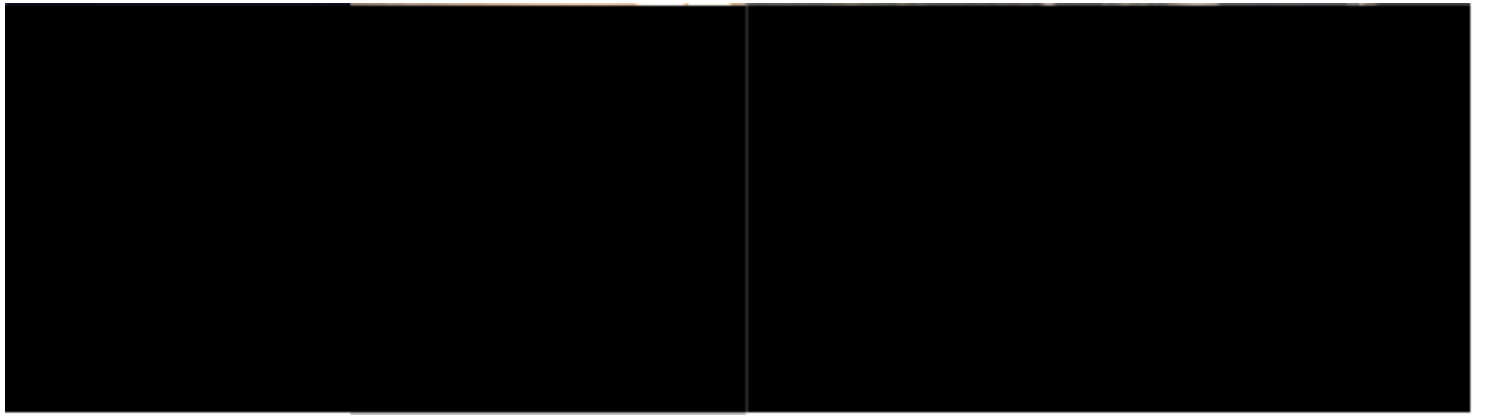


“And They Talked Amongst the Dancing Heterosexuals”
Queer Teen Televisual Representation in Theory and Practice



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Abstract

When watching a teen drama in the contemporary moment, it is hard to avoid seeing depictions of queer identity, as numbers of representation across the televisual landscape are ever-increasing. But, even with increasing statistics, are these characters allowed to function in the same ways as their straight counterparts are? If so, what acts are queer teens allowed to perform on the screen, and what is withheld from reach? This study analyzes queer teens from three televisual texts—*Riverdale*, *The Society*, and *Pretty Little Liars: The Perfectionists*—and the acts that they are allowed to and forbidden from taking on these shows. Using a combination of representational and close-reading analyses, I elucidate the gaps between the queer and straight teen characters that exist today. These gaps are much smaller than they were mere years ago, and each of the shows analyzed creates significant space for queer teens to act equally in a specific way. However, even with these spaces, the gaps that exist are still significant, with no single show allowing their queer teens to reach the same level as straight teens. This study aims not only to indicate these gaps for scholarly discussion, but also to implore the television industry to rethink how queer teens are being represented, so that all those out there coming to terms with their identity at such a volatile age can see themselves represented fully and equally on the screen. They are here, they are queer, but are they equal?

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¹ Jill Gutowitz, “The ‘Pretty Little Liars’ Spinoff Is Unhinged Queer Camp,” (*Vice*, April 2, 2019).

Introduction

Let's play a little game. Try to name all the straight² characters you have seen on television. That pop you j!"

I have been watching television shows with queer characters for quite a while now, ever since the fruitful discovery of my own queer sexuality in my sophomore year of high school. I have googled the phrase “TV shows with gay characters” more times than I care to admit. Luckily for me, I am growing up in an age where there actually are queer characters on TV (even though there are still too few), so I had a reasonable amount of content to consume. No matter how much of this television I consumed, something just was not there. I watched straight characters constantly joining clubs, forming relationships, being physically intimate, getting into college, going to parties, and existing freely. I watched gay characters be gay. Oh, and sometimes they died. They certainly were not having sex or even kissing the same-sex regularly, and often were confined to their sexuality so that the show would seem diverse and inclusive. I started to question what allowances queer teens are afforded, specifically in accordance with their straight counterparts.

For many years, the mere thought of a queer character on television was an outrageous one, much less a queer teenager. The queer characters that did exist were marginalized, abused, and often killed, always remaining secondary to the straight, cisgender, often white protagonists. As years have passed and sexuality has become a less taboo subject, television began to incorporate more queer teens into its programming. GLAAD’s yearly study “Where Are We on TV in 2018?” found that seventy-five out of 857 regular characters on primetime television are LGBTQ identifying, which comes out to 8.8%.⁴ The study also found that there are thirty-eight recurring LGBTQ characters on primetime, 120 regular and eighty-eight recurring LGBTQ characters on cable, and seventy-five regular and thirty-seven recurring LGBTQ characters on

⁴ “Where We Are on TV Report,” GLAAD, October 26, 2018, <https://www.glaad.org/whereweareontv18>.

viewing multidimensional and relatable representations of LGBT people on television can produce a change in attitudes and opinions across the nation.”¹² Himberg’s argument indicates that as scholarship developed, and more queer characters began to appear on television, those studying queer studies and media and film questioned the magnitude of the socializing effect that Gross claims television has. While early queer TV scholars argued that the socializing effect of television on American society was monumental, modern queer TV scholars have moved away from making such sweeping claims in favor of questioning just how significant that effect is. Ultimately, while television cannot act as the sole factor in increasing queer acceptance across the nation, positive representations on the readily accessible small screen certainly have an influence on how at least some view queer populations.

If there is one image that comes to mind when recalling depictions of queer teens on television, it is the notorious coming-out story. It comes as no surprise, then, that a plethora of content, both primary and secondary, exists on this particular narrative plot. Glyn Davis argues that the coming-out narrative in teen television works two-fold, arguing that while these narratives can allow for an individualized narrative, they also can draw attention to queerness in a way that is not always positive.¹³ He uses *Party of Five* as an example; when Elliott comes out to Bailey, it is more about how Bailey is *not* gay than about how Elliott is, and queerness becomes something to be avoided, rather than embraced.¹⁴ When teens are forced to come out, their sexuality is focused on in a hyper-specific way, and becomes their primary personality marker. Similarly, Sean Robinson and Bernice Alston’s work notes that coming out stories are

¹ Julia Himberg, *The New Gay for Pay: The Sexual Politics of American Television Production* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2017), 4.

¹³ Glyn Davis, “‘Saying It Out Loud’: Revealing Television’s Queer Teens,” in *Teen TV: Genre, Consumption, Identity*, ed. Glyn Davis and Kay Dickinson (London: British Film Inst., 2011), 131-132.

¹⁴ Davis, “‘Saying It Out Loud’” 132.

not about the queer teen themselves, but rather about how the heterosexual characters surrounding them handle the revelation.¹⁵ Davis, Robinson, and Alston all note that the queer coming out story is often a plot device to bring attention to the reactions of heterosexual protagonists, rather than on the queer teen's story. Both of these studies acknowledge that the coming-out story is an important one that can shape queer viewers' personal lives, and argue that the coming-out story is often executed poorly due to the vastly heterosexual production teams for television. However, scholars fail to question whether or not queer characters that are subjected to this coming-out narrative can ever exist as equals to their heterosexual counterparts who are not forced into said narrative—straight people are not forced to declare their sexuality. Joanna Schorn enters this conversation, pointing out that when characters come out on television, that is the moment in which straight people are forced to acknowledge a sexuality other than the dominant one.¹⁶ Unlike Davis, Robinson, and Alston, Schorn is the only one to take note of how the coming-out narrative, especially in non-protagonists, forever paints that character as singularly gay. None analyze how the queer narrative trope of coming-out functions alongside heterosexual teen stories, and how the effects of the coming-out narrative differ depending on the arcs of not only the queer, but also the straight characters.

Most of the literature on queer teen representations on television argues either that queer people are completely othered or must wholly assimilate into heterosexual life. Homonormativity is defined as when a queer couple can only be accepted into society when they conform to the

¹⁵ Sean Robinson and Bernice Alston, "LRp"

heteronormative values that propel the mainstream. Davis notes that often these characters are “absorbed into the heterosexuality of the medium,” with monogamous relationships, family structures, and invisible physical relationships.¹⁷ He also acknowledges that after these teens come out, they are subjected to living a domestic, nuclear family-esque life of monogamy and chastity. In a similar vein, Himberg argues that this homonormativity works to divide the queer community between those who strive for the narrative of “they’re just like us!” and those who desire to be included in spite of differences.¹⁸ Eve Ng suggests that the fight for gay marriage is homonormative (not in as critical a way) as the primary goal is to further integrate queer identifying people into dominant structures of heterosexual society.¹⁹ Suzanna Danuta Walters further posits that the “good gays” are those who assimilate into the nuclear family structure, and the “bad gays” are those who break from the set norms of how relationships “should” work.²⁰ All

Methods

media of queer characters. The representational analysis does leave gaps in the study of queer teens. The cultural context of why these are the representations of queer teens that we are getting in the contemporary moment is the first of these gaps. It also fails to expand on how these specific queer characters came to be, such as who is writing and producing these shows.

Without texts to study, a representational analysis would certainly fall flat, which is why I made the game-changing decision to employ a close-reading analysis in tandem with my representational one, diving deep into specifics of the representations production. I will analyze character arcs of queer teens such as Kevin Keller on *Riverdale* and Dylan Walker on *PLL: TP*, and how these arcs contrast/compare to the arcs of their straight counterparts. I am most interested in elucidating when and why queer characters can act in identical ways to their straight counterparts. A close reading is especially important in conducting a representational analysis, because it is impossible to understand queer teen representation without diving deep into specifics of the representation. For example, Robinson and Alston's examination of the representations of characters on *Glee*, *90210* and *The Secret Life of the American Teenager* answer the questions: "How does the show reinforce or disrupt traditional dichotomies of what it means to be heterosexual/homosexual?" and "How does the show give voice to certain characters while marginalizing, silencing, or stigmatizing other characters?"²⁵ His utilization of the close reading method allows him to make informed claims about representations by diving deep into the literal portrayals of these characters. One limitation in close reading is that it often subjective, and differs from person to person. Another limitation in studying multiple TV shows is the magnitude of content. Analyzing all representations in shows where there are multiple

²⁵ Robinson and Alston, "Lavender Identity," 32.

Riverdale weaves through many storylines. The first season follows the investigation of murdered classmate, Jason Blossom. Intermixed with the primary plot are scandalous romances, fights between friends, extracurricular decisions, parental drama, and secrets that haunt the characters. The four main characters work together to investigate and eventually solve Blossom's murder (surprise, the father did it), often getting frisky along the way. Season two ups the drama with the serial killer known as "The Black Hood," who ends up being Betty's father, loose in *Riverdale*. The show also ramps up the romance quotient in this season. With the four main characters all coupled off, sexual relations and romantic involvement seems to dominate most episodes, even with a serial killer on the loose. Sure, they argue and fight and cover up murders, but they are teens in love and that's what *Riverdale's* audience wants. In season three, sex is basically guaranteed in every episode, and it could be between anyone, from the heterosexual to the homosexual.

character we are presented with is a stereotype. Well-dressed in a button down shirt and tight jeans, he lays on Betty Cooper's bed while she is half-naked and putting on makeup. The pair talk about a boy that Betty "likes," Archie, and Kevin gives his advice on how to grapple with the issue of "millennial straight guys"²⁶ Kevin, however, differs from many other queer teen on TV as he forgoes the coming-out narrative that so often consumes queer teen representation on television. Schorn, on the coming out narrative, suggests that it is so common because "[t]he character does not just happen to *be* gay—their gayness is a topic of interest, one that needs to be discussed and digested by the rest of the cast and, by extension, the audience."²⁷ *Riverdale* avoids

sexual orientation.”³⁰ Kevin quickly becomes a character solely defined by his sexuality—his only focus is men, but remains distanced from visibly inhabiting his sexuality because his interest falls on a heterosexual man.

Kevin is defined by his sexual identity in the first episode, not by others who care that he is gay, but by his own mannerisms and the extreme focus on his sexuality. While featured heavily for a side character, he never manages to escape the role of the GBF. When Veronica Lodge, a newcomer to *Riverdale*, asks about the social scene, Kevin swoops in out of nowhere and answers that there is a “strip club” and a “tragic gay bar,” further establishing him as a character cemented in his sexuality and checked in to the social atmosphere of the school.³¹ It also eliminates the possibility of queerness in action by demoting the only center of queer activity to a “tragic” state. When Betty formally introduces him, she says “Kevin is-” and is interrupted by Veronica, who finishes her sentence saying “gay, thank god. Let’s be best friends.”³² Kevin is not introduced as anything but his sexuality; the introduction defines him: “Kevin is gay.”³³ Himberg defines the “post-gay” era that scholars claim we are living in as when “sexual orientation does not define the character or her or his motivations on a show; rather, she or he ‘just happens to be gay.’”³⁴ Kevin is defined by his sexual identity in the first episode, not by others who care that he is gay, but by his own mannerisms and the extreme focus on his sexuality. In the extreme focus on his sexuality, Kevin fails to subscribe to the “post-gay” movement away from labels and exclusion that Himberg describes. Furthermore, Kevin alone bears a non-normative sexual identity and consequently carries the burden of representing the

³⁰ Robinson and Alston, “Lavender Identity,” 40.

³¹ “Chapter One: The River’s Edge,” 9:40.

³² “Chapter One: The River’s Edge,” 9:5 ,š h

It is clear from this interaction that this is not Kevin's first time in a sexual encounter. He is already seen as sexual, and is willing to have sex at the end of the first episode. In these moments, it begs the question of whether or not a queer sex scene would be the first sexual encounter shown in *Riverdale*. Even in this exchange, sexual identity (not sex) is the main focus, rather than the act that the pair have come to the river to perform. Moose is another example of a typical queer stereotype, a closeted jock who wants to have sex with men without romance involved. However, before the two clearly horny and desperate teenagers can even take any of their clothing off, they find a dead body and their relations are cut short. The two male characters are not allowed to be visibly intimate on the screen like their heterosexual counterparts, and feel more like a tokenistic inclusion than a realistic one.

As Kevin's character arc continues, he ends up in a relationship with gang member Joaquin. Episode four is the first time we see Kevin actually engage in romantic/sexual activity, sharing a passionate, convincing kiss with the man he had just met at the drive-in theater. *Riverdale* takes the location of a traditionally heterosexual hookup, the drive-in theater, and appropriates it for a queer romance. As Kevin and Joaquin's relationship further develops, we still get nothing more than the occasional kissing (occurring only every few episodes). In comparison to the straight characters, Archie has kissed Veronica, Geraldine Grundy, and Valerie, Veronica has kissed Chuck, Archie's father has kissed Veronica's mother, Betty has kissed Jughead, and Betty and Veronica have kissed (and they are not even queer!). Kevin is relegated to having one relationship, and must have a serious relationship otherwise it would be threatening to the dominant heteronormative structures that exist in society. Season one Kevin Keller subscribes the homonormativity that so many queer characters fall victim to, getting

“absorbed into the heterosexuality of the medium and its representations.”³⁹ Unlike the straight characters in *Riverdale* the “queers always have to find a place in a heterosexual structure and system,” rather than having the ability to kiss multiple men or be promiscuous or simply hook-up with people without being in a relationship.⁴⁰ While Kevin’s stint with Moose and his comment that he has hooked up with men at Sweetwater River “once or twice” suggest that he is not sexually restrained, but what we see of Kevin’s sexual activity is.⁴¹ Kevin even says: “This is the first time I’ve really had a boyfriend. Mostly its been hookups with closeted guys.”⁴² Well, where are these hookups (besides the failed one in the first episode)? He can kiss Joaquin occasionally, he can *never* have sex with him, and their relationship is doomed to fail because it is star-crossed and, as revealed in an earlier episode, hinged on a lie. Unsurprisingly, the two break-up and Joaquin goes on the run because he helped cover up Jason Blossom’s murder. C’est la vie, at least queer men can be murderers too.

Over time, Kevin Keller becomes a completely different character, breaking from his homonormative, GBF, season one persona and becoming a significantly more dynamic character in season two. In the third episode of the second season, Kevin cruises in the local woods, going on runs as a way to find hookups. Jughead offers voiceover, saying: “Every fairy tale comes with the same warning. Good children should not go into the woods alone. Stray from the path and who knows what you’ll encounter. A hungry wolf, a handsome devil. Or maybe, something

³⁹ Davis, “Saying It Out Loud,” 129.

⁴⁰ Davis, “Saying It Out Loud,” 129.

⁴¹ *Riverdale*, Season 1, episode 10, “Chapter Ten: The Lost Weekend,” written by Roberto Aguirre-Sacasa, aired April 13, 2017, on The CW, 22:27.

⁴² *Riverdale*, Season 1, episode 11, “Chapter Eleven: To Riverdale and Back Again,” written by Roberto Aguirre-Sacasa, aired April 27, 2017, on The CW, 22:27.

worse.”⁴³ The concepts of “good children” and “stray[ing] from the path,” while possibly indicative of the serial killer loose in Riverdale, serve dually as a commentary on Kevin’s non-normative behavior. He has transformed from one of the “good gays (those who feel they are ‘born with it,’ those who are in a ‘committed couple,’ those who go to church, those who have kids, those who have weddings, those who want acceptance)” to a “bad gay...(those who celebrate their preference as a *choice*, those who prefer multiple partners, those who criticize the nuclear family...).”⁴⁴ Kevin shrugs off the homonormative identity and adopts a new, sexually liberated one. Yet, even in this,

In this moment, Kevin distances himself from the traditional heteronormative values that consume the town of Riverdale, yet is not ostracized from the dominant structures for doing so. Kevin wishes he had the leisure to act the same way as his straight counterparts, exploring sexuality and living a routine life. In acknowledging that he cannot, however, Kevin positions himself so he *can* act in similar ways to heterosexual teens, because he refuses to back down from his exploration. Robinson and Alston note that queer people often must choose between “inclusion within heterosexual circles [while invisible as gay or lesbian]” or “exclusion from heterosexual circles [while] visible as gay or lesbian.”⁴⁶ Kevin does not choose. He is visibly gay while still included in the heterosexual circles in Riverdale. Moose acknowledges this dilemma as well, saying to Kevin, “I don’t know but guys like us, like you, in a town like Riverdale, you don’t have a lot of options. So even if something bad could happen, we go for it because what if, for ten minutes, or maybe even just for two minutes, we’re not alone.”⁴⁷ If Kevin assimilates to societal norms and stops cruising, he saves himself from the possibility of violence in Riverdale. However, in acknowledging the issues with this focus on assimilation and detailing it as an issue with the town of Riverdale and American society, *Riverdale* positions its queer characters in a place where they can be as honest and openly sexual as straight characters can (at least in theory).

Riverdale gets queerer and queerer every season, no longer stuck on the gay best friend but on the appearance of total inclusion. By the third season, there are a multitude of queer characters that have come and gone from the town of Riverdale. Joaquin is dead after attempting to kill Archie. Moose is closeted, comes out, and then leaves Riverdale. Fangs, another gang

⁴⁶ Robinson and Alston, “Lavender Identity,” 40.

⁴⁷ “Chapter Sixteen: The Watcher in the Woods,” 22:04.

member, and Kevin fall for each other. Cheryl Blossom, one of the characters who draws the most screen time, is out as queer, sent to a conversion therapy center and is broken out by her heterosexual friends and her lover Toni Topaz, a queer woman of color. This is quite a different narrative of queer characters in *Riverdale* from seasons one and two. Finally in *Riverdale* “no one queer character has to be the stand in for the entire LGBT community.”⁴⁸ Queer people of sexuality, gender, and color supplement *Riverdale*’s representation of queer teens by utilizing a multitude of voices to represent a wide spectrum rather than small niche of the queer community. A queer utopia is realized for these students in “Bizzarodale,” (S3:E12) an episode that focuses primarily on the queer characters rather than the heterosexual characters that typically dominate the screen. First of all, the episode’s title indicates that queer characters dominating the screen is “bizarre.” Two minutes in we see a underwear clad Cheryl and lingerie dressed Toni in bed, talking about SAT scores and college: normal topics for teenagers. They are allowed to act in the same way that Archie, Veronica, Betty, and Jughead are, talking post-coitus about the events of Riverdale. Soon after we see a passionate make-out between Kevin and Moose. Two queer moments of romance/sexuality occur before any heterosexual relations, or even the appearance of the heterosexual characters. This representation comes after multiple indictments of Riverdale for queerbaiting, a practice that involves false hinting at queer romance, often between two heterosexual characters.⁴⁹ However, representation is representation, no matter what the

⁴⁸ Schorn, “Coming Out into the 21st Century,” 44.

⁴⁹ *Riverdale* has been accused of queerbaiting both in the first season with a kiss between the straight Betty and Veronica and in the third season in a kiss between Archie and Joaquin (who is gay). However, the specific brand of queerbaiting that *Riverdale* uses also taunts viewers with the possibility of visible queer romance equal to straight romance while continuing to deprive their audience of this content; Sam Prance, “‘Riverdale’ Needs to Stop Queerbaiting Its LGBTQ Audience,” PopBuzz, November 15, 2018, <https://www.popbuzz.com/tv-film/riverdale/queerbaiting-archie-joaquin-kiss-lgbt/>

reasoning is. While still not completely equal to their straight counterparts, queer characters finally dominate the hallowed halls of Riverdale High School.

Even when queer characters attempt to make progress at Riverdale High, there are always problems that arise, never quite allowing these characters to reach equality. Cheryl, as the first “openly lesbian student body president,” starts an LGBTQ alliance club at Riverdale High, a great step in inclusion, but subsequently outs a fellow queer individual.⁵⁰ Two steps forward, one step back. The student outed is Moose, and much of the episode hinges on Kevin and Moose’s relationship. When Cheryl outs him (an act ethically questionable at best) she notes that one of her hopes is that “Riverdale High is welcoming so that he and his Broadway loving boyfriend can finally PDA like the other sex-crazed dwelling amongst us.”⁵¹ The show itself acknowledges that the queer characters are not allowed the same visibility of sex as the heterosexual couples, yet does little to rectify this issue. Furthermore, this attempted outing is what sets in motion the series of events that end with Moose leaving Riverdale, and another queer relationship falling from view. Kevin is once again alone, never allowed to linger in love like the heterosexual teens are.

In the climax of the episode, Kevin and Moose travel to a secret bunker to have sex for the first time, an apparently major moment in queer visibility on *Riverdale*. Not only is the topic of queer sex possible, but it is talked about, and all but guaranteed. A study on sex in teen television found that “68% of all programs included *talk about sex*, and 35% of all programs included *sexual behavior*. Another study examined only programs with teenage characters and

⁵⁰ *Riverdale*, Season 3, episode 12, “Chapter Forty-Seven: Bizzarodale,” written by Roberto Aguirre-Sacasa, aired February 6, 2019, on The CW, 10:58.

⁵¹ “Bizzarodale,” 11:23.

found that about 90% of programs had sexual content.”⁵² These numbers would indicate that sex is not uncommon to see on teen TV. However, Kelly also notes “the heteronormative nature of teen dramas is obvious in the consistent definition of “sex” as penile-vaginal intercourse.”⁵³ *Riverdale* reflects this heteronormative sexual ideal, as even the rare sex scenes between queer male characters fail to show them less than fully clothed, and all queer sex is sandwiched between heterosexual intercourse, making it palatable for straight audiences. The presence of queer, non-normative intimacy bookended by the displays of normative intimacy takes focus away from the queer act itself, and packages it more comfortably for straight viewers. In their moment in the sun, Kevin pulls off Moose’s belt but the camera quickly pans to the left and cuts away, leaving viewers without an actual depiction of queer sex, just queer kissing (which is cool and all, but not enough in 2019). We see Betty on top of Jughead, both half naked, Cheryl and Toni, who are queer, but placed in a much darker setting than their heterosexual counterparts, until cutting back to Kevin and Moose, who lie in bed post-coitus with their undershirts on. I’m not judging, but most people do not get completely redressed after sex. *Riverdale* is a prime example that “queer sexual activity...is minimal, in contrast to extensive, occasionally graphic, heterosexual coupling.”⁵⁴ The lack of queer sexual activity becomes problematic in its relation to the frequent, often graphic sexual relations between the heterosexual characters, which places queer characters in a diminished capacity for authentic sexual relations compared to their straight counterparts.

In the same episode, *Riverdale* importantly acknowledges homophobia; the queer teens of Riverdale High are not without their haters, and are not living in a rose-colored fantasy world

⁵² Kelly, “Virginity Loss Narratives,” 3.

⁵³ Kelly, “Virginity Loss Narratives,” 3.

⁵⁴ Davis, “Saying it Out Loud,” 130.

Kevin Keller's autonomy, compared to that of the straight characters on *Riverdale*, is constantly shifting. He starts as the gay best friend, becomes a regular, sex-addled teen, and subsequently falls into obscurity, eventually succumbing to a cult that seems only able to manipulate queer minds. In comparison to his straight peers, Kevin is not afforded the ability to visibly act on physical manifestations of his sexuality, the same maturation of his relationships, or equal screen time. However, even amongst the issues of Kevin's representation, in relation to his straight counterparts, Kevin is *almost* equal to them. Although he can't get naked with his boyfriend on screen, he is in multiple relationships, is allowed to hook-up with men who he is not seriously involved with, forgoes the coming-out narrative, and (eventually) exists as more than just a queer man. Furthermore, as *Riverdale*'s representation increases to focus on more than Kevin as the sole queer character, his burden of representing the queer community is lightened, allowing his character to develop in ways that ioMMMMMMMande the g!Md, "!mp-

counterparts, however, he is not separated from them or ostracized from heterosexual society due to these identities. Furthermore, neither identity that he occupies becomes a plot device, but exist simply as aspects of his character.⁶¹ If anything, the fact that other characters around him learn sign language as the show progresses makes his disability a natural occurrence, rather than a spectacle. When able-bodied characters must adapt to speak to Sam, able-bodiedness becomes visible in the same way that disability does, because the luxuries afforded to able-bodied people become visible as well. With the intersection of identity, *The Society* works to take two non-normative identities and use them to destabilize how we view normative identities, questioning how the heterosexual, able-bodied world affects a character who occupies multiple subordinate identities. This development goes one step further than many of the other shows on television, which feature intersecting queer and other minority identities almost exclusively as secondary, by positioning Sam as an integral player in the show, rather than a minor character.

The third episode of the season, entitled “Childhood’s End” is the first moment that Sam visibly struggles with his sexuality, which allows access to the struggles of queerness without centering it as his main focus in the first episode. While he assists in cleaning the church post-party, he outlines his relationship with religion, sexuality, and love. He says:

[The priest] did tell me it was okay to be gay...as long as I didn’t act on it. I used to wonder how I’d ever pull that off. Turns out I didn’t need to worry. I’m gonna die a perfect Christian virgin. I’m actually kinda relieved. I mean, there’s obviously someone here who’s gay. Gay and repressed, probably. But there’s no one I’d want. That’s the real thing, finding someone who loves you, who you love back. And that’s crazy. Even outside of here it would be crazy. The fact that other people can do that...how do they find each other? Now, I can relax. Focus on what matters, on the people who matter, who love me.⁶²

⁶ that...how do they

Sam opts to not place his sexuality at the forefront of his identity, which is why he neglects to discuss it until the third episode. Sam feels that his sexuality is not, and should not have to be, his primary identity marker. Without the possibility of romance, he can “focus on what matters.” However, he can still identify with his sexuality and deal with the complications that accompany a non-normative sexual identity. His concerns align with those of his straight counterparts in many ways, about how to find someone, how to fall in love. Sam craves the traditional family life, but his path to achieving that future is complicated due to his queerness. He notes that while he likely is not the sole gay individual in this society, even if there were another he would not “want” them. While many queer teens are afforded “legitimacy to queerness only when it intersects with heteronormativity,” Sam legitimizes his queerness himself, by creating his own family structure with Becca later in the show.⁶³ This development shifts away from the trope that just because two individuals share the same sexual identity, they are automatically attracted to one another (although we later discover that the two queer characters still fall for each other).

Sam is swept up into a heterosexual world when his best friend, Becca, reveals that she is pregnant, and Sam volunteers to act as the father to this baby, in lieu of the biological father. Becca reveals her pregnancy in the third episode, and while Sam questions her every so often about the baby, it is not until the sixth episode that he offers his parental services. He says to Becca, “I’m the father...I want a family. I always have,” to which she replies “Don’t say it if you don’t mean it,” and he decisively says “You’re my friend and I love you. And I wanted a child of

⁶³ Janae Teal, and Meredith Conover-Williams, "Homophobia without Homophobes: Deconstructing the Public Discourses of 21st Century Queer Sexualities in the United States," *Humboldt Journal of Social Relations* 38 (2016), 18.

my own. This might be my only shot.”⁶⁴ While Sam appears to adopt a heteronormative family structure of mother and father, his non-normative, queer-straight relationship with Becca co-opts the dominant structure for his own purpose. The heterosexual woman and homosexual man forming a family shifts the nuclear family narrative that many teen relationships adhere to into a new structure that challenges the idea of what a family can be. When Sam volunteers to serve as father to Becca’s child, he becomes equal to his heterosexual counterparts who can father a child, without assimilating into heteronormativity and the nuclear family. While Robinson and Alston note that “There is a fine line, however, between assimilating and being just like everyone else for the purpose of inclusion and being excluded because you are not *really* like everyone else.”⁶⁵ Sam ignores this line completely and operates not based on his sexuality, but on his personal desire for a family. He is not excluded from undertaking traditionally heterosexual ventures like having a family because in the new world there are no dominant heterosexual structures. However, in creating this non-normative family structure, Sam ruptures his relationship with Grizz and pretends to have had sex with Becca when he hadn’t, disrupting his queerness without completely sacrificing it for a family. While he does not assimilate, he does change himself in order to achieve his goal of having a family, leaving him in a liminal state between heteronormativity and a complete non-normative family. Sam creates his own family structure in the absence of a social contract that allows him to fulfill his family goals, regardless of sexual orientation. He is Sam, his own person, with his own identity that cannot be co-opted by any single identity category.

⁶⁴ *The Society*, season 1, episode 6, “Like a F-ing God or Something” written by Christopher Keyser, aired May 10, 2019, on Netflix, 36:20.

⁶⁵ Robinson and Alston, “Lavender Identity,” 43.

adhering to rules that are thousands of years old. Allowing both straight and queer characters to grapple with religious beliefs in similar ways delineates the freedom of all sexualities to operate within the same space and have the same issues, rather than separating the two identities

maybe that is the reason they ended up together, the natural progression of their relationship makes it feel as if this was always meant to happen, sexuality be damned.

In *The Society*, as in most teen dramas, when it comes to the act of intercourse, queer teens are not afforded the same abilities as straight teens. As Sam and Grizz's relationship

arc. As they lie naked in bed together, Sam asks, “did you ever notice me before?” Grizz responds that he had, but he “stayed away” because he “was caught up in being straight.”⁷³ In the previous world, where adults remained in control, Grizz was not allowed to explore his sexuality in the same way that he can in a teen dominated world. While still not out to his classmates, the way Sam is treated indicates that Grizz would have no issues from others when revealing his sexuality to society--the only homophobic act comes from Sam’s brother, and feels pointed specifically at Sam rather than the queer community as a whole. By revealing that queer teen acceptance can and does exist when the dominant structures are eliminated, *The Society* works to place not queerness, but society itself as the issue that stands in the way of equal queer representation. Yet even with this critique, shockingly the representation is still not completely equal (insert rolling eyes emoji here). Sam notes that Grizz was “very convincing” in his straightness, and he responds “Not to my mom. She noticed early. I really loved tap dancing so she signed me up for peewee football.”⁷⁴ Grizz is forced to perform his straightness in a way that many queer people perform their sexuality. Sexuality is coded in certain ways; “queer subjects underscore their queerness” while “normative subjects reinforce their ‘non-queerness.’”⁷⁵ Grizz is no different, saying “I was always really good at football so it was easy just to be like my friends. But now I sorta feel like I’m 12 years old again, starting over. Is that weird? Like I should send a girl with a note that says ‘Dear Sam, do you like Grizz?’ Yes or no?”⁷⁶ However, by vocalizing this performance, Grizz unravels the system through which he was repressed. He can start anew without stigma, like a young child again. By acknowledging structures in

⁷³ “Poison,” 6:40.

⁷⁴ “Poison,” 6:53.

⁷⁵ Richard E. Zeikowitz, “Constrained in Liberation: Performative Queerness in Robert McAlmon's Berlin Stories,” *College Literature* 31, no. 3 (2004), 32.

⁷⁶ “Poison,” 7:20.

dominant society, *The Society* can disavow them and create new structures in which all people, regardless of sexuality, can operate.

Stigma still exists around queer people in New Ham, and bierasure continues to permeate the new society. In true queer romance fashion, as soon as we see a relationship form between Sam and Grizz, it all begins to crumble. When Sam agrees to act as the father of Becca's child, and part of that responsibility is telling other people that he is the biological father. All those around Sam are shocked, including two women who approach Becca and Sam, unsubtly asking "so Sam, you're, uh, you're the dad?"⁷⁷ When they walk away, one says "What? You know he's gay." and her friend responds "Sexuality is fluid."⁷⁸ U.S. society still "tends to divide sexuality into a binary; people are expected to identify with and conform to one of two sexual identities—gay or straight." By both acknowledging problems around queer M!

Pretty Little Liars: The Perfectionists goes full throttle on queer content from the first episode. Dylan Walker, an attractive musical prodigy, is the first character that appears on screen, and is one of the primary queer characters in the show. Immediately he is more than his sexuality, as we see him playing a haunting cover of Lady Gaga's "Poker Face" on the cello. Only twelve minutes into the first episode, a queer kiss occurs. There is no build up, no flirtation and coming out story that dominates the queer relationship. We know the relationship between Dylan and his boyfriend Andrew is serious when Dylan says, "When I came to college, I promised myself that I wasn't going to get serious about anybody. But the day I met you, I knew that wasn't possible."⁸⁴ In these early moments, there is nothing to compare this relationship to because there are no other serious relationships depicted on the show, either heterosexual or queer. By foregrounding queer characters in *The Perfectionists*, the show unravels the idea that "Gays, lesbians, and bisexuals have to come out of the closet, straights don't. Gays, lesbians, and bisexuals have to claim a sexual identity, straights don't."⁸⁵ At BHU, there is no need to come out, to hide sexuality, or to conform to any specific or binary sexual identity. Sexuality is fluid, free, and queer teens can explore the screen in just as many, if not more ways than straight teens can.

The first graphic sexual act comes twenty-nine minutes into the first episode, a raunchy, illicit affair that involves both men cheating on their significant others in a fit of passion. Dylan helps Nolan with a paper, and the sexually fluid Nolan comes onto him almost immediately, saying how he thinks that Dylan moving in with Andrew and becoming exclusive "[s]ounds

⁸⁴ *Pretty Little Liars: The Perfectionists*, Season 1, episode 1, "Pilot," written by I. Marlene King, aired March 20, 2019, on Freeform, 12:14.

⁸⁵ Becker, *Gay TV and Straight America*, 7.

⁸⁹ They even climb on top of one another, how scandalous! These moments are often preceded or followed by a straight couple getting physical, but Dylan can be physical in the same way as his straight counterparts, which is a key aspect of creating equal and authentic representations of queer teens. Becker notes that in the 90s, networks struggled with how to “deal with homosexuality without having to tackle the problem of same-sex intimacy,” and that “chastity was the price gay characters paid for admission to primetime television in the 1990s.”⁹⁰

Programs are now allowing queer characters to *appear*

While I primarily focus on Dylan for this case study, it is important to acknowledge that Dylan is only one of many queer characters present in the show. Alison DiLaurentis, a returning character from the original *PLL* is openly bisexual and married (then later divorced) to a woman,

teen television disappears in favor of allowing characters to experiment without attaching labels. Caitlin's mother is seen cheating on her other mother with a man, and Nolan has the gall to say "Two moms don't always make a right."¹⁰⁶ Only in such a brazenly queer show could that line be uttered. Nolan has sex with whoever he wants, because he can only truly express himself through "passion."¹⁰⁷ The show is so queer that Gutowitz writes "every time there wasn't a queer twist, I was surprised—transitively, the heterosexual plot lines in this show are the real twists."¹⁰⁸ Queer characters can not only exist as equal to their straight counterparts, they at times overtake them, and while I'm not arguing that queer people should overtake heterosexuality, it's certainly a big step towards equality on the teen screen.

Concluding Thoughts

Riverdale creates a world in which a multitude of queer identities can exist, homophobia is present but quickly disavowed as wrong (duh), and Kevin, one of the main queer characters, can still operate within the dominant structures of the dominant straight society. However, queer characters are rarely allowed to be visually sexual, Kevin often finds himself inhabiting the trope of the gay best friend, and queer storylines tend to fade into the background for periods of time. *Pretty Little Liars: The Perfectionists* liberates queer characters from their sexual chains, allowing, and encouraging, visible queer sexuality. The show, like *Riverdale*, makes space for a multitude of queer identities to not only exist, but exist as powerful and attractive. On top of it all, queer characters, like their straight counterparts, can be exceptional, boring, and deviant,

¹⁰⁶ "Pilot," 14:50.

¹⁰⁷ *Pretty Little Liars: The Perfectionists*, season 1, episode 5, "The Patchwork Girl" written by I. Marlene King, aired April 17, 2019, on Freeform, 34:05.

¹⁰⁸ Gutowitz, "Unhinged Queer Camp."

inhabiting a host of identities without confinement to one. However, *PLL: TP* so far has created a sort of “queer utopia” that often does not address the problems that come with queerness, besides brief mentions of homophobia and Dylan’s bully reappearing in the final episode (which still is not a malicious interaction, and positions homophobia as the fault of queers themselves). *The Society* normalizes queer characters in a way that does not feel utopian, but organic. When teens are allowed to rewrite the social contract, queer people, both out and closeted, help run the “government” of New Ham. Furthermore, queer characters are allowed to present as more than their sexuality, and can be football players, superhero lovers, gardeners, and more. However, like in *Riverdale* these characters are not allowed the same graphic sexual interaction as their straight counterparts, and there is not enough representation across the spectrum of queer identities.

Each of the three case studies analyzed in this paper work to elevate queer characters to the same social status as their straight counterparts, but each only tends to do so in a limited way. Because of these limitations, none of the shows manage to position their queer characters as able to act and exist in *all* the same ways as straight characters. In order for queer representation on television to move past tokenism and flat representations of a constantly growing community, the strengths of these individual shows need to work together and create a world in which all the amazing, progressive aspects can exist simultaneously. A teen televisual world in which bisexual, gay, lesbian, transgender, asexual, intersex characters of all different religions, races, ethnicities, classes, family structures, and political orientations can be visibly sexual or romantic,

identity, an effort to grapple with as many queer teen identities and simultaneously allowing them to inhabit the same spaces and perform the same actions as their straight counterparts.

After looking closely into three teen narratives in the contemporary moment, it is clear that significant progress has been made surrounding queer teens on television. Queer characters used to exist solely as deviant threats or ridiculed tropes, often getting killed off and never allowed any form of visible romance. Now, queer characters can be somewhat visibly romantic, have relationships, be stars of the show, and exist as dynamic characters. However, there remains a significant gap in what is portrayed on television. All of the queer teen characters analyzed in this paper who are able to come close to acting in the same way that straight characters are gay white cisgender men. Less than half of the queer characters on broadcast television are people of color, and a fewer percentage of queer characters of color are teens, and an even fewer percentage of those characters are afforded the same abib

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Foreword:

After extensively studying queer representations on teen television, I decided to try my hand at creating a show that solved the problems that I discovered within representation on television. First, I knew that I needed to include a diverse cast of characters, not only in terms of sexuality, but in race, ethnicity, religion, gender, and ability. One of the key failures of teen television's queer characters is the lack of intersectionality; queer characters were already "different" enough, they didn't need to inhabit more than one subordinate identity. Secondly, my queer characters needed to be able to do *everything* that my straight characters could, from love to sex to saving the world to having meaningful dialogue that doesn't surround sexuality. Queer characters need to be main protagonists alongside straight characters. Third, tropes need to either be avoided, or utilized carefully to comment on the very stereotype they embody. Rather than queer characters being relegated to the gay best friend or the depraved bisexual, they must be dynamic, interesting, and three-dimensional. Plus, they need to survive. No more "bury your gays," and if people are going to die, it cannot just be queer characters. All of this is a lot to keep in mind when creating a television show, but in the grand scheme of teen television, and the effect that these shows can and do have on a particularly impressionable age group, it is necessary work. Which is why I couldn't just talk the talk, I needed to walk the walk.