Injustice, Discrimination and the Structuring of Sensitivity: Some Insights from *Shadowhunters*

Valeria Emi Sgueglia & Camilla Stortini
Independent scholars

Abstract: As part of a broader reflection on the role that television series are playing in everyday life, in education and cultural debates, on how they support democratic values and polyphonic identities, this paper will explore the way in which the television series *Shadowhunters* deals with identity concerns and confronts prejudice and exclusion. It will analyse the patterns this series and the books behind it have elaborated to talk about the configuring of the self and, more specifically, the structuring of sensitivity. *The Mortal Instruments* (2007-2014) is a series of six young adult fantasy novels written by Cassandra Clare. It follows a group of Nephilim, humans with angelic qualities known as Shadowhunters, who fight demons and live in a world invisible to human eyes. In 2014 the decision was made that *The Mortal Instruments* would become a television series. The main character is Clary Fairchild, a seemingly ordinary human adolescent aged sixteen, who is led to discover her heritage as a Shadowhunter. The Shadowhunters' society is not exempt from perpetrating injustice and discrimination towards other beings, such as vampires, werewolves, fairies, warlocks (who are the Downworlders, a metaphor for despised minorities), and reinforces a climate of prejudice and distrust. Clary, however, starts questioning and addressing values and behaviour from a different perspective.

Keywords: Gothic, Order of Axiological Priority, Personal Identity, Prejudice, Sensitivity

The Mortal Instruments (2007-2014) is a series of six young adult fantasy novels written by Cassandra Clare. It follows a group of Nephilim, humans with angelic qualities known as Shadowhunters, who fight demons and live in a world invisible to human eyes. The main character is Clary Fairchild, a seemingly ordinary human adolescent aged sixteen,

who is led to discover her heritage as a Shadowhunter. With 36 (perhaps as many as 50) million copies in print worldwide, the book series, translated into 35 languages, has become one of the most popular within the young adult genre of urban fantasy. More than 20,000 fanfictions already exist, which continue telling stories about its characters. Such a fertile production can attest to the fact that Gothic narratives seem to particularly encourage teenagers to pour their imagination as spectators into concrete pieces of writing.

In 2014 the decision was made that *The Mortal Instruments* would become a television series. From March 2015 to May 2019 three seasons were released. Due mostly to inexperienced actors and actresses, to an insufficient budget, to extremely commercial aesthetic choices and to low quality special effects, the three seasons of the Nephilim saga, especially the first one, do not succeed in transposing the complexity of the plot and characters of the books, nor in dealing with the rich imaginary worlds depicted by Cassandra Clare. Stereotypes are abundant and the narration often lacks coherence. On top of that, essential scenes in the books that make visible the progressive personal and psychological transformation of central characters have simply been suppressed.[1] Nevertheless, the series, receiving a moderate approval among teenagers, has enlarged the audience of the books.

As part of a broader reflection on the role that television series are playing in everyday life, in education and cultural debates, on how they support democratic values (Laugier, 2023) and polyphonic identities, this paper will explore the way in which the television series *Shadowhunters* and the stories told in Clare's books deal with identity and diversity concerns, confronts prejudice and exclusion, discusses law-abiding attitudes, and addresses the conditions in which compassion, freedom and mutual understanding can grow. It will analyse the patterns this series and the books behind it have elaborated to talk about the configuring of the self and, more specifically, the structuring of sensitivity. This essay therefore sets out to examine some of the stages of the journey that brings a small group of singularly fated adolescents to deepen their sensitivity and structure it according to a moral order. As Steven Bruhm puts it, « we *are* what we have become in response to the threat of violence from anything like the figure of the father », and the Gothic is a mode of enacting « a narrative of prohibitions, transgressions, and the processes of identity construction that occur within such tensions » (Bruhm, 2002: 263). This study thus seeks to highlight how the young protagonists of the Shadow World overcome that initial violence and engage in a transformative process that

---

1.　A telling example comes from the last episode of the series when, according to the source material, the vampire Simon should have reverted to his original human condition, which is not the case in the television series.

will enable them to structure their identity according to an order of moral values.

The organisation of the Shadowhunters' society is based on a strict set of laws and rules whose motto is *dura lex, sed lex*.[2] Despite its noble function, this statutory legislation is frequently used by Nephilim (human beings with angelic blood in their veins) to justify immoral actions, which perpetrate injustice and discrimination towards other beings, such as vampires, werewolves, fairies, warlocks, the Downworlders, and reinforce a climate of prejudice and distrust. Clary, who is a "fair child", starts questioning and addressing values and behaviour from a different perspective. With Simon, her beloved friend, who chooses to follow and support her in the Shadow World, Clary falls into a dimension populated by demons and demon hunters. Raised in a loving and caring family, she is led to interact with her new companions from her personal perspectives, shedding a compassionate and innocent light on abnormal circumstances and incidents. Clary and Simon will progressively befriend Alec, Isabelle and Jace, three Shadowhunters already used to fighting dangerously and risking their lives. They will also gradually become familiar with Magnus, a four hundred years old warlock who « thinks of himself as a freewheeling bisexual » (Clare, 2012: 389).

The whole young company is composed of typical Gothic characters, rootless, hidden, ambiguous selves, « no longer [children], not yet [adults] » (Byron & Deans, 2014: 91), borderline beings who, walking on the edge of their multiple nature (human, angelic, demoniac), subvert any ideological assumptions. They eschew, each according to their own disposition and singular condition, the dominant social and moral paradigms. By exercising their imaginative freedom, they constantly push the limits of what is acceptable and authorised. It is in this respect that *The Mortal Instruments* can be read as Gothic novels, for they « offer the adolescent a different choice: the possibility of subversion and transgression, or else the "safety of conformity." » (Byron & Deans, 2014: 93) The protagonists of Clare's novels choose insubordination, the only posture that makes it possible for them to express the conflicts inherent to their interior life. The latter being « a major theme of the Gothic » (Bruhm, 2002: 262), this naturally suits adolescents in their need to explore and simultaneously shape their interior depths, as well as to « address and disguise some of the most important desires, quandaries, and sources of anxiety, from the most internal and mental to the widely social and cultural […]. » (Hogle, 2002: 4)

In the course of their adventures, the five teenagers and the warlock Magnus get closer and closer, interlace their personalities and begin

to structure their sensitivity according to an axiological[3] order of priorities. Witnessing on the screen the full range of sentiments, expectations, aspirations, beliefs, and fears which generate such kinds of body and soul transfigurations, it seems that the spectators in front of their devices participate actively in what can be defined as an educational and moral evolution. This communion process is one of the main reasons for the huge popularity of television series among teenagers. According to the « *absolutisme sériephile* » of Sandra Laugier, television series:

> are constitutive of human life forms; […] they are resources for our scientific and moral education; […] they give us access to reality in new and unimaginable ways. From this point of view, […] it is outdated and useless to see television series as tools of mass manipulation that impose dominant visions of reality, or as "mirrors" of society that reveal its contradictions and problems. The interest and strength of television series lie primarily in their capacity to provide moral training and to foster the appropriation of reality.[4] (Laugier, 2019: 21)

The French philosopher thinks that the integration of television series into daily life makes the spectators develop an emotional connection with the characters (Gefen & Laugier, 2020). The strength of television series, she believes, lies in « their ability to educate us and make us progress, through the attachment to characters over the course of their lives and to groups whose interactions both include and move us. »[5] Thus, television series' characters are « the vehicles or accomplices of the conversation that the viewer constantly engages in with his or her own moral conceptions while watching what is being watched. »[6] (Laugier, 2019: 15)

Our analysis of the main characters of the saga, four Shadowhunters, one human and one warlock, will necessarily draw from the books where their personalities have enough breadth to be investigated.

---

3. *Áxios*: what has worth. Axiology: the theory of moral values, the discourse on what has worth. Axiological: relative to values. Cf. *Centre national de ressources textuelles et lexicales*, "Axiologie" (https://cnrtl.fr/definition/axiologie, last accessed 25/01/2023).
4. "[…] *les séries* […] *sont constitutives des formes de vie humaines;* […] *elles sont des ressources pour notre éducation scientifique et morale;* […] *elles nous donnent accès à la réalité de façon nouvelle et inimaginable. De ce point de vue,* […] *il est suranné et inutile de voir les séries télévisées comme des outils de manipulation de masse qui imposeraient des visions dominantes de la réalité, ou des 'miroirs' de la société qui en révèlent les contradictions et problèmes. L'intérêt des séries télévisées et leur force sont prioritairement dans leur capacité de formation morale et d'appropriation de la réalité.*"
5. "*C'est leur capacité à nous éduquer et nous faire progresser, à travers l'attachement à des personnages au long cours de leur vie et à des groupes dont les interactions nous incluent et nous animent.*"
6. "*Ce sont les supports ou les suppôts de cette conversation que le spectateur engage constamment avec ses propres conceptions morales en regardant ce qu'il regarde.*"

In the books as well as in the television series, a Shadowhunter can have and can be a parabatai, a sort of warrior soulmate, himself or herself a Shadowhunter. The word parabatai appears from the outset of the saga as a key notion to understand the strong and deep bond that will be built amongst the young protagonists in the course of the story. Clary has recently broken into the world of the Shadowhunters. As she fears for her mother's safety, she returns home only to find the place ransacked and her mother gone. After fighting and defeating for the first time a ferocious demon with the help of Jace, she is plunged into a state of unconsciousness and is taken care of by Isabelle, Alec and Jace for three days. It is here, in the Institute, a safe house for Shadowhunters, where the three teenagers live, that she first hears the term parabatai, uttered by Alec during a squabble with Jace: « "We may be parabatai," Alec said tightly. "But your flippancy is wearing on my patience." » (Clare, 2007: 69) Shortly afterwards at her home, where she is back with Jace who wants to help her understand what happened to her mother, she gets the following explanation: « "Parabatai," said Jace. "It means a pair of warriors who fight together— who are closer than brothers. Alec is more than just my best friend. […]." » (Clare, 2007: 87) In ancient Greek *parabátai* (παραβάται) is a nominative plural of *parabátes* (παραβάτης), which designates the warrior who fights on the chariot beside the charioteer (*aurige*). The corresponding verb is *parabaíno* (παραβαίνω), from "*para*", "next to", "by the side of", and "*baino*", to walk or to march, to proceed. The *parabátes* or side-man cannot leave the charioteer and fights to protect the latter, while the charioteer drives: the one is essential to the other. In the Shadow World, two Shadowhunters can choose to unite their lives forever and to become a couple of combatants operating in symbiotic coordination. In the direct sequel *Tales from the Shadowhunter Academy*, Magnus explains:

> Some people are uniquely suited to be parabatai […]. Born to it, you might say. People think it's about getting along, about always agreeing, being in sync. It's not. It's about being better together. Fighting better together. Alec and Jace haven't always agreed, but they've always been better together. (Clare & Johnson, 2015: 407)

The idea of being in deep union with someone, weaving indestructible and everlasting bonds of mutual understanding and support has always been, regardless of cultures and historical periods, one of the most powerful and meaningful levers for the imagination of young adults. The more this imperishable love is devoid of *éros* (erotic love) and filled with *philía* (friendliness, amiability)[7] and *agápe* (brotherly love)[8], the more it

7. "Affectionate regard, friendship, usually between equals". Liddell, Scott, Jones, "Philía", *Ancient Greek Lexicon* (LSJ, https://lsj.gr/wiki/φιλία, last accessed 03/02/2023).
8. In Christianity, *agápe* is the highest form of love, charity. Cf. Liddell, Scott, Jones, "Agápe", *Ancient Greek Lexicon* (LSJ, https://lsj.gr/wiki/ἀγάπη, last accessed 03/02/2023).

affects adolescents in their difficult "navigation". Considering that the parabataic relationship forbids amorous feelings by law (*dura lex, sed lex*), it becomes even clearer how much it embodies the ideal purity of a union that allows adolescents to explore love in its highest form, that which the absence of erotic attraction makes disinterested. Clare picked up from the Bible (Ruth 1: 16-17) the words pronounced by the two Shadowhunters during the parabatai ceremony. In these verses, Ruth shows her loyalty to her mother-in-law, Naomi, after the death of her husband:

> Entreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following [after][9] thee
>
> For whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge
>
> Thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God
>
> Where thou diest, will I die, and there will I be buried
>
> The Lord [Angel] do so to me, and more also, if aught but death shall part thee and me.[10] (Webster Bible translation)

Again from the Bible, albeit from the New Testament, Paul's words in the first letter to the Corinthians may well be the very ones that resonate in the young minds of the small group of protagonists grappling with the construction of their relational identity:

> Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonour others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. (1 Corinthians 13:4-7. New International Version)

This is the ideal of love that drives them, even when *éros* is an integral part of it, as in the case of the paradigmatic relationship that Simon and Isabelle build throughout the story.

The concept of parabatai can provide us with an interesting perspective for interpreting the transforming dynamic existing between the five teenagers and a centuries-old warlock. The experience of coordinating one's actions and thoughts in parabataic union (a concept that conveys the strength of *philía*) sheds light on the nature of the relations that will allow a company of timid, unconfident, vulnerable, *sui generis* young people to

---

9. In brackets are added the words that Cassandra Clare chose for her own version of this passage.
10. During the time of the judges, an Israelite family from Bethlehem – Elimelech, his wife Naomi, and their sons Mahlon and Chilion – emigrated to the nearby country of Moab. Elimelech died, and the sons married two Moabite women: Mahlon married Ruth and Chilion married Orpah. After about ten years, the two sons of Naomi also died in Moab. Naomi decided to return to Bethlehem. She told her daughters-in-law to return to their own mothers and remarry. As Orpah reluctantly left, Ruth declared her intent. The significance of this oath appears even more clearly when remembering that Ruth is the great-grandmother of David the King.

progressively overcome what sorrowfully holds them back. At the beginning of *City of Bones* (the first novel of *The Mortal Instruments*), the five members of the « Team Good », as Simon ironically calls them, appear as stereotypical characters, each of them embodying standard qualities and flaws: Jace is reckless, Isabelle is a heartbreaker, very comfortable with her body, Simon is a geek, Clary is an idealist, Alec is the opposite of Jace and they are parabatai. Magnus, who is at once in and out of the Team, plays the role of a frivolous and nonchalant young/old man. In the course of their journey, they will discover and *activate* many other layers of their personalities, of their singular sphere of sensitivity, and will therefore discover a more appropriate order of values, that is to say a broader moral horizon.

Italian philosopher Roberta De Monticelli (2012) calls *ordo amoris* (love order, order of the heart) the value priority system that each person elaborates over his/her existence: « [The] order of the heart [is a] concrete personal order of axiological priority activated in every response more or less appropriate to the demands of reality […]. »[11] (De Monticelli, 2012: 208) Such a personal order of axiological priority has not only been developed through reasoning and conceptualisation but also through the faculties related to sensitivity which is « a modality of experiencing reality, and by no means a realm of subjective arbitrariness ».[12] (De Monticelli, 2012: 71). The value priority system of each individual tells us about his/her moral identity; our moral identity becomes visible in our choices and behaviour; the way we are affected by the world motivates those choices and that behaviour. As De Monticelli explains, we perceive the richness of the world as an ensemble of axiological qualities which affect us positively or negatively and move us more or less profoundly. The responses we give to the « demands of reality » are rooted in the experience of values (De Monticelli, 2012: 75). Emotional sensitivity is not given once and for all but needs to be activated and structured according to an axiological order. The activation can only be progressive, layer by layer, from the most superficial or outer strata to the inner ones. A person, De Monticelli points out, will feel, will be affected by a greater or lesser "amount" of reality depending on the greater or lesser amount of activated layers of his/her sensitivity. The sphere of sensitivity is therefore susceptible to maturation. The maturity of a person is ultimately the maturity of his/her sensitivity (De Monticelli, 2012: 77), the way he/she perceives, understands and is affected by the world. This article's aim is to identify the founding stages of the maturation process that the five adolescents undertake *together*; the maturation of the sphere of sensitivity indeed cannot,

11. "[*L'*]*ordine del cuore* [*è un*] *ordine personale concreto di priorità assiologica attivato in ogni risposta più o meno adeguata alle esigenze del reale* […]." All translations are ours.
12. "[…] *una modalità della nostra esperienza del reale, e per nulla affatto un regno dell'arbitrarietà soggettiva.*"

by definition, be an individual or solitary path since it is always thanks to or because of the other that sensitivity is refined and deepened. Life, De Monticelli argues, consists essentially in the responses, more or less suitable, we give to the demands of reality: usual or exceptional behaviour, decisions, commitments, struggles. The gang of steadfast and subversive types we are following in this paper will prove to be intelligent and imaginative in rejecting the discriminatory and corrupted socio-political system. Their maturity reflects the maturity of their sensitivity as well as the structure of their *ordo amoris*. A very large part of what we call "understanding", De Monticelli underlines, is indeed related to the activation and structuring of sensitivity.

Jace is the first character whose evolution we will follow by analysing a few key events that activate deeper layers of his sensitivity. In this maturing process the relationship with Clary plays a decisive role. Not aware of his origins, Jace seems not to care about his past and his future; he lives in the moment, looking for the next combat. He meets Clary and they fall deeply in love. Raised in a loving family, far from the world that the war between demons and Shadowhunters makes unstable and terrible, Clary acts towards Jace as the one who opens a way to new modes of perceiving and understanding. Clary, however, is able to fulfil this function precisely because Jace is in love with her. Jace's love for Clary makes him apt to contemplate Clary's *ordo amoris*, for « [a]ll positive relational feelings are precisely dispositions to sense the reality of others and the axiological universes connected to it. »[13] (De Monticelli, 2012: 194) The relationship between Clary and Jace resembles the one existing between *parabatai*, but *éros* occupies the place of *philía*. One of the scenes that can illustrate this angle of analysis takes place at the end of the first book. Valentine, the villain and Clary's biological father, is about to put to death Clary's adoptive father (who is a werewolf) and he is manipulating Jace who erroneously believes that Valentine is his father. Jace's ambivalence towards Valentine traps him in the psychological dynamic that Hogle identifies as characteristic of the Gothic: « In some way the Gothic is usually about some "son" both wanting to kill and striving to be the "father" and thus feeling fearful and guilty about what he most desires » (Hogle, 2002: 5). Realising, at least intuitively, that Jace is struggling within a destructive *ordo amoris*, Clary, very wisely, appeals to Jace's sphere of affectivity and manages to make him perceive her sorrow and despair, as well as to bring out his own thoughts and fears:

> "You have a family", she said. "Family, those are just the people who love you. Like the Lightwoods love you. Alec, Isabelle-" Her voice cracked. "Luke is my family, and you're going to make me watch him

13.   "*Tutti i sentimenti relazionali positivi sono propriamente disposizioni a sentire la realtà altrui e gli universi assiologici a essa collegati.*"

> die just like you thought you watched your father die when you were
> ten years old? Is this what you want, Jace? Is this the kind of man you
> want to be? Like –"
> She broke off, suddenly terrified that she had gone too far.
> "Like my father", he said. (Clare, 2007: 455)

It is relevant to note that Clary, by encouraging Jace to break a negative and disruptive pattern, which often consists in inflicting upon others the sufferings we ourselves have endured, initiates a process that will lead the boy to sharpen his sensitivity and, as a consequence, his moral skills.

A second excerpt takes us to the fifth book where Jace's maturation is more visible. In this scene Jace is once more under influence, dominated by forces that try to shrink his axiological horizon. In the heat of the battle against Sebastian, the son of Valentine, Clary is once more called to recalibrate Jace's sphere of values. In doing so, she remembers the boy who had learnt, through progressive transformations, to care about himself and others: « She was seeing Jace and not-Jace: her memories of him, the beautiful boy she'd met first, reckless with himself and others, learning to care and be careful. » (Clare, 2012: 489)

To finalise the portrait of Clary and Jace and of their structuring relationship, one last salient dialogue needs to be quoted. The two valiant Shadowhunters have walked their initiatory path to the end. The bonds of indissoluble friendship they have forged with the rest of the company during tragic vicissitudes have enabled Jace to build a less negative vision of himself and others. While Clary, Jace and the whole company are enjoying a moment of peace in idyllic surroundings, Clary gives to Jace the ring of his true family, something of his past that he thought was forever lost. The passage that follows is indicative of the type of "parabataic" connection that the two teenagers have interwoven: « "Every time", he said quietly. "Every time I think I'm missing a piece of me, you give it back." » (Clare, 2014: 724) This short passage captures two interrelated ideas that important twentieth-century philosophers have been most concerned to investigate (Parfit, 1984; Ricoeur, 1990; Cavarero, 1997). The first assumes that personal identity is a constantly evolving phenomenon. The second that personal identity is a fragmentary and intermittent reality in whose elaboration those who know and love us participate. Clary seems to be able to catch and restore to Jace parts of the unique drawing of his life, as if the meaning of Jace's identity had been entrusted to Clary's telling of it. The resulting story is not the framework of a compact and coherent identity; rather, it reveals the sketch of a precarious unity.

Apparently very different from Clary is the second female character we wish to shed light on: Isabelle. She calls into question the problematics

of postfeminism. The term postfeminism, « widely accepted as a backlash to second-wave feminism » (Bae, 2011: 39), does not have an unambiguous meaning, although scholars agree that it spans feminism and antifeminism: « [b]ecause post refers to after, beyond, and past; postfeminism, having to do with the pastness of feminism, means a revolt against feminism. In reality, it is a set of values embracing both antifeminist and feminist values. » (Bae, 2011: 39) Incarnating the complexity inherent in postfeminist theory, Isabelle enacts well

> the 1990s phenomenon of Girl Power, which reclaims once disparaged elements of femininity and resignifies them in feminist and emancipatory terms. Girlies insist that feminism and femininity are not mutually exclusive but can be combined in a new, improved blend. (Genz, 2007: 72)

This approach to feminism is usually opposed by the previous generation of feminists[14], represented in the *Shadowhunters* series by Isabelle's mother, Maryse Lightwood. Two examples: one from the television series, season 1, episode 5, where Maryse openly disdains Isabelle's dressing style and the other from *City of Bones*. In episode 5, Isabelle's mother makes her appearance for the first time. In the New York Institute (the Lightwoods' home base), Clary and Isabelle are discussing how to find Valentine; Isabelle wears a tight short black dress whose low-cut neckline, not covering her bra, accentuates the curves of her breasts. She also wears black knee-high boots. A portal (a five-dimensional door) is opened inside the Institute and Maryse walks in with determined strides. Although she too is wearing a black dress, it is a classic sober suit. Her severe gaze seems to be void of maternal love. She inspects her daughter with a disapproving glance and utters: « Isabelle, dressed to impress, I see ». Openly contesting her daughter's dressing style, Maryse condemns Isabelle's seductive attitude and the idea of femininity associated with it. A closer look, however, reveals that, through the uninhibited and exuberant exercise of her femininity, Isabelle « seek[s] both to appease and to free [herself] from the excesses of male and patriarchal dominance » (Hogle, 2002: 5). Despite a lack of culinary skills, Isabelle enjoys cooking. She is however terrible at it because her feminist mother wanted her not to be trapped in the comfortable domestic prison « that revolves around the traditional triangle of "*Kinder, Küche, Kirche*" (children, kitchen, church) » (Genz, 2007: 71). As Jace says:

> Because […] it's only been recently that women have been Shadowhunters along with men. I mean, there have always been women in the Clave – mastering the runes, creating weaponry,

---

14. Second wave feminism "commonly refers to the emergence of the women's liberation movement in the late 1960s" (Brabon & Genz, 2007: 5).

> teaching the Killing Arts – but only a few were warriors, ones with exceptional abilities. They had to fight to be trained. Maryse was a part of the first generation of Clave women who were trained as a matter of course – and I think she never taught Isabelle how to cook because she was afraid that if she did, Isabelle would be relegated to the kitchen permanently. (Clare, 2007: 84)

That Robert, Maryse's husband and father of Alec, Isabelle and Max (the youngest brother), has been relieved by Cassandra Clare of any possible role in the transmission of the family's culinary art, tacitly provides the reader with an insight into the state of the Shadowhunters society's practices of exclusion. In order to be admitted to the public and political arena, women like Maryse have also adopted its flaws and constraints.

Maryse and Robert are thus representative of a narrow-minded, snobbish and discriminating society. Their oldest son, Alec, is not only gay but also guilty of being in love with a warlock, Magnus. Alec is totally terrified about the possibility that his parents would learn about his homosexuality. Only Isabelle knows and protects her sibling's secret. While Isabelle seems to pay much attention to the attractiveness of her body, she is extremely caring, maternal and considerate towards her friends and family, thus proving to be in search of a more complex identity and gender dimension, freer from predefined moulds. The scriptwriters of the television series decided to make more explicit the conflict between generations about homosexuality and class belongingness using the popular plot twist of a wedding interrupted by the discriminated lover. In season 1, episode 12, Alec Lightwood, in spite of his love for Magnus, has decided to marry Lydia Branwell, a respected Shadowhunter, in order to please his parents. This emblematic scene deserves to be described in its entirety not only because it makes clear the profound complicity existing among the members of the Team Good, together with the respect and support they vow to one another, but also because it captures and makes palpable (with the techniques proper to the cinematic medium) a moment of axiological structuring, during which a deeper layer of Alec's sensitivity is activated and positioned according to a moral order. It should be stressed that it is thanks to Alec's love for his friends and his sister that he is able to orient his moral sensitivity in the direction of a more authentic *ordo amoris*. At the acme of the nuptial ceremony, Magnus makes his appearance. Isabelle, radiant and visibly moved, admits that she invited him. Alec's parents are outraged and Maryse, barring the way to the warlock, tries to make him leave. Magnus, majestic and unyielding, exclaims that he will leave if Alec asks him to. On the altar, Alec, perceptibly shaken, stares dumbstruck at the gorgeous and intelligent young woman who is to become his wife. A joyous trepidation shines in the eyes of Alec's friends. Far from reacting with anger and lack of understanding, Lydia intercepts Alec's disoriented

gaze and encourages him to embrace his feelings for Magnus. Alec, out of breath, stumbles over an apology. From the altar, the young Lightwood turns his eyes to Magnus in the aisle. Alec is struggling because he understands that he is called to give an appropriate response to that specific « demand of the reality », that is, to clarify to himself which *ordo amoris* he has been elaborating: truthfulness over pretence, acceptance of his feelings' nature over acceptance of social decorum, his ideals over his parents' beliefs. « [It is] reality, with the demands it poses, » De Monticelli affirms (2012: 156), « which decides the fate, let us say, of our soul: its gradual dulling and dying, or its painful and blissful awakening and living. »[15] Alec slowly leaves the altar, his eyes settled on Magnus. With a newly discovered determination, he resolutely dismisses his mother's attempt to prevent him from reaching the warlock. He seizes Magnus and passionately kisses him unconcerned about the appalled Shadowhunters who have come for the wedding. His friends' and his sister's radiant faces smile timidly. Cassandra Clare tells the story of Alec's coming out towards the end of book 3, *City of Glass.* Although very concise, the scene does not lack intensity and, just like the nuptial ceremony from the series, it makes visible the maturation of Alec's sphere of sensitivity, as well as the incapacity of Alec's parents to dismiss their judgmental posture:

> Alec had his arms around Magnus and was kissing him, full on the mouth. Magnus, who appeared to be in a state of shock, stood frozen. Several groups of people – Shadowhunters and Downworlders alike – were staring and whispering. Glancing to the side, Simon saw the Lightwoods, their eyes wide, gaping at the display. Maryse had her hand over her mouth. (Clare, 2009: 423)

Alec, a gay, sexually inexperienced half-angel, and Magnus, the bisexual son of a demon having had thousands of partners, embody two main themes of gothic literature: abnormality and queerness (Palmer, 2012; Westengard, 2022). Clare describes Magnus as an eccentric creature, who likes to dress flamboyantly and does not hesitate to make use of nail polish, make-up and glitter. The figure of the warlock, who by definition deviates from the normal, allows Clare to give life to a character who, not being bound by the criteria of acceptability, can freely subvert the canons of what is permitted or forbidden. Alec, for his part, embodies a less conspicuous but equally subversive queerness since, by not recognising and not accepting the separation that exists between Shadowhunters and Downworlders, he questions one of the cornerstones of the society to which he belongs. By pairing Alec and Magnus in a romantic storyline, Cassandra Clare takes a

---

15. "[È] *la realtà, con le esigenze che pone, che decide del destino, diciamo così, della nostra anima: del suo graduale ottundersi e spegnersi, o del suo doloroso e felice rinnovarsi e vivere.*"

stance against discrimination and exclusion[16] while claiming for her work Gothic inheritance. Hybridising, indeed, angelic and daemonic aspects of nature, Clare not only explores divergence instead of rejecting it, but she also elaborates her poetics beyond normality and abnormality. The last words of Nick Groom's essay, *The Gothic: A Very Short Introduction* (2012), remind us, tragically, of the insanity of any attempt to understand reality through notions such as normality and abnormality:

> The culture of blame […] is symptomatic of how Western society treats difference, of how "normality" is aggressively imposed. This is not simply reactive, it can be brutally proactive. In 2007, a twenty-year-old woman named Sophie Lancaster was beaten to death in a park in a Lancashire town simply because she was dressed as a Goth. […] Her death is a chilling reminder that dissent, the lifeblood of a liberal and democratic society, can come at an awful cost. (Groom, 2012: chapter 13)

In *Shadowhunters*, the discriminations that the Downworlders still suffer from are never unquestioned, in Clare's novels as well as in the television series. As McCallum pertinently points out, the contemporary Gothic genre reflects better the complexity and the conflicts of modern societies because, by its nature, it must keep detecting the displacement of the line discriminating between what is perceived as normal or pathological, natural or aberrant, admissible or shocking. He writes that

> The binaries of heterosexual/homosexual, masculine/feminine, perverse/normal, even subject/object […] have all been contested, reinforced, and reconfigured in significant ways in both theory and social practice since 1960 […]. These shifts have had an impact on the Gothic as well, since changing frontiers of social acceptability recalibrate what shocks, thrills, or horrifies. (McCallum, 2014: chapter 5)

Through the vampire Raphael Santiago, whose asexuality is clearly underrepresented in the media, the television series *Shadowhunters* further investigates queerness:

> To "queer" means to destabilize the settled and normative meaning (of a word, notion, or text), to pervert that meaning (given the etymological root of "perversion": to "turn away"), just as queer sexuality perverts or turns away from heterosexual norms. (McCallum, 2014: chapter 5)

---

16.   In 2019, Cassandra Clare published *The Red Scrolls of Magic* and, in 2020, *The Lost Book of the White*. The protagonists of these two books are Alec and Magnus, who in the meantime have adopted a newborn warlock.

Raphael is the respected leader of New York's vampire clan; he was transformed into one of the Night Children when he was fifteen. Raphael's asexuality is confirmed during episode 10, season 2. Raphael and Isabelle have become very close due to Isabelle's addiction to a substance which, giving temporary relief from pain, causes a feeling of healing and euphoria. Since its active ingredient is the venom present in a vampire bite, Isabelle quickly starts to depend on Raphael to assimilate the drug. The two of them begin to learn more about each other and they become close friends. When the vampire eventually declares his feelings for her, Isabelle enticingly asks him to kiss her. Raphael winces and shyly backs away, claiming that he is not « like that » and that he is « just not interested in sex ». Even though the flirtation between Raphael and Isabelle does not exist in the books, the vampire's coming out is consistent with the character depicted by Cassandra Clare. As a queer character, Raphael fits well in the gothic genre (Fincher, 2007); his asexuality however exceeds stereotypes concerning vampires, including those created during the last three decades. As Groom (2012: chapter 13) states, « [t]he sexual politics of vampires have also been romantically reinvented for teenage boys (*The Lost Boys*, Joel Schumacher, 1987) and teenage girls (*The Twilight Saga*, 2008-12). » As for Simon, the nerdy mundane transformed into a vampire, he conveys some stereotypical traits better than Raphael. Although Simon is described as being more seductive than his human self, his sex appeal could not be compared to that of a conventional vampire. His physical appearance would hardly impress; on his face still linger infantile characteristics, while his body betrays his insecurity and his feeling of inadequacy. Isabelle muses on what attracts her to him:

> She couldn't help staring at Simon as if he were some exotic species of animal. He lay on his back, his mouth slightly open, his hair in his eyes. Ordinary brown hair, ordinary brown eyes. His T-shirt was pulled up slightly. He wasn't muscular like a Shadowhunter. He had a smooth flat stomach but no six-pack, and there was still a hint of softness to his face. What was it about him that fascinated her? He was plenty cute, but she had dated gorgeous faerie knights, sexy Shadowhunters… (Clare, 2012: 172)

As the reader will discover all fifth and sixth books long, where the relationship between Isabelle and Simon grows deeper, what fascinates Isabelle is Simon's *ordo amoris*: « She couldn't remember a time when she hadn't loved him or trusted him, and he'd never given her a reason not to do either. » (Clare, 2014: 378) The axiological structuring of sensitivity is, indeed, vividly voiced, we believe, in Simon's trajectory. First of all, he proves to be a faithful friend who willingly follows Clary into her dramatic new life and does not hesitate to lay down his life for her. In love with her since their childhood, he joins in his experience the three aspects

of love we mentioned (*éros*, *philía* and *agápē*). Furthermore, he has the privilege and the curse to belong to and traverse all dimensions of being. Born as an ordinary mundane, he dies because of Clary's new life, is buried and reborn as a vampire. He then becomes a powerful Daylighter, a vampire able to stand in the sunlight without burning. To protect him from Raphael, who wants to barter his life for the vampire clan's alliance in the battle against Valentine, Clary scars Simon with the first mark, the mark of Cain[17], making him invincible. In many ways, Simon incarnates the purity, the innocence, the integrity of adolescence which make him incorruptible, out of reach of any inequitable political power. When the Inquisitor Aldertree (as powerful as a Prime Minister) throws him in prison and tortures him into making a false statement, Simon refuses categorically (Clare, 2009: 107). Aldertree's manipulating logic within the *Raison d'État* cannot undermine Simon's moral order.

In the course of his ascending trajectory, Simon deepens and axiologically structures his sensitivity and, therefore, his identity. According to De Monticelli, this process of deepening and structuring highlights precisely that sensitivity has an identity nature: « in the *ordo amoris* resides one's identity »[18] (De Monticelli, 2012: 81). Emotional life, De Monticelli very incisively writes in the preface to the 2012 edition of her work, is of enormous importance in the emergence of personal identity, of « an unmistakable style in responding to the demands of reality »[19] (De Monticelli, 2012: I). The personalities of the six members of Team Good are so endearing precisely because their « unmistakable style » is permeated with courage, selflessness, loyalty, compassion. These are the character excellences that determine their responses to the « demands of reality ». At the apex of his personal growth, Simon begins his descending trajectory which, as a freely made sacrifice, leads him to be downgraded, to lose his immortality, his powers, his strength and all his memories of the Shadow World. Such an absolute renunciation, offered to save his friends' lives, will give him access to a novel ascension towards, this time, the semi-angelic condition.

In the analysis we have conducted so far, Simon certainly emerges as the character who best exemplifies the kind of axiological structuring of sensitivity that this study has sought to highlight. Besides, the choices that Simon makes on each occasion and the actions of which he is the agent emphatically reveal the intimate nexus between personal identity and *ordo amoris* that De Monticelli pinpoints. A convergence therefore appears

---

17. "Behold, thou hast driven me out this day from the face of the earth; and from thy face shall I be hid; and I shall be a fugitive and a vagabond in the earth; and it shall come to pass, that every one that findeth me shall slay me. / And the Lord said unto him, Therefore whosoever slayeth Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold. And the Lord set a mark upon Cain, lest any finding him should kill him." (King James Version)
18. "*nell''ordine del cuore' risiede l'identità delle persone.*"
19. "*uno stile inconfondibile di risposta alle esigenze della realtà.*"

between Simon's order of moral values and the words from Milton's *Paradise Lost* that Cassandra Clare put at the end of her six-book long story. Remembering the ruinous decision of fallen angels to reign in hell rather than to serve in heaven, it seems to us that Simon incarnates the opposite destiny since, loving Clary freely, he freely served her ideals:

> Freely we serve
>
> Because we freely love, as in our will
>
> To love or not; in this we stand or fall. (Milton, 1667: 5, 539-540)

Valeria Emi Sgueglia holds a Ph.D. in Philosophy from Jean Moulin University (Lyon 3) and a Ph.D. in French Studies from the University of Aberdeen (Scotland). There, she served as a teaching assistant from 2009 to 2013. She previously taught at Jean Moulin University (2001-2003) and at the University of Toulon (2003-2008). From 2016 to 2021, she worked as an assistant professor of French in Taiwan, at Da-Yeh University and National Chengchi University. Her fields of expertise are twentieth-century French literature, Indian Buddhist philosophy and language didactics. Her publications include a short essay on Nietzsche, comparative philosophy articles exploring the notion of reductionist identity, and others on Yourcenar, Ortese, Caillois, Jabès, Huxley.

ⓘ https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9735-3587

Camilla Stortini is a budding researcher, passionate about gothic, fantasy and utopian literature since childhood. She graduated *summa cum laude* in Psychological and Psychobiological Cognitive Science at the University of Padua. Her areas of interest include neuropsychology and psychophysiology, with a focus on sleep and memory, on which she has conducted experimental research described in her dissertation, *The Effect of Sleep on the Creation of False Memories*. She is currently enrolled on the master's programme in Neuroscience and Neuropsychological Rehabilitation at the University of Padua.

ⓘ https://orcid.org/0009-0006-5367-3235

Works Cited

Bible, "1 Corinthians", New International Version.

Bible, "Genesis", King James Version and New International Version.

Bible, "Ruth", New Jewish Publication Society and Webster Bible translation.

Bae, Michelle S., "Interrogating Girl Power: Girlhood, Popular Media, and Postfeminism", *Visual Arts Research*, Vol. 37, No. 2, 2011, 28–40 (doi:10.5406/visuartsrese.37.2.0028).

Bruhm, Steven, "The Contemporary Gothic: Why We Need It", in Jerrold E. Hogle (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*, Cambridge UP, 2002.

Byron, Glennis and Deans, Sharon, "Teen Gothic", in Jerrold E. Hogle (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Modern Gothic*, Cambridge UP, 2014.

Cavarero, Adriana, *Tu che mi guardi, tu che mi racconti*, Milano, Feltrinelli, 1997.

Clare, Cassandra, *City of Bones*, New York, Margaret K. McElderry, Simon & Schuster, 2007.

———, *City of Ashes*, New York, Margaret K. McElderry, Simon & Schuster, 2008.

———, *City of Glass*, New York, Margaret K. McElderry, Simon & Schuster, 2009.

―――, *City of Fallen Angels*, New York, Margaret K. McElderry, Simon & Schuster, 2011.

―――, *City of Lost Souls*, New York, Margaret K. McElderry, Simon & Schuster, 2012.

―――, *City of Heavenly Fire*, New York, Margaret K. McElderry, Simon & Schuster, 2014.

――― and Johnson, Maureen, "The Fiery Trial", in Cassandra Clare *et al.*, *Tales from the Shadowhunter Academy*, New York, Margaret K. McElderry, Simon & Schuster, 2015.

De Monticelli, Roberta, *L'ordine del cuore: etica e teoria del sentire*, Milano, Garzanti, 2003, 2012.

Fincher, Max, *Queering Gothic in the Romantic Age: The Penetrating Eye*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.

Gefen, Alexandre and Laugier, Sandra (eds.), *Le Pouvoir des liens faibles*, Paris, CNRS Éditions, 2020.

Genz, Stéphanie, "(Re)making the Body Beautiful", in Benjamin A. Brabon and Stéphanie Genz (eds.), *Postfeminist Gothic. Critical Interventions in Contemporary Culture*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.

Groom, Nick, "First and Last and Always", *The Gothic: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford, Oxford UP, 2012.

Hogle, Jerrold E, "Introduction: the Gothic in western culture", in Jerrold E. Hogle (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*, Cambridge UP, 2002.

Laugier, Sandra, *Nos vies en séries, philosophie et morale d'une culture populaire*, Paris, Flammarion, « Climats », 2019.

――― (ed.), *Les Séries, Laboratoires d'éveil politique*, Paris, CNRS Éditions, 2023.

McCallum, E. L., "The 'Queer Limits' in the Modern Gothic", in Jerrold E. Hogle (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Modern Gothic*, Cambridge UP, 2014.

Milton, John, *Paradise Lost,* 1667.

Palmer, Paulina, *The Queer Uncanny: New Perspectives on the Gothic*, Wales UP, 2012.

Parfit, Derek, *Reasons and Persons*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1984.

Ricœur, Paul, *Soi-même comme un autre*, Paris, Seuil, 1990.

Westengard, Laura, "Queer Gothic Literature and Culture", in Sorcha Ni Fhlainn and Bernice M. Murphy (eds), *Twentieth-Century Gothic: An Edinburgh Companion*, Edinburgh UP, 2022, 259–272.