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# “Comparing [*sic*] a girl to a summers day is gay” – Que(e)rying EFL Learners’ Engagement with Shakespeare’s Sonnet 18 and Contemporary YA Fiction

## “Comparar a una joven con un día de verano es gay”: cuestionar en clave *queer* la interacción de los estudiantes de inglés como lengua extranjera con el Soneto 18 de Shakespeare y la ficción juvenil contemporánea

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### ABSTRACT

This paper presents qualitative research findings from a literature-focused classroom project in which EFL (English as a foreign language) learners engage queerly with Shakespeare’s famous Sonnet 18 “Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day” and Patrick Ness’ young adult (YA) fiction narrative *Different for Boys*. This project was carried out at a German secondary school (*Gymnasium*) with a year 11 upper-level class of advanced English. The central rationale of this project – informed by a theoretical basis of literary studies, EFL pedagogy, and queer theory – was to retrace how far the learning processes of students concerning these two texts may validate, irritate or dissipate heteronormative literary readings and interpretations, which are framed here as ‘hetero-normalization’. The results show that a queer focus can draw all learners into critical and committed literary interpretations – with each learner displaying highly individual negotiations located between upfront queer visibility and continued ‘hetero-normalization’.

Keywords: hetero-normalization, Shakespeare, literature pedagogy, English as a foreign language, young adult fiction

### RESUMEN

Este artículo presenta los resultados de una investigación cualitativa de un proyecto de aula centrado en la literatura en el que los estudiantes de EFL (inglés como lengua extranjera) interactúan de manera extraña con el famoso Soneto 18 de Shakespeare “Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day” y el adulto joven (YA) de Patrick Ness. Narrativa de ficción *Diferente para chicos*. Este proyecto se llevó a cabo en una escuela secundaria alemana (*Gymnasium*) con una clase de nivel superior de inglés avanzado de Year 11. El fundamento central de este proyecto, informado por una base teórica de los estudios literarios, la pedagogía EFL y la teoría *queer*, fue rastrear hasta qué punto los procesos de aprendizaje de los estudiantes en relación con estos dos textos pueden validar, irritar o disipar las lecturas e interpretaciones literarias heteronormativas, que se enmarcan aquí como heteronormalización. Los resultados muestran que un enfoque *queer* puede atraer a todos los estudiantes hacia interpretaciones literarias críticas y comprometidas, con cada estudiante mostrando negociaciones altamente individuales ubicadas entre la visibilidad *queer* inicial y la heteronormalización continua.

Palabras clave: heteronormalización, Shakespeare, pedagogía de la literatura, inglés como lengua extranjera, ficción para adultos jóvenes

## INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

Why teach Shakespeare when aiming to include queer perspectives in our classrooms? This author of some of the most canonized texts might not be the first who comes to mind in the endeavor of establishing a queer pedagogy. Yet, 16-year-old teenagers can engage productively in queer reading and querying heteronormative text reception and reading expectations at the example of Shakespeare's texts as well as with YA literature – as this paper will show at the example of empirical insights into a German ELF classroom and the theoretical considerations behind them.

To elucidate how this – only at first sight – unlikely connection came about, the project needs to be contextualized in the specific conditions and theoretical as well as curricular developments that have centrally informed and influenced the rationale of the study presented here. First, the German EFL context has an established tradition of using literary texts, and by extension literature pedagogies, in processes of learning and teaching English, ranging from the use of picture books in primary contexts to longer novels and poetic works in secondary classrooms (cf. Delanoy *et al.*, 2015). Especially in advanced English classes leading to the German final exams (*Abitur*), Shakespeare's literature has long been and continues to be, a mainstay among the literary texts chosen for EFL syllabi (cf. Eisenmann & Lütge 2014). Second, a more recent and decidedly transformative strand of EFL research has established a queer perspective within this discipline, leading to more critical pedagogies that seek to affirm and make visible, LGBTIQ+ identities and experiences in teaching while calling into question rigid heteronormativity and bi- or cis-gendered systems as powerful cultural and social norms (cf. Eisenmann & Ludwig, 2018; König, 2018; Merse, 2021). In the context of literature pedagogy, this may include the reading of texts with visible LGBTIQ+ protagonists, or negotiating how far readers' engagements with texts could be informed by heteronormative worldviews. Lately, such queer-informed practices have also been

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout the text, the spelling mistakes are reproduced deliberately when they are verbatim student quotes.

endorsed as a cross-curricular mandate in many German educational policies (cf. Merse 2017).

The classroom project detailed in this paper – as well as the research that evaluated this project – tie in with these developments. In the classroom project, Shakespeare's sonnets, in particular Sonnet 18, are focused on. They lend themselves to queer re-readings not only due to their open speech situation and some queer literary references – but also because of their varied reception history which shows numerous examples of explaining away that many of Shakespeare's romantic sonnets are addressed to a young man. This, in turn, serves as an ideal springboard for the queer-informed EFL literature classroom to explore how readings and interpretations of Shakespeare's work have been subject to ongoing hetero-normalization – or how learners tend to perceive the ambiguous gender and addressee constellations in Sonnet 18. In the classroom project, these trajectories were coupled with the reading of Patrick Ness' (2010) young adult fiction narrative *Different for Boys* which features and affirms gay and bisexual themes. Here, learners transferred their literary exploration of Shakespeare's Sonnet 18 to an imaginative intertext with *Different for Boys*.

The objective of the study associated with this classroom project was to explore the learning processes of EFL students that unfold when they engage queerly with – and thus, critically query – Shakespeare's Sonnet 18 and Patrick Ness' *Different for Boys*: What (non)-heteronormative scripts and assumptions do learners bring to these texts? What happens in the classroom if heteronormative assumptions are challenged? What insights do learners generate when taking over LGBTIQ+ perspectives during their engagement in this classroom project? To answer these questions, we reanalyzed data stemming from this particular classroom project that was carried out at a German secondary school (*Gymnasium*) of a year 11 upper-level class of advanced English. The data set includes transcribed passages of the actual classroom discourse that unfolded during this project and written responses by learners that were collected on worksheets. Methodologically, this study is hence situated between a teacher's action research and a didactically informed ethnography, coupled with a qualitative analysis of the data set.

In this paper, we will begin by exploring the theoretical underpinnings of this study and the classroom project. At first, we will draw on literary studies to retrace how the reception history of Shakespeare's sonnets was marked by a continued heteronormalization – a finding from scholarship that, in turn, informs the very logic of the whole classroom and research project presented in this paper which sets out to critically examine this dynamic in the context of queer pedagogy. In a second step, we will outline current developments and established concepts in both EFL education research and queer pedagogy to legitimize and explain the literary engagement envisioned for this study. Based on this theoretical and conceptual substance, what follows is an in-depth description of the rationale and actual practical application of the teaching unit focusing on Shakespeare's Sonnet 18 and Patrick Ness' *Different for Boys* – and how these two texts were brought together in an imaginative intertext. The second half of this paper will present the details of the research context and the methodological approach, and go on with detailing the empirical insights of this qualitative study. The findings yield a very differentiated picture of how the EFL learners of this study engage queerly with both pieces of literature – rather than following a unified pattern of literary experience and negotiation. Indeed, the learning processes and classroom dynamics analyzed in this study indicate a continuum in which learners follow or (gradually) discard hetero-normalized readings, call into question norms of sexuality and gender to varying degrees, arrive at nuanced queer-informed literary interpretations while drawing on literary analysis, and unfold a variety of empathetic perspective changes into LGBTIQ+ experiences and identities. As diverse as these types of engagement may be, they do indicate that a queer focus on literature pedagogy can lead to highly committed and deeply critical readings and interpretations in the EFL classroom.

## THE SONNETS' RECEPTION THROUGHOUT THE CENTURIES: HETERONORMALIZING SHAKESPEARE

The reception of Shakespeare's sonnets represents almost four centuries of silencing –and at the same time revolving around –a controversial fact: 126 out of the 154 sonnets are addressed to a beautiful

young man (Stallybrass 1993). This has been denied, pathologized, or explained away most of the time. And yet, just because of this dissimulation, this particular point has been queerly present in the history of Shakespeare's reception – which renders it interesting for foreign or second language teachers interested in literary and cultural learning.

The sonnets were first published in 1609, dedicated to a "Mr. W. H.," who has since been the cause of much speculation. Biographic readings (for an overview, cf. Grundmann 2004) have time and again discussed different historic persons as the potential receiver of the sonnets, sometimes with implications about Shakespeare's sexuality. However, this is not the focus of this article. For us, the question raised is not if Shakespeare was gay or bisexual (and the concepts of homosexuality, bisexuality, or heterosexuality did not exist in his time anyway) but what the readings of his sonnets reveal about the norms and taboos of his readers – and how this can be used in English language teaching (ELT).

A discussion of the sonnets' reception takes us back to their second edition of 1640, in which some quite strong editing had taken place: not only were the order and structure of the poems changed, but titles were added and some pronouns were changed to more clearly suggest a female addressee only (Stallybrass, 1993). The sonnets still seem to have been a cause of irritation, as a reference in Edmond Malone's edition (with the original pronouns reinstated) in 1780 shows: "Some part of this indignation might have been abated, if it had been considered that such addresses to men, however indelicate, were customary in our author's time, and neither imported criminality, nor were esteemed indecorous" (qtd. in Stallybrass, 1993, p. 95).

However, Malone's somewhat placating and context-sensitive remark seems to have been of no avail: When George Steevens published Shakespeare's complete works in 1793, he left out the sonnets altogether. He who read Sonnet 20 with an "equal mixture of disgust and indignation" was sure that his readers should be spared this experience: "We have not reprinted the Sonnets etc. of Shakespeare, because the strongest act of Parliament that could be framed, would fail to compel readers into their service" (qtd. in Stallybrass, 1993, p. 95).

Fortunately, the sonnets did not fall into oblivion. Instead, various other ‘explanations’ for the male addressee were crafted to be able to read them: It must have been a reference to Jesus – and the dark lady to the church –, or he could have been Shakespeare’s son; or else, the sonnets were not written by Shakespeare (cf. Grundmann, 2004). Samuel Taylor Coleridge in 1803 does recommend them to his son but not without suggesting a platonic reading to keep a pure image of the admired genius: “if thou wouldst understand these sonnets, thou must read the chapter in Potter’s *Antiquities* on the Greek lovers[.] This pure love Shakespeare appears to have felt –to have been in no way ashamed of it– or even to have suspected that others could have suspected it” (qtd. in Stallybrass, 1993, p. 98).

Possibly the most far-fetched ‘explanation’ for the sonnets’ addressee was inspired by a hoax: In the 1790s a forged letter appeared that had supposedly been written by Elizabeth I thanking Shakespeare for his sonnets. The idea was gratefully taken up and supported with scholarly ‘evidence’ by George Chalmers who exclaims against anyone who would ever have thought that “Shakespeare, a husband, a father, a moral man, addressed a hundred and twenty-six *Amorous Sonnets* to a *male* object!” He is glad that through the letter and his explanations the actual object of the sonnets, the Queen, is finally known and Shakespeare’s reputation saved: “But I have freed him, I trust, from that stain [...] his real object [...] being once known, darkness brightens into light, order springs out of confusion, and contradiction settles into sense” (qtd. in Stallybrass, 1993, pp. 96-97).

But eventually, with time and cultural values changing, the readings of the sonnets changed, too. While towards the end of the 19th century Oscar Wilde’s quoting Shakespeare as promoting the ‘love that dare not speak its name’ still contributed to putting Wilde in prison, by the turn of the millennium this very fact is a worthy object of literary research influenced by the emergence of gender studies and queer theory. While in the 1930s an entire volume was written: “to express strong and earnest expostulation against the allegation that Shakespeare in his *Sonnets* or elsewhere confessed moral perversity” (Thomson, 1938, p. i), nowadays there is consensus in literary research that the addressee of most of the sonnets is male.

## THE SONNETS IN THE CLASSROOM: HETERO-NORMALIZATION CONTINUED?

When it comes to *teaching* Shakespeare's sonnets, however, the questions arise: How common is this knowledge? And is it passed on to learners when they are taught Shakespeare? There is little research on this, but recommendations in teachers' guides on teaching the sonnets in the ELT classroom suggest that the male addressee is far from being well-established. For example, in the German ELT context – where Shakespeare is still widely taught in the upper grades – Volkmann (2014, p. 31) references several teaching materials in which the “unmentionable fact” is omitted. How this fact is circumnavigated reads like a continuation of the earlier reception depicted above, rather than modern student-oriented pedagogy that takes into account research findings from its reference disciplines. Indeed, Volkmann (2007) suggests that there is a gap between how well gender and queer studies have been integrated into literary studies, their lesser influence on didactic research, and their nearly total absence in practical teaching contexts.

One possible explanation for this is that teachers shy away from teaching supposedly controversial topics such as same-sex desire, excluding such perspectives from their classrooms. This could be the result of educational policies that seek to regulate the presence of seemingly deviant sexual orientations and gender expressions in teaching, for example, such as Section 28, which forbade ‘intentionally promoting homosexuality’ in schools up until 2000 in Scotland and until 2003 in the rest of the UK. On the other hand, this could have to do with subjective teacher beliefs. Evrpidou (2021) could show that avoiding queer topics in the classroom is linked with existing self-concepts as *English language* teachers, *i. e.*, a self-concept that prioritizes the teaching of language aspects rather than issues of sexual and gender diversity – an effect that is also due to shortcomings in teacher education where this nexus is not established. In addition, Nelson (2015) suggests that some language teachers hesitate to integrate LGBT content into their classrooms because they are concerned that such content might lead to divisiveness and confrontation, or that it is perceived as private or irrelevant to learners' lives. However, we would argue that the very reasons which may

lead teachers to shrink from such an approach could be the reasons why to use it. LGBTIQ+ issues and a critical approach to heteronormativity may evoke different and potentially controversial reactions, but (probably just because of this) they are highly relevant to learners. Sensitizing teachers to this educational potential as an integral part of their profession could be contextualized in the framework of López Pereyra's (2020) concept of rethinking teacher education with the empowering and emancipatory lens of critical pedagogy.

To summarize, the hetero-normalization surrounding the reception of Shakespeare's sonnets seems a constant component of his literary legacy. To counteract this, to pay tribute to the legacy of the sonnets, and to find ways of avoiding further hetero-normalization, we suggest in this chapter that teaching Shakespeare's sonnets (in particular Sonnet 18), exploring their reception history revolving around norms of gender and sexuality, and combining it with a modern piece of Young Adult (YA) literature, can ideally be located in queer-inclusive language education. We then provide research data from a case study in which this was done.

## ADDRESSING LGBTIQ+ IN THE CLASSROOM: THE POTENTIAL OF LITERATURE FOR CHALLENGING HETERONORMATIVITY

Our approach to engaging queerly with Shakespeare is located in current attempts to update ELT (literature) teaching and learning agendas in the light of gender and queer theory and to integrate LGBTIQ+ content into classrooms (cf. Nelson, 2006; Merse, 2015, 2017, 2021, 2022; König *et al.*, 2015; König, 2018; Eisenmann & Ludwig, 2018; Marks & Merse, 2018; Queering ESOL website).

Firstly, the relevance of a critical reflection on norms of gender and sexuality can be located on a personal level, referring to the everyday life of teenage students. Their school years are the time when norms of femininity and masculinity as well as sexuality and social expectations about relationships become important to them. LGBTIQ+ identities are increasingly more accepted and sometimes teachers find that their students know more about – and are more open towards – gender and sexual diversity than they would expect

(or more than themselves, possibly). However, not conforming to heteronormative standards still meets with much discrimination: the *European Union Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Survey* (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2013) found that more than eight in ten respondents had faced negative comments or behavior and that a large majority did not come out during their time at school. This makes gender and sexual diversity a topic of educational relevance, too. If education aims to support students in developing their personality, LGBTIQ+ ways of life must be represented in the school. This does not only include addressing students identifying as LGBTIQ+ but addressing all learners by reflecting on underlying norms of sexuality and gender. This educational view has resulted in curricular foci on representing gender and sexual diversity: In Germany, for example, one federal state after another has introduced addressing sexual diversity as a cross-curricular requirement, though not without polemical public debate (cf. Merse 2017, pp. 178-185). In the UK, OFSTED (2012) identified lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender learners as a group that might require careful expert teaching. Although we would argue that queer-informed teaching should go beyond addressing the alleged needs of LGBTIQ+ learners, OFSTED certainly contributes to an educational climate in which embracing queer themes and interrogations becomes possible.

The question, then, is *how* to teach in a queer-informed way in EFL classrooms. The advantage of the personal relevance of the topic is that addressing norms of gender and sexuality is likely to motivate learners to speak in a foreign language. This relevance will almost certainly include some controversy and negotiation of different perspectives – which we welcome. Nelson (2015) confirms that LGBT content, among other benefits, raises learners' curiosity, leads to meaningful discussions, and helps to connect socially. However, the personal nature of the topic may also lead to inhibitions or, if not done well, to resistance, especially if students do not feel safe in the classroom community.

Literature (in the widest sense, including cartoons, films, and other texts) in the classroom offers great potential to navigate this pedagogic challenge. Fictional texts can, on the one hand, provide

insights into lives unknown to the students and do so in a way that is emotionally accessible. In this case, students get to know and feel an LGBTIQ+ character (Renzi *et al.*, 2012). Approaching a character with empathy allows taking over another's perspective, which may lead to points of identification for some, recognition, or (future) reference for others. Gaining such knowledge or association can be one step towards preventing discrimination, since homo- and transphobia are often strongest with those completely unfamiliar with LGBTIQ+ lives. On the other hand, the lives and stories, problems and privileges of the characters and the effects taking over such perspectives has on the student can be addressed and discussed more easily with the example of a fictional character than by speaking directly about oneself. The fictionality can thus be a safe space for getting to know, empathizing with, and negotiating different concepts of identity (König, 2018). Last but not least, a queer perspective when working with literary texts can foster general aims of literature pedagogy, *e. g.*, familiarizing pupils with the characteristics of different genres or analyzing the speech situation of a text when learning about how the characters are represented in the text.

If literature in general is a suitable medium for bringing queer perspectives into ELT, why are Shakespeare's sonnets in particular suitable? They are linguistically difficult and a challenge to access. Would it not be easier to work with contemporary and possibly narrative texts closer to the lives of the students, especially with an empathic approach? There are a few reasons specifically recommending the sonnets for a program that includes LGBTIQ+ issues and critically interrogating heteronormativity. The first reason is that reading the sonnets in class might contribute to closing the gap between philological research findings and actual classroom practice discussed above. The very history of the sonnets' reception as outlined above can be used as an example of the dynamics of heteronormative and homophobic repression: The students can reconstruct how homoerotic readings of the sonnets were marginalized or explained away and how the social norms of the readers and critics played into this. The historical –and in the case of a German or Mexican classroom, the cultural– distance to the reception sources might make it easier for pupils to see these norms and dynamics of heteronorma-

tivity or homophobia and to speak about them than when talking directly about their everyday life structures. The – unwittingly – satirical effects of these historical sources add to this effect.

Another reason for introducing the sonnets in class is that poetic texts – by their very characteristics which make them ‘difficult’ – lend themselves particularly well to a queer approach. The openness of their language, and the many gaps of meaning that are to be filled, allow for different readings, including fluid ones in terms of gender expressions or diverse sexual identities. Also, the way poetic use of language deviates from everyday usage disrupts the reading experience in a way that lends itself to closer analysis, fostering the students’ symbolic competence (Volkmann, 2014). Finally, the sonnets might not be an easy read at first sight but – once accessed – a very worthwhile one and a poetic experience which teenage hearts can warm to.

### ‘STOP READING STRAIGHT’ – QUEERLY ENGAGING WITH LITERATURE: CONCEPTUAL CONSIDERATIONS

‘Queer’ is often described as a term whose meaning refuses to be fixed, or, put differently, as a term that can have multiple meanings (*e. g.*, Jagose 1996, Giffney, 2009). While this illustrates well the epistemological stakes of the concept, in this section we do specify some aspects of the term to both describe the pedagogic rationale that informed the queer engagement with Shakespeare described here and to provide a framework for analyzing the data collected during the teaching unit we describe later.

The first specification revolves around the adjectival use of queer to describe a person’s non-normative sexual and gender identity (Giffney, 2009). What follows is that the critical interrogation of heteronormativity, as described below, is combined with a “determined push for visibility” (Pilcher & Whelehan, 2004, p. 129) that propels seemingly deviant sexualities and genders into the consciousness of learners to increase the range of identities represented in language education, which has repeatedly been described as informed by an assumed monosexuality (Nelson, 2006). While it is certainly an important educational project to include a more di-

verse range of sexual and gender identities in classrooms to work against their silencing and marginalization, merely including, for example, a gay or bisexual protagonist in literary texts is not in itself enough: achieving representational equality does not necessarily end homophobia or discrimination, as Luhmann (1998) points out, or it might even worsen stereotypes depending on the choice of literary representations and the way they are negotiated in the classroom. Nor can one instance in the classroom where an LGBTIQ+ person becomes tangible in a text “aim to tell students the ‘accurate’ portrayal of the Other” (Kumashiro, 2002, p. 43). What we do stress, however, is that such texts can serve “as both catalysts and resources for students” (Kumashiro, 2002, p. 43) to learn more about particular LGBTIQ+ experiences and perspectives as mediated through literature. Such texts, combined with carefully designed tasks and questions (for example, in Merse, 2021, or Eisenmann & Ludwig, 2018), invite students to change their perspectives and develop empathy, and explore what they encounter with the alleged Other in a text does to themselves (cf. Kumashiro, 2002, p. 3). To achieve this, we suggest reading Patrick Ness’s story *Different for Boys* (2010) to bring in gay and bisexual themes, and propose a classroom scenario in which this story intersects with Shakespeare’s Sonnet 18 to initiate a complex interplay of changing perspectives.

Additionally, we foreground a focus on heteronormativity as a key concept brought forward by queer theory. We understand heteronormativity both as an individual thought pattern and as a social regulatory system that ensures that heterosexuality and a clear-cut male-and-female gender dichotomy are naturalized, privileged, and made to seem ‘normal’, while at the same time creating a hierarchy that marginalizes or silences everyone or everything that falls outside of what Butler (2006) postulated as the heterosexual matrix (cf. Degele, 2005).

If this understanding of heteronormativity is transferred to the reading of Shakespeare’s Sonnet 18 in the classroom, the following assumptions can be identified. First, learners who encounter this sonnet for the first time likely read heterosexual desire into the sonnet which a male person directs at a female addressee – even though the speech situation is potentially open because of the lack of male/

female pronouns. Such a reading validates both heterosexuality and a clear-cut gender binary in which one gender desires the opposite gender. Certainly, such assumptions can be troubling and complicated in the classroom if learners learn who the addressee of the sonnet was. Second, it is not unlikely that teachers also follow a heteronormative script, highlighting the alleged heterosexual desire expressed in this poem, while silencing other interpretations and constellations that the openness of the sonnet allows for. Third – and this is also a central component of the teaching unit sketched out here – a focus on heteronormativity can lead learners to an exploration of how norms of sexuality and gender have been constructed into the sonnet across the centuries, and how certain readings can be silenced and other readings privileged.

In our further understanding of queer, we follow existing lines of argumentation that see queer as a verb, and hence as an activity that leads students to challenge their hidden agendas and uninterrogated assumptions about the naturalness of sexuality and gender (Degele, 2008; Hall, 2003). For the teaching of Shakespeare's (2010) Sonnet 18, this means that learners are encouraged to denaturalize and interrogate possible heteronormative assumptions brought to the text, and to decipher Sonnet 18 in ways that bring out its latent and queer content (cf. Giffney, 2009, p. 7). This understanding of queer also emerges in Luhmann's seminal text on queer pedagogy, in which she suggests that such a pedagogy goes beyond incorporating queer content in classrooms and worrying about making such content "more palatable to students" (Luhmann, 1998, p. 141). Rather, a queer pedagogy looks at the learning processes that unfold when "idyllic stabilities of normalcy" (Luhmann, 1998, p. 146) are undermined, and when what is normally known about sexuality and gender is put into crisis: How does a learner take up, or refuse to take up, the positions that a text offers? What do new knowledge and new information do to one's understanding of a text? Are there any instances that illustrate how learners gradually call into question what is known while at the same time holding on to seemingly secure and preferred positions? Only if we allow for such troubling interventions into heteronormativity, or to speak with Britzman (1995), only if we 'stop reading straight', can the pedagogic potential of

queer play out productively in the EFL classroom and provide supportive environments in which learners can queerly engage in new explorations of sexuality, gender, and the norms that surround them – while learning about Shakespeare. This change in reading and literature practices can thus contribute to reconceptualizing schools and by extension EFL classrooms, as queer transformative spaces as they are envisaged by Kjaran and Sauntson (2020).

In the next section, we describe a teaching unit of approximately three 90-minute lessons based on the arguments and pedagogic rationale outlined above. Describing the teaching suggestions serves as a link between illustrating the potential of queer engagements with Shakespeare in the EFL classroom elaborated on so far and the empirical insights into a classroom where this unit was taught which will be provided subsequently.

## PRACTICAL EXAMPLE: A TEACHING UNIT ON SONNET 18 AND CONTEMPORARY YA LITERATURE

### **Analyzing the sonnet - Raising awareness of heteronormativity**

The unit starts with a regular analysis of Shakespeare's Sonnet 18 in pair work, in which pupils explore the characteristics of this kind of poetry, its specific metaphors and metrics, and how these all play together to evoke the impression of eternal love and beauty. What is of interest in a queer-informed approach is the collection of results afterward, when the teacher can draw the student's attention to the identity constructions they brought to the text. Did the students interpret the voice and the beloved person as male or female, or did they leave them unspecified? Did they assume heterosexual relationships, or did homosexual readings exist, too – or else any that would defy these binary constructs? How did the pupils anchor their assumptions in the texts? Did knowing the author's gender make a difference?

It is important to stress that there is no wrong reading because everyone can read the speech situation in this sonnet differently, according to their imagination, context, and experience. However, the learners can become aware of (perhaps existing) heteronormative

reading habits. In other words: We are mostly used to reading love declarations as heterosexual, and often from a man to a woman – even if we might not identify as male or heterosexual ourselves. Such a reflection on one's reading habits can lead to raising awareness of heteronormativity, something that most teenagers are not aware of although it deeply affects them. After such a reflection the teacher can provide the students with the information that Sonnet 18 is addressed to a young man, and then elicit from the pupils if this changes their perception of the sonnet.

### **Exploring the history of the sonnets' reception – Exploring dynamics of heteronormativity**

To further reflect on the dynamics of heteronormativity, the students then explore the history of Shakespeare's reception. They look at quotes and paraphrases of the editors' decisions and critics' remarks throughout the centuries, discussed above (see König, 2015, where they are presented as a worksheet). They then discuss how each source addresses the fact that the addressee of most of the sonnets is male – and what this reveals about the norms and values regarding gender and sexuality at the time when these sources were written.

### **Shakespeare through the eyes of YA fiction protagonists – Developing empathy, changing perspectives**

The last part of the unit is dedicated to further increasing the visibility of LGBTIQ+ characters, moving the focus from the historical to the present and thus inviting a transfer of the reflections on heteronormativity closer to the learners' lives. To achieve this, a contemporary source is added to the Shakespeare sonnet: Patrick Ness's 40-page narrative *Different for Boys* (2010).

The story is about four childhood friends who are discovering how and whom they desire. Whereas one of them, Jack, is more or less out as gay, Ant, the narrator, and Charlie have a secret affair with each other, which they handle very differently: While Ant tries to find out what this means for his sexuality, Charlie declares it to be

practicing for future heterosexual encounters and distances himself through homophobic abuse in public. Then there is Freddie who rejoins the old group of childhood friends after some years of absence and unwittingly sets off the events when he tries to win Ant for the rugby team. Charlie's jealousy leads to a fight in which he violently outs Ant. Afterward, Ant is supported by Freddie and Jack with whom Ant eventually has his first kiss. The story is very well written, funny, and serious at once, with characters that appeal to the students. A stylistic device that recommends the story further for a queer approach is that on the textual level, everything related to first sexual experiences (and sexualized swearing) is hidden by black bars, offering a good opportunity to talk about taboos with the students.

Through the eyes of these protagonists, the class comes back to questions of visibility raised during the critical reflection of heteronormativity in Shakespeare's reception. This time, they take a look at the dynamics of visibility and heteronormativity from a personal, emotionally accessible perspective, which adds to the analytical exploration carried out before. To link *Different for Boys* to Shakespeare's Sonnet 18, the learners are asked to imagine an English lesson in the life of the protagonists of the story in which the class deals with the poem: Who do the protagonists imagine themselves when reading the sonnet? What do they feel like and how do they act when the teacher mentions or does not mention the male addressee, or even is homophobic when talking about the male addressee? The English lesson imagined is not actually in the text itself but is added to create an imaginative intertext between Sonnet 18 and *Different for Boys* and to facilitate the complex changes of perspectives. This idea is based on another literary example with intertextual references to Shakespeare's sonnets: In Zadie Smith's (2001) novel *White Teeth* Irie Bowden, a teenager of Jamaican descent, has a brief moment of feeling recognized when her English class reads sonnet 130 ("My Mistress' Eyes Are Nothing Like the Sun") and she identifies with the dark lady, reading her as a person of color. Her teacher rejects this interpretation and thus reinforces Irie's feeling of not belonging to or meeting English cultural standards. What this scene illustrates in terms of defining powerful norms of 'race' is taken up for similar negotiations about sexuality in our example.

These activities aim to make the pupils aware of the *subjective* effects on individuals when queer love declarations or interpretations are silenced or explained away. These questions are addressed in small groups organized as a group puzzle (or jigsaw technique): In the first phase, all pupils focusing on the same character meet, then switch to groups with each character represented at least once, and then back again to the character groups. The tasks for each of these phases can be seen on the worksheet (Figure 1).

■ Figure 1. Sample worksheet

**Even better than a summer's day**  
 "Different for Boys" meets Shakespeare

**1**  
 Character focused on: Ant  Charlie  Jack  Freddie

"Shall I compare Charlie to a summer's day"

→ feels like Charlie & wants to love him especially when he does his gay stuff

> Which 'thee', do you think, does your character imagine when reading Shakespeare's Sonnet 18?

Explain your idea (from your homework) and compare it with the others focusing on the same character. You may change or add possibilities if you find theirs convincing.

**2**  
 Read the classroom situation described on the extra task sheet and put a cross next to the situation you have.

The context of the sonnets being dedicated to a man and the textual hints that the addressee of the first 126 sonnets is male are...

Group A: ... not mentioned  Group B: ... mentioned  Group C: ... mentioned and then dismissed

① Individually, each of you imagine how your character feels (inside perspective) and how he behaves (outside actions). Write down a few key words. Try to find hints in the short story which support your interpretation of the character's reaction.

Interpretation and textual hints/evidence	Feelings & thoughts	Possible comments /reaction/behaviour
	- maybe thinks of Charlie as he feels similar key for Charlie - but still assumes that the addressee of Sonnet 18 might be a girl, because that's the "normal" thing	- he won't say that the addressee could be male as he doesn't really think that - might feel lonely as the relation he has with Charlie, when the sonnet reminds him of it is not "real"

② In the group, contrast your results with those focusing on the other characters in the same situation.

**3**  
 Back in your character groups, compare your results from Task 2 to those of the others focusing on the same character and contrast the feelings and actions of your character in the different situations.

## EMPIRICAL INVESTIGATION: RESEARCH CONTEXT AND METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

This teaching unit described above is part of a larger research project designed by the first author (König, 2018). The research project was a case study consisting of three gender-related teaching units, with the Shakespeare scenario being the last of the three. The focus of the study was to achieve an understanding of how to foster a reflection of norms of gender and sexuality in the classroom, and what texts and tasks are suitable for doing so. Methodologically, this case study is situated between a teacher's action research and a didactically informed ethnography. The units were designed by the first author and then taught by a cooperating teacher who always looked at and gave feedback on the lesson plans presented to him, sometimes making small alterations before or spontaneously during the teaching process. During the lessons, the researcher was present as a participant observer taking field notes. The lessons were audio-taped and all worksheets and written assignments were collected and copied and then returned to the pupils.

The observed group was a grade 11 class at a *Gymnasium*, *i.e.*, an upper-level class of advanced learners of English as a foreign language preparing for their *Abitur* exam the following year. The teaching unit on Shakespeare took place in July 2014 in three blocks of 90 minutes, with some discussions continuing in another lesson. The class consisted of 19 students, 13 of whom identified as female, six as male, around the ages of 16 and 17. Their teacher estimated that about half of them had at least one parent with a cultural and linguistic background other than German and that about half had parents with an academic degree. The school promotes a liberal image and is situated in a midsized German university town. The teacher was experienced, had 20 years in the profession, open-minded but not formally educated in gender or queer studies.

For this chapter, we reanalyzed data from the teaching unit on Shakespeare. We found that the data, although collected with a different aim in mind, also lent themselves to an in-depth exploration of the queer engagements learners show while going through the lessons of this unit. This analytical lens led us to explore the following issues:

- Did the learners read and understand Shakespeare's Sonnet 18 with a heteronormative script in mind, or did they not bring such assumptions to the text?
- What happens when possible heteronormative assumptions are 'queered' and learners are 'troubled' by the information that the addressee of Sonnet 18 is male? How do instances in which heteronormative assumptions are challenged look like? Is there an openness to integrate this new knowledge into prior assumptions, is there a refusal to take up a queer perspective, or is there an 'in-between-ness' of both?
- What insights do learners gain when taking over LGBTIQ+ perspectives?

We re-analyzed the data by transcribing selected passages of the classroom discourse and analyzing the written responses on the worksheets. Both the selection of passages and the analysis were carried out by both authors independently to reduce and fill the blind spots that the participating researcher (who conducted the original study) might have, and also to arrive at a 'fresh' perspective on the data through involving a second researcher. Both analyses were then combined into a text illustrating the queer engagements learners exhibited. We constantly interweave select data into our interpretation to provide examples of the learners' and the teacher's original voices. The pupils' responses are transcribed including mistakes in grammar, syntax, and orthography. Underlined words represent our added emphasis. As the research presented here is qualitative in nature, we aim to create a rich and complex understanding of the particular research context that was explored (cf. Croker, 2009), *i.e.*, how certain learners in a specific classroom engage queerly with Shakespeare's Sonnet 18 and Patrick Ness's story *Different for Boys*.

## EMPIRICAL INSIGHTS INTO THE LEARNERS' QUEER ENGAGEMENT WITH SONNET 18 AND *DIFFERENT FOR BOYS*

### Analyzing the sonnet – Raising awareness of heteronormativity

At the outset of the first lesson, the pupils were asked to summarise Sonnet 18, which they had prepared at home. The first three answers are indicative of the identity constructions brought to the text in the ensuing classroom discussions. The first pupil reads out:

The speaker opens the poem with a question addressed to the beloved whether he or she should compare him or her to a summer's day. In the following lines, he differentiates himself from a summer as it isn't always perfect. He ends the poem by pointing out that this love is endless and won't fade in contrast to the summer.

Asked for possible additions, her classmate offers: "He says that a summer could change her position, but the woman he is speaking of has an eternal summer that could not change". Another pupil adds to this: "not only the summer can fade, but also the woman is always more beautiful than summer". While the first pupil initially keeps the gender of the voice and addressee open –if binary– and only then goes on to refer to the speaker as 'he', the second and third assume that the speaker of the poem is male and the addressee female.

The pupils seem to draw on their naturalized knowledge and view the poem as establishing a gender binary in which the speaker is a man and the addressee is a woman. Open readings do occur but are not insisted upon. Rather, the impression that the sonnet has a male speaker and a female addressee is reinforced when the rhetoric and stylistic devices of the poem –first analyzed in pairs– are discussed in class. For example, when one pupil elaborates on the line 'thy eternal summer shall not fade', he thinks that its effect is "to underline her beauty and also to show the difference that the summer ends and her beauty not".

Interestingly, however, quite several pupils use gender-neutral expressions when referring to the persons: “the reader already in the first line knows that the speaker is thinking or talking positive of the addressee”, while others simply refer to the addressee as a “person”: “sun gives warmth, and warmth could be connected to love, and so he could speculate that the speaker is in love with the person that he is writing to”.

When the teacher asks to focus on the effect of the question the sonnet opens with, one pupil imagines a situation that led to the sonnet being uttered: “He already is in the situation really because I had this feeling that it might be before that his girlfriend or someone asks him if he really can compare her to a summer day.” Another pupil speculates about the power of the comparisons made in the sonnet.

I think he just thought about the prettiest or best thing that he could imagine, then he thought about it and realized that even though this is the best thing he could think of, still the woman that he loves – or maybe just the addressee that he is talking to - is better than that.

Both of these responses are interesting in two ways. On the one hand, a heterosexual relationship or heterosexual desire is a readily available framework pupils use to understand the relationship between the speaker and addressee. In this respect, one could argue that pupils activate their naturalized knowledge of how relationships ‘normally’ are. On the other hand, these responses also already show that heterosexual love and desire might not be the only available framework. Next to “his girlfriend”, it could also have been a “someone” who induced the sonnet. And it is noticeable that the other student adds to “the woman that he loves” that it could also be “just the addressee that he is talking to”.

These hesitations and additions show that not all students necessarily follow a heteronormative script. Indeed, a gendered binary of a male speaker and a female addressee is activated by several learners, and quite a few students also activate a heterosexual pattern when

it comes to them making sense of the relationship described in the sonnet. However, such readings are not necessarily unanimously shared, which might indicate that there is a space into which students could inscribe alternative understandings of the poem. This leads us to expect that once the historically accurate information is added and queer engagements unfold later, this can cause greater irritation to some (who followed a heteronormative script), than to others who might use that information to productively fill the gap that their imagination has left open.

All in all, the assumption that the pupils would read the sonnet with heteronormative patterns is not fully justified. However, there is a dynamic of ‘normalization’ in the course of the classroom discussion, when the references to a male speaker and a female addressee as well as a romantic heterosexual relationship become increasingly established. And while some students do not easily use clear-cut ascriptions of male, female, and heterosexuality, no one actively challenges or calls into question a gendered binary or heterosexual desire in the sonnet, or even suggests same-sex desire.

At some point, the teacher draws attention to this fact and dramatizes the gender of the addressee, with a statement that can unsettle clear-cut heteronormative readings: “All of you – as far as I could hear – assumed the addressee is a woman”. To this, one student immediately responds: “No. Well, we thought about it and neither it is mentioned whether the speaker is a man or woman, nor is it mentioned whether he is talking to a man or a woman. It’s genderless, so it could also be a man talking to another man or something like that.” What is noteworthy is that this student and his partner did not share this interpretation in class, even though they thought of it during pair work. The fact that they did not intervene in the mainly heteronormative readings can be interpreted as part of the normalizing tendency noticed before. It is an example of how alternative readings can remain unvoiced in the face of an impression of a majority that is ‘normal’ – especially in the context of a school where ‘correct’ answers are often looked for.

However, the example also shows that such voices can be elicited as soon as the teacher opens a critical space for them. This student seems to readily embrace a more open and queer reading and is not

deeply troubled by or resistant to what the teacher suggests. Still, a close reading of this statement reveals that the speaker's gender remains "he", at the same time that new gender and desire relations become imaginable. This highlights how queer engagements are potentially messy, oscillating between 'common' gender perceptions and new non-heteronormative constellations of love and desire.

In principle, another student agrees with this statement but adds a reflection:

I would agree *to* [him]. And I would say that it is not clear if it is addressed to a woman or a man. But I think the adjectives he uses like 'lovely' have more connotation of a woman, because I think... when we read poems, most of the time they are about woman, I think, but I don't think that in this case it has to be *about woman*. But one thinks it."

On the one hand, this student seems to activate gender-specific connotations of words (*e. g.*, lovely) as well as cultural norms and 'usual' expectations about love poetry that cause her to stabilize a female addressee (which could be read as 'doing gender'). At the same time, she acknowledges that alternative readings are possible, too, but re-states that this is not what is usually assumed. This personal reflection indicates the student tends to resist a queer reading, while simultaneously reaching a new level of reflection that leads her to notice the power of norms to regulate the way literature is perceived. While this is not a full-frontal intervention into normalcy, the student has taken a step forward in acknowledging that regulatory norms do exist.

In general, conclusions about the gender of the speaker are drawn more quickly (and mostly implicitly) than about the addressee, which could be interpreted as intuitively equalling author and speaker. Only one student explicitly mentions why she posits a male speaker and not a female one. Agreeing to a potential same-sex relationship expressed in this sonnet, she then starts considering the possibility of a female speaker and a male addressee, but then finds arguments against this reading:

one wouldn't expect a woman to write something like this, especially in that time that Shakespeare lived". She adds that it "wasn't usual for women to express her feelings like that, to write poems and give it to a man, because it was the task of a man to [court women].

She draws on historical and culturally context-sensitive assumptions about gender expectations in the Elizabethan Age, according to which a female speaker seems less probable than a same-sex relationship. However, after opening up about this possibility she notes that the first interpretation is likely to be a heteronormative one: "Yeah, so but, that actually I think that it could also be addressing a man. But at first you think it's addressing a woman." This can be read as a case of in-between-ness, where a previous understanding is still active, but a new and different meaning gradually enters the scene and overlaps with her previous reading.

All these pupils' responses after the teacher has questioned the gender of the addressee show that their re-reading the sonnet in this light not only opens new options for understanding the dynamics of gender and desire in it. It also leads to a deeper engagement with the poem (and its context), with the pupils' looking for and arguing with textual evidence for their ways of reading.

It is only at the beginning of the next lesson that the teacher explains that literary research suggests that it can be safely assumed that Sonnet 18 is addressed to a man. In doing so, he continues the productive irritation he caused in the previous session and makes the gender of the addressee more specific. The teacher asks the pupils whether this new information changes their perception of the sonnet or their attitude toward it. The students' responses are a 'mixed bag'. Several students declare an open-minded attitude ("it's okay if you think about it.") or state that "for me, it didn't play a role, really, if it was addressed to a man or a woman", which might indicate that this student read the beauty and love ascriptions in the poem as universal rather than necessarily attached to a certain gender. (Another possibility might be that such declarations are socially desirable answers rather than indicating deep processing and thinking, but the depth of reflection that unfolded throughout

and also the more skeptical tones students adopted indicate that socially desirable answers in this teaching unit were uncommon.)

In contrast to these more open-minded and respectful opinions, another student is troubled by the new information: "It surprised me that such a genius writer like Shakespeare is gay." Shakespeare's reputation as a world-famous poet – and thus, as a canonized norm – apparently is not easily reconcilable with the student's assumption that Shakespeare was gay. The teacher explains that examining the sonnet is not about discerning whether Shakespeare was gay or not: "We don't know that. All we know is that he wrote poems that were in this way or others addressed to a young man", thus relativizing the student's assumption and hinting at the differentiation between the lyrical speaker of the sonnet and Shakespeare as the real author. However, the pupil (mis-)understands this remark as an occasion to add that it's "a little bit weird". This, combined with the previous instance of the teacher questioning the gender of the addressee, illustrates that (perceived) teachers' interventions can open doors both to questioning norms and to reiterating them.

In two cases students try to adhere to heterosexual readings of the relationship in the sonnet. One student insists on the openness of the speech situation and says that "we don't know if he really spoke to the young man in the poem or to somebody else. And because the poem was published later on, and it was not like a letter or something." Another student suggests that "this poem doesn't have to express a love relationship but also a *friend* relationship" preferring a platonic reading. From a queer perspective, this can be seen as resistance to non-heteronormative readings, which stabilizes preferred readings and maybe more comfortable truths. Such readings, however, should not *per se* be prescribed in the classroom, as the openness of the speech situation can indeed stimulate the students' imaginations in different directions.

Another student articulates her opinion as follows:

I think that it is still a little bit – not strange or weird – but it's just something that is still not really common in our world, or maybe it starts to get normal but even though, if you hear that someone is homosexual you still just think about it for a moment or just are a

bit surprised because it is still nothing that can be defined as normal. So for me, it's like, okay or whatever you want to call it, that Shakespeare wrote it to a man, but *in* the first moment you hear it, it's a bit strange or surprising.

This longer statement shows that the student is receptive to new knowledge and is willing to queer her understanding of the sonnet. Yet at the same time, the student openly admits to being irritated by the new information. The interesting aspect here is that she uses this information as a springboard to reflect on contemporary norms of sexuality, concludes (or to her critique) that being homosexual is often not considered 'normal', and uses this as an explanation that it is "strange or surprising" to learn that the sonnet was addressed to a man.

Similar reflections of norms can be found in other students' comments, but these refer to the norms of sexuality and gender across time, by which students establish a diachronic perspective. One student suggests that at the time the sonnet was written, people might have been afraid to express same-sex affection "so they sort of did not say it directly but through such a poem". This indicates that this student notices the power of heteronormativity, leading people –depending on the period and social context– to use subversive practices of expressing desire. Another student also reflects on the historical contingency of sexual norms and says that she "heard something, I don't know in which time, but it was common to be gay or homosexual but there was a time when it was a trend or it wasn't dangerous", whereas "100 years ago it wasn't". This suggests existing or developing awareness that norms of sexuality can change over time. More broadly speaking, this also shows that as soon as queer engagements are facilitated in the classroom environment, students might also begin more broadly to think about how heteronormativity has the power to influence people's lives.

### **Exploring the history of the sonnets' reception – Exploring dynamics of heteronormativity**

After the students discussed their opinions and perceptions of the sonnet in light of the information that it was addressed to a man,

they explored the sonnet's reception over the centuries by analyzing a worksheet with a selection of historic sources (see above). They focused on the questions of how these sources approach the issue of the addressee, what their ways reveal about the norms of the time as well as if they differentiated between author and speaker (for the worksheet cf. König, 2015).

In the following session, the teacher made productive use of the fact that some students were missing in the lesson with the historic sources and asked the others to explain what they had worked on. Going through the data from this lesson, it becomes clear that the students acquired new knowledge about the 'hetero-normalization' of Shakespeare's sonnet, and that no student showed active denial or resistance to this new knowledge. Instead, it appears that by exploring the effects of heteronormativity through seemingly distant historic source texts, the students' queer engagements tend to unfold more neutrally –but still in a way that can be seen as an intervention in normalcy that leads students to an in-depth understanding how the normalizing and regulatory practices concerning sexual desire and gender expression have functioned over time.

This is apparent in the students' responses when the teacher asks for reasons why critics silenced and explained away an alleged same-sex desire or the fact Shakespeare addressed the sonnet to a man. One student hypothesizes that at the time "they thought that homosexual people are, I don't know, ill people or against the norm", thus realizing that attitudes towards homosexuality are time-bound and context-specific. The same student also assumes that the critics were afraid that, based on his popularity, Shakespeare might function as a role model for other gay people, or that society would come to accept homosexuality if they found same-sex desire expressed in a sonnet. Another student elaborates on this idea and says that maybe Shakespeare "was able to talk to people in different kind of ways, he was able to spread news or talk to people about it, like gay and stuff". Here, the student implicitly recognizes the subversive role literature might have to effect change, and argues that the critics policed the reception of Shakespeare so that such ideas might not spread.

Interestingly, another student takes over the perspective of the critics of the time:

So, if you [*i. e.* as a critic] suspected Shakespeare to be gay – or homosexual – you would have to stand up for that and you had to somehow just present your opinion on that and I think that there was the danger that some people could start to hate you or insult you on that or cut you out of the society.

In this case, homophobia might have affected the critics in such a way that they did not want to be accused of anything inappropriate and thus to be ‘guilty’ by association. This institutionalization of homophobia also becomes apparent in another student’s response, who explained the silencing with the fact that same-sex desire was illicit or illegal, “a crime at that time”, and allowing for it in the sonnet might have “threatened the entire system”, as she remarks. During the round-up after this discussion, students expressed their surprise that the mindset of people can change over time, especially when comparing texts from the reception history with each other and with more recent, or their own, attitudes towards homosexuality. This learning effect is important in that it illustrates that heteronormativity, homophobia, or the meanings attached to sexual identities and desires are diverse and changeable, rather than static or essential.

### **Shakespeare through the eyes of YA fiction protagonists – Developing empathy, changing perspectives**

This last part of the empirical investigation collects several vignettes from the teaching unit in which students take over the perspective of one of the protagonists of *Different for Boys*, and juxtapose the individual perspectives with several classroom scenarios in which the reading of Shakespeare’s Sonnet 18 is handled in heteronormative, inclusive or homophobic ways. These vignettes explore how far the students developed empathy and managed to take over or change into, the perspective of their chosen protagonist – and what insights into the effects of norms of gender and sexuality were gained by this. The data for these vignettes are taken from the students’ hand-written notes on the worksheets (see Figure 1 for an example).

## Being Ant

All students who took over Ant's perspective imagined Charlie as Ant's preferred addressee of Sonnet 18. Their explanations show that the students were able to adopt Ant's perspective by recognizing his desires and dreams: "Ant really likes Charlie & wants to kiss him (especially when he does his shy grin)"; "attracted physically + starts to love him, wants to kiss him + be with him". These examples show that pupils can take over a gay protagonist's perspective, enter this world, and see this world through the eyes of a gay (albeit closeted) teenager.

When Ant is set into the heteronormative scenario (*i.e.* the teacher does not mention that Sonnet 18 is addressed to a man), one student writes that Ant might wish he could express his feelings to Charlie in the same way that Shakespeare could to a girl. This interpretation is quite assertive as it has Ant appropriating the sonnet more consciously to his secret desires. The same student, however, also thinks that in the classroom, Ant says that "he finds a female addressee not only plausible but right" and hence, "pretends not to see/imagine other possibilities". This student's interpretation shows that Ant's secret desires stand in stark contrast to how he actually might behave in the classroom public when the sonnet is dealt with.

When Ant is imagined to be in a classroom where the male addressee of Sonnet 18 is mentioned, the students develop a different picture. One student says that Ant, who is usually inattentive and ignores what the teacher says, is suddenly excited and feels an interest in the sonnet. The student thinks that Ant "feels addressed" in this scenario and could see Shakespeare as his role model. The student thus suggests that if a space for identifying homosexually is opened up and a queer perspective is included, this can in turn increase an LGBTIQ+ student's motivation to engage with a text.

For the homophobic classroom scenario, another student develops an inner monologue and speaks with Ant's words: "Even my teacher doesn't accept homosexuality, how are others going to accept it? That is the reason why I'm not telling anybody about my sexuality". Furthermore, the student imagines that to the public Ant is "sitting quietly, says nothing, looks on the floor". The student reflects Ant's feelings of losing hope that he will be accepted, which

in turn strengthens his belief in keeping the affair with Charlie and his homosexuality almost invisible in the classroom. This reflection shows the pupil's depth of engagement with the psychological and discursive violence of homophobia.

### *Being Charlie*

With Charlie as the most ambiguous character in *Different for Boys*, it is particularly interesting to see how students changed into his perspective and his perception of the different classroom scenarios. All pupils who engaged with Charlie assume that he imagines “any random girl” as the sonnet's addressee, and explain this with the fact that “he is still into girls and doesn't see himself as gay”. This mirrors Charlie's ambiguous behavior in the novel, where he oscillates between uttering homophobic remarks, ascertaining his alleged heterosexuality, and having a sexual relationship with Ant.

In the scenario where the teacher does not mention the male addressee, one pupil deeply engages with Charlie's perception of the romance expressed in the sonnet. According to him\*her, Charlie thinks that “Shakespeare's sonnet is about a woman – it's normal”, while when he had sex with Ant, he “never thought of stuff like this” as expressed romantically in the sonnet. Consequently, Charlie “thinks about Ant and is disgusted by himself, then *trys* to imagine a girl”. This student ingeniously renders Charlie's thoughts as distinguishing strictly between ‘normal’ love for a woman and hm having sex with Ant, which does not seem to have anything to do with ‘proper’ love. According to this pupil, Charlie rejects any other thoughts about Ant in himself and tries to stabilize his alleged attraction to girls. Ultimately, that same pupil also puts the following words into Charlie's mouth: “I just want to have sex – *compairing* a girl to a *summers* day is gay!”. With this wonderfully paradoxical comment (with either a strong sense of irony or not aware of any), this pupil has Charlie distance himself from any expression of love by depreciating writing a love sonnet to a girl as gay. Thus, Charlie marks the sonnet as unmanly, uses a homophobic interpellation, and at the same time denies the feelings he might have for Ant by emphasizing his homophobic self-presentation.

When two pupils put Charlie into the scenario with the male addressee being mentioned, it seems that Charlie feels being caught red-handed and suddenly unmasked by the teacher, which leads them to hypothesize that Charlie would make fun of homosexuality in the classroom, “commenting, swearing, accusing people to be gay” – only to distract others from thinking that he might be connected to the same-sex desire underlying the sonnet. In one pupil’s eyes, for Charlie “it’s not imaginable that people can admit their homosexuality”, therefore he is “angry about the fact that he’s confronted with homosexuality again”. For the other pupil, it also seems likely that Charlie goes through a rollercoaster of feelings in that classroom situation: “touched, jealous, hurt, confused, reminded (own life), tension, angry, frightened”, which indicates a deep confusion that this pupil has projected on Charlie concerning his sexual behavior and his feelings.

### *Being Jack*

A couple of students chose to take the perspective of Jack, the protagonist who is rather openly gay. All of them think that Jack would imagine Ant to be the addressee of the sonnet, in particular so because they think that Jack expects Ant to be gay, too. One student also writes that Jack might dream of having a sexual relationship with Ant, whom he secretly desires. During this change of perspective, none of the students show any difficulty in feeling into the person of a gay teenager.

In the classroom scene where the male addressee is not mentioned, the pupils assume that Jack still thinks that the poem revolves around the love between two men. Hence, the pupils assume that Jack would use the openness of the speech situation in the sonnet and fill this gap with homosexual romantic love while asking himself at the same time if this romantic love would be possible with Ant. The pupils also emphasize that Jack might “point out that the sonnet is not necessarily addressed to a woman” and thus confront his classmates and his teacher with an alternative reading. In our understanding of these responses, the students imagine Jack to be a powerful character who carves out a space for his homosexual iden-

tification with the sonnet and whose imagination is not inhibited by possible heteronormative readings. Moreover, the pupils also recognize that Jack can have the potential power to openly challenge heteronormative readings expressed in the classroom and disrupt these worldviews with his alternative reading. Thus, the pupils' empathy went as far as imagining a strong gay character whose critical agency becomes a welcome asset to the classroom.

Jack's powerful and critical agency is also part of the pupils' imagination when the classroom scenario is homophobic. Even though the teacher dismissed a male addressee, the pupils still ascribe a confident reaction to Jack. According to them, Jack might think "Why wouldn't the great S. be gay? I don't mind if he liked boys or girls", and then go on to confront the classroom with their homophobia by saying "Why is it a problem if he addressed it to a man? It is his story, he is free to show his feelings however he loves!". The interesting thing here is that although the classroom scenario is openly homophobic, the pupils think that Jack is not silenced by that and makes his voice heard. These pupils seem to be able to imagine the possibility of open resistance and standing up for one's opinion and identity in the classroom.

The remaining combination –the openly gay protagonist in a classroom where the male addressee is explicitly mentioned– is also quite insightful. Here, the pupil writes about Jack's thoughts: "I'm not the only one --> famous, successful 'ancestors'". Hearing about the male addressee is interpreted by this pupil as a feeling of having someone to refer to, as a connection between Shakespeare and Jack via a gay heritage, and as proof that being gay is nothing bad. At the same time, the pupil also wonders if Jack might fear his classmates' reactions: "Is it tolerated by my fellow students?". As such, the whole situation is considered to be a test of how Jack's classmates might react. By extension, this could also mean that the pupil who wrote this has engaged with the question of what other people might say when sexual diversity becomes a topic in class. It is interesting to read that the same pupil comes to offer these two reactions, which indicates that s\*he is very sensitive to Jack's feelings and experiences and to the general atmosphere of a group, *i. e.* if people might react in a hostile, reserved, or open-minded way if a gay horizon opens up.

## Being Freddie

The dataset of pupils who took over Freddie's perspective allows us to conclude how these pupils think a heterosexual teenager who can be described as a gay ally might react to Shakespeare's Sonnet 18 and the information regarding the addressee.

All students who were in Freddie's shoes assume that Freddie imagines his girlfriend as the addressee of the sonnet, which comes as no surprise because he is perceived as heterosexual through and through: "he definitely isn't gay or hasn't got any homosexual feelings". One pupil even added, "he tells Ant it's okay to be gay as long as he doesn't try sleeping with him". It can be argued that in writing this, the pupil has engaged with the idea that a heterosexual man can express tolerance towards gay people as long as certain borders are not crossed, exhibiting an elaborate change of perspective into a heterosexual character and what this character might feel about gay people.

There are no data for the classroom scenario in which the teacher mentions the male addressee but explains this fact away. For the classroom scenario in which the teacher doesn't mention the male addressee, one pupil thinks that Freddie doesn't suspect anything and believes the sonnet is written to a woman –for him, there is no other possibility. When no homosexual connotation is mentioned, this pupil voices Freddie's absolute certainty of a heteronormative reading– which might mirror the readings of many of that pupil's classmates before the queer intervention. It is also interesting to see that as soon as a heterosexual character enters the pupil's imaginative field, a homosexual reading of Shakespeare's sonnet is not considered possible anymore. When the same pupil thinks about how Freddie might react in the classroom, s\*he writes: "Maybe he comments that Shakespeare was a romantic *wuzz*, writing such a sonnet is unmanly and women wouldn't be attracted to such type of men". It seems that Freddie is assumed to stabilize standards of proper masculinity when being masculine is called into question by the unmanly activity of writing poetry. This shows that within the pupil's imagination, heteronormative ideals are projected on the heterosexual character of the story. In the other scenario where the teacher mentions the

male addressee, one pupil comes to the following conclusion about Freddie's reaction: "Okay, I can live with that weird thought because I was thinking of a girl". This shows that Freddie is assumed to be able to concede a queer reading as long as he can maintain his heterosexual reading. This suggests that this pupil might think that as soon as heteronormativity or heterosexual identity is challenged by queer entanglements, assertions are made that stabilize a person's heterosexuality so as not to appear gay or unmanly.

## CONCLUSION

Our aim in this article was to develop a rich understanding of how learners engage queerly with Shakespeare's Sonnet 18 in combination with a contemporary YA fiction story, Patrick Ness's *Different for Boys*. We investigated the learning processes and classroom dynamics that unfold when the teaching of literature meets the queer-informed pedagogic rationale of critically interrogating heteronormativity with learners, alongside experiencing and taking over LGBTIQ+ perspectives. The data illustrate the diverse student engagements observed during the teaching unit, ranging from challenging and understanding the heteronormativity surrounding the reception of the sonnet to feeling into the perspectives of the protagonists, themselves with various sexual identifications, via empathetic approaches.

We found that classroom dynamics, at first sight, tend to heteronormalize the reading of Shakespeare. However, on closer inspection, several instances show that not all readings are *per se* heteronormative and that spaces exist into which learners gradually insert new information and readings. What is remarkable is that those highly individual (re)negotiations –ranging from students who stopped 'reading straight' to students resisting a queer reading– can lead to a committed engagement with the sonnet and Shakespeare: learners put forward textual evidence to argue for personal reading, they refer to and ask for knowledge of cultural context, and use and expand their understanding of the characteristics of a sonnet and differentiate between the author and the speaker of a sonnet. From the point of view of literature pedagogy, therefore, queer engagement can be

said to be highly beneficial and sharpen the learners' analytical and interpretational skills.

The pupils' engagement with the heteronormative reception history of Shakespeare's sonnet led to a more distanced and matter-of-fact understanding of the historically contingent and context-bound views on sexual desire and appropriate gender behavior. This led students to recognize that the norms of sexuality and gender are not stable over time and that the meanings people attach to sexuality and gender can change. Indeed, many pupils were surprised by the fact that literary critics went to such great lengths to explain away the fact that Shakespeare could be in any way connected to the 'love that dare not speak its name'.

Complex and highly affective queer engagements also occurred when pupils worked on the interplay of Sonnet 18 and *Different for Boys*. By layering a canonical text over a contemporary story, a palimpsest emerges that allows for a markedly empathetic change of perspectives from the individual learners towards literary characters of various sexual identifications, and in turn, these characters' imagined perceptions of coming into touch with Sonnet 18 in fictitious classroom scenarios. Given a queer-inclusive education, this task aimed at bringing LGBTIQ+ experiences into focus and allowing learners to experience the effects of norms of sexuality and gender. The variety of the students' answers, and the detailed nuances they interpreted into the different characters, show the productive potential of a learning environment in which students are encouraged to feel into and coordinate complex and new perspectives.

As different as the types of queer learner engagements might be, they do show on a meta-level that a queer focus on teaching Shakespeare can draw learners into committed readings of Sonnet 18 in which they constantly renegotiate and update existing reading habits and the assumptions they initially brought to the text. The combination of 'queer' and Shakespeare can catalyze to spark critical discussions that get learners deeply involved, both cognitively and emotionally, in the reading and learning process. We do not, however, want to give the impression that a queer focus is combined with Shakespeare only to give a canonical text some glossy and exotic 'veneer'. Rather, we include a queer perspective on Shakespeare's

texts to foster deep learning, critical thinking, and committed engagements with literature and as an important way of keeping the teaching of Shakespeare up-to-date and relevant in EFL classrooms of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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