality of Narrative*:

> The strength of the impact of narrative depends on the extent to which our engagement with its representational and expressive devices can reveal and restructure what is at stake in our background of experience — the meanings and values that we negotiate in our embodied interactions with the physical, intersubjective and socio-cultural world. (205)

This explains quite clearly the focus of our analysis: the spread of the literary production we analyzed is widely explained in terms of emotionality and of sharable meanings and values, but also in terms of the affordances employed – such as metaphors, symbols, non-mimetic tropes.
Cognitively, we go about characters as we go about humans: we feel nearer to the character when s/he touches us in some way. These narratives have the potential both to touch us and make us feel so involved in the story as we were part of it. The “experiential dimension of narrative”, as Caracciolo calls it, is what gives our reading experience the taste it has: experience matters, and its value is fundamental also in our interactions with stories, as it helps us to renegotiate again and again our convictions, broaden our way of seeing the world, understand ourselves more deeply.
Works Cited

Primary Sources


**Secondary Sources**

Adler, Shawn, "'Harry Potter' Author J.K. Rowling Opens Up About Books' Christian Imagery."


Merril, Judith. *The Year’s Greatest Science-Fiction and Fantasy. 4th Annual Volume*. Hicksville
Moruzi, Kristine, Michelle J. Smith and Elizabeth Bullen. *Affect, Emotion and Children’s Literature – Representation and Socialization in Texts for Children and Young Adults*. 

Nikolajeva, Maria. *Reading for Learning: Cognitive Approaches to Children’s Literature*. 


