

## **Of Risk and Youth: Exploring Discourses of Adolescence Through Meg Rosoff's**

*How I Live Now*

**Lourdes López-Ropero<sup>1</sup>**

**University of Alicante**

**Abstract** New developments in the field of youth studies are calling for a reorientation of discourses of adolescence away from developmental tropes of transition, crisis, and dysfunction, and towards a more fluid sociocultural framework. Meg Rosoff's acclaimed novel *How I Live Now* (2004) achieves a balance that transcends the pitfalls of developmentalism and gestures towards a sociological model of adolescence. In this novel, key developmental ideas such as risk, vulnerability and liminality are not the province of the young characters, but are reframed as the defining features of the dystopic society they inhabit. Rosoff's critical revision of dominant ideas about adolescence is facilitated by her fluid use of different literary traditions ranging from adolescent realism and evacuation fiction to dystopia.

**Keywords** Meg Rosoff . Risk . Developmentalism . Adolescence . War . Anorexia .

Dystopia

### **Introduction**

---

<sup>1</sup> Lourdes López-Ropero is Associate Professor at the English Department of the University of Alicante, where she teaches Contemporary Literature in English.

University of Alicante, English Department, Carretera San Vicente del Raspeig s/n, 03690, San Vicente del Raspeig, Alicante, Spain.

Over the last two decades, new developments in the field of youth studies have called for a reorientation of discourses of adolescence away from developmental tropes of transition, crisis, and dysfunction, and towards a more fluid sociocultural framework, challenging stereotyped constructions of youth as an age group with problems. Whereas “childhood studies have struggled with romantic ideals of childhood,” Johanna Wyn explains that “negative stereotype [...] has tended to inform youth research” (2014, p. 8) and, in a similar vein, Brian Barber claims that despite the progress that has been made, “there remains a suspicious characterization of adolescents and a predominant focus on the negative behavior that some of them exhibit” (2009, p. 7). Evidence can be found in the best-selling volume *Youth at Risk: A Prevention Resource for Counselors, Teachers and Parents*, originally published in 1989 and currently in its sixth edition. The editors identify adolescence with poor wellbeing and risk behaviour:

The terms *at-risk youth* and *adolescence* are used somewhat interchangeably. It seems that to be at risk is to be between the ages of 13 and 18. Such parameters are understandable when we realize that most of the behaviors that are used to describe at-risk youth are those that coincide with the turbulent and exploratory developmental period of adolescence. [...] If all youth have the potential to develop at-risk behaviors, preventive steps can be taken to see that the young person does not reach his or her at-risk potential. (Gross and Capuzzi, 1989/2014, pp. 8-9)

The assumption underlying this argument is that the intense physical and cognitive growth that takes place during adolescence entails risks, so that successful maturation is

only achieved if the risks are overcome by means of prevention or intervention. Developmental assessments of this kind naturalize essentialist understandings of adolescents as troublesome and endangered, as Nancy Lesko and Susan Talburt point out (2012, p. 5). These sociologists are very critical of how “expertise,” or “‘authority arising out of a claim to knowledge, to neutrality and to efficacy’ ” quoting Nikolas Rose, “has been significant to the invention and administration of youth” (p. 5). Lesko and others advocate a sociocultural approach to understanding adolescence, one that challenges prevailing representations and alerts us to their social construction, offering a more balanced picture of young people as competent and as “subjects in their own right” rather than as incomplete and transitional individuals (Best, 2006, p. 11). In marked contrast to developmentalists, proponents of the sociological model “tend to locate risk in the society surrounding adolescents rather than in the youth themselves” (Cahill, 2014, p. 7). The assumption that risk is inherent to adolescence leads Douglass R. Gross and David Capuzzi to categorize youth according to whether they fulfill their alleged risk potential or not. Such views have been instrumental in the understanding of adolescence, despite the fact that they reveal limited expectations about youth, oversimplify their possibilities, needs, desires, and obscure the diversity of features that they may display.

It is not surprising that Young Adult literature, which features labels such as “the problem novel,” tends to endorse dominant ideologies about adolescence and adolescent wellbeing. Sharon Stringer and Roberta Seelinger Trites have addressed what they see as the inevitable connection of this literature with issues of growth and successful transition to adulthood. Having identified the representation of growth as a dominant feature of Young Adult fiction, Trites explains that “most adolescent literature bears some sort of didactic impulse,” even if subtly expressed (2000, p. 73). It can also be

identified in novels with rebellious protagonists, such as *The Catcher in the Rye*, where Holden Caulfield's teacher Mr. Antolini ultimately intrudes in Holden's first-person narrative as a figure of wisdom and authority (2000, pp.73-74). Stringer on her part sees Young Adult literature as a good source of insight into adolescents' "problems and vulnerabilities" (1997, p. 97). She shows awareness of how claims about adolescent disorders are prone to exaggeration, but also admits that they should not be overlooked, since "adolescents are certainly vulnerable," pointing at the challenge of "striking a realistic balance between underestimating and overestimating adolescents' troubles," which can include "depression," "anorexia," "delinquency" and "aggression" (p. 89). Michael Cart criticizes the traditional problem novel for its utilitarian and didactic appeal, sacrificing depth of character to plot (2011, pp. 24, 78).

Other critics have acknowledged the potential of Young Adult literature to interrogate dominant discourses about adolescence and stress the need to promote texts that offer more unconventional representations of young people. Alison Waller underlines the way "more experimental" works "explode some of the dominant frameworks [...] and instead propose a representation of young people that is not essentially developmental" (2009, p. 53). Sophia Sarigianides advises teachers to use texts that complicate views of youth, because more conventional choices run the risk of turning the Young Adult literature curriculum into "a mirror for reproducing" certain expected experiences, such as, "anticipated teen angst" (2012, p. 224). Similarly, Lydia Kokkola warns that conceptualizations of adolescence as a period of stress "tend to be self-fulfilling" because "if teenagers are surrounded by a belief system that emphasizes strife, they are more likely to perceive themselves as being in a state of conflict than they would if other options were more clearly visible" (2013, p. 40).

In this paper I explore the discourses of adolescence in Meg Rosoff's *How I Live Now* (2004) in order to see how an original and highly acclaimed Young Adult text may contribute to the ongoing critique of dominant views of adolescence. This novel has received a reasonable degree of critical attention, although perhaps less than it deserves as a unique and multi-layered work of fiction. With very few exceptions (Lockney, 2013), there has been a tendency to discuss it alongside other texts (Kennon, 2005; Wilkie-Stibbs, 2006; Ellis, 2008; Tsai, 2014). Part of the uniqueness of *How I Live Now* arguably stems from its generic ambivalence, as it is an inspired mixture of different genres, such as adolescent realism, historical war fiction, and dystopia, but does not fit neatly into any of these categories. This formal hybridity may explain why, for example, the novel is mentioned but not discussed in *Contemporary Dystopian Fiction for Young Adults* (Basu, Broad and Hintz, 2013, pp. 2,3) or why it is not included in *Female Rebellion in Young Adult Dystopic Fiction* (Day, Green-Barteet and Montz, 2016), despite featuring an empowered female protagonist. Rosoff's reluctance to write a sequel despite her readers' insistence (Rosoff, 2012) may indicate the author's own desire to preserve the novel's uniqueness by distancing it from the Young Adult dystopia category and its trend for sequels. It could be argued that the novel's experimental character, furnished by its generic fluidity and its speculative component, creates opportunities for questioning mainstream adolescent discourses, to follow Waller's argument. In fact, the portrayal of adolescence within the novel is an issue which remains unexamined in the existing scholarship on this text. Rosoff's pronouncements on this topic suggest a nuanced understanding of young people. She has spoken of adolescence as "a very extreme time of life [...] that makes for intense transformations, intense possibilities for growth" (BookBrowse), echoing the tenets of developmentalism with its adolescent exceptionalism, but she has also unsettled them

with statements like the following: “I’ve snuck all sorts of mid-life crises into my novels, and they fit remarkably well, because if anyone knows the feeling of being lost and alone, it’s a teenager. Or a middle-aged woman. Or a hundred-year-old man. The gaining of wisdom is one subject that plays and plays” (2007, p. 60). Here notions of initiation, crisis or growth are divested of their developmental connotations and made to cut across different stages through the lifespan, a move which gives them a wider resonance as part of the human quest for meaning and belonging, and the eternal confrontation with change and uncertainty.

### **The ‘Trouble’ with Daisy**

The early chapters of *How I Live Now* introduce conventional adolescent themes through its 15-year old protagonist, New Yorker Daisy. When we first meet her, she appears to fit the frame of the troubled teenager as conceptualized by Gross and Capuzzi, with her anorexia, family frictions and psychiatric history. Eating disorders are in fact one of the issues identified in their co-edited volume as placing adolescents at risk, especially middle-class girls (Drew, Ordway and Stauffer, 2014, pp. 199-200). Daisy’s anorexia is hinted at but never explained in detail. Readers have to rely on the random clues that Daisy scatters through the narrative to reconstruct the circumstances for her forced move to England. It is likely due to the distress that her anorexia brought to the family. She repeatedly expresses a strong dislike for her stepmother, “Davina the Diabolical,” whom she accuses of manipulating her father and sending her away because she was troublesome, and because the couple wants to “go on their merry way” now that they are expecting a baby (Rosoff, 2004, p. 11). When soon after Daisy’s arrival her cousin Piper encourages her to eat because she looks too thin, she complains about hearing “that old broken record” from someone she has just met (p. 13). Other hints include her tendency to feel cold and a number of sardonic references to “shrinks”

and money “wasted” on them (pp. 37, 170), from which we may gather that Daisy has received a great deal of expensive, if inefficient, counseling.

Daisy features other risk traits, such as peer dependence and negative emotionality. She keeps mentioning her friend Leah, who functions as an ally against her family. Together they imagine that Daisy’s stepmother wants to poison her and refer to her future baby as Damian, “the devil’s spawn” (p.11). Further reliance on peer approval is suggested by the way she pretends not to be impressed by her cousins’ bohemian life in the countryside, lest they may think that her urban lifestyle is less “cool” than theirs; she claims to “have one of the best Oh Yeah, This is So Much What I Usually Do kind of faces” (pp. 5-6). She also shows a propensity towards negative self-reflection. When Aunt Penn offers Daisy her empathy and allegiance after hearing about her family troubles, Daisy thinks her aunt is simply being polite and totally disagrees with her when her aunt implies she has inherited her mother’s beauty. She is haunted by thoughts of her mother, who died in childbirth. They crop up several times in the early chapters, triggering in Daisy feelings of guilt and shame that are condensed in the phrase “Murderer or Poor Motherless Lamb” (p. 19), revealing of how Daisy thinks people regard her.

The early chapters invoke a developmental framework in the portrayal of the main character as an adolescent with problems, but as the story progresses it becomes clear that Daisy’s issues do not dictate the plot. They disappear gradually against the backdrop of the new contexts in which Daisy finds herself, which implies that contingency rather than essence is a more adequate criterion of adolescent behavior. As the vague contours of the problem novel begin to fade, readers enter a different literary terrain, one more fertile with possibilities for the protagonist. The expectations that Daisy’s initial portrayal may have placed on readers are suspended as the narrative

works to “denaturalize,” to borrow Lesko’s term (1996), assumptions about adolescence when Daisy changes families and a war setting is introduced.

### **Denaturalizing Adolescence: Changing Families and Dystopian War**

Daisy’s move to a different family is instrumental in creating a new context in which she may flourish free from the strictures of an environment that frames her as a troubled adolescent. *How I Live Now* ties in with a long-standing tradition in children’s literature of “children who succeed outside conventional families” (Reynolds, 2009, p. 194). Rosoff’s use of this motif allows her to criticize the failure of “traditional family structures,” as Kimberley Reynolds has observed in relation to this novel and others (p. 207), but also to question conventional understandings of adolescence for being harmful to teenagers. Daisy’s English family functions as a foil to her New York family by not conforming to age-related expectations, because within this alternative community age demarcations and attributes become diffuse. When Daisy meets Edmond at the airport, she is surprised to see that he is “not exactly what you’d expect from your average fourteen-year-old,” as he enjoys such adult privileges as smoking and driving (p. 3). These impressions of youth autonomy are furthered when she realizes that her nine-year-old cousin Piper and not her aunt acts as her hostess, offering her food and tea and guiding her to her room. In a curious role reversal, Piper expresses concerns about Daisy not eating and being so thin, while Aunt Penn gives her freedom to eat whatever she prefers. With her eyes “all serious and watching you” (p. 13), Piper is far removed from stereotypes of children as innocent or primitive. Implicit in the portrayal of Daisy’s cousins is a critique of developmental notions of normal growth and conventional educational styles, associated with the stage theories of developmental psychologists Jean Piaget or Erik Erikson. Whereas her father’s attempts at regulating Daisy’s poor wellbeing appear to have failed, her cousins seem to succeed despite the

virtual absence of adult intervention in the form of parents, school or doctors. Except for the eldest, Osbert, all of them are relaxed homeschoolers. Daisy is pleasantly surprised to see that Isaac's paucity of speech is not identified by his mother as a problem or a risk that requires expert intervention. He is not being pressured to speak but left to develop naturally at his own pace instead. Speaking from her own experience and in her characteristic impassioned tone, Daisy remarks that in New York Isaac "would have been stuck in a strait-jacket practically from birth and dangled over a tank full of Educational Consultants and Remedial experts [...] for the next twenty years arguing about his Special Needs and getting paid plenty for it" (p. 22). In her portrayal of Edmond and Isaac, the former with his telepathic abilities and the latter with his special connection with animals, Rosoff envisions unique types of adolescents who do not conform to any standard and who are part of a community where being different is the norm. The author, then, responds to the need to create adolescent representations that are as diverse as those of adults, allowing her young characters "a wide range of possibilities and characteristics" (2012, p. 221), to use Sarigianides' words.

Daisy's new extended family of peers has an almost immediate positive impact on her. She soon transcends her role of observer of her cousins' eccentricities to become involved in their activities. When they take her fishing to the river on a jeep without seatbelts, for Daisy it feels "much nicer than usual to be alive" (Rosoff, 2004, p. 17). Unlike the young New Yorker, Edmond, Isaac and Piper are raised to be happy by living simpler, non-materialistic lives in a place where the absence of phone network is compensated by the splendour of the landscape. Their idyllic life, in fact, perfectly enacts the factors that promote adolescent wellbeing according to sociologists Marc Cieslik and Donald Simpson: "loving [...] families; good friendships; non-commercial healthy lifestyles [...] tempering the individualism and competitiveness of modern

societies” and “curbing the power of the mass media, new technology and the attractiveness of consumerism” (2014, pp. 87-88). Daisy also feels a strong sense of belonging and safety in her cousins’ old country home, where Piper and Edmond in particular “wat[ch] over” her (Rosoff, 2004, p. 35).

Certain elements in the novel suggest possible links with the Brothers Grimm’s “Snow White” which have gone unremarked by critics and which reinforce Daisy’s outcast status within her nuclear family. Her name connotes whiteness and she is the much desired daughter, as Aunt Penn informs her (Rosoff, 2004, p. 23), of a young woman who died in giving birth to her. She is banished into the forest, or in this case the English countryside by “the evil workings of [her] wicked stepmother” (Rosoff, 2004, p. 33) who regards her as a threat to her dominance over her father’s household. In her exile, Daisy is embraced not by a group of dwarfs, but by her extravagant cousins. The dwarf figures in this classic tale have also been described as “guardians” and as “others who are outside the normal social realm” (Girardot, 1977, p. 290), qualities fulfilled by Daisy’s cousins. In her new family, Daisy finds not just a caring community but also romantic love and sexual fulfillment, and here lies an important departure, one of several, from the “Snow White” story, since Daisy is given more adult possibilities than the heroine of the classic tale. Although the dwarfs are impressed by her beauty, Snow White remains sexually innocent sleeping alone in one of their beds (Bettelheim, 1976, pp. 208-209). In contrast, Daisy and Edmond, cousins and minors, give full rein to their mutual attraction in different improvised spaces (Rosoff, 2004, p. 53). If, as Trites explains, sexuality is more often a source of worries than of enjoyment in adolescent literature (2000, p. 84), echoing an understanding of sexuality as a risk factor in adolescence, this is not the case in Rosoff’s novel which may qualify as “radical” in its portrayal of “sexually active adolescents,” to quote Kokkola (2013, p. 9).

Sexual contact with Edmond is not just risk-free, thanks to Daisy's anorexia-related amenorrhea, but a source of joy and, ironically, of nourishment, as Daisy refers to her desire for Edmond in terms of hunger and starvation.

Another salient way in which the narrative works to destabilize negative stereotypes about adolescence is through its war setting. Brian Barber's volume *Adolescents and War* stems in part from the need to challenge "the putative incompetence or troublesome nature of adolescents" displayed in the scientific literature. Barber's empirical research failed to find evidence of such dysfunction, a result which he considers illuminating given the great the difficulties involved in situations of war and political conflict (2009, p. 8). In fact, the notion of resilience, defined as the capacity to overcome adversity or to "obtain good outcomes in spite of serious threats to adaptation or development" (Masten, 2001, p. 228), is often linked to the study of the development of young people in war or extreme situations. War's empowering potential has not been lost to children's and adolescent literature. Mitzi Myers, for example, explains how war stories typically "transgress expected norms [...] in transferring moral authority and decision making from adults to younger protagonists, children wiser than their elders" (2000, p. 334). Similarly, Lee Talley underlines how evacuation fiction, a genre on which Rosoff draws in her novel (Lockney, 2013, p. 318), illuminates the "vulnerabilities of the young," but also the "ways they are capable, and how those skills and potential are often disregarded in times of peace" (Talley 2013, p. 32). By drawing on the evacuation story model, Rosoff introduces a discourse of competence, adaptability and belonging that counters stereotypes about youth dysfunction. The story of Daisy and her cousins caught in the English countryside during a war echoes of such evacuation classics about the London Blitz as Nina Bawden's *Carrie's War* (1973) or Michelle Magorian's *Goodnight, Mister*

*Tom* (1981). In Bawden's novel, two urban middle-class children, 12-year-old Carrie and her younger brother, have to adapt to the austere life of their foster family in the Welsh countryside. Like Daisy, the children become involved with a more eccentric branch of the family living in an old mansion at Druid's Bottom, a pastoral and slightly magical space inhabited by the maid Hepzibah and fellow evacuee Albert Sandwich, a possible model for Edmond, with whom Carrie falls in love. Some evacuation stories expose the thriving potential of children when taken out of damaging environments, as is the case of working-class Will, the protagonist of *Good Night, Mister Tom*. Will arrives in Little Weirworld suffering the consequences of abuse and neglect, but he is able to recover fully thanks to the caring attention of his host and the village community. Although Will's damage is initially severe and associated with his low social background, his story bears some resemblance with Daisy's, as in both cases the change of setting virtually saves these young people's lives. In both evacuation novels, as in Rosoff's, the new destination ultimately becomes the protagonists' true home. The change of settings and families caused by wartime evacuation challenge stereotypes of youth vulnerability and dysfunction.

In marked contrast to Bawden and Magorian and in a clear departure from the traditional evacuation story and its pastoral associations, however, Rosoff places her young characters in a high-risk environment where the countryside ceases to be, as Karen Lockney observes, "a sanctuary from the realities of war" (2013, p. 318). Rosoff updates the London Blitz to include the occupation that never happened and places it within a global war on terror, thus displacing familiar historical events to a near-future England. That Rosoff gives the evacuation story, and her novel, a dystopic turn, illustrates the tendency for contemporary war writing to be less "comfortable or reassuring" than "previous simpler works" (Myers, 2000, p. 328). *How I Live Now* is a

product of different times and its characters are trapped in a new kind of warfare that Mary Kaldor aptly describes as one in which conventional distinctions between “what is private and what is public, state and non-state, informal and formal, what is done for economic and what for political motives cannot easily be applied” (2012, p. 2). A very discerning Daisy articulates the uniqueness of this new warfare, which acquires dystopic proportions in the novel, as follows:

There were snipers and small groups of rebels everywhere, disorganized bands of covert fighters and half the time you couldn't tell the Good Guys from the Bad Guys and neither could they. Buses blew up, and occasionally an office building or a post office or a school, and bombs were found in shopping malls and packages [...]. You could ask a thousand people on seven continents what it was all about and you wouldn't get the same answer twice, nobody really knew for sure [...]: oil, money, land, sanctions, democracy. The tabloids waxed nostalgic for the good old days of WWII, when The Enemy all spoke a foreign language and the army went somewhere else to fight. (Rosoff, 2004, p.168)

There are no safe spaces in this novel, then, because the enemy is ubiquitous and unknowable. The rural youth idyll is short lived and Restonbridge Farm, the home where Daisy and Piper are evacuated when the country house is sequestered by the army, also fails to secure protection.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> The notion of pastoral idyll might be regarded as not completely perfect or pure. The children in Magorian's novel are exposed to the knowledge of the war's toll. The text articulates other sensitive issues such as the existence of runaway evacuees and the exploitation of children as labour in some foster farm homes.

## **Reframing Vulnerability and Risk**

The dystopian turn that the narrative takes once the war breaks out allows Rosoff to reflect current political developments and anxieties over globalization and transnational terrorism (Wilkie-Stibbs, 2006) but, more importantly for my argument, it contributes to the dissociation of Daisy from the conventional image of adolescence. Rather than defining the status of youth, the notions of vulnerability and risk in this novel are reframed as commonalities shared by individuals of all ages. In the war ecosystem, risk cannot be conceptualized as an “individual psychological or developmental shortcomin[g],” but is the consequence of “social processes” (Cahill, 2014, p.5); it cannot be located in the youth themselves, but in the “risk society” they inhabit (p. 7). In *Precarious Life*, a book that was published the same year as Rosoff’s novel and which emerged from a similar political climate, Judith Butler approaches vulnerability as an inherently human quality that is related to our “interdependence” as social beings (2006, p. 27). Shared vulnerability and interdependence become painfully visible under extreme conditions, such as the September 11 attacks that prompted the writing of Butler’s book: “Violence is [...] a way a primary human vulnerability to other humans is exposed in its most terrifying way, a way in which we are given over, without control, to the will of another, a way in which life itself can be expunged by the willful action of another” (2006, p. 28-29). Daisy and Piper are confronted with this feeling when they witness the merciless killings of Joe and Major MacEvoy at the whim of the checkpoint guards on their way back home from the farm where they work as fruit pickers. The sudden outburst of violence, which Daisy describes with graphic detail, seems disproportionate and gratuitous, as it is simply triggered by Joe insulting the guards: “And then in an almost lazy kind of way the checkpoint guy who’d been looking at him raised his gun and pulled the trigger and there was a loud crack and part

of Joe's face exploded and there was blood everywhere and he fell over out of the truck into the road" (Rosoff, 2004, p. 104). Major McEnvoy is riddled with bullets when he tries to rescue Joe. In another revealing example, when Daisy and Piper are forced to abandon their evacuation home to seek safety by themselves in the forest, they come across the aftermath of a massacre at Gateshead farm. In what is perhaps the most shocking and gruesome scene in the book, Daisy presents readers during a four-page account with a spectacle of corporeal decay that hints at the primal precariousness of human life when deprived of the "conditions that make life possible," to continue Butler's reasoning (2010, p. 23). She graphically describes the bodies of 17 people of different ages and their farm animals rotting under the sun and being eaten away by foxes, crows and rats, a scene that mirrors the endless struggle for survival in the natural world. This time Daisy faces readers with their own vulnerability by creating a sense of empathetic identification with those whose lives have been extinguished. She does not only address readers directly by saying "Put yourselves in our shoes for a minute walking into this deserted place" (Rosoff, 2004, p. 140), but takes pains to transport them into this eerie scene by her vivid descriptions of sights and smells, her shifts to the present tense and her emotional appeals as shown in her poignant reference to a girl dead in her mother's arms (p. 142).

Daisy's confrontation with human vulnerability in a high-risk environment leads her to assert her personal capacities in a completely autonomous way. During her perilous journey through the forest with Piper, Daisy is able to overcome successfully a host of problems related to food, shelter and orientation. A particularly remarkable shift is her attitude towards food, as she realizes that "somewhere along the line [she]'d lost the will not to eat" (p. 159). We thus see her accepting the food that the soldiers bring to her and Piper in the barn, then cooking a survival meal of salami and mushrooms in the

forest, and eventually fantasizing about the food that she cannot get because of the war rationing. Self-restricting food in times of scarcity would obviously be absurd, but the key to her recovery lies in the fact that the root cause of her anorexia is no longer present in her new life. Daisy's refusal to eat was to a large extent a form of protest against her family dynamics, which rendered her an outcast in her own home. She hints at this when she confesses to Edmond that she engaged in self-destructive behaviour to make "other people feel guilty" (p. 44) and when she claims that she refused her stepmother's food for fear that she may want to poison her, or that hearing her father and Davina having sex made her lose her appetite (p. 54). Once placed in a more caring environment, Daisy begins to experience her body differently, not as a tool for punishing others or as a conduit for her dissatisfaction with her life, "bounded and self-referential," but in a way that intensifies her feeling of "aliveness" and interdependence on other bodies who are responsive to her (Butler, 2010, pp. 54-55). Daisy finds the emotional sustenance of which she had felt deprived in the way Piper holds her hand and Aunt Penn fondles her hair or kisses her goodbye, and ultimately in her sexual encounters with Edmond. As Hsin-Chun Tsai has put it in her discussion of anorexia in this novel, Daisy's "emotional hunger is [...] satisfied gradually" (2014, p. 50). Similarly, the lack of understanding in her nuclear family and therapists finds an unconventional corrective in Edmond's ability to read her thoughts. When this community of affect is disrupted by the war, restoring it becomes Daisy's second objective after survival, both goals being key agents in her empowerment. Again there are no adult figures of authority and wisdom to guide or save the protagonist. While the attempts of Daisy's father and therapists in New York to help her failed, in London there is no *in loco parentis* figure to replace them, as all networks of social protection fall apart during the war. Dr Jameson is the only adult in Daisy's new life in London

who is allowed to articulate, though briefly, some words of advice. His critical remarks on Daisy's weight when he visits the country house looking for antibiotics in the early weeks of the war disturb Daisy's time "completely free of doctors" (Rosoff, 2004, p. 59). Yet significantly, Dr Jameson gets killed —Daisy finds him among the dead in Gateshead Farm— and so do other potential figures of authority like Major McEvoy or Aunt Penn.

### **The Problem Novel and Female Agency**

While featuring an anorexic adolescent protagonist may link this novel to developmentalism and to teenage realism and the problem novel, these paradigms are invoked but not fully embraced, as I have been arguing in this paper. In order to gain further insight into Rosoff's diversion from these frames, I will now briefly discuss the portrayal of anorexia in another well-known Young Adult text, Laurie Halse Anderson's *Wintergirls* (2009), one that can be classified as a single-issue problem novel. Anderson strives for accuracy in her depiction of anorexia—in her acknowledgements, she asserts that she was inspired by the real stories of her readers and thanks a pediatrician and a psychotherapist for sharing their expertise. *Wintergirls* offers a detailed chronicle of the physical and mental deterioration of its adolescent protagonist, Lia, after the death of her best friend Cassie to the same illness. The narrative poignantly depicts Lia's struggle with her body image, her obsession with restricting calories, her medicalization and her interactions with a number of caring adults who try to rescue her from the self-destructive impulses which place her on the brink of death. These adults (both family and doctors) are granted substantial didactic intrusions throughout the narrative. Lia is portrayed in conventional terms as a teenager out of control, engaging in very risky behaviour and subject to the lasting influence of her best friend Cassie, who haunts her by encouraging her to stay thin. "Most teens

today struggle with something” appears in Cassie’s obituary (Anderson, 2016, p. 22), and the statement gestures towards the stereotypical notion that adolescents are by definition troubled, underlining the novel’s connection to a developmental paradigm. Anderson does not deny Lia hope, but provides her with very limited agency. In one of the concluding lines of the novel Lia asserts that Cassie “got tired and went to sleep. Somehow, I dragged myself out of the darkness and asked for help” (p. 277). Even if Lia is eventually saved by her own determination to live, as she implies here, her recovery depends on the intervention of adults and experts who will help her to restore her mental and physical health. Lia’s statement also betrays the didactic impulse that is often found in adolescent fiction, as she finally seems to have learned her lesson and invites readers to avoid the mistakes that she and her friend Cassie have made.

Rosoff confers a greater degree of agency on Daisy by not focusing on her struggle with anorexia, but on the opportunities for recovery and empowerment that are created in her new environment. In the frame tale set in the present, Daisy presents herself as the author of her personal story, claiming her authority to include those materials she considers meaningful: “I can’t remember much about life before the war anyway so it doesn’t count in my book, which this is” (Rosoff, 2004, p. 1). Her memoir focuses on her life-changing London experiences, which she interweaves with fleeting references to her past life in New York, in particular to her family and weight issues. Daisy clearly does not want her personal narrative to be dictated or to be determined by her ‘adolescent’ problems, so she highlights the experiences and individuals she considers relevant to her life in the present. In sharp contrast to Lia in *Wintergirls*, Daisy tells us very little about her battle with anorexia and her narration is never displaced, except for Dr. Jameson’s comments, by the homiletic intrusions of family members and doctors that abound in Anderson’s novel. When Daisy is forced to return

to New York before the war is over, leaving Piper behind and without knowing what has become of Edmond, writing becomes a way to deal with her grief and to treasure her recent memories: “I refused to let go of what I loved. I wrote everything down” (p. 168). At the same time, Rosoff shows readers that stereotypes about adolescent deviance are deep-rooted. Despite the prevailing sense of destruction and uncertainty in world politics, Daisy still encounters the same prejudices, as people are unable to go past the image of the troubled teen and see the humanity and the grief in her. During her hospital stay, which her father arranges as a subterfuge to drive her out of London, she puzzles the staff as she “was not interested in starving, killing, slashing, depriving, maiming or punishing myself [... She] was dying of loss” (pp. 167-68). Her stepmother, on her part, continues to reproach Daisy with the psychological and financial stress that she has brought to the family and is glad that her daughter Leonora, Daisy informs us, has turned out “Refreshingly Normal” (p. 170).

### **Reframing Liminality**

If there is a tendency in this novel to denaturalize developmental themes such as risk and vulnerability by giving them a wider human resonance, a similar claim can be made regarding the notion of liminality. The idea of adolescents as transitional subjects embarked on an initiatory journey towards a stable and coherent adult identity is destabilized in this narrative, where a sense of liminality is not only experienced by the young characters. Rather it becomes a defining feature of the post-apocalyptic society that has emerged from the war. From this broader perspective, liminality refers to “the in-between situations and conditions characterised by the dislocation of established structures” and “the uncertainty about the continuity of tradition and future outcomes” (Wydra, Thomassen, and Horvath, 2015, p. 2). Butler’s identification of a certain loss of “First Worldism” after 9/11 (2006, p. 39) applies to Rosoff’s story, where the sense of

social dislocation and uncertainty acquires a dystopic dimension. When Daisy returns to England after the war, she finds a country where people live in a permanent state of evacuation and, on a deeper level, of initiation, with no signs of the kind of reconstruction that took place after the Second World War. Most citizens have moved to the countryside for safety and trade has been replaced by rural self-sufficiency (Rosoff, 2004, p. 186). It should be noted that this relocation is far from a retreat into a pastoral idyll. As Lockney observes, “the tradition is again subverted” and the healing potential of the garden motif becomes uncertain (2013, p. 319). Even if the final chapters of the novel and the couple’s reconciliation take place in Edmond’s garden, the green space plays a “pragmatic” role as a source of produce for the community, and besides, Edmond’s inner turmoil has infused it with a sinister aura that frightens Daisy (p. 319). In this context, the notions of linear progress and adult closure that sustain the discourse of developmentalism are eschewed in favour of a more fluid if unpredictable life course. Daisy encapsulates this idea when she refers to her hopes for the future as “living some sort of life” with Edmond (p. 179), and this sense of future uncertainty is suggested by the “now” in the title, which also furnishes the concluding line of the novel. Indeed, we may claim that in this respect *How I Live Now* offers a vision of human existence similar to that found in traditional narrative forms, where life is “fundamentally an initiatory process” (Girardot, 1977, p. 275), and “ ‘what is called initiation coexists with the human condition’ ” since “ ‘every existence is made up of an unbroken series of ordeals, deaths, and resurrections’ ” (Eliade, quoted in Girardot, p. 275).

In this liminal post-war scenario, the only wisdom to be gained is the primary interdependence of human beings, as understood by Butler, which Daisy points at when she claims “by saving Piper I saved myself” (Rosoff, 2004, p. 193). The banished outsider who finds shelter in the idyllic home of her English cousins has reciprocated

their love and attention by also helping them, and this exchange has strengthened them all. This notion of dependence is not governed by hierarchies dictated by age or even gender demarcations. Any associations of Edmond with a prince charming figure and of Daisy with the passive heroine of a fairy tale are reversed when Daisy comes to Edmond's rescue and intends to rehabilitate him from his war trauma. Through war-affected Edmond, Rosoff shows a reluctance to idealize the resilience of young people. Adversity builds strength, as shown in Daisy's own "triumphs over adversity" (p. 184), but overexposure of the sort that hyper-empathic Edmond has experienced may lead to negative outcomes. The manifestations of Edmond's damage are surprisingly reminiscent of an earlier Daisy. He is thin, self-destructive through cutting, feels cold, hears voices, suffers survivor's guilt, and desperately needs "to be loved" (p. 193). Although Edmond has not suffered the negative influence of a resentful stepmother or a dysfunctional family, Daisy informs us that his powerless witnessing of the massacre at Gateshead Farm has "poisoned" him (p. 193). This victimization reversal is enhanced by Edmond's potential associations with "Sleeping Beauty," which are evoked through several elements in the final chapters of the story. When Daisy meets Edmond, he is not suspended in sleep, but in an isolating state of melancholia in his "claustrophobic" garden (p.181). In his self-inflicted harm we may see a more agentic version of the prick of the spindle motif. By vehemently offering reluctant Edmond her love and care, Daisy tries to brave the metaphorical thorny hedge that he has built around himself and which materializes in "the dense thorny branches of a Blood Rose, cut and pinioned into cruel horizontals against the wall" (p. 191). The motifs of initiation and interdependence of this fairy tale are divested of their traditional associations with sex roles and young age and put at the service of a vision of human existence ungoverned by gender hierarchies and where initiatory experiences cut across the whole life span.

## Conclusion

*How I Live Now* celebrates young people's strength over adversity and revises negative stereotypes associated with adolescence. While not ignoring the connection of youth with certain problems, such as family frictions, anorexia or cutting, these are not portrayed as individual shortcomings of the adolescent characters, but rather as manifestations of damage caused by external forces. Those motifs function as referents of an assumed 'adolescent mystique,' or essence, to use Betty Friedan's term in her feminist classic, rather than as determinants, not being allowed to shape the characters' behaviour or the contours of the storyline. In addition, they are deployed in unconventional and creative ways, as is the case with Daisy's anorexia, which triggers her move to London and protects her from an unwanted pregnancy, to ultimately vanish unaided by experts. By placing her protagonist in shifting contexts—New York and London, the nuclear family and a community of choice, peace and war—Rosoff shows the extent to which youth behaviour is marked by social conditions and relations rather than determined by a host of psycho-biological characteristics. If, as has been argued, the representation of adolescence requires a difficult negotiation between magnifying and downplaying the specificities of this age group, Rosoff achieves a balance that avoids the pitfalls of developmentalism and gestures towards a sociological model. In her novel, key developmental ideas such as risk, vulnerability and liminality are not the province of the young characters, but are reframed as the defining features of the dystopic society they inhabit, in which the initiatory pattern is extrapolated to the human condition. Kokkola points at the tendency to "exaggerat[e] the *sturm und drang* of adolescence" when actually "all phases of human life bring their own challenges" (Kokkola, 2013, p. 6), and these challenges are more pronounced in the post-apocalyptic world featured in the novel where the alleged stability of the adult world, against which

the turmoil of adolescence is constructed, has been thrown into disarray. Rosoff's revision of dominant developmental ideas about adolescence is facilitated by her fluid and experimental use of different literary traditions ranging from adolescent realism and evacuation fiction to dystopia, which result in a unique work of Young Adult fiction. *How I Live Now* underlines the potential of this body of literature to contribute to the ongoing critique of adolescence constructions, and to serve as a corrective to the damaging effects that the perpetuation of negative and monolithic representations of youth may have.

## References

- Anderson, Laurie Halse. (2016). *Wintergirls*. London: Scholastic.
- Barber, Brian K. (2009). The Complexity of Youth and Political Violence. In Brian K. Barber (Ed.), *Adolescents and War: How Youth Deal with Political Violence* (pp. 3-32). Oxford University Press.
- Basu, Balaka, Broad, Katherine R. and Hintz, Carrie. (2013). Introduction. In Balaka Basu, Katherine R. Broad and Carrie Hintz (Eds.), *Contemporary Dystopian Fiction for Young Adults: Brave New Teenagers* (pp. 1-15). New York: Routledge.
- Bawden, Nina. (1973). *Carrie's War*. London: Penguin.
- Best, Amy L. (2006). Introduction. In Amy L. Best (Ed.), *Representing Youth: Methodological Issues in Critical Youth Studies* (pp. 1-36). New York University Press.
- Bettelheim, Bruno. (1976). *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*. London: Penguin.

- BookBrowse. (2004). An Interview with Meg Rosoff. Accessed September 10, 2017, from [https://www.bookbrowse.com/author\\_interviews/full/index.cfm/author\\_number/1059/meg-rosoff](https://www.bookbrowse.com/author_interviews/full/index.cfm/author_number/1059/meg-rosoff).
- Butler, Judith. (2006). *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. New York: Verso.
- Butler, Judith. (2010). *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* New York: Verso.
- Cahill, Helen. (2014). Approaches to Understanding Youth Well-Being. In Johanna Wyn and Helen Cahill (Eds.), *Handbook of Children and Youth Studies* (pp. 1-16). Singapore: Springer.
- Cart, Michael. (2011). *Young Adult Literature: From Romance to Realism*. Chicago: American Library Association.
- Cieslik, Mark and Simpson, Donald. (2014). *Key Concepts in Youth Studies*. Los Angeles: Sage.
- Day, Sara K., Green-Barteet, Miranda A., and Montz, Amy L. (Eds.). (2016). *Female Rebellion in Young Adult Dystopian Fiction*. London: Routledge.
- Drew, Meredith J., Ordway, Ann M., and Stauffer, Mark D. (2014). The Secret of All-Consuming Obsessions: Eating Disorders. In Douglass R. Gross and David Capuzzi (Eds.), *Youth at Risk: A Prevention Resource for Counselors, Teachers and Parents* (pp. 197-228). Alexandria, VA: American Counseling Association.
- Ellis, Sarah. (2008). A View Down the Microscope. *The Lion and the Unicorn* 32, 155-168.
- Friedan, Betty. (1992). *The Feminine Mystique*. London: Penguin.
- Girardot, N. J. (1977). Initiation and Meaning in the Tale of Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs. *The Journal of American Folklore* 90(357), 274-300.

- Gross, Douglas R. and Capuzzi, David. (2014). Defining Youth At Risk. In Douglass R. Gross and David Capuzzi (Eds.), *Youth at Risk: A Prevention Resource for Counselors, Teachers and Parents* (pp. 3-22). Alexandria, VA: American Counseling Association.
- Kaldor, Mary. (2012). *New and Old Wars: Organized Violence in a New Era*. Stanford University Press.
- Kennon, Patricia. (2005). 'Belonging' in Young Adult Dystopian Fiction: New Communities Created by Children. *Papers* 15(2), 40-49.
- Kokkola, Lydia. (2013). *Fictions of Adolescent Carnality: Sexy Sinners and Delinquent Deviants*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Lesko, Nancy. (1996). Denaturalizing Adolescence: The Politics of Contemporary Representations. *Youth and Society* 28(2), 139-161.
- Lesko, Nancy and Talburt, Susan. (2012). An Introduction to Seven Technologies of Youth Studies. In Nancy Lesko and Susan Talburt (Eds.), *Keywords in Youth Studies: Tracing Affects, Movements, Knowledges* (pp. 1-10). New York: Routledge.
- Lockney, Karen. (2013). Progressive Representations of Place-Based Identities in Meg Rosoff's *How I Live Now*. *Children's Literature in Education* 44, 311-325.
- Magorian, Michelle. (1981). *Good Night, Mr. Tom*. New York: HarperTrophy.
- Masten, A.S. (2001). Ordinary Magic: Resilience in Development. *The American Psychologist* 56, 227-238.
- Myers, Mitzi. (2000). Storying War: A Capsule Overview. *The Lion and the Unicorn* 24, 327-336.

- Reynolds, Kimberley. (2009). Changing Families in Children's Fiction. In M.O. Grenby (Ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Children's Literature* (pp. 193-208). Cambridge University Press.
- Rosoff, Meg. (2004). *How I Live Now*. New York: Wendy Lamb.
- Rosoff, Meg. (2007). Identity Crisis? Not Really. *Publishers Weekly* 254(42), p. 60.
- Rosoff, Meg. (2012). *How I Live Now: The Sequel*. Accessed November 14, 2017, from <http://www.megrosoff.co.uk/2012/01/19/how-i-live-now-the-sequel/>
- Sarigianides, Sophia Tatiana. (2012). Tensions in Teaching Adolescence/ts: Analysing Resistances in a Young Adult Literature Course. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy* 56(3), 22-230.
- Stringer, Sharon A. (1997). *Conflict and Connection: The Psychology of Young Adult Literature*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook.
- Talley, Lee A. (2013). Operation Pied Piper: Historical Texts and the CCSS. *The ALAN Review*, 26-32.
- Trites, Roberta Seelinger. (2000). *Disturbing the Universe: Power and Repression in Adolescent Literature*. Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press.
- Tsai, Hsin-Chun. (2014). The Girls Who Do Not Eat: Food, Hunger and Thinness in Meg Rosoff's *How I Live Now* and Laurie Halse Anderson's *Wintergirls*. *Jeunesse: Young People, Texts and Cultures* 6(1), 36-55.
- Waller, Alison. (2009). *Constructing Adolescence in Fantastic Realism*. New York: Routledge.
- Wilkie-Stibbs, Christine. (2006). The 'Other' Country: Memory, Voices and Experiences of Colonized Childhoods. *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 31(3), 237-259.

- Wydra, Harald, Thomassen, Bjørn and Horvath, Ages. (2015). Liminality and the Search for Boundaries. In Harald Wydra, Bjørn Thomassen and Ages Horvath (Eds.), *Breaking Boundaries: Varieties of Liminality* (pp. 1-8). New York: Berghahn.
- Wyn, Johanna. (2014). Thinking about Childhood and Youth. In Johanna Wyn and Helen Cahill (Eds), *Handbook of Children and Youth Studies* (pp. 1-15). Singapore: Springer.