

# Some Issues in Young Adult Literature

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*You are either going to be disgusted by them,  
or you are going to be so filled with love for them  
that your heart almost breaks.  
(The girl who was Saturday night, Heather O' Neill)*

## Introduction

Young adult literature, adolescent literature, juvenile literature, junior books, books for teens, books for tweens... different words to describe texts that bridge the gap between children's literature and adult literature. But, why are there different ways of naming the same genre? Hayn and Nolen (2012) explain that the answer may lie in evolution and that even those who advocate the genre face difficulties in reaching agreement over terminology. Cole (2009) asserts that "given the negative connotations of the words *adolescents* and *teens*, most experts agree upon *young adult literature*" (p. 49).

Literature written for young adults developed after World War II, when the change in the economy offered many teenagers an increase in economic resources and social autonomy. This new context contributed to the growth of a young adult market in the book publishing industry (Habegger, 2004).

During the 1960s, The Young Adult Library Services Association coined the term "young adult" to represent the 12-18 age range and, according to Cart (1996), the 1960s would be "the decade when literature for adolescents could be said to come into its own" (p. 43). In those times, young adult literature referred to realistic fiction that was set in the contemporary world and addressed problems, issues, and life circumstances of interest to young readers.

In recent years, the conventional definition of "young adult" has expanded to include those as young as 10 and, since the late 1990s, as old as 25 (Cart, 2008). Moreover, "literature," which traditionally meant fiction, has also expanded to include new forms of literary nonfiction, new forms of poetry and text combined with pictures, such as picture books, comics and graphic novels.

Although there are varied definitions for Young Adult literature, most of them point to the fact that this genre only includes works *written* for and *marketed* to young adults. In addition, characteristics of a young adult novel usually include several of the following: a teenage (or young adult) protagonist, a first-person perspective, adult characters in the background, a limited number of characters, a compressed time span and familiar setting, current slang, detailed descriptions of appearance and dress, positive resolutions, few (if any) subplots, and an approximate length of 125 to 250 pages, though this last aspect is not necessarily the rule.

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## Themes in Young-Adult Literature

*A lot of people have no idea that right now Y.A. (Young Adult)  
is the garden of Eden of literature.  
Sherman Alexie*

*So much of Young Adult literature has turned dark, almost pathological. It's almost as if there is a race  
to see who can be the most dysfunctional.  
Richard Paul Evans*

A comparative study carried out by Wells (2003) identified the following most common literary themes that are present in young adult books: friendship, getting into trouble, interest in the opposite sex, money, problems with parents (divorce, single parents, remarriage), younger siblings, concern over grades/school, popularity, puberty, race, death, neighborhood, and job/working. Some of the themes found relate directly to adolescent development and some of them reflect characteristics of our society. Since the 1990s, young adult literature has been based on social issues and has dealt with confronting themes including, among others, anorexia, child abuse, depression, sex and drugs.

Kaplan (2005) points out that, with the purpose of engaging more young people in reading, young adult books are constantly in search of the new and are being transformed by topics and themes that years ago would have never been conceived. Kaplan describes some of these “new” themes as “daft”, “a little far-fetched” and “out-of touch with everyday reality”. Yet, amongst supernatural romances, posthuman settings and a super class of human beings, most adolescent readers view characters that live and wrestle with real problems close to their own life experiences as teenagers. Questions of character, identity and values are at the centre of all these themes and a possibility arises for young adults to better understand how they, as adolescents, are being constructed. However, there are those who believe that, instead of helping young people to understand social and emotional problems and develop coping skills, young adult literature can have a negative impact on young readers. For supporters of this last view, openly discussing risky behaviour can lead teenagers to imitate the actions described in the stories they read.

It cannot be denied, though, that young adults do experience traumatic events in real life and young adult literature may engage teenagers emotionally while helping them realise that they are not alone and providing a rich context of information for topics that might not otherwise be freely discussed.

### **Some *disturbing societal issues* as YAL topics**

Chance (2014) states that “not all (YA) novels today are lighthearted... some... tackle difficult and disturbing societal issues.” Two points can be considered in this notion: lightheartedness on the one hand and darkness, as it has been called, on the other. There is what might be described as a degree of superficiality in this type of literary productions, either in the topics themselves or in how they are dealt with. It is possible to read the adventures of young friends playing the roles of amateur detectives in situations in which risk is minimum and success is most certainly achieved by the heroes (such as Edward Stratemeyer’s Hardy Boys or the Nancy Drew series), and it is also possible to find a “difficult and disturbing societal issue” such as genetic manipulation serving as a setting for a story in which the more *disturbing* aspects of cloning are, at best, made a brief reference to –such as in Nancy Farmer’s Matteo Alacrán stories.

There are stories whose setting resemble our own, but in a (bleak) universe, in which the hero needs to grow from innocence to adulthood to survive and help others. These may be dystopian tomorrows in our own Earth (as in Veronica Roth’s Divergent series) or in far off planets and civilizations (Frank Herbert’s Dune); or in universes where the natural is what we call supernatural or magic (such as Terry Pratchett’s Tiffany Aching series, within the Discworld multiverse). Again, there is reference to worrying issues such as the manipulation of the natural environment or the morality of turning human beings into social guinea pigs, but the stress seems to lie on the development of the narrative more than on a desire to make the (young) readers actually reflect on the effect of manipulating nature or society.

And then, there are other stories, in which the “disturbing issue” has a strong role in the plot and makes the protagonist –and the reader– reflect on options and choices and eventually take a stand. Gary Schmidt, for instance, takes the topic of parental abuse and its effect on children, with a great dose of hope in the vital role of friendship and education to overcome the dreadful situation. Khaled Hosseini’s *The Kite Runner* deals, very explicitly, with friendship, betrayal, oppression, homosexuality, racial and other types of violence, and though a work of fiction, it does take place in our time, in our recent history, and in our world, presenting events that, sadly, have most probably happened.

Death and its related issues is also one of those “difficult” topics that have also been tackled by YAL. There is the interesting question whether it has been dealt with mostly in a “lighthearted” way or more as a “disturbing societal issue”. An initial attempt at a reply involves considering the realities connected with death that will be taken into consideration: death as a self-provoked event, death as a consequence of disease, and grief related to death.

Suicide, and teenage suicide to that effect, can be observed in different YAL works, albeit with varying depths in its treatment. A first example is a very early novel that, due to its characteristics, can be considered YAL: Louisa May Alcott’s *An Old Fashioned Girl* (1869). The reader will find a suicide attempted by Jenny, who is, in the main character’s words, “a girl ... who tried to destroy herself simply because she was so discouraged, sick, and poor”. Undoubtedly, there is a whole social situation surrounding this desperate decision: Jenny is said to have been unable to get a decent job, her only option being to take an immoral type of life, which she rejects. Nothing is expressed explicitly –the words “prostitution” or “suicide” do not appear, and the extreme situation of many a poor young woman is thus presented by means of side references only. The happy ending in this story consists in suicidal Jenny being adopted by a gentle matron, who helps her overcome her dire situation. Thus, thanks to this charitable action, the danger of suicide disappears from the girl’s horizon. It is a tale full of hope, in which the “disturbing issue” is presented and dismissed as quickly and lightly as possible, serving as a trigger for a moral reflection for more fortunate young ladies. Teenage suicide, however, is more complex than what Alcott’s simplified reference may lead to believe. Probably Alcott’s Jenny felt the anguish, sadness and despair which lead many teenagers to this terrible decision, but nothing is actually said about it. In contemporary YA novels the approach is quite the opposite. John Green’s *Paper Towns* (2008) seems to lead to the conclusion that teenage Margo has committed suicide. It is a fear the main character, her friend Quentin, does not allow into his mind, but which is never really discarded. There is a balance between the possibility of suicide and the hope that the girl has simply gone missing. In *All the Bright Places* (Jennifer Niven, 2015), the reader has access to the mental and emotional processes that a suicidal teenager goes through. In this work, the driving force of the story is precisely the drama behind the decision of taking one’s own life, from a first person perspective. There is no easy way out in *All the Bright Places*, and the end is actually the opposite of what Alcott offered in her approach to the topic. It is possible, then, to witness a change in perspective: from a covert reference and a miraculous way out to a dark tale of grief and defeat.

Another issue related to death is the suffering that those who will remain alive have to go through. From two different perspectives, *A Monster Calls* (Patrick Ness, 2011) and *The Fault in Our Stars* (John Green, 2014) deal with disease, agony, grief and mourning. In *The Fault in Our Stars*, 17-years old Hazel faces her own coming end: she suffers from terminal cancer. But despite the fact that her young life is seriously compromised, one of her main concerns is what is to become of her parents, especially her mother, not only *if* but *when* she dies. The thoughts that go through her mind, her worries about the pain she, though unwillingly, has caused and will cause to those she loves deeply, present the situation of loss and bereavement perceived by the one who will actually provoke them. It could be said that this presents the other side of the coin: in the stories dealing with suicide commented before, there is little or no concern for those who will bear the departure of the beloved one; the consideration of the feelings of pain, remorse, worry, experienced by the one about to die opens up a wholly different perspective for the readers. In *A Monster Calls*, Conor, the teenage protagonist, needs to face the fact that his mother is dying of cancer, and that he has contradictory feelings regarding her soon-to-occur death. The process of accepting the inevitable –there is nothing he can do to save his mother’s life– is intermingled

with a deeper and maybe more subtle feeling: the ambivalent desire for the end to delay but at the same time to come, which also brings about guilt and shame at his own weakness and self-perceived selfishness.

Unwind (Neil Shusterman, 2007) discusses the topic of abortion, portraying it against a dystopian environment, and from the perspective of the young adults who are going to be retroactively aborted. In this future society, life is sacred in the mother's womb and until the age of 12, but parents can opt for a so-called retroactive abortion, between their children's ages 13 to 18. Their lives are said not to be terminated, but recycled, as each and every part of their bodies is harvested to be used for transplant. Facing death here is seen through the eyes of three of these young people who are going to be *unwound*, that is, who are going to be subjected to the retroactive abortion. Each of the three main characters deal with their fate in a different way, which can relate to general reactions to impending death: exalted acceptance, hopeless resignation, and open refusal. However changed the rules in the dystopian future when these events take place, the young readers can relate to the fears and struggles of the protagonists.

These are some approaches to a "difficult issue" (Chance, 2014). From a rather lighthearted side reference to a deep consideration of the causes, consequences and ramifications of the specific issue chosen here –death, YAL offers a variety of possibilities for readers to consider different facets of the topic.

### Views of darkness

Headlines such as The Guardian's "Yes, teen fiction can be dark –but it shows teenagers that they aren't alone" (June 8, 2011), "YA books on death: is young adult fiction becoming too dark?" (May 11, 2014) or The Times' "Teens Crave Young Adult Books on Really Dark Topics (and That's OK)" (February 6, 2015) have opened a debate about how young adult novels that are characterized as *bleak* (or *dark*) may influence young adult readers.

According to Habegger (2004), "one of the primary reasons that 'bleak' books are considered to be so bleak is due to their themes or subject matter. These books are about teens that face serious problems, such as violence, alcoholism, suicide and the 'Big Ds: death, divorce, disease and drugs'" (p. 36). Habegger also explains that colloquial language is another characteristic of bleak novels and that the settings are usually realistic and contemporary, often in lower-class environments that are harsh and difficult places to live.

For Gardner (2011) there is a reason for the amount of darkness depicted in young adult literature and it is related to the reality that exists behind the bleak young adult books: the darkness in many teens' lives. Gardner explains that our world contains considerable darkness and that, instead of creating it, writers and publishers are reflecting what comes from the hearts and minds of real people.

For instance, Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* (2012), a dark series filled with death, violence, betrayal and mistrust, "is in fact critiquing a number of disturbing elements in current culture: violent video games, violent film and television, celebrity culture, and voyeuristic "reality" television shows" (Ordway, 2012). Similarly, there are many other examples of young adult bestsellers whose titles -not to mention the plots- illustrate dark, even scary, themes.

In Patrick Ness' *A Monster Calls* (2011), already mentioned, darkness is not only perceived in the multi-tonal black and white illustrations that accompany the text but also in the internal and external conflicts the characters are faced with. However, the kind of darkness portrayed in this novel may be defined as heart breaking and truly inspiring rather than cruel and destructive. Conor, the main character, struggles to cope with the consequences of his mother's terminal cancer and, when everything seems to be unclear and obscure, a light of hope is eventually found.

### Some reactions

Probably because of its rather recent expansion, reflection on YAL is also rather recent, and certainly only at its beginning. However, and as some parts of the previous analysis references were made to a changing approach to certain disturbing issues. Though there are plot-driven

stories in which there is little space for serious pondering of topics connected to life, society, change, to name a few, there are other works in which special care has been put so as to allow the reader to actually go beyond the narrative and see aspects that otherwise would have escaped their attention. This possibility, though, has met extreme reactions from adults.

In 2011, The Wall Street Journal published an essay by Meghan Cox Gurdon (essayist and book critic): *Darkness Too Visible*. In it, the author expressed her viewpoint about some current –and popular– topics in published YA novels:

How dark is contemporary fiction for teens? Darker than when you were a child, my dear: So dark that kidnapping and pederasty and incest and brutal beatings are now just part of the run of things in novels directed, broadly speaking, at children from the ages of 12 to 18. (Cox Gurdon, 2011).

She also advocated the idea that the way in which these topics are dealt with verges on sensationalism and naturalizes behaviours and attitudes which should rather be condemned.

This provoked strong reactions, mainly against her position. The most widespread criticism was that Cox Gurdon was trying to turn a blind eye to the fact that life is tough, not only for adults, and that teenagers going through any of the violent situations that are dealt with in YAL need to know that they are not different or bad because they have to undergo extremely difficult situations, and this is in partly achieved when they come to read YA novels. One such reply was given in The Guardian by young adult books author Maureen Johnson. She contended that

If subjects like these are in YA books, it's to show that they are real, they have happened to others, and they can be survived. For teenagers, there is sometimes no message more critical than: you are not alone. This has happened before. The feeling that you are feeling, the thing you are going through –it is a known thing. (Johnson, 2011)

What is more, she strongly dismissed the idea that YAL authors advertise in a way violent behaviours –“No one writing about self-harm is teaching how to self-harm. No one writing about rape is providing instructions on how to rape or how to be raped” (id.).

Even if it is true that the topics chosen in YAL and the way in which they are addressed seem to be more realistic, it is also true that many authors have taken a darker tone. However, the constant flow of novels for young adults offers a wide range of possibilities, from the lighthearted to the very deep, and in this as well the young readers are given a choice.

## Conclusion

It is undeniable that the subjects chosen and the approach taken to discuss them have experienced some change since the early YA novels. In the 1960s and 1970s issues once considered taboo or strictly restricted to adult literature started to be openly discussed in books for young adults (Abate 2010), and thus the scope and depth of what was accepted as a suitable topic for teenage literature became wider. And, in many ways, darker.

It is also undeniable that what were once considered *adults-only topics* in fact affect all age groups. If in the past they were barely or not discussed in relation to young adults, it probably had to do with the fact that the concept of adolescence as a separate period in life, with its own characteristics, emerged in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, with works such as those by anthropologist Margaret Mead. The consideration of disturbing or problematic issues through the eyes of a teenager may well help young readers who are undergoing similar situations to feel, as Johnson (2011) put it, not alone, especially if those around them do not offer the appropriate support.

But it is also true that in some cases, there is more emphasis on the negative aspects of reality, and very little hope. If it is correct to assume that young adults also go through painful situations that put them sorely to the test, it is also important to show some degree of hope, that not everyone and everything is dark, that it is possible to achieve happiness despite the extreme pain suffered. It is not fair to consider that all novels for the younger generations promote despair over hope; but it is accurate, at least, to say that there is an observable growing darkness in YAL.

All in all, what Abate (2010) expressed concerning children's books is also applicable to YAL:

Since the appearance of works for young readers, authors, parents and critics have debated these questions: Is the role of these books to educate young people about the world in which they live, including its unpleasant aspects. Or, is it their responsibility to shield children from such elements?

And, paraphrasing her answer to these questions, the decision largely depends on our social construction of young adulthood and what we, as parents and educators, want for them.

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# A Colourful and Enigmatic View of English Art

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Objective: to present an overview of contemporary art as it is perceived today in the influential English speaking countries, mainly UK and USA. A contrast between traditional and contemporary art will be contemplated as well as historical/cultural influences that originated the various stages in art. The main purpose of this visual presentation<sup>2</sup> is to develop an awareness towards art as it is seen today.

The following views on art throughout history reflect the essence of this talk, art is an expression of the inner self, it is what the artist creates in the spectator through the expression of feelings, which reproduce all the stages in the development of the human mind. Let's analyse them together and see their common denominators: an adventure of his soul, represent the inward significance of the object of art, it makes us see, makes demands on the spectator and it gives life a shape.

Analyse:

*"EVERY PRODUCTION OF AN ARTIST SHOULD BE THE EXPRESSION OF AN ADVENTURE OF HIS SOUL".*

W. Somerset Maugham. 1874/1965

*"THE AIM OF ART IS TO REPRESENT NOT THE OUTWARD APPEARANCE OF THINGS BUT THEIR INWARD SIGNIFICANCE".*

Aristotles. 384 bc

*"ART DOES NOT REPRODUCE WHAT WE SEE; RATHER IT MAKES US SEE"*

Paul Klee. 1879/1940

*"ALL ART SHOULD HAVE A CERTAIN MYSTERY AND SHOULD MAKE DEMANDS ON THE SPECTATOR".*

Henry Moore. 1898/1986

*"THE OBJECT OF ART IS TO GIVE LIVE A SHAPE".*

W. Shakespeare.

Over the past century art has evolved from conventional studio methods, such as painting or sculpture, to include wide-ranging approaches to art making, including conceptual ideas, performances, installations and many experimental forms, a variety of materials and combinations of visual and sound images. It has even invaded public places, country fields (land art) and the most unthinkable places such as installations in churches (as we have seen at the Biennale in Venice, 2015).

Modern art can be bizarre or baffling. It can be funny, frivolous or puzzling and pointless. But it can also be stimulating, thought-provoking, absorbing and exciting. And above all... we should approach it with an open mind, forgetting all the traditional adjectives that usually define it: beautiful, awful, nice, attractive. Remember, you do not have to like art to appreciate it, and this is what we do today, appreciate as a mental exercise that implies involvement. Now we, the spectators, have to participate in the work of art and get involved. Yet many people feel better in the comfort of realistic art, art they can recognise and does not ask them to move away from their comfort zone. Take a risk... get involved and open up to your inner self; art, as Shakespeare says, should shape your life, your soul.

1. Please note that this presentation was based on a visual component.

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Joshua Reynolds (1723-1792) was an influential eighteenth-century English painter, specializing in portraits. He promoted the "Grand Style" in painting which depended on idealization of the scenes and people. But what do we actually see in his paintings? They had to reflect splendor, beauty, outstanding landscape and country life, and above all show the richness of their clothes and perfection of their houses. His grand style showed this...what feelings are reflected, does it arise emotions in the spectator? The beauty of this girl's face conveys only that, static beauty. But the artist was expected to reflect all this, to cover imperfections, to hide anything that did not represent beauty. But the techniques used were perfect, detailed painting demanded a lot of work, concentration and hours of posing! The best artist in those days was the one who never showed ugliness in his paintings.

So... art is changing or not? (*Photos of Ramsey's and Bacon's paintings*)

What is your first reaction when you contemplate these two paintings? Do you have an immediate reaction connected with beauty and ugliness? Do you feel identified with one of them? How have you reacted? You feel forced to move away from your comfort zone, don't you?. These paintings are separated by over two hundred years and reflect all the changes and advances in the world, but also human conflicts.

Allan Ramsey (Scotland, 1713). This portrait is full of both grace and individuality, spotless skin (very rare in those days! There were health problems, dental problems, smallpox marks... but the artist had to hide all that).

And now the other portrait! What feelings does it show? Does it show human perfection? Does human perfection really exist? Francis Bacon (1902-1992), from Ireland, lived almost a century of major changes in history, inventions, wars, and the impact on art was enormous. Art reflects the history of mankind... it has to. His figurative art is known for his bold, emotionally charged imagery. He was unsure of his ability, he drifted as a highly complex bon vivant, his art became more somber, inward-looking and preoccupied with the passage of time and death. Bacon was equally reviled and acclaimed during his lifetime and Margaret Thatcher described him as "that man who paints those dreadful pictures"! And he became one of the most influential painters of portraits reflecting all the human decadence and abject feelings. In the 1950s (after WW2) Bacon shocked the international art world with his bold, severe and nightmarish figures. His figures were disturbing and made viewers to reconsider their feelings, they were affected violently. He was very good at exploring texture and colour to express those feelings.

Since his death his reputation and market value have grown steadily, and his work is amongst the most acclaimed, expensive and sought-after. On 12 November 2013, his *Three Studies of Lucian Freud* set the world record as the most expensive piece of art sold at auction, selling for \$142,405,000 until exceeded by the sale of a Picasso in May 2015 (over \$200.000.000). So art also means money and the art market is these days one of the most active all over the world. Fortunes are paid every day just for the pleasure of possession of a work of art.

And now we go to one of the greatest masters ever, his work continues influencing artists even to this day and many have tried to imitate his paintings of nature...and have realized it is impossible.

Joseph Turner (1775-1852), the "Painter of Light" (*photos from his paintings from Internet*). He was an English Romanticist landscape painter, water colourist, and printmaker. Turner was considered a controversial figure in his day because he moved away from static landscapes and seascapes and showed the real forces of nature. He is now regarded as the artist who elevated landscape painting to its highest in the history of painting. The art critic John Ruskin described him as the artist who could most "stirringly and truthfully measure the moods of Nature."

Now slightly close your eyes and look at his paintings of rough seas and then look at Rothko's. You see the pattern? Wouldn't you say that Rothko captured Turner's seas in his abstract paintings? And this is the height of Abstract Expressionism. Both artists separated by over two centuries yet one of the great sources of inspiration for modern Rothko was precisely "unconventional Turner"! See the cycles of art history?

Mark Rothko (1903-1970) was an American painter of Russian Jewish descent. Although Rothko himself refused to adhere to any art movement, he is generally identified as an Abstract Expressionist. He is one of the most famous postwar American artists. And war was indeed a

major turning point for all the artists. He always favoured colour and clearly states it when he says: “the fact that one usually begins with drawing is already academic. We start with color.” He also said that colours contain their own life force, a “breath of life” lacking in most figurative painting of the era. Many of his paintings are composed of bright, vibrant colors, particularly reds and yellows, expressing energy and ecstasy. By the mid-1950s, however, Rothko began to employ dark blues and greens; for many critics of his work this shift in colors was representative of a growing darkness within Rothko’s personal life.

### What changed?

Thomas Gainsborough (1750) and Hockney (1970) separated by two centuries yet the subject theme is the same... what has changed is the world and the perspective of life. Gainsborough was also a landscape artist and this is one of his most famous portraits of the magnificence of country life for well-off families. This is the period of the Enlightenment. What does he show here? He was definitely asked by this landlord to paint a scene that would reveal his riches, his vast stretches of beautiful land, a beautiful family. It is a combination of portrait and landscape, showing great sensibility, relaxation of power, leisure and possessions gave them peace of mind –in those days these paintings served a marketing purpose! To show how well he was doing in life. But observe one detail that indicates that part of this painting was finished in a studio: silk shoes. The landscape was painted first and on top the family that posed in the studio...the lady of the house with a book on her lap that was never finished! The new conception of success: land and relaxation.

And then we go to David Hockney’s painting... isn’t this a marketing tool as well? It is the portrait of a couple of very famous interior designers in the 60s who wanted to show their von vivant way of life. It was the days of Pop Art. Analyse this painting, in which ways does it resemble Gainsborough? Right, the same theme, the same attitude of showing off but in a different setting, a setting according to the times and history. Lack of sensibility, cold, detached as society was in those days; everything had to show aloofness and superiority given by money and acquisition of goods. Hockney is still very active today and he has ventured into different techniques, also using Polaroid snaps or photolab-prints of a single subject, Hockney arranges a patchwork to make a composite image. Since 2009, Hockney has painted hundreds of pop art portraits, still lifes and landscapes using the Brushes iPhone and iPad application.

### More Portraits

Reverend Patrick Brontë (1777-1861) was an Irish-English priest and author who spent most of his adult life in England and was the father of the writers Charlotte, Emily, and Anne Brontë. So... his profession is clearly visible in this work, austere figures, calm, expressionless (one was expected not to show feelings) and the message is thus conveyed: three well brought up ladies looking for husbands!

Contrast with von vivant actress Marilyn Monroe by controversial artist Andy Warhol (1928-1987). He was an American artist who was a leading figure in the visual art movement known as pop art. His works explore the relationship between artistic expression, celebrity culture and advertisement that flourished by the 1960s. After World War II things started to change, but in different ways, in the countries where the war was fought the reaction was suffering, the anxiety of starting all over... paintings expressed all that. In the countries where such proximity to suffering was not experienced, people concentrated on consuming, on all the funny sides of life, on loudness, mass industry flourished, tins became the latest fad... eating out of tins... and this was USA, and it was the birth of Pop Art in the hands of a publisher and marketing figure who became an artist: Andy Warhol. After a successful career as a commercial illustrator, Warhol became a renowned and sometimes controversial artist. Warhol’s art used many types of media, including hand drawing, painting, printmaking, photography, silk screening, sculpture, film, and music. Marilyn Monroe was an icon, she represented all the excesses of this new era, and this is the origin of this painting. Monroe everywhere, in different colours, but colours are fading in some of the frames...why? It was after her death...an icon fades away to be replaced by others.

Warhol said “during the 1960s, people forgot what emotions were supposed to be. And I do not think they’ve ever remembered”. Everything was superficial and material. Pop arts reflected the light-hearted attitude that people craved after the World War II, that was real society in USA. Artists who had grown up during the war were now witnessing the fierce marketing of new products and they based their work on images that everyone could relate to (tins, cleaning products, stars). It represented Western American society.

Lucien Freud (grandson of psychologist, 1922-2011) was a German-born British painter. Known chiefly portrait and figure paintings, he was widely considered the pre-eminent British artist of his time as his works showed great psychological penetration. He was influenced by the theories of two of the greatest psychologist, Freud and Jung. Many of the poses of his nude models the conscious or unconscious influence of his grandfather’s psychoanalytical couch. His relationship with models and friends was discomfiting and conflictive. Great artist to show all human passions at all ages, his works on old age are very shocking and intense. Bacon and Freud were friends but artistic rivals. The two artists painted each other several times, starting in 1951. The fact that Queen Elizabeth took the risk of posing for him, before his death, shows the great recognition to his art. He was a strong believer in the fact that the face and body have all the power to show the most inner feelings. Needless to say, the differences between portraits in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, and portraits these days, are remarkable; but they are only the results of new conflicts in human beings: art reflects life and its demons.

### **So... when did things change?**

The technical revolution affected people at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, new inventions, cars, electricity, engines and cameras; the industrial revolution gave origin to the exploration of new materials; there was a new conception of life. Electricity created a new world... that of leisure time, days became longer. The invention of photography in 1839 affected artists’ practice the most. The public wanted photographs, not paintings. Some artists questioned the need for copying the world around them when photos could do the work with little effort; some used photos in their compositions. Some works received critical acclaim but disapproval was the most common reaction: *WHEN DID PEOPLE STOP BEING HORRIFIED BY ART THAT DID NOT CONFORM? WHEN DID THEY STOP BEING SCANDALISED AND SHOCKED? NEVER.* Much of the work being produced could only be appreciated by other artists and this continues... up to today.

Then came Carl Jung and his theory on the unconscious collective mind (1875-1961) and the gap between the expected “beautiful art” and “new art” became wider and reached the peak of artistic expression with Surrealism. The motto was “let’s represent our dreams, thoughts, feelings, the real core of humanity.”

Before 1900, artists had begun experimenting with colours in ways that had not been possible before as new chemical pigments were invented and the innovation of keeping paint in tin tubes kept these colours bright and fresh. Some artists also attempted to convey feelings or symbolic meanings through colour. Remember that in the past only natural pigments and dyes were available. You may have heard of Matisse... well he was one of the pioneers in using bright colours and the society was shocked! Artists started believing in the theory about the spiritual power of colours.

### **More contrasts** (*Epstein’s sculptures and Greek sculptures*)

Epstein and Greek sculptures offer a contrast in the representation of people. One shows the essence of beauty, of what a sculpture should be, but for whom? Beauty, serenity, or power and strength, ideal people. The contrast with Epstein’s “iron man” is dramatic for some spectators, but it clearly shows the use of new materials, the use of materials known to every person. It is also the impact that World War I had on artists. In this it is the conversion of a rock drill into a man: man and industry, man and labour. It is intimidating and menacing, something never shown in a sculpture before. (Certainly nearer to the common man than the idealistic sculpture on the right). For those of you who like literature, Ezra Pound also formed part of this post war movement.

Sir Jacob Epstein (1880-1959) was a British sculptor who pioneered modern sculpture. He was

born in the United States, and moved to Europe in 1902, becoming a British citizen in 1911. He often produced controversial works which challenged taboos on what was appropriate subject matter for public artworks, Revolting against ornate, pretty art, he made bold, often harsh and massive forms of bronze or stone. his works often shocked his audience. This was because they deliberately abandoned the conventions of classical Greek sculpture.

### **Sculpture: a new vision** (*Hepworth*)

When looking at these two pieces of work by Barbara Hepworth we notice the new changes in art, abstraction, and simplicity of forms that give rise to different interpretations according to the spectator, the spectator has to get involved even further, has to participate now. She used undulating and smooth materials that often appear as if they have been part of the natural landscape; as a matter of fact she always liked putting her sculpture in the landscape, as part of it. Sculptures are for the open air; they have to merge with the surroundings.

Dame Barbara Hepworth (1903-1975) was an English artist and sculptor. Her work exemplifies modern sculpture. She was "one of the few women artists to achieve international prominence highly interested in abstraction and art movements on the continent." And notice both Hepworth and Epstein were decorated by Queen Elizabeth (Dame and Sir) thus showing their great influence in modern sculpture. They (together with Henry Moore and Louis Bourgeois) formed the avant garde group and experimented with styles; powerfully inventive remained at the forefront of contemporary art.

Nash's sculpture may originate a traditional question in you: Is this a sculpture? But may be by now you have the tools to firmly say "it is." Why? It represents a dome (made of cork) which may (or may not mean) the fragility of religion in this modern world.

David Nash (1945) is a British sculptor who has worked worldwide with wood, trees and the natural environment, Nash also makes land art, of which the best known is *Wooden Boulder*, begun in 1978 a work involving the journey of a large wooden sphere from a Welsh mountainside to the Atlantic Ocean. Nash, the same as Hepworth and Moore, makes sculptures which stay in the landscape.

Henry Moore Henry (1898-1986) was an English sculptor and artist who experienced living through World Wars I and II, both having a great impact in his life and work. He is best known for his semi-abstract monumental bronze sculptures which are located around the world as public works of art. Buenos Aires is one of those cities... why don't you investigate where it is located?

His forms are usually abstractions of the human figure, typically depicting mother-and-child or reclining figures. Moore's works are usually suggestive of the female body, apart from a phase in the 1950s when he sculpted family groups. His forms contain hollow spaces. Moore and Nash worked together and formed part of committees to promote modern sculptures and their relation to the landscape. At the outbreak of the World War II the Chelsea School of Art was evacuated and Moore resigned his teaching post. During the war, Moore produced powerful drawings of Londoners sleeping in the London Underground while sheltering from the Blitz. The war influenced his work and made profound emotional demands on him.

Bright colourful sculptures, no longer in bronze but in different everyday materials, such as ceramics and paper. These two are part of a 2015 exhibition of YBA. Monica Debus is a young upcoming artist (born in Scotland) who uses ceramics as a key material that allows to introduce colour and drawings. The smoothness Moore achieved with bronze, she achieves with new materials; she was influenced by Moore in the rounded shapes, smoothness and refinement; in this case, the same as Moore, she chooses the subject of affection.

The other abstract sculpture made of wood and paper was collectively made by young artists from Glasgow; they move away from figurative representation and create a piece of work (untitled) that balances colour and shape, moving away from roundness: geometrical shapes begin its way into sculpture and this is the most remarkable aspect of their work, that's why it was chosen.

### **Summer Exhibition-Royal Academy of Art (2015)**

So now we face a new dimension of art. We saw different materials being used, different meanings being expressed and it is time to experience the latest is art, Summer Art Exhibitions.

The best and most avant garde location is London, the Royal Academy embracing now the real YBA (new generation).

We start with an artist that is cleverly combining engineering, metaphysics, philosophy, art, mathematics... to create works of art. Outstanding young artist Jim Lambie. Following the existing architecture of a room, Lambie applies continuous lines of tape to the floor beginning at the outer perimeter where the floor meets the walls. Using strips of alternating colour he gradually works his way into the centre to create a sort of distorted architectural footprint, which completely transforms the character and mood of its environment. Jim Lambie lives in New York and Glasgow and was nominated for the Turner Prize in 2005. Lambie reconfigures the place to become the compositional elements of new sculptural forms.

Often made on the spot within the gallery setting, his work has an improvisatory feel and an energy that is immediately compelling. Lambie is best known for his on-going series of psychedelic floor and wall pieces made out of strips of multi-coloured vinyl tape under the collective title ZOBOP.

The Grand Opening in June was the highlight of the London season, everybody who was somebody was there and somebody even ventured showing up dressed to match the stairs, thus beginning a new fashion in London: coloured stripes. Isn't Lambie's work influential then?

And contemporary art continues experimenting, why not using everyday objects and give them a new dimension. When one of these simple objects becomes part of art, it gains a new status, it is transformed in meaning and use. The reason why it was originally made no longer exists; the artist has chosen it and it can no longer be used. Joseph Cornell (USA, 1903-1972) transformed everyday objects into spellbinding treasures. He felt the urge to preserve miniature objects so as to protect them from a society that threw everything away; a society that celebrated the new and discarded the old. And a new art was born, that of miniature "castles" that protected history of objects.

As a contrast Jon Arad (2015) gave an everyday object a new image with new materials, new life and shape. An ordinary chair became a cult, a sculpture. Is it still a chair? Can it become an object to be used in simple everyday life? It is for you to decide. Chairs have been used as objects of art for a long time, from thrones to humble wooden seats, but always reflecting a moment in history. Arad's chairs symbolise the luxury society admires and expects to find in every object; every object should be "an object of desire," regardless its comfort or use.

Spirals have different meanings and spectators add many more. To choose spirals as an inspiration for an art work may symbolise an infinite variety of religious and ancestral ideas. Artists have always referred to symbols in one form or another, hidden in the painting/ sculpture/ installation, some have preferred African symbolism (Picasso), others Celtic, but they have always been present. I have chosen spirals in this case because they seem to have been chosen by a great number of contemporary artists and the spectator has to be aware of their possible meaning. Spirals combined with colours acquire an extra strength. Take red, for example, as in the case of Cy Twombly.

Spirals are some of the oldest geometric shapes in ancient artwork dating back at least to the Neolithic period. Because of its connection with mother goddesses, the spiral is a very feminine symbol, representing not only women but also a variety of things traditionally associated with women. Besides lifecycles, fertility and childbirth, the spiral can reference intuition and other more internal concepts associated with women. Spirals and circles are much more commonly found in nature than straight-edged shapes like triangles and squares. As such, people today tend to associate spirals with the natural world as opposed to the constructed, mechanical and urban world. Life cycles and cycles of the natural world create change. As such, the spiral is not a symbol of stagnation but rather of change, progression, and development. In Celtic symbology the spiral is one of the most used shapes. The spiral symbol can represent the path leading from outer consciousness (materialism, external awareness, ego, outward perception) to the inner soul (enlightenment, unseen essence, nirvana, cosmic awareness) (*Source: internet*).

In these slides we see spirals represented in two different forms: one three dimensional and the other woven on a flat canvass surface. The spectator decides on their impact and significance.

## Royal Academy of Arts (2015)

### *The Dappled Light (Shawcross)*

This sculpture-installation, the largest installed in UK, exemplifies contemporary art at its level of excellence and imagination. It is the creation of a young artist. In order to make and install it he set up a workplace with the latest machinery (including sophisticated cranes) in engineering, he had a team of specialist in diverse areas, ranging from engineers to labour men. Collaborative work in art is another of the characteristics of this century as artists' imagination goes beyond the limits of what an individual can achieve on his own. Ideas and projects become a reality thanks to a team. Conrad Shawcross is an artist who creates his works of art combining all possible sciences and the previous stages to their realization imply research and studies on how to defy the laws of nature.

He is a 38-year-old British artist, and the youngest member of London's prestigious Royal Academy of Arts. He has just unveiled "The Dappled Light of the Sun," a colossal steel sculpture that scales the institution's classical courtyard like an alien landing. Even for Shawcross –an artist celebrated for his feats of engineering, spanning rope machines and robots– this is ambitious. Each of the 8,000 pieces has been handmade in five diminishing scales; when laid flat, the piece comprises about 7½ miles of welded steel and weighs in at around 30 tons. "It exploits the geometry of the tetrahedron," Shawcross explains of the mass of pyramid shapes. (*Material from Shawcross Catalogue RA*) "Seen on their own, they're very rational and ordered, but together, they become totally unruly. So the finished work is full of energy and movement. It looks anarchic against the order and stillness of the courtyard space." "I wanted to recreate the sense of well-being and serenity you get when sitting under a tree and the sunlight pierces through." The sculptures of Conrad Shawcross RA explore subjects that lie on the borders of geometry and philosophy, physics and metaphysics. For the 2015 RA Summer Exhibition, Shawcross has created a large-scale, immersive work consisting of five steel, cloud-like forms. These are made from thousands of tetrahedrons, standing at over six metres high and weighing five tons each. Shawcross explains: "The Greeks considered the tetrahedron to represent the very essence of matter. In this huge work I have taken this form as my 'brick,' growing these chaotic, diverging forms that will float above the heads of visitors."

As you may appreciate in these views, Shawcross has also worked with neon lights, wood, steel and a combination of them all. His work is the perfect example of today's advances in technology and industry put to the service of art, of course in the hands of a creative and visionary artist.

Let's go now to another extreme: the most controversial criticized and admired artist of these days: Damian Hirst. (*Photos of his works*) An artist? An opportunist? A business man? A madman? A money maker? He represents all these categories and critics are fiercely praising or demolishing him.

In 1988 a group of artists created a group called Friese, characterised by their lack of conventions or rules and complete freedom over the materials, processes and themes, their work shocked and provoked viewers. They were the YBA, today called Brit art because they are no longer young. Damian Hirst led this movement.

Damien Hirst Damien Hirst was born in Bristol in 1965. Throughout his work, Hirst has challenging approach to ideas about existence. His work shocks the viewer's convictions about the boundaries that separate desire and fear, life and death, reason and faith, love and hate. Hirst uses science and religion, creating sculptures and paintings whose beauty and intensity offer the viewer insight into art that transcends our familiar understanding of those domains. "There are four important things in life: religion, love, art and science," the artist has said. "At their best, they're all just tools to help you find a path through the darkness." But which darkness... his or ours?

Death is a central theme in Hirst's works. He became famous for a series of artworks in which dead animals (including a shark, a sheep and a cow) are preserved –sometimes having been dissected– in formaldehyde. The best known of these being *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*, a 14-foot (4.3 m) tiger shark immersed in formaldehyde in a vitrine. He was and is highly criticized, yet he has become the icon of contemporary art. His work sells at incredibly high prices and world art collectors dispute the possession of his work.

In September 2008, he himself sold a complete show, *Beautiful Inside My Head Forever*, bypassing his long-standing galleries. The auction exceeded all predictions, raising £111 million (\$198 million), breaking the record for a one-artist auction as well as Hirst's own record with £10.3 million for *The Golden Calf*, an animal with 18-carat gold horns and hooves, preserved in formaldehyde. Is money the driving force behind his work? Why then did he abandon his managers and galleries so as not to have to share profits with them? "I did the work, the money is mine."

So now you see that art is not just the spiritual side... a lot of money is involved and what puts the prices up? Art dealers, the greed of art collectors, marketing, art critics, galleries, Biennales... all contributes to prices dumping or soaring high. Very few artists in history have become rich or earned money for a living. It is only in these days that some very few artists make money. Money that comes from a very well organized industry: the art industry. Take for instance any art fair (Arte BA, the Friese, Biennales), the industry starts rolling well before the opening, collectors and galleries are contacted and they all compete in the purchasing of well famed works of art, the more who enter in the auction, the higher the price. Fierce quarrels, secret plots... anything may happen. The only goal is to be the acclaimed possessor of a masterpiece... as it is called. But... is it? What are today's parameters? Do these pieces go to Museums? Or are they kept in well preserved store places all over the world?

In spite of all these speculations on money Hirst has been praised in recognition of his celebrity and the way this has galvanised interest in the arts, raising the profile of British art and helping to (re)create the image of "Cool Britannia." Although Hirst participated physically in the making of early works, he has always needed assistants, and now the volume of work produced necessitates a "factory" setup, and this has led to questions about authenticity.

How would you define an installation? Is it permanent or ephemeral art? Spaces are meant to be used and they are always changing; today everything moves at a rapid pace, why then art should be static?

This is precisely what these two artists convey in their installations. Both represent a different use of the space, our space. One with colourful objects and neon lights gives life to a desert. The other with just cables attached to walls takes away movement from the space, the space is static and there is no possibility of change, the space responds to the lack of movement conveyed by those tight cables blocking the way. Two different uses and interpretation of space.

Geometric abstraction is a form of abstract art based on the use of geometric forms sometimes combined into non-representational compositions. Wassily Kandinsky, one of the forerunners of pure non-objective painting, was among the first modern artists to explore this geometric approach in his abstract work. However, geometric abstraction cannot only be seen as an invention of 20<sup>th</sup> century avant-garde artists or movements. It is present among many cultures throughout history both as decorative motifs and as art pieces themselves. Islamic art, in its prohibition of depicting religious figures, is a prime example of this geometric pattern-based art, which existed centuries before the movement in Europe and in many ways influenced this Western school. Geometric patterns were used to visually connect spirituality with science and art, both of which were key to Islamic thought of the time. Each and every culture in the world evaluates art and how it relates aesthetically to their surroundings and/or beliefs. Today, artists often use geometrical elements such as lines, angles, and shapes to create a theme throughout their artwork. Also, artists started using these geometrical elements as a way to create the illusion of the third dimension. This art became to be known as Optical or Op Art.

Like colour, shapes and patterns can describe emotions too. We respond unconsciously to different shapes, they can be uncomfortable, soothing or seem calm and happy. Some art creates the illusion of movement through geometrical shapes, some seem to quiver and whirl.

These paintings show a colourful and enigmatic representation of optical art and the spectator is free to speculate on their meanings. Palladino (Italy-Britain) is a well-known painter and sculptor who has participated in Biennals, inundating cities with his art. In this painting, he encircles geometric figures in four colours offering a perfect balance of shapes and colour.

Using different materials in art: today's art works uses new materials such as dyed pieces of cloth, paper, rattan, wood. Notice that the walls are no longer used, instead artists invade the space by using the floors so that spectators really have to walk through art and look at it from every angle. Art now is to be touched, felt and avoided by physically moving away from it, without being able to escape from it.

Richard Tuttle plays with limits, the limits that human beings try to either impose or avoid. Here the spectator decides what to do. It is art that now can be enjoyed by children, they respond to it either by touching it or by playing around it, imagining it is a big playground.

Anish Kapoor, the greatest of them all! To say Anish Kapoor is to say spectacular, grand, astonishing work. Sir Anish Kapoor (1954) is a British-Indian sculptor also decorated by Queen Elizabeth for his contributions to British art. In the late 1980s and 1990s, he was acclaimed for his explorations of matter and non-matter, specifically evoking the void in both free-standing sculptural works and ambitious installations. Many of his sculptures seem to recede into the distance, disappear into the ground or distort the space around them. His later stone works are made of solid, quarried stone, many of which have carved apertures and cavities, often alluding to, and playing with dualities (earth-sky, matter-spirit, lightness-darkness, visible-invisible, conscious-unconscious, male-female, and body-mind). "In the end, I'm talking about myself. And thinking about making nothing, which I see as a void. The use of red wax is also part of his repertoire, evocative of flesh, blood, and transfiguration. Throughout his career, Kapoor has worked extensively with architects and engineers. Kapoor says this body of work is neither pure sculpture nor pure architecture. His works are in most of the main capitals of the world and integrate with open spaces and are meant to be used by people, either by just walking around, inside, up or down. The Olympic Games house one of his magnificent pieces which towers up to the sky showing the heavenly aura of the games. He is called "The master of the Voids" because his starting point is always the void and what he does around it is just to enhance it and make it useful. All kinds of materials go through his hands and he has a mastery of altering any space with unique artistry.

We go from the huge masterpieces of Anish Kapoor to the other extreme: the miniatures of Joseph Cornell. Joseph Cornell (1903-72) had the mind of a visionary and the methods of an archivist. He accumulated odds and ends from the real world –bird's eggs, marbles, foreign stamps, thimbles– and assembled them into enigmatic dreams. The little boxes for which he's famous, when filled with arrangements of tiny fragments and fronted with glass, convey an intense but mysterious sense of meaning –somewhere between reliquaries and riddles. He thus created miniature museums to preserve the identity of objects which represented family and community life at a given moment in history. Poetical theatres, he called them, and indeed they are. There is an air of nostalgia and yearning to his art; a love of what he called "the light of other days", from ancient Egypt to his own lost childhood.

The contrast between the two artists enhances their work and teaches us to appreciate the role of art in our everyday lives, we can walk through Kapoor's work but we can also walk through our imagination in Cornell's work. Both equally powerful and meaningful, representing different aspects and moments of life: from alertness to silence, from grand splendour to quiet contemplation. Two extremes that at one point get together.

Jeff Koons (1955) is an American artist known for his reproductions of banal objects –such as balloon animals produced in stainless steel with mirror-finish surfaces. Money maker? Result of good marketing? Yet he occupies a prominent place in today's art. His works have sold for substantial sums of money, including at least one world record auction price for a work by a living artist, in 2013 Koons's *Balloon Dog (in the slide)* sold in New York City for US\$58.4 million.

### **Biennale of Venice (June 2015)**

Sarah Lucas (1962) is an English artist. She is part of the generation of Young British Artists who emerged during the 1990s. Her works frequently employ visual puns and bawdy/porno humour, and include photography, collage and found objects. Highly controversial, disliked in the traditional way, transgressor, that is why she was chosen to represent UK at the Biennale in Venice. Through her career, Lucas has continued to appropriate everyday materials (including, for example, freshly made fried eggs) to make works that use humour, visual puns and sexual metaphors of sex, death, Englishness and gender.

Thank you very much and I hope you leave this room feeling really confused about contemporary art!

