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**Character tropes in children's literature with LGBTQ themes
published between the years 1980 and 2000**

Bakalářská práce

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PROHLÁŠENÍ

Prohlašuji, že jsem bakalářskou práci vypracovala samostatně pod odborným dohledem vedoucího práce a uvedla jsem v ní předepsaným způsobem všechny použité podklady a literaturu.

V Olomouci dne: Podpis:

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1 Introduction

When introducing her research into LGBTQ literature for youth, B.J. Epstein states that “[c]hildren’s literature in particular has a special role to play in our ever more globalised world by giving children the opportunity to read and learn about various kinds of people, backgrounds, and perspectives.”¹ In complete agreement with this opinion, this thesis presents analyses of children’s literature concerned with lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer (i.e. “LGBTQ”, or simply “queer”) characters and themes. These LGBTQ texts were chosen on the basis of two major criteria: their year of publishing ranging from 1980 to 2000, and them being analyzed or referenced in the academic texts used as secondary sources for this thesis.

The research into character tropes in stories with LGBTQ themes which were published between 1980 and 2000 in anglophone countries can provide context for the same genre of today. This capsulated collection of texts and stories stands out amongst other children’s literature by being concerned with sexuality, the discussion of which is often avoided in this genre, as Epstein writes: “If sexuality is not studied, then diverse forms of sexuality are certainly rarely discussed.”² The properties of this branch of stories for children are a fascinating topic of study, especially as Epstein claims that children’s books were viewed “to be less serious, important, or interesting”³ in academic circles. Despite these views, this thesis argues that LGBTQ-themed children’s literature contains valuable information on the perception of queer individuals, queer children, and queer families in society, which it proves by offering an analysis of the most common character tropes in these texts.

In order to present the research, there will first be a discussion of the theoretical framework, namely narrative strategies, implied and default reader, queer decoding, and queer theory. In the next section, the picture books will be historically contextualized in terms of the history of children’s literature and of the queer community. Then, the thesis

¹ B. J. Epstein, “‘The Case of the Missing Bisexuals’: Bisexuality in Books for Young Readers’, *Journal of Bisexuality* 14, no. 1 (January 2014): 3, accessed 14 November 2019.

² Epstein, 4.

³ Epstein, 4.

will present the most prominent literary tropes in these texts – the asexual child, followed by a comparison of representation of male and female same-sex couples, a further elaboration on the qualities of queer representation, and information on the use of queer subtext. To present an opposing opinion, the negative views of homosexuality in literature aimed at children will be presented and discussed. The analyses will be concluded by a discussion of normalcy in regard to queer identities.

2 Theory

Before delving into the analyses of children's books, it is important to inspect the field of theory that is concerned with queerness in literature. Although children's books are generally simple with a minimum of text, some of their implications cannot be properly grasped without having a basic understanding of the concepts this chapter will present, define and discuss. The first sub-section presents the strategies an author may have while introducing queer characters into their work, and the second follows with introducing queer theory as defined by Annamarie Jagose and Jessica Kander, as well as discuss the bounds of its use for literary analysis. The third sub-section introduces and describes the implied or default reader. Lastly, the fourth section will describe what a queer reader may do to feel addressed by a narrative.

2.1 Narrative strategies

Valerij Tjupa briefly summarizes the essence of narrative strategies as “[...] a use of certain narrative techniques and practices to achieve a certain goal.”⁴ Such strategies differ based on how central the sexual identity of the character is to the story; whether their sexuality is clearly labeled using appropriate terms; or whether it exists only on the peripheral level. Jane Sunderland is a linguist who focuses mainly on language in relation to gender and identity. In the publication *Language, Gender and Children's Fiction* (2011), she defines three major approaches authors may have: the gay strategy, the different strategy, and the backgrounded strategy.⁵ This section will describe and discuss each of them separately, while also highlighting their possible advantages or disadvantages.

Stories which employ the gay strategy use and explain queer terminology, as well as discuss sexuality and sexual identity.⁶ This may often result in the text having a weak plot and only educating the reader on homosexuality, which, for the modern reader, may seem too stiff and robotic. *Daddy's Roommate* (2000), a picture book describing the day to day

⁴ Valerij Tjupa, 'Narrative Strategies', *Hühn, hollet al. (Eds.): The Living Handbook of Narratology*, accessed 4 December 2021, <http://www.lhn.uni-hamburg.de/article/narrative-strategies>.

⁵ Jane Sunderland, *Language, Gender and Children's Fiction* (London ; New York: Continuum, 2011), 163–68.

⁶ Sunderland, 163.

life of a boy whose heterosexual parents got divorced and his father found a male partner, was published “after the moral panic about gay men and AIDS,”⁷ which lead to demonization of gay men and male same-sex couples in the eyes of society. Sunderland concludes that while from the modern standpoint, the gay strategy may come off as too “didactic,”⁸ it can be understood and accepted “in the context of its own age.”⁹

The different strategy takes a more subtle approach and does not attempt to use and explain terminology.¹⁰ Instead, the child protagonist recognizes their family with same-sex parents as somewhat different from most other families and learns to accept their difference. For example in *Heather Has Two Mommies* (first ed. 1988, second ed. 2016), a picture book about a girl’s life with her two mothers and the importance of a loving family, a whole class of children draw their family, and no child has the same family type.¹¹ Heather learns from the teacher that “[e]ach family is special. The most important thing about a family is that all the people in it love each other.”¹² Using this strategy validates the experience of children in non-traditional families while remaining accessible to child readers. On the other hand, it does not teach children about terms like “gay” or “homosexual”.

Works which rely on the backgrounding strategy tend to not explore queer topics at all. *The Duke Who Outlawed Jelly Beans* (1991), a collection of stories from a kingdom full of magic and mythical creatures, presents the adventures of five children, none of which have heteronormative nuclear families (meaning a mother, a father, and their biological children). For example, “Ogre’s Boots” begins with the introduction of the family of the protagonist: “Two mothers lived in the kingdom with their daughter, Little Jenny, and her big brother, Dan.”¹³ This is all that is said on the topic of Little Jenny’s

⁷ Sunderland, 164.

⁸ Sunderland, 164.

⁹ Sunderland, 164.

¹⁰ Sunderland, 165.

¹¹ Lesléa Newman and Laura Cornell, *Heather Has Two Mommies* (Somerville, Mass: Chandlewick Press, 2016), 24–29.

¹² Newman and Cornell, 29.

¹³ Johnny Valentine and Lynette Schmidt, *The Duke Who Outlawed Jelly Beans*, 1st ed (Boston, Mass: Alyson Publications, 1991), 19.

family, as an ogre appears to terrorize the village and the focus is shifted to this issue.¹⁴ Similarly, “The Frog Prince” opens with: “Once upon a time, in a small village in a faraway kingdom, a boy named Nicholas lived with his father. Nicholas’s father had a friend named Karl, who wore a bushy black beard and who often carried Nicholas around the yard on his shoulders.”¹⁵ When this information is established, the story launches into the tale of Nicholas meeting a frog which turns out to be an enchanted prince.¹⁶ Characters in same-sex relationships simply exist within the story and their identities are not brought into the spotlight. In a way, they are on the same level as heterosexual characters whose identity is scarcely debated. These narratives present the existence of LGBTQ people as a common occurrence, lifting the burden of being thought of as “other.”¹⁷

2.2 *Queer theory*

As the name suggests, the queer theory relates to most of the topics discussed in this thesis. Before all else, it is important to define the key term “queer”. Hanna Kubowitz discusses the negative connotations of the term “queer,” as it is synonymous with “deviant” or “odd”.¹⁸ The LGBTQ community reclaimed this negative term, however, and uses it to self-identify, as Kubowitz shows:

Queer is how I conceive of myself as a bipolar, left-handed, short-sighted, but otherwise fairly able-bodied member of the high-risk group of breast cancer, a once untimely orphaned, now middle-aged, middle-class white lesbian academic in a culture still dominated by heterosexuality, heterocentricity, and heteronormativity – at least this is how I perceive myself some of the time, particularly when focussing on those aspects of my identity in which I deviate from heterocentric norms.¹⁹

¹⁴ Valentine and Schmidt, 19.

¹⁵ Valentine and Schmidt, 1.

¹⁶ Valentine and Schmidt, 1.

¹⁷ Epstein, “‘The Case of the Missing Bisexuals’”, 3.

¹⁸ Kubowitz, ‘The Default Reader and a Model of Queer Reading and Writing Strategies’, 203.

¹⁹ Kubowitz, 203.

Although this statement presents many ways to be “queer” in society, for the purpose of this thesis, “queer” will be used to signify a non-heterosexual sexual identity or a gender identity which does not correspond to sex assigned at birth.

The characteristic trait of queer theory is that its nature does not leave much room for creating a systematized model, since defining it would strip it of its core principle: ambiguity. Rosemary Hennessy in *The Routledge Queer Studies Reader* characterizes queer theory as follows: “Queer theory [...] sees any identity as internally divided and therefore not an apt or effective rallying point for change. “Queer” is a mark of the instability of identity.”²⁰ Annamarie Jagose, an LGBTQ scholar, author of fiction and academic texts among which belongs her 1996 publication *Queer Theory: An Introduction*, defines it along the lines of a “nascent theoretical model which has developed out of more traditional lesbian and gay studies”²¹ and further comments on the “elasticity” of the term queer being the very purpose of it.²² Jessica Kander states that queer theory deconstructs the notions of normalcy or naturality, while promoting identity as a multifaceted, non-fixed concept.²³ For the purpose of this text, queer theory may be summarized as a socio-political theory which promotes viewing identity and sexuality as complicated and fluid. It suggests that one or two labels cannot satisfactorily define a human being.

There is little history to employing queer theory in literature for children. Kubowitz deems queer theories difficult to use: “Due to their interdisciplinary nature they are rather unspecific, and hence only partly adequate, as a tool for literary analysis.”²⁴ Kander adds that “within the field of childrens literature [...] the use of queer theory is only just in its infancy.”²⁵ Queer theory finds more space for its application in social issues, as it opposes the constraint that labels for sexuality or gender identity cause. Within this thesis, however, this approach will remain only acknowledged, not utilized, as the lack of a solid blueprint

²⁰ D.E. Hall et al., *The Routledge Queer Studies Reader* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2013), 135.

²¹ Annamarie Jagose, *Queer Theory, Interpretations* (Carlton South, Vic: Melbourne University Press, 1996), 1.

²² Jagose, 1.

²³ Jessica Kander, ‘Reading Queer Subtexts in Children’s Literature’ (Ypsilanti, MI, Eastern Michigan University, 2011), 2–3, <http://commons.emich.edu/theses/328>.

²⁴ Kubowitz, ‘The Default Reader and a Model of Queer Reading and Writing Strategies’, 204.

²⁵ Kander, ‘Reading Queer Subtexts in Children’s Literature’, 24.

for queer theory analyses in children's literature would not produce comprehensible results.

Queerness in terms of identity is connected to the issue of what characteristics may the text assume the reader has, and how these assumptions affect the reader's experience – all of which will be addressed in the next section.

2.3 Implied and default reader

The reader of literary texts is often assumed to possess a certain quality in order to relate to the narrative. One such quality related to children's literature would be the age of the reader (e.g. picture books assume the reader to be under ten years old). Hanna Kubowitz, the author of the 2012 article "The Default Reader and a Model of Queer Reading and Writing Strategies Or: Obituary for the Implied Reader", recognizes this conceptual idea as the implied reader.²⁶

The term implied reader was first introduced by Wayne C. Booth, who defined it as "the author's image of the recipient that is fixed and objectified in the text by specific indexical signs."²⁷ In other words, the implied reader is the author's idea of the reader of the work in question. This idea is translated into the text in the form of specially curated signs. Wolfgang Iser, a literary critic, further describes the implied reader as "a textual structure anticipating the presence of a recipient without necessarily defining him [...] the concept of the implied reader designates a network of response-inviting structures, which impel the reader to grasp the text."²⁸ From these definitions, the implied reader can be understood as an abstract concept of a reader for whom the text is originally created and who is being addressed by the text.

Kubowitz then defines a different, but not entirely separate concept of the default reader. It is the universal assumption that the reader follows the norm in society; the default may change depending on genre, but Kubowitz summarizes the default characteristics of the western society to be: male or female unambiguous gender, heterosexuality, whiteness, being neurotypical, able-bodied, and having a Christian background.²⁹ As these notions are important to the framework of this work, they will be identified in simple terms. Male or female unambiguous gender refers to a

²⁶ Kubowitz, 'The Default Reader and a Model of Queer Reading and Writing Strategies', 201.

²⁷ Wayne Booth qtd. in Wolf Schmid, 'Implied Reader', *Living Handbook of Narratology*, 27 January 2013, accessed 15 April 2021, <http://www.lhn.uni-hamburg.de/node/59.html>.

²⁸ Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore; London: John Hopkins University Press, 1997), 34.

²⁹ Kubowitz, 'The Default Reader and a Model of Queer Reading and Writing Strategies', 209.

state where a person identifies fully with their gender assigned at birth based on their genitalia and fulfills the role of that specific gender completely, does not experiment with gender expression, or appear “gender ambiguous” or “gender-less”. A heterosexual person is only attracted to the opposite sex. A white, or alternatively Caucasian, person is someone with light skin and European roots. Neurotypical individuals are those that do not suffer from any kind of mental illness or disorder, and able-bodied individuals are those who are not physically disabled or do not suffer from any chronic illness. And finally, having a Christian background refers to a state where a person, regardless of whether they are Christian themselves, is born into a family which follows Christianity, or a nation where majority of inhabitants are Christian, or a nation which historically has roots in Christianity. The reader may either fit into these groups and feel understood by the text which presupposes these characteristics in the audience, or differ from these default categories and have a harder time relating to the characters or the narrative.

The assumption of the recipient’s need to find the characters relatable is classified as the text appropriation hypothesis. According to this hypothesis, the reader has an innate tendency to look for ways in which the text speaks to them and makes them feel seen and understood. B. J. Epstein defines this phenomenon as mirror reading in her journal article “The Case of the Missing Bisexuals”. She states that while mirror reading, the reader is looking for their own self in texts.³⁰ Kubowitz claims that if the reader differs from default in one or more ways, they are prone to use reading strategies to make themselves feel included in the text.³¹

In an interview, Leora Spritzer talks about interpreting a relationship of two characters in *The Color Purple*:

I remember second-guessing myself towards the beginning, when Celie is first fascinated by Shug, and wondering if I was reading too much into it. I was really delighted to discover later in the book that I had not been misinterpreting it after all and it actually was hella queer.³²

³⁰ Epstein, ““The Case of the Missing Bisexuals””.

³¹ Kubowitz, ‘The Default Reader and a Model of Queer Reading and Writing Strategies’, 210.

³² Leora Spritzer, Interview with a Queer Reader: Leora Spitzer talks Queer Jewish Books, Queer Fanfiction, and Still Looking for a Book that is “Yours”, Web Page, 29 April 2020, accessed 16 April 2021, <https://caseythecanadianlesbrarian.com/2020/04/29/interview-with-a-queer-reader-leora-spitzer-talks-queer-jewish-books-queer-fanfiction-and-still-looking-for-a-book-that-is-yours/>.

As exemplified, the members of the queer community are likely to be aware of certain signs or metaphors that allow them to understand characters or themes as queer.

2.4 Encoding and decoding of messages

Spritzer also admits, however, that she struggles to find narratives that would address her as a queer Jewish woman:

But I've been racking my brains, and though I've read a handful of fantasy novels, biographies, and memoirs with bi[sexual] characters, none of them reflected my own experiences particularly. The fantasy characters are in such a different cultural context that while I appreciate them and their love stories, they aren't like mine at all, and I haven't found any biographies or memoirs that echoed my own history very much.³³

If LGBTQ readers are not satisfied with the overt themes of the narrative, they may use queer decoding strategies to identify queer subtext. Even in cases where the piece of media features a couple consisting of a man and a woman, there are certain “queer markers”³⁴ that queer audiences may be more sensitive to. Among these may be “emphasis on the price to be paid for leading a secret life, illegitimate desire, repression, and inhibition.”³⁵ The queer markers are themes, topics, or situations that the non-heterosexual reader recognizes from their real-life experience as a sexual minority and subsequently claims them as allusion to queerness.

In some instances, the decoding of queer subtext is a direct response to the author's encoding of queer themes into the story. Some works, such as *The Importance of Being Earnest*, are generally agreed to contain encoded queer meaning,³⁶ mainly because of the author's own sexuality and the criminalization of homosexuality at the time the play was created. While readers nor scholars may know with certainty whether encoding of queer topics was deliberate, there is always space for discussing individual subjective interpretations.

³³ Spritzer.

³⁴ Kubowitz, 'The Default Reader and a Model of Queer Reading and Writing Strategies', 215.

³⁵ Kubowitz, 215.

³⁶ Kubowitz, 204.

3 Historical context

This section will overview two aspects of historical context of the chosen texts. The first section will offer information on the treatment of LGBTQ individuals by society in the 1980s and the 1990s. The second section will be concerned with the age of origin of published children's literature in the UK and the US, as the lasting effects of the ideologies of this era will be found at the roots of in most of the stories to be analyzed.

3.1 *LGBTQ community from 1980 to 2000*

Within the cultural environment of the UK, the Section 28 of the Local Government Act stands out.³⁷ It forbade any manner of “promoting” homosexuality in literature or drama³⁸ and thus held a great influence over fiction produced at the time. Sunderland explains that state school libraries depended on funding and would refuse to stock children's books with gay themes.³⁹

Another factor to the negative attitudes toward the queer community was the public opinion of the AIDS epidemic. The online resource center for HIV reports that in June of 1981, a “cluster of cases of a rare and unusually aggressive cancer” was spotted among homosexual men in San Francisco.⁴⁰ Due to an article in the *New York Times*, the illness later to be understood as AIDS was dubbed “gay cancer” by the public.⁴¹ Over the following four years, AIDS symptoms were found in children of mothers engaging in sex work, hemophilic patients and female partners of infected men,⁴² and the numbers of confirmed cases were raising worldwide: “[b]y the end of the year, 85 countries had reported 38,401 cases of AIDS to the World Health Organization. By region these were; Africa 2,323, Americas 31,741, Asia 84, Europe 3,858, and Oceania 395.”⁴³

³⁷ Sunderland, *Language, Gender and Children's Fiction*, 143.

³⁸ Sunderland, 143.

³⁹ Sunderland, 143.

⁴⁰ ‘A Timeline of HIV and AIDS’, HIV.gov, 11 May 2016, accessed 15 April 2021, <https://www.hiv.gov/hiv-basics/overview/history/hiv-and-aids-timeline>.

⁴¹ ‘A Timeline of HIV and AIDS’.

⁴² ‘A Timeline of HIV and AIDS’.

⁴³ ‘History of HIV and AIDS Overview’, Global information and education on HIV and AIDS, Avert, 20 July 2015, accessed 15 April 2021, <https://www.avert.org/professionals/history-hiv-aids/overview>.

Altogether, negative views on male homosexuality in the UK rose sharply between the years 1983 and 1987.⁴⁴ To counteract these mindset shifts, the LGBTQ community and allies then worked to humanize homosexual people through fiction.

3.2 *Children's literature*

The children's branch of anglophone literary publishing has its roots in the second half of eighteenth century England.⁴⁵ This was the age when philosophers such as John Locke or Jean Jacques Rousseau held great influence. Their conceptualization of childhood changed society's understanding of what children are. Jacqueline Rose stresses the prolonged effect that the Age of Reason had: "Children's fiction has never completely severed its links with a philosophy which sets up the child as pure point of origin in relation to language, sexuality and the state."⁴⁶ These ideologies affect the way adults perceive children to this day. Understanding children as opposed to adults in that they are more pure, clean, and only waiting to acquire sexuality, translate into the children's stories as a wide-spread trope of the asexual child, which is described and discussed in depth in the following section.

4 **Asexual child trope**

This research into queer-themed children's literature was conducted in order to find and describe the most common character tropes in a selection of texts. The selection consists of four picture books and a short story collection containing five stories, which are all understood as LGBTQ-friendly (i.e. validate queer identities and guide towards acceptance). The picture books are titled *Daddy's Roommate* (2000), *Asha's Mums* (1990), *Heather Has Two Mommies* (first ed. 1988), and *Gloria Goes to Gay Pride* (1991). The collection *The Duke Who Outlawed Jelly Beans* (1991) then contains the stories "The Frog Prince," "Eaglerider," "Dragon Sense," "Ogre's Boots," and "The Duke Who Outlawed Jelly Beans."

⁴⁴ Sunderland, *Language, Gender and Children's Fiction*, 143.

⁴⁵ Jacqueline Rose, *The Case of Peter Pan, or, The Impossibility of Children's Fiction*, New Cultural Studies (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), 63.

⁴⁶ Rose, 63.

The close readings of the texts have shown that these picture books do not offer a large variety of character types, and by extension, there are few tropes to describe. One that is prominent – and the ideological basis of which explains the scarcity of other character tropes in these texts – is the trope of the asexual child. This section begins with describing the phenomenon and follows with discussion of its function in narration. Then, the construct of the child and the relationship between children and adults is described. This section concludes with the effect these factors have on the conceptualization of child sexuality in texts.

The asexual child trope appears frequently as to protagonists of children's books. This trope is characterized as the child character being very pure, naïve, and not understanding, registering, or generally having a sexuality. The picture book *Heather Has Two Mommies* features Heather, who at the age of five or six years old learns that other kids have fathers while she does not.⁴⁷ Similarly, Asha in *Asha's Mums*, a picture book about a daughter of two mothers that strives for her family to be accepted, does not realize why the teacher would not believe she has two mothers, or why kids in her class might be surprised by it.⁴⁸ Unless these protagonists were very isolated children, this purity bordering ignorance seems unlikely; even if it were possible that Heather, for example, had no friends with heterosexual parents until that point in time, no relatives or family friends that would have a father or be a father figure, every child would likely encounter heterosexual romance in picture books or media. Neither Asha nor Heather, however, seem to have thought about this in their five or six years of life, as they are rendered too pure to notice relationships of adults. They, therefore, fall into the asexual child trope.

In these picture books, the children experience learning or exploration of different topics through the child protagonist. If the character already understood homosexuality or knew what social repercussions may come with it, the narrative would not create a learning environment. Thus, *Heather Has Two Mommies* portrays Heather as clueless to other types of families:

“What does your daddy do?” David asks Heather.

⁴⁷ Newman and Cornell, *Heather Has Two Mommies*.

⁴⁸ Rosamund Elwin, Michele Paulse, and Dawn Lee, *Asha's Mums: By Rosamund Elwin & Michele Paulse; Illustrated by Dawn Lee* (Toronto: Women's Press, 1990).

“I don’t have a daddy,” Heather says. She looks around the circle and wonders, *Am I the only one who doesn’t have a daddy?*⁴⁹

[italics in the original]

Rose writes: “If children’s fiction builds an image of the child inside the book, it does so in order to secure the child who is outside the book, the one who does not come so easily within its grasp.”⁵⁰ The clueless nature of the fictional child is not a reflection of reality, but a device or a narrative tool that ensures the child reader will be able to go through the same journey of discovery as the protagonist.

With that being said, this trope is entwined with a phenomenon appearing not only in literature, but outside of it as well: the construct of a child. I propose that there is often a contrast in terms of behavior and psyche between the real, existing child, and the fictional child character. Rose refers to the philosophy of the Age of Reason (see Section 3.1) when determining that children’s literature is the direct result of “(...) conception which places the innocence of the child and a primary state of language and/or culture in a close and mutually dependent relation.”⁵¹ Kander elaborates on this notion, saying that this “ascription of innocence” involves “the assumption that children are without sexuality.”⁵² Strictly in the environment of literature, the construct of the child is an artificially created concept that often manifests as the child protagonist, created by an adult author, acting in a manner that reflects societal ideas of innocent children.

The greatest paradox of children’s literature is that it is not written for children, but rather aimed at children.⁵³ An adult author creates an ideal child character for their implied reader, after which adults, parents or other caretakers, decide which book is the best children’s book for the child. As apparent, the real child is not given a voice. Rose writes that “the best book is the book which does the child most good, that is, the book which secures the reader to its intent and can be absolutely sure of its effects.”⁵⁴ In other words,

⁴⁹ Newman and Cornell, *Heather Has Two Mommies*, 23.

⁵⁰ Rose, *The Case of Peter Pan, or, The Impossibility of Children’s Fiction*, 58.

⁵¹ Rose, 64.

⁵² Kander, ‘Reading Queer Subtexts in Children’s Literature’, 5.

⁵³ Rose, *The Case of Peter Pan, or, The Impossibility of Children’s Fiction*, 51.

⁵⁴ Rose, 59.

a children's book that is deemed good will relay a lesson to the child, without stopping to ask whether that is what the child would enjoy most. This separation of the child from children's literature shows that relating between children and adults is impossible.

The identities of adults and children exist in a mutually exclusive relation. An adult is what a child is not and vice versa. Rose argues that the adults do not enforce the construct of the child in literature to harm children, but rather to help and protect themselves:

The child is sexual, but its sexuality (bisexual, polymorphous, perverse) threatens our own at its very roots. Setting up the child as innocent is not, therefore, repressing its sexuality—it is above all holding off any possible challenge to our own.⁵⁵

For these reasons, the focus on sexuality in the children's books with queer themes is shifted from the children to the adult characters in the narrative: their parents.

⁵⁵ Rose, 60.

5 Imbalances between of two-mother and two-father families

After discussing the conceptualization of childhood, it is time to bring forward the fact that all LGBTQ characters in the analyzed narratives were the parents of the protagonist. These narratives work towards creating understanding, they validate non-heteronormative experiences and teach children love and acceptance. Despite working to create understanding, validating non-heteronormative experiences and teaching children love and acceptance, these literary works do not represent same-sex male and female parents in an equal manner. There are imbalances in terms of the ratio of two-mother to two-father households; the gender and number of children that the pair is permitted to raise; and the language that is used for the individual caretakers.

5.1 *More mothers than fathers*

By and large, the children's books feature more two-mother families than two-father families. Out of nine picture books or short stories analyzed, only two have featured a male same-sex parental unit. The majority of the rest were two-mother families, with one exception of a queer single mother. In the short story "The Eaglerider", the main character's single mother reveals that she had a female lover once,⁵⁶ and while her identity is not labeled, she is clearly not heterosexual. In the case of LGBTQ themed children's literature, the gender imbalance seems to shift in favor of women.

This inequality partially stems from gender stereotypes, as women are seen as more caring, nurturing, and over-all better parents than men. When looking at the texts, it is apparent that this presumption took its toll; while in the case of two-mother households, the children are fully in the care of the couple, the male couples are not afforded the same. In *Daddy's Roommate*, the boy lives with his mother and only visits the father and his partner on weekends. In "The Frog Prince" the child protagonist does live with his father, but the father's partner lives separately. Sunderland argues that it is simpler for a children's book to feature two mothers: "If mothers are seen as natural carers, they may be relatively easy to represent."⁵⁷ Another factor in play is the effect that Section 28 had on British

⁵⁶ Valentine and Schmidt, *The Duke Who Outlawed Jelly Beans*, 8.

⁵⁷ Sunderland, *Language, Gender and Children's Fiction*, 150.

society. Section 28 forbade endorsing male homosexuality in any way.⁵⁸ This as well as the negative attitudes towards gay men during and after the AIDS crisis made male homosexuality more “socially transgressive”⁵⁹ at the time children’s books such as *Daddy’s Roommate* were published. This evidence suggests that a child protagonist with two mothers is less problematic than one with two fathers.

5.2 Gender and number of children

The imbalance between sexes shows further in the fact that two mothers are shown to raise children of any gender, as is the case in *Heather Has Two Mommies*, *Gloria Goes to Gay Pride*, “Dragon Sense”, and “The Duke Who Outlawed Jelly Beans”, often even multiple children of different genders, as shown in *Asha’s Mums* and “Ogre’s Boots”. In contrast, two fathers appearing in *Daddy’s Roommate* and “The Frog Prince”, only raise boys. That is, out of eight narratives that feature both same-sex parents, the two that feature a male couple only have them raise boys.

Moreover, the stories *Daddy’s Roommate* and “The Frog Prince” do not allow for both partners and the boy to be in the same household, at least not for the majority of the narrative. In *Daddy’s Roommate*, the biological father and his new partner only see the boy on weekends.⁶⁰ The two fathers featured in “The Frog Prince” only move in together after they decide to take in a second son, previously the Prince:

“But one father isn’t enough for two boys”, said Karl. “Perhaps I’d better move in too, to keep you out of mischief.” His eyes twinkled as he looked at Nicholas’s father.⁶¹

From the previous discussion of gender stereotypes, it is apparent that a lesbian mother is a less problematic role model for her daughter than a gay father.⁶² Queer men

⁵⁸ Sunderland, 143.

⁵⁹ Sunderland, 150.

⁶⁰ Michael Willhoite, *Daddy’s Roommate*, 10., anniversary ed., [Nachdr.] (New York: Alyson Wonderland, 2000), 18–19.

⁶¹ Valentine and Schmidt, *The Duke Who Outlawed Jelly Beans*, 5.

⁶² Sunderland, *Language, Gender and Children’s Fiction*, 151.

and queer women were perceived and treated differently by the society at large and this affected the children's stories strongly.

5.3 *The issue of language*

The last facet of this issue is that the language the works use for the parents shows inequality as well. The term language, in this section, refers to the terms of endearment or words of kinship by which the parents are addressed.

Two women are usually called by a variation of "mother": in Asha's Mums, both women are "Mum" or "Mummy;"⁶³ Heather calls her parents "Mama Kate" and "Mama Jane."⁶⁴ Gloria, similarly, addresses both mothers as "Mama" and their first name.⁶⁵ Concerning male couples, however, one is called "father" or "daddy" and the other is referred to by an euphemism or code-word. The very name of the picture book *Daddy's Roommate* shows that the second caretaker is not understood to be the protagonist's father or step-father, only to be a man that lives with his Daddy.⁶⁶ This pushes the "Roommate" into a position of being "the extra" or "the other" and invalidates his role in the boy's life as his third caretaker and his father's new partner.

As for the other instance of a male same-sex couple raising children in "The Frog Prince," the father's partner is referred to as "father's friend Karl."⁶⁷ This, again, strips away his identity as the second parent. He eventually moves in to help with raising the Prince, and after, the family is said to contain two fathers and their two sons.⁶⁸ This eventual change raises questions about what Karl's parental status depended on.

Among the instances of two-mother families, there is one ambiguous case. The story "Dragon Sense" features a boy raised by two women, out of which one is his mother, and the other is addressed only by her first name, Diana.⁶⁹ At the end of the story, however,

⁶³ Elwin, Paulse, and Lee, *Asha's Mums*, 24.

⁶⁴ Newman and Cornell, *Heather Has Two Mommies*, 6.

⁶⁵ Lesléa Newman and Russell Crocker, *Gloria Goes to Gay Pride*, 1st ed (Boston, Mass: Alyson Wonderland, 1991), 5.

⁶⁶ Willhoite, *Daddy's Roommate*, 5.

⁶⁷ Valentine and Schmidt, *The Duke Who Outlawed Jelly Beans*, 3.

⁶⁸ Valentine and Schmidt, 8.

⁶⁹ Valentine and Schmidt, 13.

the boy judges that “[t]he jewels would last him and his mothers for many years.”⁷⁰ The collective term “his mothers” makes it unclear whether this story is truly an exception to the rule of male partners being addressed euphemistically.

As a result of this dichotomy, male same-sex couples are not presented as full-fledged parents to the reader. The trope of the “code-worded partner” to the father of the child dominates the selected texts for this work, albeit the number of featured same-sex male parents is not high to begin with; this is strongly connected to the social and historical environment of the 1980s until the end of the century (as was described in the Sections 3.1 and 5.1) which heavily influences the representation of queer men in these selected works.

⁷⁰ Valentine and Schmidt, 18.

6 Quality of representation

In the 2015 article “On Imperfect Representation vs. No Representation”, Marcy Cook addresses the issue of a lack of queer representation in media:

[...] when you have almost no representation at all, no voice at the table, you need positive representation first. You need to build up the goodwill and increase the number of characters from marginalized groups, so not just one or two characters are shouldering the representation of whole segments of society.⁷¹

This section of the thesis addresses one of the important building blocks of this argument: what constitutes “positive [queer] representation”? Such a question can be linked to the discussion of tropes easily. Say that tropes may be divided into those which reflect positively on the LGBTQ community and those that reflect negatively: what creates or constitutes these divisions?

In order to attempt answering this particular question, this topic will be approached from three perspectives. First sub-section is concerned with the explicitness of the characters’ identities: whether terms that refer to sexualities, i.e. homosexual, gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer and others, are used and explained. The second sub-section then discusses the nonverbal acts and expressions of affection between the LGBTQ characters.

The general issue of representation is that its presence in literature cannot be simplified into a binary existential question, i.e. the representation either “is there” or “is not there”. It is a nuanced topic that is subject to constant discussion and re-analysis. It may be said that the beauty of representation lies in the eye of the beholder; different readers may prefer different forms of queer representation in literature, and that is completely natural and understandable.

6.1 Usage of queer terminology

The approach that aligns the most with Sunderland’s narrative strategies (see Section 2.1) is to analyze whether the text introduces LGBTQ terminology, and if such terminology is explained. Only of the texts analyzed explicitly use the words “gay” or “homosexual”.

⁷¹ Marcy Cook, ‘On Imperfect Representation vs. No Representation’, Book Riot, 27 August 2015, accessed 15 April 2021, <https://bookriot.com/on-imperfect-representation-vs-no-representation/>.

Daddy's Roommate has the mother explain the father's new relationship to her son: "Mommy says Daddy and Frank are gay. At first I didn't know what that meant. So she explained it. Being gay is just one more kind of love."⁷² The last sentence of this narration is accompanied by the illustration of Frank hugging the father while both are smiling. The father's relationship is validated for the son, but the explanation was not very specific in what being homosexual means.

Gloria Goes to Gay Pride (1991) tells the story of the day the protagonist, Gloria, goes to a pride march with her mothers. The term gay appears in the very name of the book, and differences in sexuality are explained as the march passes anti-LGBTQ protesters who hold signs saying "GAYS GO AWAY."⁷³ Gloria is confused about this: "Why do they want us to go away?"⁷⁴ Upon learning that some people are against them being a family, Gloria seems even more distressed, so her mother explains the reason for the pride parade: "Love is the most important thing of all. [...] Some women love women, some men love men, and some women and men love each other. That's why we march in the parade – so that everyone can have a choice."⁷⁵ The protagonist understands that her family can be labeled by the word "gay", but interestingly enough, she identifies within the label of "gay". When asking her mother "why do they want us to go away,"⁷⁶ it does not suggest that she would separate the mothers' identity from her own.

In "Dragon Sense", one of the mothers is mentioned to be a "lesbian sorceress,"⁷⁷ but the text does not explain the term lesbian further. The word sorceress is defined and exemplified sufficiently:

Yet the family wouldn't have been the same without Daniela to add excitement. One time she transformed Peter's dog Oscar into a winged horse for a day. [...] Another time one of Daniela's spells went haywire, and a hippopotamus materialized in the family's small living room.⁷⁸

⁷² Willhoite, *Daddy's Roommate*, 26–28.

⁷³ Newman and Crocker, *Gloria Goes to Gay Pride*, 24.

⁷⁴ Newman and Crocker, 26.

⁷⁵ Newman and Crocker, 26.

⁷⁶ Newman and Crocker, 26.

⁷⁷ Valentine and Schmidt, *The Duke Who Outlawed Jelly Beans*, 13.

⁷⁸ Valentine and Schmidt, 13.

While showing clearly that a sorceress is someone in possession of magical powers, the text makes no such attempts to explain and exemplify what or who a lesbian is. The term is thus used explicitly, but the meaning is not disclosed.

The tendency to use the term “different” to describe untraditional family types, such as in this case same-sex partners and their children, appears often in the picture books. The protagonist in *Asha’s Mums* fights with her classmates, who don’t believe one can have two mothers:

Coreen said “How come you have two mummies?”

“Because I do,” I said.

“You can’t have two mummies,” Judi insisted.

“Yes she can,” Rita turned around in her seat.⁷⁹

One of the girls, Coreen, insists particularly strongly because her “dad says it’s bad.”⁸⁰ In these works, the child, typically falling under the asexual child trope, realizes that their family is not like the majority of other families, and undergoes a learning experience, at the end of which having same-sex parents is normalized and validated for the child. Such narratives use the importance of love to teach lessons of self-acceptance and acceptance of others.

The collection of stories *The Duke Who Outlawed Jelly Beans* represents the other end of the spectrum of approaches to terminological explicitness: texts that only use the backgrounding strategy in which homosexuality nor difference are acknowledged. “The Frog Prince” establishes the what the boy’s family looks like at the very start: “[...] a boy named Nicholas lived with his father. Nicholas’s father had a friend named Karl [...] who often carried Nicholas around the yard on his shoulders.”⁸¹ The story resumes its focus on the family toward the end of the story, where Nicholas is trying to convince the Prince to leave the castle and come live with his family: “My father and his friend Karl have always said they’d like another son. You’d be welcome in our family, and they would never be

⁷⁹ Elwin, Paulse, and Lee, *Asha’s Mums*, 12.

⁸⁰ Elwin, Paulse, and Lee, 15.

⁸¹ Valentine and Schmidt, *The Duke Who Outlawed Jelly Beans*, 1.

cruel to you.”⁸² The integrity of the men as parents is questioned by the Prince, but not on the basis of their gender, but because they would be adopting him:

“They wouldn’t be the same as real parents,” protested the prince.

“Sure they would,” said Nicholas. “My dad adopted *me*, and he’s pretty real. He could adopt you, too.”⁸³

[italics in the original]

“Dragon Sense”, a story about young Peter who goes on a quest to find treasure to help his two mothers, starts similarly, with the family of Peter being introduced: “He lived with his mother, who was a bookkeeper, and his mother’s friend Diana, who was a sorcerer.”⁸⁴ The life of his family is elaborated on further, but again, not on the basis of having same-sex parents, but rather on the basis of the relationship of a bookkeeper and a sorceress.⁸⁵

These short stories are not outwardly concerned with queer themes and same-sex parents or queer single parents exist naturally in the background of their children’s adventure. As Peter Hollindale points out, however, no approach is perfect:

If you present as natural and commonplace the behaviour you would *like* to be natural and commonplace, you risk muting the social effectiveness of your story. If you dramatize the social tensions, you risk a superficial ideology stridency.⁸⁶

[italics in the original]

When a narrative takes the former approach, it may be beneficial in that queer parents are not presented as an oddity, but at the same time, the representation may be too minor or insignificant for the child reader to notice it.

⁸² Valentine and Schmidt, 5.

⁸³ Valentine and Schmidt, 5.

⁸⁴ Valentine and Schmidt, 13.

⁸⁵ Valentine and Schmidt, 13.

⁸⁶ Peter Hollindale qtd. in Sunderland, *Language, Gender and Children’s Fiction*, 171.

6.2 Expressions of affection between queer characters

LGBTQ representation in children's literature goes beyond words. In books where the amount of text equals about one or two sentences per page, it is possible to analyze the illustrations that accompany the narration. Illustrations hold as much, if sometimes not more, information than the text in picture books. An analysis single page from *Daddy's Roommate* shows a clear example of this. On the tenth page, the narration reads: "And sometimes [Daddy and the Roommate] even fight together."⁸⁷



Figure 1. The boy's father fights with his partner Frank. Created by Willhoite, Michael. From *Daddy's Roommate*, page 10.

The only information this text conveys is that the pair sometimes fights. The illustration above the text, as seen in Figure 1, shows Frank standing behind the father, angrily showing him a white shirt which has a burn mark from an iron on it. The father is not facing him, only dismissively raising his hand in Frank's direction. The reader may infer that the father of the boy ruined the shirt when ironing it, which is why his partner is angry at the damage. At the same time, the father does not seem to be sorry and apologizing, he is only upset as well: perhaps his sitting at the desk suggests he is working. This example shows the illustration carries more information about a situation than the narration itself.

⁸⁷ Willhoite, *Daddy's Roommate*, 10.

LGBTQ parental figures show minimal affection towards each other in the illustrations. *Daddy's Roommate* shows Frank touch the father's shoulder when they are making up after a fight,⁸⁸ Frank hugging the father from behind as they are smiling,⁸⁹ and them watching a movie together while Frank has an arm around the father's shoulders and they sit close together.⁹⁰ It is important to note two significant similarities: it is always Frank who seems to initiate physical contact, not the father; and these expressions of affection all happen while the pair are at home. When the book describes outside activities, it is either only one of the men interacting with the child, or the pair stand far apart, with the exception of applying sunscreen at the beach.⁹¹ This evidence suggests that there is a difference between how the pair behave at home, and how they behave in the outside world.

This is further exemplified when Gloria in *Gloria Goes to Gay Pride* pays attention to her two mothers holding hands in public during the parade: "Usually my mommies don't hold hands when we go out, but today they do because today is Gay Pride Day, and that makes them smile."⁹² Though subtle, these two scenes reflect that queer parents or couples did not publicly express affection or act like a couple.

Heather Has Two Mommies shows the two mothers often in the same illustration, but apart from one illustration where the mothers hug as they wave goodbye to their daughter on the first day of school,⁹³ they are always far apart or separated by their daughter, Heather: lying in the grass and eating apples,⁹⁴ baking,⁹⁵ reading bed-time stories,⁹⁶ looking at the pictures the children drew,⁹⁷ or walking home after school,⁹⁸ the women are always shown with their daughter in-between them. *Asha's Mums* depicts the

⁸⁸ Willhoite, 11.

⁸⁹ Willhoite, 28.

⁹⁰ Willhoite, 30.

⁹¹ Willhoite, 22.

⁹² Newman and Crocker, *Gloria Goes to Gay Pride*, 20.

⁹³ Newman and Cornell, *Heather Has Two Mommies*, 18–19.

⁹⁴ Newman and Cornell, 8–9.

⁹⁵ Newman and Cornell, 13.

⁹⁶ Newman and Cornell, 14.

⁹⁷ Newman and Cornell, 31.

⁹⁸ Newman and Cornell, 32.

two mothers in one illustration only once, and they only stand side by side,⁹⁹ which can hardly count as expression of affection.

A reason for the lack of depiction of the queer characters' affection toward one another is that the focus of the story is the child, not the parents. Overall, the focus is not on the quality of the parents' relationship, but on the quality of the relationship they have with their child.

This analysis showed that if children's literature allows queer characters to be featured in the narrative, the expression of their identity is still restricted. They are adults whose attractions and relationships remain somewhat hidden and the focus is strictly on the child, which is presumed to not have ties to sexuality or sexual attraction (see Section 4). In relation to this, Kander mentions the paradox that children are viewed to be completely naïve and asexual, but at the same time thought to automatically be heterosexual.¹⁰⁰ Thus – as exemplified in the preceding section – if the child reader is thought to be devoid of sexuality in order to be identified in juxtaposition to the adult, and if the existing queer adult characters and their relationships are not explored in the text or the illustrations because the main focus is on the child in the story, the option which remains and which shall now be discussed is the use of queer subtext in children's fiction.

⁹⁹ Elwin, Paulse, and Lee, *Asha's Mums*, 19.

¹⁰⁰ Kander, 'Reading Queer Subtexts in Children's Literature', 5.

7 Subtext

As mentioned in the previous sections, overtly queer child characters are completely missing from children's books and queerness is only discussed in regards to the parent figures of the protagonist. Katie Schenkel states in Marcy Cook's article that some LGBTQ representation is better than none:

If it's a choice between imperfect representation and no representation, imperfect wins. Every time. [...] while imperfect representation is imperfect, no representation is simply maintaining the status quo.¹⁰¹

In the realm of children's literature, however, queer representation in the form of parental figures to the protagonist is not as accessible to children that may be exploring their developing sexuality and identity, since relating between an adult and a child is difficult at best and impossible at worst.¹⁰² According to Kubowitz, a safe way in which the child reader may have access to exploration of queer topics is through subtext.¹⁰³

Subtext in literature is in close relation to encoding and decoding of messages. Allusions to queerness or queer topics are encoded by the author, who uses queer writing strategies, and the reader then performs a queer reading of the work to decode those underlying themes.¹⁰⁴ Kubowitz makes it clear that while these queer readings may be performed by essentially anyone, queer readers are more likely to try and decode subtextual queerness:

[...] our model has also made plain that one does not have to be queer oneself in order to employ queer reading strategies, but that queer strategies can be employed by anyone. Yet, it was also demonstrated that the initial motivation to do so may well be greater for a marginalized reader who is practised at employing inclusionary reading strategies.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰¹ Cook, 'On Imperfect Representation vs. No Representation'.

¹⁰² Rose, *The Case of Peter Pan, or, The Impossibility of Children's Fiction*, 4.

¹⁰³ Kubowitz, 'The Default Reader and a Model of Queer Reading and Writing Strategies', 212.

¹⁰⁴ Kubowitz, 202.

¹⁰⁵ Kubowitz, 214.

In other words, a queer reader is more likely to find queer content in the underlying themes of the narrative.

There is no ultimate argument which would determine whether a work is meant to be read with or without queer themes. Kubowitz writes that “the more marginalized a reader is, i.e. the less s/he generally finds her-/himself represented in texts, the more s/he becomes used to read her-/himself into texts,”¹⁰⁶ or in other words, will perform mirror reading and strive to find their own self in literature.¹⁰⁷ Kander praises the subtextual level of literary works for “allowing for a safe space for children to gradually and subtly develop an understanding of queer identity.”¹⁰⁸ These queer interpretations of texts which seemingly do not contain LGBTQ themes exist regardless of the author’s intention, as narratives may be reinterpreted again and again for the benefit of the individual readers.

“The Frog Prince” stands out with its possibilities for queer interpretation. The Prince’s behavior toward the main character Nicholas bears the closest resemblance to a queer child character in these picture books. There is no overt romantic relationship between the two boys, especially as Nicholas eventually convinces the Prince to let his two fathers adopt him as their second son.¹⁰⁹ Regardless, using queer decoding strategies will reveal underlying themes that can help child readers explore queer topics.

The story begins with the Frog Prince begging Nicholas for a kiss so he could turn back into a human. Although the boy initially refuses, his reasons do not relate to the gender of the enchanted royal, but rather to his doubts about the frog telling the truth:

“What’s your favorite dessert, Frog?” he asked.

“Easy,” replied the frog. “Chocolate ice cream. Now kiss me.”

“That wasn’t *that* kind of question,” protested Nicholas. Then he paused. A frog wouldn’t like chocolate ice cream... but a prince might.

“Okay,” he finally agreed. He leaned over, wrinkled his nose, and, as lightly and quickly as he could, he kissed the top of the frog’s head.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁶ Kubowitz, 205.

¹⁰⁷ B.J. Epstein, ‘We’re Here, We’re (Not?) Queer: GLBTQ Characters in Children’s Books’, *Journal of GLBT Family Studies* 8, no. 3 (May 2012): 287, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1550428X.2012.677241>.

¹⁰⁸ Kander, ‘Reading Queer Subtexts in Children’s Literature’, 12.

¹⁰⁹ Valentine and Schmidt, *The Duke Who Outlawed Jelly Beans*, 5.

¹¹⁰ Valentine and Schmidt, 2.

[italics in the original]

Nicholas kisses the Prince out of necessity, but this does not change the fact that this story breaks away from heteronormative storytelling that tends to have young women rescue cursed princes with a kiss. Such a kiss is, usually, portrayed as romantic in this type of narrative, and even though the boys do not earn each other's hand in marriage by breaking the spell like a heterosexual couple would, romantic connotations are brought forward in the mind of the reader.

The Prince's fascination with playing with Nicholas may, again, allude to queerness. He reveals to Nicholas that his parents do not let him have friends his age. He seems excited to play with Nicholas: "Now, for one hour, we can play together! I have never played with another boy before!"¹¹¹ While it may be a possibility, his interest in playing with a boy does not necessarily translate to sexual attraction or acts. It rather symbolizes the thrill of being allowed to take interest in the same sex, which was forbidden before.

When it is time for the Prince to come back to the castle, the story references more difficult queer themes. The Prince reveals that the King and Queen willingly gave him to their wizard as a test subject: "This morning, I spilled my juice at breakfast. Do you know how they punished me? They gave me to the wizard to use for experiments!"¹¹² The disproportional punishment and cruelty of the parents caused by a minor mistake in combination with the mention of experiments suggests that this may be a metaphor for gay conversion therapy.

The Prince has many reasons to feel reluctant to come back to his family, even after the curse has been broken by Nicholas. He knows that his parents would send him to the wizard again. Nicholas insists that his father and his uncle Karl would gladly adopt him:

"My father and his friend Karl have always said they'd like another son. You'd be welcome in our family, and they would never be cruel to you." [...]

The prince shuddered at the thought of going back to the castle, so he agreed.¹¹³

¹¹¹ Valentine and Schmidt, 2.

¹¹² Valentine and Schmidt, 2.

¹¹³ Valentine and Schmidt, 5.

This is playing into the very queer-specific trope of “chosen family”: the people one chooses to be their kin without being related to them. The Prince leaves his life at the castle behind and comes to live with a group of people whose care and appreciation for him is stronger than one of those related to him by blood.

When he becomes a part of his new family, the Prince chooses a new name. While a change of name may be more widely associated with a transgender identity than with homosexuality, it is a symbol of a new beginning regardless. Supposedly he had no name before, and his new father suggests he should pick one:

“We need to give you a name,” said Karl. “We can’t call you ‘prince’ all the time.”

“When I was little, my favorite uncle was named Jesse,” said the prince. “I like that name. You can call me that.” And they did.¹¹⁴

By choosing to be called Jesse, he chooses a happier, metaphorically queer life in a safe, loving environment.

“The Frog Prince” is a prime example of what amount of room for personal interpretation the subtext of a simple short story may provide. If explicitly discussing homosexuality in children’s literature is not accepted by society at large, encoding messages into the text is an efficient way of evading prejudices and homophobia and providing children with the stories that resonate with them. Moreover, a text such as this one may be re-interpreted in ways other than queer: the cruelty of the biological parents, the Prince’s complicated emotions and his discovery of a new, loving family are themes that children from emotionally abusive families or adopted children could identify with. Those in search of representation of their inner feelings can find their own meaning without having to face the scrutiny of those that, for whatever reason, do not support the idea of children having access to literature with difficult or controversial topics.

¹¹⁴ Valentine and Schmidt, 6.

8 Homosexuality as the result of trauma

Some stories are not intended to validate queer experiences. Stories which contain the trope of homosexuality being the direct result of childhood trauma or neglect do not present homosexuality as a socio-cultural identity; rather, it is understood to be a misguided state of mind or an illness. This chapter will outline how homosexuality is framed with relation to psychology and to religion respectively. Each framing will be described in a separate section.

The representative text for the psychological framing of homosexuality will be the infamous picture book *Alfie's Home* (1993) which tells the story of a young boy Alfie who, due to his parents having a toxic relationship and his uncle sexually abusing him, “becomes” homosexual in his teen years and is cured by “counselling”. For the religious texts, it must be clarified that the short comic pamphlets known as chick tracts do not strictly fall under the category of children’s literature. Though that is true, the three tracts chosen, *The Gay Blade* (2000), *Birds and the Bees* (2004), and *Home Alone?*(2008), are addressing children or are written to be read out to them by their caretakers. They were thus chosen to show a larger scope of examples of this negative approach to queer sexuality.

The inclusion of these texts is important for this work in order to offer a fuller context for this genre. While picture books like *Daddy's Roommate* or *Heather Has Two Mommies* were being published, containing messages of acceptance and love, at the same time, other child readers would read *Alfie's Home* or the chick tracts and thus be exposed to the messages and tropes they contain. The following two sections will analyze and contextualize the anti-LGBTQ works, as there is no point in overlooking them.

8.1 Psychological framing

The children’s book *Alfie's Home* does not shy away from dark themes, as the child protagonist’s uncle repeatedly molests him. The boy, the text explains, seeks fatherly love with his uncle: “[The counselor] said it was very bad, what my uncle did to me. [...] The counsellor said it wasn’t my fault, that my uncle took advantage of my need for Dad’s

love.”¹¹⁵ The text further suggests that Alfie’s homosexual attraction was caused by the fact his father did not love him enough: “[The counselor] explained that because I didn’t experience affection with my father, that now I was looking for closeness with other boys, to fill my need for my Dad’s love.”¹¹⁶ The notion that homosexuality stems from a lack of affection from the parent, or that it is caused by a traumatic experience in childhood, bears a striking resemblance to the theories of Sigmund Freud, especially concerning his 1905 publication *Three Contributions to the Theory of Sex*. This thesis will consider Freud’s work in order to contextualize the information *Alfie’s Home* presents.

Freud claims that “[t]he disappearance of a strong father in childhood not infrequently favors the inversion”¹¹⁷ – inversion meaning homosexuality in Freud’s terms. Freud also argues that “[...] a more accurate examination of those claimed to be congenitally inverted [i.e. homosexual from birth] will probably show that the direction of the libido was determined by a definite experience in early childhood.”¹¹⁸ Based on these similarities between Freud’s theories and *Alfie’s Home*, it is apparent that the latter is based on Freud’s claims.

In this picture book, being gay is treated as a mental issue that should be fixed. After Alfie seeks out a counsellor, the man denies that he would be gay: “I told him my story and that I thought I was gay. He said I wasn’t gay. I just missed my Dad’s love and was taught wrong things by my uncle.”¹¹⁹ The book *Alfie’s Home* suggests that Alfie was derailed from “normal” sexuality by a traumatic experience as well as bad parenting.

Alfie’s Home downplays recovery from trauma, while presenting child molestation and pedophilia as less problematic than being gay. The description of what the uncle did to Alfie is the largest piece of continuous text in the book:

One night when he was holding me, he started touching my private parts. Over time, he taught me touch and play with his. It felt very strange, scary and a little good too.

¹¹⁵ Richard A. Cohen and Elizabeth Sherman, *Alfie’s Home* (Washington, D.C: International Healing Foundation, 1993), 14.

¹¹⁶ Cohen and Sherman, 15.

¹¹⁷ Sigmund Freud, *Three Contributions to the Theory of Sex*. (Dover Publications, 2012), 11, accessed 17 April 2021, <http://www.mylibrary.com?id=567840>.

¹¹⁸ Freud, 6.

¹¹⁹ Cohen and Sherman, *Alfie’s Home*, 12–13.

He told me it was OK, that this means he really loves me. This went on for several months. He told me, “This is our special secret.”¹²⁰

One simple apology from uncle Pete, however, seems to solve many of Alfie’s issues: “He cried and asked me to forgive him. That helped me a lot.”¹²¹ While the text presents molestation quite realistically, it fails to do the same for the complicated, often painful process of healing from trauma.

Another case of an almost magical problem-solving occurrence is the disappearance of the emotional distance of the father from Alfie. The counselor advises the father that his son needs his “TIME, TOUCH and TALK,”¹²² [capitalization in the original] and if such basic needs are met, Alfie will stop being gay. The father and son have a private conversation after the session: “[Dad] said he was sorry he didn’t spend more time with me, sorry he didn’t hold me, sorry he didn’t share with me more. I cried and cried and Dad held me in his arms.”¹²³ The father seems to completely change his ways after this, as he takes his son out to do all sorts of outdoor activities.¹²⁴ The boy eventually remarks: “Now, I realize that I’m not gay. Spending time with my Dad really healed my heart.”¹²⁵

In a similar way, Alfie’s parents’ relationship is fixed uncommonly easy. In the beginning, little Alfie is unhappy because “[...] Dad is always working... and when he’s at home, he screams a lot.”¹²⁶ It is also shown that the mother goes to Alfie with her problems: “Mom cries sometimes because she doesn’t know what to do. Then she holds me, telling me about her unhappiness and problems. It makes me feel very uncomfortable and strange.”¹²⁷ Although the marriage is unhappy from the very start, all issues are solved almost magically through counseling. After the counselor reveals Alfie’s “disposition,” his parents seem to decide to start attending couple therapy: “Mom and Dad went to a

¹²⁰ Cohen and Sherman, 7.

¹²¹ Cohen and Sherman, 23.

¹²² Cohen and Sherman, 17.

¹²³ Cohen and Sherman, 18–19.

¹²⁴ Cohen and Sherman, 21.

¹²⁵ Cohen and Sherman, 24.

¹²⁶ Cohen and Sherman, 3.

¹²⁷ Cohen and Sherman, 4.

counselor who helped them love each other more.”¹²⁸ The ease with which all the true problems of the characters are fixed shows that rather than a realistic portrayal of psychological conditions, it is more so a modern conservatives’ wishful thinking.

The treatment of homosexuality as if it were a mental disorder that needed to be “healed” suggests that Alfie’s counseling was a form of conversion therapy. The Trevor Project, a support organization for LGBTQ youth in the United States, describes conversion therapy as “any of several dangerous and discredited practices aimed at changing an individual’s sexual orientation or gender identity” which “could include efforts to change a person’s gender expression [...] or to reduce or eliminate sexual or romantic attraction or feelings toward a person of the same gender.”¹²⁹ The happy heteronormative future suggested by *Alfie’s Home* is, however, not what awaits conversion therapy survivors, as The Trevor Project lists the staggering statistics:

According to The Trevor Project’s 2020 National Survey on LGBTQ Youth Mental Health, 10% of LGBTQ youth reported undergoing conversion therapy, with 78% reporting it occurred when they were under age 18. [...] LGBTQ youth who underwent conversion therapy were more than twice as likely to report having attempted suicide and more than 2.5 times as likely to report multiple suicide attempts in the past year.¹³⁰

Alfie’s journey away from homosexuality – or rather sexual confusion – toward his happy heterosexual life is a matter of a fairy tale, as The Trevor Project states: “[n]o credible scientific study has ever supported the claims of conversion therapists to actually change a person’s sexual orientation.”¹³¹ Thus, this text only invalidates LGBTQ identities and presents fully fictional scenarios.

¹²⁸ Cohen and Sherman, 22.

¹²⁹ 4/28/2021 10:36:00 AM

¹³⁰ ‘About Conversion Therapy’, The Trevor Project, accessed 14 April 2021, <https://www.thetrevorproject.org/get-involved/trevor-advocacy/50-bills-50-states/about-conversion-therapy/>.

¹³¹ ‘About Conversion Therapy’.

8.2 Religious framing

This chapter will analyze short evangelical comics otherwise known as chick tracts. While these are not strictly speaking children's books, the three tracts to be analyzed are aimed at children. Due to the tracts being freely available for essentially anyone to order and distribute them among their local community, child readers have very easy access to them – not to mention they are available for free at the Chick Publications website. The discussion will be centered mainly around the tracts' claims that homosexuality is at once result of child molestation, demonic possession, mental illness, and a choice of lifestyle.

Most of the arguments made in these narratives are based on interpretations of the Bible. The tracts, however, also touch on certain pseudo-scientific data from organizations as the Family Research Institute, which is a hate group that is listed in Southern Poverty Law Center's 2015 intelligence report, "Active Anti-LGBT Groups."¹³² When presenting "scientific" data, the tracts turn to such organizations for support.

There are, however, more theories that the texts allude to. For example, the tract titled *The Gay Blade* shows two men, likely homosexual, as one of them points at another pair of figures further away: "**LOOK** – He's got a new one – **Good for him!**"¹³³ [Emphasis in the original.] This suggests not only that gay men are promiscuous, but also that they seduce straight men to their "lifestyle". This is termed the "recruitment theory": a belief of people who identify as conservative and politically right-leaning, that queer people deliberately seduce and convert people to homosexuality, which is supposedly done, in the words of Richard Peddicord, to "freshen [homosexuals'] ranks."¹³⁴

If the tracts *Home Alone?*, *Birds and the Bees* and *The Gay Blade* were to be analyzed to find a linear process of "becoming" homosexual, the initial cause of homosexuality would be rape of minors by an existing homosexual person. For example, in *Home Alone?*, it is argued that the coach, Brad, was not born gay: "Brad was *not* born that way. At the

¹³² 'Active Anti-LGBT Groups', Southern Poverty Law Center, accessed 3 March 2021, <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/intelligence-report/2015/active-anti-lgbt-groups>.

¹³³ Jack T. Chick, *The Gay Blade*, Chick Tracts (Chick Publications, 2000), 20, accessed 10 November 2020, <https://www.chick.com/products/tract?stk=0084>.

¹³⁴ Richard Peddicord, *Gay and Lesbian Rights: A Question--Sexual Ethics or Social Justice?* (Kansas City: Sheed & Ward, 1996), 77.

age of 11, he was sent to juvenile hall for stealing. There he was raped by two older boys. *That* act brought Brad into the homosexual world.”¹³⁵ [Emphasis and numerals in the original.] The chick tract presents rape as avoidable if one already worships Jesus and thus has a “moral code” that helps refuse the gay person: “Charlie knows **nothing** about God or morals. [...] He has **no defenses**.”¹³⁶ [Emphasis in the original.] After the sexual act, the victims become “invaded”¹³⁷ by an evil spirit and start having homosexual urges. These comics, similarly to *Alfie’s Home*, claim that homosexual attraction is caused by child molestation.

A common phenomenon in the tracts is victim blaming (i.e. placing the blame for the assault on the victim, not the aggressor) of the raped characters. The responsibility for not getting raped is put on the victim, who then needs to find their way to Jesus and pray for forgiveness. As the tract *Home Alone?* covers the suffering of Jesus Christ for mankind, the narration makes the following claim: “Charlie learns that **all** have sinned, but Christ wants to make him a ‘new creature.’”¹³⁸ [Emphasis in the original.] The tract claims that “gay brainwashing floods our TV channels”¹³⁹ and that the lack of religious education in schools made Charlie unaware of the supposed danger of homosexuality,¹⁴⁰ but then it backtracks and informs the reader that Charlie did, in fact, sin by being a victim of assault. Unless he repents, God will send him to Hell: “He feels dirty and ashamed. But if Charlie embraces the homosexual lifestyle... His homosexual spirit will feed on others... And his heart will harden against God.”¹⁴¹ All in all, this is a textbook example of victim blaming, as well as a narrative that contradicts itself.

The argument that knowledge of Christian scripture would help children refuse sexual advances of the adult goes against logic. The basis of rape is that it is not consensual; the victim does not have a chance to say no and walk away. The tract *Birds and the Bees*

¹³⁵ Jack T. Chick, *Home Alone?*, Chick Tracts (Chick Publications, 2008), 6, accessed 10 November 2020, <https://www.chick.com/products/tract?stk=1039>.

¹³⁶ Chick, 7.

¹³⁷ Chick, 7.

¹³⁸ Chick, 19.

¹³⁹ Chick, 9.

¹⁴⁰ Chick, 7.

¹⁴¹ Chick, 16.

seems to elaborate further on the claim that religious education would help save the children: “The Bible shows us what’s right and wrong. [...] But now we can’t *have* a Bible – or even talk about *Jesus* in school. So kids grow up not knowing what God says about the *devil* or what *sin* is.”¹⁴² [Emphasis in the original.] If the recruitment theory was a real social issue instead of a baseless discriminatory rhetoric, it is very unlikely that the supposed sexual assaults that lead to the creation of another homosexual person would be stopped by the Christian values embedded into the mind of the victim.

After “turning gay,” the victim is offered the choice; either they pray to Jesus and they will be saved, or they remain proud of their sexuality, die very early of STDs, and subsequently burn in Hell.¹⁴³ The heavenly afterlife is presented as the ultimate goal – as God supposedly hates gay people, their names would not be written into the Book of Life and they would be doomed to suffer for all eternity.¹⁴⁴ At the same time, *Birds and the Bees* claim that “God doesn’t want anyone to go to hell.”¹⁴⁵ This is known as the religious paradox: Christian God loves everybody, but if one don’t live by his rules, he will damn them forever.

In the chick tracts, male homosexuality is frequently equated with diseases. Not only do the comics present the narrative that homosexuality is being “spread”, but in every installment concerning the LGBTQ community, they refer to the AIDS crisis and data from controversial studies and organizations (such as Family Research Institute). *Home Alone?* explains AIDS to be “A horrifying plague, spread primarily by promiscuous gay men.”¹⁴⁶ These narratives use the epidemic, which was devastating for the queer community at the time, as a tool to bash and demonize queer men.

Homosexual relationships are misrepresented by the comics. *Birds and the Bees* begins with a schoolteacher informing the class that she has a surprise: two dentists have come to visit them. When the men approach, one is overweight, the other has elongated facial features. Both have some form of a demon stuck to them like a parasite. One of the

¹⁴² Jack T. Chick, *Birds and the Bees*, Chick Tracts (Chick Publications, 2004), 11, accessed 10 November 2020, <https://www.chick.com/products/tract?stk=1052>.

¹⁴³ Chick, *Home Alone?*, 7–16.

¹⁴⁴ Chick, *Birds and the Bees*, 10–11.

¹⁴⁵ Chick, 13.

¹⁴⁶ Chick, *Home Alone?*, 10.

men introduces his partner as his wife. They hold hands as their demons reach out toward each other.¹⁴⁷

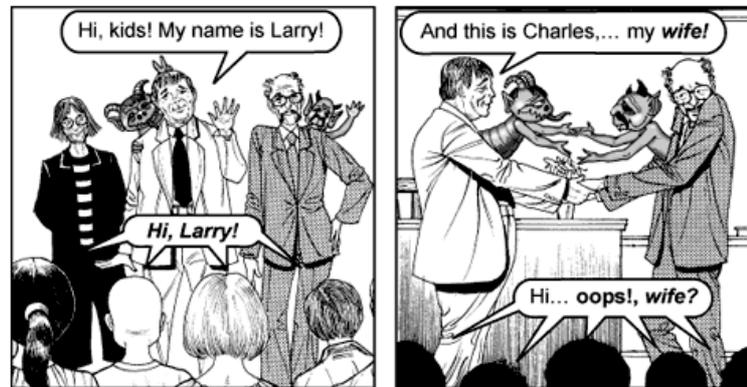


Figure 2. Two panels introducing the gay men, Larry and Charles. *Birds and the Bees* chick tract. Created by Chick, Jack. Page 3. From the Chick Publications website, <https://www.chick.com/products/tract?stk=1052>.

As shown in Figure 2, the onlooking children are confused. The exclamation “oops!” suggests that something is not right. This is evident, since he called his male spouse a wife. Considering the approach of chick tracts to homosexuality, however, another interpretation of this reaction is at hand: that this confusion shows the same-sex relationship itself to be a mistake, and that the men are wrong in more ways than one.

Moreover, the illustrations often portray queer men as effeminate. They are presented as almost half-women, crossdressing while having a full beard and menacing faces, as exemplified in Figure 3.¹⁴⁸



Figure 3. Depiction of effeminate homosexual couple. *The Gay Blade* chick tract. Created by Chick, Jack. Page 4. From the Chick Publications website, <https://www.chick.com/products/tract?stk=0084>.

¹⁴⁷ Chick, *Birds and the Bees*, 3.

¹⁴⁸ Chick, *The Gay Blade*, 4.

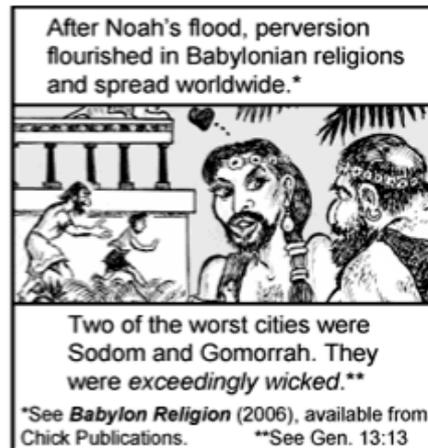


Figure 4. Illustration of a feminine Babylonian man. *Home Alone? chick tract*. Created by Chick, Jack. Page 12. From the Chick Publications website, <https://www.chick.com/products/tract?stk=1039>

Especially in Figure 4, the combination of traditionally masculine and traditionally feminine traits in the person in the middle is striking. John P. De Cecco and John P. Elia argue that this view of queer men is embedded in the mindset of society at large: “[...] with the penis leading the way, men are the active principle in their sexual congress,”¹⁴⁹ while women are, in turn, meant to be “yielding bottoms” interested in love and pleasing men.¹⁵⁰ This popular view results in society understanding gay men to be feminine (submissive to another man) and lesbian women to be masculine (not interested in men)¹⁵¹. The chick tracts then drive these misunderstandings and tropes to extremity.

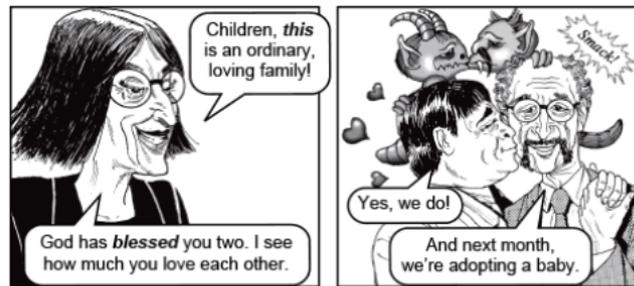
There is another important and unsettling similarity in Figures 3 and 4: children are depicted as being endangered by queer men. In Figure 3, the woman in the background is shielding the boy with her body; the details around her figure suggest she is trembling in fear. In the background of the illustration in Figure 4, an adult man with outstretched arms is chasing a child. These are clear examples of the chick tracts presenting queer men to be sex offenders dangerous to children.

Chick tracts use character design as a tool to divide characters into the categories of moral and immoral, likeable and unlikeable.

¹⁴⁹ John P. De Cecco and John P. Elia, eds., *If You Seduce a Straight Person, Can You Make Them Gay? Issues in Biological Essentialism versus Social Constructionism in Gay and Lesbian Identities* (New York: Haworth Press, 1993), 2.

¹⁵⁰ De Cecco and Elia, 3.

¹⁵¹ De Cecco and Elia, 3.



God expects a *man* to marry a *woman* and have children.
Any *other* way is forbidden by God. (Gen. 2:24; Lev. 18:22; Rom. 1:26-27)

Page 4

Figure 5. The teacher and her homosexual guests. *Birds and the Bees* chick tract. Created by Chick, Jack. Page 4. From the Chick Publications website, <https://www.chick.com/products/tract?stk=1052>.



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Figure 6. The Christian children. *Birds and the Bees* chick tract. Created by Chick, Jack. Page 9. From the Chick Publications website, <https://www.chick.com/products/tract?stk=1052>

The illustrations depict Christians as moderately attractive, their children are big-eyed with chubby cheeks, as seen in Figure 5. Contrastingly, the queer people and their allies in Figure 4 are wrinkly, unattractive, with either very sharp faces, or fat, melting features. *Home Alone?* even contains a racist caricature of a black man (enlarged lips and strangely shaped, monkey-like ears) and a Jewish man (a hooked nose so big the men almost are not able to kiss), as shown in Figure 6.¹⁵² As apparent, the illustrations aim to create strong negative associations in the readers' minds.

¹⁵² Chick, *Home Alone?*, 15.

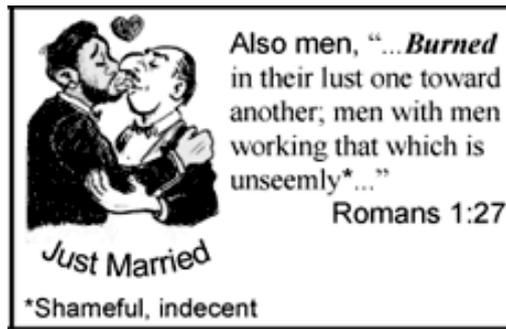


Figure 7 - A racist caricature of a black man and a Jewish man. *Home Alone? chick tract*. Created by Chick, Jack. Page 15. From the Chick Publications website, <https://www.chick.com/products/tract?stk=1039>

All three chick tracts presented Christians as victims. The perpetrator ranges between Satan, demons, an oppressive gay agenda, and anti-Christian laws. In *Birds and the Bees*, a boy, Frankie, asks the dentists if they are “Queers.”¹⁵³ When Frankie mentions that his father said homosexuality is wrong, the teacher tells him his father is dangerous; later in the same tract, the gay men express an intent to put bigots in prisons and insane asylums.¹⁵⁴ The kids wonder why the teacher brought someone gay to class and a Christian girl, Suzie, says the teacher was forced to “because of the new laws.”¹⁵⁵ As a finale of her own monologue about the Bible to her group of friends, Suzie exclaims: “Satan wants to destroy us kids.”¹⁵⁶

The chick tracts use unpleasant imagery and the threat of going to Hell as a tool to scare the reader into obedience of the church, as well as instill in Christians a sense of righteous purpose. They are, as the comics present it, fighting a war against the forces of evil in the name of all that is moral and “normal”.

¹⁵³ Chick, *Birds and the Bees*, 5.

¹⁵⁴ Chick, 6.

¹⁵⁵ Chick, 19.

¹⁵⁶ Chick, 19.

9 Notions of normalcy

A topic which children's literature with LGBTQ themes often addresses is the concept of normalcy. In heteronormative society, the norm is to be heterosexual; the term queer, is synonymous with "strange" or "odd,"¹⁵⁷ and therefore inherently opposing the norm. This chapter will overview how the chosen texts tackle the topic of normalcy by discussing three major perspectives: texts which are proving households with queer parents to be as "normal" as their heterosexual counterparts; texts that present queer families as inherently "normal" and common; and finally texts which question and undermine what it means to be "normal".

9.1 Proving normalcy

Children's books from anglophone countries tend to emphasize that queer families are just as normal as heterosexual ones. This is a response to stigma and discrimination that queer individuals and their families face (for concrete examples and discussion, see Sections 8.1 and 8.2). Some of the children's books allude to such distrust or outright discrimination of LGBTQ people in a way that would not upset the child reader. In *Asha's Mums*, the mothers try to shield their naïve daughter from negative opinions on queer families, as her teacher refuses to accept a form with two mothers listed as parents:

"The trip is only two days away. I can't go if the form is not filled out right. All the kids are going to go without me." Mum Alice gave me a big hug and a kiss and said, "Don't worry about it, Asha, the form is filled out right. We'll go see your teacher and talk with her."¹⁵⁸

Gloria Goes to Gay Pride has the main character Gloria encounter anti-gay protestors during the march for gay rights. Her mother explains to her that not all people are accepting, to which Gloria says: "But you always tell me love is the most important thing of all!"¹⁵⁹ Sunderland makes an observation that in many children's stories with

¹⁵⁷ Kubowitz, 'The Default Reader and a Model of Queer Reading and Writing Strategies', 202.

¹⁵⁸ Elwin, Paulse, and Lee, *Asha's Mums*, 8.

¹⁵⁹ Newman and Crocker, *Gloria Goes to Gay Pride*, 26.

queer themes, same-sex partners and parents are “credited through the value of love.”¹⁶⁰ Love and its importance seems to be the easiest choice for a common ground between queer and non-queer families.

The focus of these children’s texts is often drawn to showing the love and support that queer parents give to the child protagonist. Before Gloria goes to pride with her mothers, the book lists all the different holidays the family celebrate and the gifts they share¹⁶¹. *Daddy’s Roommate* shows and illustrates all the things the boy, his biological father and his new partner do on the weekends, as well as all the ways in which the partner spends time with the protagonist: “Frank likes me too! Just like Daddy, he tells me jokes and riddles, Helps me catch bugs for show and tell, Reads to me, Makes *great* peanut butter-and-jelly sandwiches, And chases nightmares away.”¹⁶² *Heather Has Two Mommies* introduces the queer mothers separately by emphasizing, again, how they spend their time together: “Mama Kate is a doctor. She has two stethoscopes so she and Heather can listen to each other’s heartbeats. Mama Jane is a carpenter. She has two hammers so she and Heather can build things together.”¹⁶³ These lists of activities the family, or alternatively the child and the individual parent, enjoy together show queer parents to be as caring, loving and attentive as any good parent would be. They serve not only to comfort the child of queer parents by showing they are not “abnormal” or less loved, but to show the straight majority through fiction that queer people are “normal people”.

Heather Has Two Mommies and *Gloria Goes to Gay Pride* seem to push the same-sex parents towards fitting societal norms even more. Heather’s mothers work as a doctor and a carpenter respectively (see previous paragraph),¹⁶⁴ and Gloria’s as a nurse and a mechanic.¹⁶⁵ The profession of a nurse or a doctor is associated with being caring, nurturing, and selfless, which are traditionally traits of associated with women. Mechanics or carpenters, however, need to be manually skilled, operate with tools or heavy items, and possess physical strength, which are qualities associated with masculinity. I propose that

¹⁶⁰ Sunderland, *Language, Gender and Children’s Fiction*, 163.

¹⁶¹ Newman and Crocker, *Gloria Goes to Gay Pride*, 5–8.

¹⁶² Willhoite, *Daddy’s Roommate*, 12–17.

¹⁶³ Newman and Cornell, *Heather Has Two Mommies*, 10–11.

¹⁶⁴ Newman and Cornell, 10–11.

¹⁶⁵ Newman and Crocker, *Gloria Goes to Gay Pride*, 11–12.

both picture books are thus heteronormatively coding the mothers in terms of their jobs. Perhaps these books being written by the same author is a factor; the choice of character traits may reflect only the beliefs of a single author. Such portrayals, however, perpetuate the stereotype that same-sex partnerships copy the heterosexual dynamic.

On the whole, it is important to ask whether thoroughly proving the same-sex couples to be “as normal as” opposite-sex couples is progressive or regressive in terms of social change. Epstein states that confirming their normalcy is something that in reality takes away from equality of queer parents in the eyes of the reader,¹⁶⁶ as queer families have to be thoroughly confirmed as normal but straight ones do not. While it is desired to end stigma by showing queer people as good, loving parents, equating fitting the norm with being a valid parent may do more harm than good.

9.2 *Inherent normalcy*

In other cases, the narrative does not center around proving characters to be normal. This is typical for Sunderland’s backgrounded strategy, which manifests as the story presenting queer characters as common and normal without the need to defend them, or as the narrative disregarding the topic of normalcy. *The Duke Who Outlawed Jelly Beans*, a collection of texts with backgrounded queer characters, is not concerned with whether the same-sex parents’ identities are normal or not, since the narrative skims over the protagonists’ families and focuses on the child’s adventures (see Section 6.1, Paragraph 5). All the main characters in the book have queer parents. Nicholas and eventually Jesse in “The Frog Prince” have two fathers.¹⁶⁷ Scarlet has a single mother that tells her once of her first love: “[...] I fell in love with a woman, and in my country, many people did not like that.”¹⁶⁸ Peter in “Dragon Sense” lives with his two mothers,¹⁶⁹ just as Little Jenny does in “Ogre’s Boots,”¹⁷⁰ and Anna in the final story “The Duke Who Outlawed Jelly Beans” is being raised by two mothers as well.¹⁷¹ At least within the fictional world of this

¹⁶⁶ Epstein, ‘We’re Here, We’re (Not?) Queer’, 294.

¹⁶⁷ Valentine and Schmidt, *The Duke Who Outlawed Jelly Beans*, 1–6.

¹⁶⁸ Valentine and Schmidt, 8.

¹⁶⁹ Valentine and Schmidt, 13.

¹⁷⁰ Valentine and Schmidt, 19.

¹⁷¹ Valentine and Schmidt, 25.

collection of stories, *The Duke Who Outlawed Jelly Beans* sets new criteria for normalcy, which is a unique concept.

9.3 Questioning the concept of normalcy

Certain texts choose to oppose the norm in showing that a “normal family” does not exist. There are many different family types apart from the model that tends to be termed traditional (mother, father and their biological children) and only presenting this one model as valid discredits the experience not only of the children of same-sex parents, but of many other children from divorced families, with single parents, children who are adopted, or live with other family members and caretakers than a mother and a father.

When Heather learns that other kids have a dad and she does not, it confuses her, but her teacher is quick to have the kids draw their families.¹⁷² When the children are done with their work, she remarks: “It doesn’t matter how many mommies or how many daddies your family has. [...] Each family is special. The most important thing about a family is that all the people in it love each other.”¹⁷³ This message addresses not only children of same-sex parents, but any children in a family type that does not match the idea of a traditional family.

“The Duke Who Outlawed Jelly Beans” discredits heteronormative ideas of a “normal” family even further. The Duke regent rules that since he had a mother and a father and “turned out so well,”¹⁷⁴ everybody else must have this type of a family, or they would be thrown into a dungeon.¹⁷⁵ The child protagonists discover that many of them do not have this type of family, and they force the Duke into leaving the castle by mimicking him and laughing at his ideas.¹⁷⁶ This story is using a metaphor for real-world problems, such as anti-gay conservatives discriminating queer families, while remaining accessible and understandable to child readers.

¹⁷² Newman and Cornell, *Heather Has Two Mommies*, 23.

¹⁷³ Newman and Cornell, 28–29.

¹⁷⁴ Valentine and Schmidt, *The Duke Who Outlawed Jelly Beans*, 27.

¹⁷⁵ Valentine and Schmidt, 27.

¹⁷⁶ Valentine and Schmidt, 28–29.

Whether the texts confirm or challenge the norm, the common denominator for all of these stories is that they focus on the importance of love in the family. If the text is concerned with the notions of normalcy, it either claims that because same sex-parents love and care for their child and the child loves them back, they are a normal family, or the text argues that there is no need for the family to fit the norm, as long as the family members love one another. Although the approaches to the topic of normalcy as listed in the three previous sub-sections are very different in comparison, they all show queer parents to be loving and attentive.

10 Conclusion

The original objective of this thesis was to find and analyze common character tropes in children's literature with queer themes published between the years 1980 and 2000. The following research has shown that this selection of books does not contain large character variety. The most prominent trope that blocks introducing a more diverse range of protagonists is the asexual child trope, which renders the child character naïve and without sexuality. The parents, whose identities are being explored or debated, are thus reduced into their parental role and their queer identity. Although this seems to be a simple, repetitive formula, there were many other aspects of queer-themed children's literature that this thesis analyzed.

The initial discussion of literary theory pertaining to this topic revealed three main narrative strategies – gay, different, and backgrounded strategy – that authors may use to approach the queerness of the characters. They differ in terms of how openly they discuss queerness or how naturally this possible discussion is incorporated into the story. The queer theory was discussed, but as its application in the field of literary analysis is a fairly new and highly ambiguous discipline, this theory was not utilized in this thesis. After this, the implied and default reader were introduced. The default reader is a concept that is strongly connected to the inclusion of LGBTQ characters in children's books. In connection to the default reader, the principle of queer encoding and decoding was explained along with the text appropriation hypothesis, showing the reasons an underrepresented reader may have to desire to feel seen by the text, and the means such reader may use to feel included in a narrative.

Describing the historical context of the 1980s' LGBTQ community and the origin of published children's literature in anglophone countries provided important information for later analysis. The ideologies of the Age of Reason were transformed into the asexual child trope in queer-friendly picture books, the Anti-LGBT chick tracts and the picture book *Alfie's Home*. The latter were a prime example of the negative attitudes towards gay men that have risen in the 1980s.

The discussion of the asexual child trope unveiled the mental constructs which survive from the end of 18th century. Adults in society tend to see children as beings without sexuality or understanding of it. Not only are child readers thus blocked from exploring sexuality in an accessible medium, but the child characters in picture books are

given the traits of purity and naiveté. Children's literature was shown to be separated from real children.

Imbalances in portrayal of two-mother and two-father families revealed to be favoring the same-sex female partners. The picture books include proportionally more two-mother families. Two women were seen to raise children of any gender, have them in their care and both be addressed as mother, while male couples did not live with their child, only raised boys and one of them was addressed as a friend or a roommate. This phenomenon was traced back to the negative attitudes to gay men, as well to gender stereotypes of men being worse at parenting than women.

Representation and its quality was discussed right after, its spectrum described via the aforementioned three major narrative strategies, as well as analyzing the illustrations. This chapter revealed that only two texts use the words "gay" or "homosexual", while the rest tend to use the subtler different or backgrounding strategy. The parents were shown displaying affection towards one another very rarely and usually not in public; overall, the relationship of the child was the main focus, and thus the relationship of the parents was overlooked.

The following section informs about queer subtext and queer encoding, which are a safe way to provide children with metaphorical discussions of queer topics to let them find their own meaning of the text. The analysis of subtext was then shown on a concrete short story from the selection, "The Frog Prince".

The thesis also introduces anti-LGBTQ narratives aimed at children that advocate for conversion therapy and generally speak against gay men. The recruitment theory was introduced and its implications then identified in both main framings in these works, the psychological and the religious. The representative text for the psychological framing, *Alfie's Home*, covers such topics as dysfunctional families and child molestation, and states them to be causes for homosexuality, and promotes conversion therapy. The religious side of this argument is represented by chick tracts that rely heavily on interpretations of the Bible. These comics paint homosexuality as a mental illness, a result of child molestation, possession by evil spirits, an evil political agenda, and a personal choice – the implications and interactions of which were analyzed in-depth along with the illustrations in the tracts.

Lastly, this work addresses an overarching topic that most of the works reference, which is normalcy. It was demonstrated that many of the stories aim to normalize same-sex parents and LGBTQ people by showing them to be as loving, attentive and good as

any other parent. Others challenge the norm and the notion of a traditional family. A small group of stories does not address the family's normalcy at all. What almost all of the picture books share is that they emphasize the importance of love in the family, no matter what the family looks like.

The analyses of the chosen texts uncovered certain aspects which may have a negative effect on the reader. Disregarding all anti-LGBTQ texts, for obvious reasons, two examples are the underrepresentation of two-father families and the heteronormative coding of lesbian mothers. The question remains whether these phenomena have stopped appearing in children's literature in contemporary works. Do children now have access to books in which the child protagonist would personally explore same-sex attraction? Does children's literature discuss gender identity, intersex individuals, bisexuality, asexuality and other identities, or does its focus only stay on homosexuality? And lastly, do these narratives still aim mainly to defend the queer family, or are there more children's books that contain queer representation, but are not centered around discussing queerness? Hopefully, the research on children's literature that seeks to answer these questions will continue onward.

The stories for children analyzed in this work are the pioneers of queer-themed children's literature in the UK and the US. They have been written and published in spite of all social stigma and discrimination. They were not created in order to convince the heterosexual majority that queer people would be good parents if given the chance, but rather written for the children of already existing families of same-sex parents who needed a way to relay to their child that, while their family may be different and certain people will not accept them, the child is still valid, loved, and not lacking in any way. I believe that the final take-away of this work would be that positive queer representation aids virtually any child reader, and thus, children should be allowed to explore the topic of sexuality in this manner. Just like a child may learn hate and fear of "the other" when chick tracts are read out to them, they may learn acceptance, compassion and appreciation for the diversity of humanity if they have access to a queer-friendly picture book.

11 Resumé

Původním záměrem této práce bylo najít a analyzovat nejběžnější tropy postav (tedy typy postav, které jsou opakovaně a záměrně užívány) v dětské literatuře s queer motivy publikované mezi léty 1980 a 2000. Nejvýraznější tropus byl tropus asexuálního dítěte, který představuje dítě jako naivní a bez sexuality. Postavy rodičů, jejichž identity jsou pak předmětem diskuze, jsou tudíž omezeny na svou rodičovskou roli a sexuální orientaci.

Počáteční představení literární teorie, která se k tématu této práce vztahuje, odhalila tři základní narativní strategie – „gay“ strategii, „odlišnou“ (*different*) strategii a „okrajovou“ (*backgrounding*) strategii – které mohou autoři využít v přístupu ke queer postavám a které se od sebe liší například v tom, jak otevřeně diskutují o LGBTQ sexualitách nebo jak přirozeně je tato diskuze vložena do příběhu. Dále byla popsána tzv. queer teorie, ale jelikož je její využití pro literární analýzu dětských knih poměrně nové a nestandardizované, v této bakalářské práci se takový rámec analýzy nevyskytl. Následovalo představení konceptů „implikovaného“ (*implied*) a „výchozího“ (*default*) čtenáře, které se blíže pojí k zahrnutí LGBTQ postav do dětských knih. V návaznosti na tuto problematiku byl pak popsán princip queer kódování a dekódování (*queer encoding and decoding*), a byly uvedeny důvody, proč by se čtenář mohl cítit, že je v literatuře málo reprezentován, a způsoby, jakými by mohl tento čtenář dosáhnout většího pocitu inkluze.

V této práci byl dále popsán historický kontext osmdesátých let vzhledem k LGBTQ komunitě a vznik publikované dětské literatury v anglicky mluvících zemích. V první sekci byl ukázán negativní přístup tehdejší společnosti k neheterosexuálním mužům, diskriminativní legislativa a sociální dopad epidemie AIDS, v té další pak vliv osvícenství na dětskou literaturu a spojitosti mezi osvícenskými myšlenkami a tropem asexuálního dítěte. Diskuze o tomto tropu odhalila sociální konstrukty, které jsou stále přítomné od konce osmnáctého století. Dospělé osoby obvykle vidí děti jako bytosti bez sexuality nebo chápání sexuality, jelikož identita dospělých závisí na identitě dítěte jako jejího absolutního protikladu. Nejen že pak dětské čtenáři nemají přístup ke zkoumání sexuality formou literatury, ale jsou jim přiděleny vlastnosti naprosté morální čistoty a nevinnosti.

Nerovnosti v zobrazování rodin s dvěma matkami a dvěma otci naznačily, že ženské stejnopohlavní páry jsou v rámci příběhů zvýhodněny. Ve vybraných dětských knihách se vyskytuje více rodin se dvěma matkami, které pak vychovávají dítě nebo více dětí různých pohlaví a jsou označovány jako matky. Mužské stejnopohlavní páry se vyskytly pouze dvakrát, přičemž ani v jednom případě nežili oba muži společně s dítětem v jedné

domácnosti jeden z partnerů nebyl označován jako otec. Tyto nesrovnalosti byly spojeny s negativními postoji společnosti k homosexuálním mužům, stejně jako stereotypy pohlaví, podle kterých jsou muži horší v péči o dítě.

Další sekce probírala LGBTQ reprezentaci vzhledem k narativním strategiím a k zobrazování stejnopohlavních párů v ilustracích. Pouze dva z vybraných textů používají slova „gay“ nebo „homosexuál“, a zbytek využívá „odlišnou“ nebo „okrajovou“ strategii. Co se týče ilustrací, rodiče si v nich projevovali náklonost jen výjimečně a většinou ne na veřejnosti. Celkově se LGBTQ literatura pro děti spíše soustředila na vztah rodičů k dítěti, než rodičů mezi sebou. Dále byl předmětem diskuze podtext (*subtext*) a queer kódování (*queer encoding*) jako způsob, jak v obrazné rovině představit dětem téma sexuality.

Tato bakalářská práce také představila anti-LGBTQ texty určené dětem, které propagují konverzní terapii (*conversion therapy*), zobrazují homosexualitu například jako pouhou zmatenost nebo posedlost démonem, a obecně se staví proti mužské homosexualitě. Byla představena konzervativní „náborová“ teorie (*recruitment theory*), tedy přesvědčení, že homosexualita se šíří skrze aktivitu existujících homosexuálů, kteří svádějí další osoby a přivádějí je na „svou stranu“.

V závěru tato práce zkoumala různé přístupy ke konceptu normálnosti v těchto dětských knihách. Analýza ukázala, že velká část těchto LGBTQ knih se snaží ukázat, že stejnopohlavní rodiče jsou stejně normální a milující jako každý jiný rodič. Další skupina textů pak normě pro rodinu oponuje a ukazuje mnohé jiné typy rodinných uspořádání. Malá část příběhů pak o normálnosti rodiny se stejnopohlavními rodiči vůbec nehovoří. Téměř všechna tato díla ale poukazují na důležitost lásky v rodině.

Příběhy pro děti analyzované v této bakalářské práci jsou průkopníky svého žánru ve Velké Británii a USA. Vznikly ne proto, aby heterosexuální většinu přesvědčily o tom, že stejnopohlavní páry by mohly být dobrými rodiči, kdyby se jim k tomu naskytla příležitost, ale spíše pro existující děti stejnopohlavních párů, kterým se jejich rodiče snažili sdělit, že jsou milovány a nejsou méněcenné jen proto, že je jejich rodina v něčem odlišná. Závěr této práce zdůrazňuje že pozitivní queer reprezentace je prospěšná pro jakéhokoli dětského čtenáře, a děti by tudíž měly mít přístup k literatuře, skrze kterou mohou nepřímo prozkoumávat sexualitu jak cizí, tak svou. Stejně jako se dítě může naučit nenávisti a strachu z odlišnosti z homofobních textů a příběhů, může jej obrázková knížka s kladným přístupem k LGBTQ identitám naučit empatii, toleranci a respektu k různorodosti lidské společnosti.

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Annotations

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Title of the thesis: Character tropes in children's literature with LGBTQ themes published between the years 1980 and 2000

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Abstract

This bachelor thesis is concerned with literature for children with LGBTQ themes which was published between the years 1980 and 2000 in anglophone countries. It is based on analyses of specific children's books and stories with subsequent commentary on the similarities and differences in regards to character tropes present in the works. Among the topics explored are the trope of the asexual child, quality of queer representation, gender stereotypes, and the construct of normalcy.

Key words: Character tropes, Sexuality, Homosexuality, Children's literature, Identity, Purity, Representation, Normalcy, Same-sex parents, LGBTQ

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Abstrakt

Tato bakalářská práce se zabývá literaturou pro děti s LGBTQ tématy, která byla vydána mezi léty 1980 a 2000 v anglofonních zemích. Je založena na analýze vybraných děl a následném komentování jejich rozdílů a podobností vzhledem k opakujícím se tropům postav. Mezi tématy, kterým se práce věnuje, je tropus asexuálního dítěte, kvalita LGBTQ reprezentace, stereotypy pohlaví, a konstrukt normálnosti.

Klíčové pojmy: Tropy postav, Sexualita, Homosexualita, Dětská literatura, Identita, Nevinnost, Reprezentace, Normálnost, Homoparentalita, LGBTQ