

“Hamlet Walked So Anakin Could Run:” Pairing Shakespeare with *Star Wars* in the  
Freshman Classroom

Douglas Lanier, writing of Shakespearean allusion in *Star Trek* in his book *Shakespeare and Modern Popular Culture*, claims that, “one way to answer the question ‘What is Shakespeare doing in popular culture?’ is to recognize that these allusions are *doing something*, that pop culture uses Shakespeare to create meaning and not merely as an inert decoration or simple-minded token of prestige” (Lanier 16). The question that naturally follows, then, is if these allusions are doing something, *what are they doing?*

In particular, this paper is interested in what Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* is doing in modern pop culture, and more specifically, what it is doing in George Lucas’ *Star Wars*. Borne out of the author’s master’s thesis, which examines Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* and *Henry V* against Lucas’ Anakin Skywalker, this paper relates the pedagogical findings of assigning *Star Wars Episode 3: Revenge of the Sith* alongside *Hamlet*—pushing first-year students to excavate the questions proposed first by Shakespeare, and picked up over 400 years later by Lucas. The approach proposed here suggests questions of identity, agency, power, performance, truth, and manipulation, among others, as central to both stories and both key characters. Students were assigned to read *Hamlet*, both in class and at home, with class time focused on socratic-style class discussion. Subsequently, the film *Revenge of the Sith* was watched together, in person, in class, over the course of three periods. The resulting class discussions not only bridged *Hamlet* and Anakin’s common flaws, blunders, and fates, but also raised questions of the persistence of these core ideological questions that authors (and audiences) still seem to be grappling with.

Students’ responses to this pedagogical move was groundbreaking—while initial reactions to *Hamlet* were less than enthusiastic, the class discussions which interrogated both characters

and plots in tandem raised new, relevant, and complicated thoughts in relation to Shakespeare's work.

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## The Fate of Ophelia & Juliet: Empowering Shakespeare's Tragic Heroines in Young Adult Fiction

### Abstract

Dressed in white, flowers in her flowing hair, Ophelia is one of Shakespeare's most easily identifiable female characters. Images of her from paintings created by the likes of Waterhouse and Millais prove ubiquitous, appearing on posters, calendars, and other merchandise of popular culture. She has even become the symbol for the modern, broken adolescent female in books such as psychologist Mary Pipher's "Reviving Ophelia." Indeed, she carries such cultural freight that Taylor Swift's "The Fate of Ophelia" can evoke her as the tragic possibility for what could have happened to the Taylor persona if her love (a romans-à-clef nod to Travis Kelce) had not entered her life. The continued popularity of Ophelia forces us to again ask the question that Elaine Showalter poses in "Representing Ophelia: Women, Madness, and the Responsibilities of Feminist Criticism": "Why has Ophelia been such a potent and obsessive figure in our cultural mythology." One could, of course, ask the same question about Juliet – also a cultural icon, also evoked in discussions of young women's mental health, and also featured in a Taylor Swift song. Her story has been retold in *West Side Story* and rewritten in *& Juliet*, but – like Ophelia – the question of why she is such a powerful part of our cultural mythology still remains a source of debate.

In this paper, I will address Showalter's question as I examine representations of Ophelia and Juliet in young adult literature and culture. I will consider a number of texts; however, I will primarily focus on Lisa Klein's *Ophelia* and Joy McCullough's *Enter the Body*.

Contemporary YAL books often present the story of *Hamlet* and *Romeo and Juliet* either from female character's perspective or in a manner that gives the female protagonist agency. In so doing, they often attempt to recreate Ophelias and Juliets who are stronger, smarter, and more active participants in their own stories. However, no matter how masterful the retelling, some aspects of the original plays cling to the retold tales. In addition, some texts fall into the trap that Showalter identifies in her essay: "To liberate Ophelia from the text, or to make her its tragic center, is to re-appropriate her for our own ends." At times, YAL authors and screenwriters create troubling character types as they attempt to counter traditional passive female type. This paper will examine YAL representations of Ophelia and Juliet and consider why they still have such a hold on audiences, what it means to "empower" them, and what the continued popularity of Ophelia and Juliet might say to and about contemporary adolescent girls.

Note: This paper uses different texts to build on preliminary work that I presented several years ago at MMLA.

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SAA 2026: Generation Shakespeare: YA Adaptations

“Because People Listen When You’re a Boy”

Alexene Farol Follmuth’s *Twelfth Knight* and Ron Wimberly’s *Prince of Cats* are two young adult adaptations of Shakespeare that, when read together, show the breadth and malleability of Shakespearean discourse in modern young adult literature. Both texts feature non-white, non-English protagonists and because one, Follmuth’s *Twelfth Knight*, is a comedy while the other, Wimberly’s *Prince of Cats* is a tragedy, the subject positions of the protagonists offer a spectrum for consideration. Follmuth’s comedic novel is low on angst yet high on self-awareness—the subtle wit of the character’s preserves the cutting dialogue of *Twelfth Night* and uses video game avatars to explore the Gender Game™. Wimberly, by contrast, offers a graphic novel which he describes as “literary hip-hop” and mixes the music of Biggie Smalls, Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, Kurosawa, and *Romeo & Juliet*. Either of these texts is an interesting study on its own, but given the seminar’s question of “how does YA literary theory handle Shakespeare’s work,” and questions of adaptation rigor and pedagogy, I am excited to discuss these two texts together.

Title: "The skull is a nice touch": Traces of Shakespeare in *The Underland Chronicles*.

Abstract:

While Suzanne Collins is best known for her young adult series *The Hunger Games*, she wrote an earlier series of novels that are just as riveting, just as dark, and just as full of the challenges of growing up and falling in love while trying to avoid wars, resist tyranny, and protect family and friends from the many dangers that threaten them. *The Underland Chronicles* feature a young protagonist, Gregor, who falls from his laundry room in New York City to an underworld in which he encounters giant talking rats, cockroaches, and bats and a human civilization that immigrated to this land from England in the sixteenth century. Sprinkled throughout the five books are quotations from Shakespearean plays and characters who bear Shakespearean names, such as Perdita and Miranda. Halfway through the series, in book three, we also learn that the aunt, uncle, and mother of the queen of this land (and Gregor's friend and love interest), are named Susanna, Hamnet, and Judith. Unsurprisingly to any Shakespearean, Susanna is the eldest sibling while Hamnet and Judith are twins. What is one to make of these brief, occasional references to Shakespeare? None of them seem crucial to the plot, and it is certainly possible to read the series without any knowledge of the Shakespearean canon, characters, or family members. However, for a reader with this knowledge, these citations and names are also too frequent to ignore. Are these allusions simply "a nice touch," like the Yorick-esque skull that one character holds when first encountering Hamnet? Are they easter eggs hidden within the text to entertain the occasional Shakespeare professor or Shakespeare fan reading these books? Are they meant to establish authority or to critique it? Or are they adding another subtle layer to this dystopian story?