

History, Huh:
A Post-Modern Study of the Consumption of Queer Romance

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Abstract

Queer romance is a subgenre of the romance genre, being differentiated by the genre and sexuality of the main relationship explored within the novel. When starting this thesis, I was especially interested in who is writing and reading queer romance, what they look for in queer romance novels, how they feel during and after the reading process, and how (and with whom) they identify in terms of the characters in these novels. Research showed that of the popular queer romance novels, most are written by queer identifying authors. Representation is something readers keep in mind when choosing a novel, and when it comes to the portrayal of these characters, most often readers are left feeling as if they are experiencing the story and romance through a friend's eyes. Generally, readers will only question representation of queer identities if they feel something is wrong with the representations.

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Index

Chapter 1: Introduction.....	4
Background: Romance Novels.....	4
Purpose.....	7
Significance.....	8
Chosen Novels and Their Authors	12
Chapter 2: Literature Review.....	16
Reading the Romance	16
Sub-Genres and Age Ranges	20
Queer Romance.....	23
Tropes and Stereotypes.....	26
Community.....	29
Chapter 3: Theory	33
Queer Theory.....	33
The Gaze	35
Chapter 4: Method.....	44
Methodological Considerations and Positionality	45
Methods of Data Collection.....	46
Queer Romance Novels & Date Collection	50
Analysis of Reviews	56
Chapter 5: Data Description and Analysis.....	58
Description of Book Findings	58
Analysis of Book Findings.....	75
Readers' Reviews	86
Chapter 6: Conclusion.....	99
Contributions.....	103
Limitations.....	103
Future Research	105
References.....	107
Appendix A: Figures	114

Chapter 1: Introduction

“The thing is, I don’t read romance novels for the realism. I read them because they make me feel seen and heard... They let me explore my desires – both the ones I’m proud of and the ones I clear from my search history – and they’ve taught me who I am.” – Annie Crown, *Night Shift* (2023)

Background: Romance Novels

The Romance Writers of America, a non-profit writers association founded in 1980, defines romance novels as being comprised of two elements: a central love story and a happily ever after (HEA) ending (n.d.). While romance novels can be written in any tone, style, era, and comprise different sub-genres, these two elements must be present for something to be considered a “true” romance novel. Because of these two elements, romance novels are often viewed by the romance reading community as novels that provide comfort, as readers receive a generic guarantee of a consistent (happy) ending.

The romance genre can be found in different forms of media, such as television, movies, and video games. However, for this thesis, I focused on the literary form of romance: romance novels. This was because of my particular interest in the consumption of romance novels, specifically queer romance novels, due to my own consumption habits. Here, I defined Queer as a rejection of the binaristic definitions of gender and sexuality that constructs heteronormative descriptions of male/female, masculine/feminine, heterosexual/homosexual. Queerness in itself is diverse and can be experienced by individuals of various differing backgrounds in many different ways.

Historically, romance novels have not been considered “true literature,” or of significance—despite being extremely popular (Philips, 2020). Romances may be called many different things, such as “chick lit,” “bodice-rippers,” or even the more misogynistic “mommy-porn.” Dorni (2022), for example, claims that the words “romance novel” come with a stigma, bringing up the image of paperback novels with shirtless men and suggestive titles. These novels tend to be represented as a something middle-aged housewives read to escape from passionless marriages. This view is rooted in historical stereotypes about both the genre and the primary gender (female) of its writers and readers, a negative view fuelled by sexism and misogyny.

According to some recent sources, the movement towards removing the stigma from romance novel consumption has been led by online communities such as TikTok (dorni, 2022; Nankervis, 2022). “Booktok,” the TikTok book community, as well as “Bookstagram,” the Instagram book community, have embraced romance novels; there are even members of the community who refuse to read any genre other than romance. These readers often read only romance because it is a genre that suits them, because they find romance narratives, tropes, and arcs to be captivating and familiar in the sense that romance novels follow a similar narrative arc (in turn providing them a sense of certainty and security), they need something light to read, they do not want to follow a series, and because there is a sense of community built around reading romance novels (Jdiazsweetsavageflame, 2023; Wajid, 2020). Additionally, from an accessibility standpoint as a disabled reader, I believed that it is possible that readers choose to read romance as it allows them to take breaks while reading without worrying about missing

or skipping anything important to the plot; reading romance with a short attention span is easy, due to the genre's use of tropes.

A trope is defined as a commonly used theme or device (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Within literature, and especially in genre fiction like romance novels, tropes are often times used not only when writing, but also when selecting a novel to read. Readers are familiar with tropes; they bring a sense of familiarity while also providing a tool for describing a book-to-book readers (Novelize, n.d.). One example of tropes in romance novels is that of the HEA, and another is that of the grumpy x sunshine, which can be found when one character is described as being cold or not as open as everyone else, while the other character is described as being happy all the time.

In my view, the romance genre has often acted as an outlet for female empowerment; the novels allow women to take control of the narrative as both writers and protagonists. Because of this, I consider the destigmatization of romance novels a feminist act. However, the view that all romance novels are for and by women is incorrect. This can be seen through the numerous breakthroughs of male-identified or nonbinary¹ authors such as F.T. Lukens, John Green, T.J. Klune, and Alexis Hall, within the romance realm. Additionally, it can be seen through the presence of queer and male readers within online communities, the existence of queer book clubs (Martin & Miller, 2022), and queer scholarly writing about romance novels (Crisp, 2009; Gallant, 2022; Spencer 2022).

¹ Identifying as a gender outside the binary (male or female).

Due to the existence of male-identified and nonbinary romance authors, as well as the developing of popularity queer romance novels (Larson & Carter, 2024), I chose to focus this thesis on queer romance specifically, instead of focusing on romance novels in general. Queer romance is a subgenre that is differentiated by the gender and / or sexuality of the main characters / relationship explored within the novel. In queer romance, instead of focusing on one man and one woman, novels focus on a queer pairing. This means that any relationship composed of at least one queer individual counts as a queer romance; this is true even in cases where one person in the main pairing isn't queer identifying. Examples of this could be a romance between a straight, cisgender man and a transwoman, a romance between a bisexual and a straight individual, a romance between two women, or two men. For my purposes, what makes the novel queer is simply that at least one of the main romantic characters identifies as queer.

Purpose

As a scholar in the field of Women & Gender Studies, it is important that I acknowledge my positionality within this research; I am a white, disabled, queer individual, queer romance reader and my positionality impacted my analysis. The goal of this thesis was to explore the impact of identity on the consumption of queer romance novels. I was especially interested in who is writing and reading queer romance, what they look for in queer romance novels, how they feel during and after the reading process, and how (and with whom) they identify in terms of the characters in these novels. I was also interested in analysing some of the community-decided top queer romance novels, through my own reading, and determined if there were any overlapping

themes within this group of queer romance novels, their representation of queer characters and relationships, and if certain identities were more well represented than others.

Significance

As a queer reader reading queer romance, I often feel like I am being objectified in romance novels, as if my identity only exists in characters facing hate crimes and stigma. Otherwise, I am left feeling completely unseen and unrepresented, even when there are characters who share my sexual and gender identity. This feeling is mentioned by other queer romance readers, with some feeling like queer stories do not reflect them, but instead represent what queer individuals are imagined to be by straight people (Foster, 2022). Some readers even go as far as to criticize some M/M² romance novels for being akin to the argument that some lesbian pornography is actually made for (or at least appropriated by) straight men (Iannacci, 2011). While this sentiment is not held by the queer reading community as a whole—there is no singular queer community with shared sentiments, but, rather, multiple queer communities—it is one I found interesting to consider when researching who reads queer romance and why.

It is important to remember that while most romance novels have been written about and by female identified individuals, most of these have been to white women. There are two primary reasons of this. First, the publishing industry prioritizes white individuals when choosing which authors get published, and whose identities are represented (Nankervis, 2022, p. 351). Some authors have stated previously that they

² With M/M standing for males loving men.

have been told that characters of color (and any other marginalized identities) will have little or only a narrow appeal, and are thus not deserving of attention (Beckett, 2019, p. 1). Additionally, there have been cases where authors from marginalized communities experienced a harder time with publishing companies, such as being censored when speaking up about topics such as racism (Akana, 2023). Second, when diverse authors get published, their novels are often shelved in separate sections of bookstores and online book selling platforms, such as “Black Author” sections, instead of with the other (“mainstream”) romance novels (Parnell, 2022). This can lead to readers not being able to find the novels as easily when they are searching through the romance section, or not recognizing these books as romance novels at all (Beckett, 2019, p. 10).

While conducting in my literature review (below), I came across academic work on romance novels dating back to the 1980s, such as Janice Radway’s *Reading the Romance*, but very little of that work addressed queer romance. This relative lack made me wonder if researchers are still afraid of the stigma attached to romance genres, even as many communities seem to be embracing them (certainly they are buying them). I believe that academics could learn a lot from readers of queer romance, which is why I embarked on this project. Researching queer literature allows queer voices to take centre stage. In the absence of this research, queer stories, lessons, and accomplishments are rendered nonexistent by a cloak of invisibility. While there are whole fields that were developed to give queer folks a voice (such as queer theory, sexuality studies, and gender studies), there remain many areas that even these areas of academic study have avoided. I believe that there is a lack of research around why

queer romance is read, both by queer and non-queer readers, which is why I embarked on this project.

While romance continues to be the highest earning genre of fiction (Curcic, 2022), it also continues to be described through a variety of negative discourses. Specifically, discourses that rank particular forms of literature according to perception of them as being of high culture and importance, or of low culture and of little importance. The stigmatizing and belittling of genre fiction, such as romance and its readers, is evidence of where romance sits in this ranking system. In this discursive structure, romance continues to be imagined as a sort of porn for stay-at-home moms. While there is nothing wrong with romance novels featuring explicit sex or being written for stay-at-home moms, the idea of romance novels not being “real” literature continues through the shaming and degrading of romance novels by those who get to have their voices most heard in academia (white, cisgender, heterosexual, men) (Harmsworth, 2022; rookwood, 2021; woltal, 2022). These views continue to spread despite the popularity of genre fiction, and specifically romance (Curcic, 2022). This can be seen in which novels are considered classics (most often books written by men); no romance novels (according to Goodreads tags) are found on Merrill’s list of 20 “Indispensable High School Reads” (2017), only 3.57% of Smith’s list of “Books Every English Major Should Read” are romance (2015), and only 17% are romance in McKenna’s list of “100 Must-Read Classics” (2022). This lack of championing for romance novels can additionally be seen through the top-rated books under Goodreads Literature and Classics tags, where 16% of the top 50 books tagged as Literature were tagged as a romance, and 24% of the top 50 books tagged “Classics” were also tagged as a romance.

Within online romance reading communities, I have noticed a movement to center more diverse voices, whether it be novels by diverse writers, or by centering characters of all identities. This movement towards removing the stigma around romance novels and centering more diverse voices is often attributed to social media such as Instagram and TikTok (dorni, 2022), where readers within the community aim to boost the voices of individuals who are not straight, cisgender, and white. This is especially done by minority identifying creators, who call attention to and make space for diverse forms of representation within the genre and community at large. Examples of this can be seen with specialty accounts on Bookstagram, such as [eloise bradbooks](#) and [readwithrhys](#) who focus on novels that include queer characters, as well as [raethereviewer](#) and [book_girl_magic](#), who focus on novels that center racialized characters.

One sub-genre that has especially experienced a boost in visibility on social media and in bookstores is queer romance. I know, personally, that with more novels representing queer individuals, more readers feel represented. However, some queer individuals question if (this) representation is always a good thing, arguing that there are still folks who are not represented or are misrepresented. Queer men have stated that the novels written by cis and / or straight women often represent an idealized version of queer men that they do not feel represented by (Foster, 2022). One participant in a project by Foster even stated that “as a queer, trans reader, I looked forward to seeing myself in their pages. But I was surprised to find that some LGBT-focused stories were reflecting not me, but a straight person’s imagination of me”; other participants in the

study agreed (para. 3). This in-turn supports the claim that queer readers do not always feel represented by queer representation.

By talking to readers of queer romance, we can gain an understanding of who is consuming this genre, why they are consuming it, and how they understand / make sense of what they are consuming. In turn, this allows for the verification of stereotype replication, which can provide a sense of confidence in queer romance for the diverse queer identifying individuals reading the novels. Additionally, this research can serve to further amplify the voices being represented, as well as removing stigma associated with romance novels, and queer romance more specifically.

Chosen Novels and Their Authors

In this section I will offer brief descriptions of the five novels I chose as my data set. The process of choosing these novels will be touched on later during the methods sections.

Red, White, & Royal Blue

Red, White, & Royal Blue is written by Casey McQuiston (they/them), a queer and nonbinary, white-passing American author. At the start of the novel, both Alex, the First Son of the United States, and Henry, a British Prince, have previously met and do not like each other. The two are instructed to at least pretend to be friends in public by their publicity managers and are forced to go to each other's social engagements. After seeing each other from different views, the two transition from enemies to friends, and then to a hidden romantic partnership. Someone leaks their private emails to the public and the media start to piece together their relationship. In the end, both characters

convince their families and the world that there is a place for queer identifying people within the political and royal community.

Cemetery Boys

Cemetery Boys is written by Aiden Thomas (he/they), a transgender Latino-American author. The novel starts with an exploration of Yadiel's family culture, which places importance on taking care of the spirits of the dead. Yadiel accidentally channels Julian's spirit while trying to prove himself as a man to his family. It is through trying to solve the mystery of Julian's murder that, slowly but surely, the two learn to respect each other, and become friends, and eventually, fall in love. In a search for Julian's body to find out how he died, the pair find out that not only were a bunch of other people missing, but that all the bodies were used as sacrifices by Yadiel's uncle. With the help of a little magic, and by sacrificing his uncle's spirit, Yadiel brings back those who were sacrificed, making them human again, and proving himself to his family.

Delilah Green Doesn't Care

Delilah Green Doesn't Care is written by Ashley Herring Blake (she/her), a bisexual, white-presenting³ American author. Delilah spends her days doing photography (her dream job), and waitressing to make ends meet, and her nights at bars trying to find someone to take home. The novel itself starts with Delilah getting a message that her stepsister (to whom she doesn't talk) wants to hire her as a photographer for her wedding; the money is too much for Delilah to turn down,

³ With the term being used to describe authors who do not publish details pertaining to their race, but photos of the author suggest being white.

regardless of how much she dislikes her stepfamily. It is through this wedding that Delilah meets her stepsister's two best friends, one of whom, Claire, she starts an affair with. Throughout all the wedding events Delilah and Claire both must attend, the two become close. The novel ends with the discovery that the original problem that caused both groups to dislike each other was a misunderstanding; they become a community, and Delilah starts a monogamous relationship with Claire.

A Lady's Guide to Celestial Mechanics

A Lady's Guide to Celestial Mechanics is written by Olivia Waite (she/her), a queer, white-presenting American author. This is a historical novel, that takes place in Britain. Having lost her father, Lucy has no one to lean on, and no one to support her scientific work. Catherine is looking for someone to translate great scientific work within her late-husbands and Lucy's field, and it is through this that the two meet and begin living together for convenience (both in Catherine having a bigger library and being geographically closer to the scientific community). Eventually, through living in close contact, the two begin having a hidden affair; the two become close, spending most of their time together. It is the negative reaction to the proposal of a woman doing science, let alone scientific translation, that leads to the creation of Lucy and Catherine's first published works. When Lucy's identity as a woman comes to light, the general reaction by those in the scientific field is that of mockery. Proving her knowledge, and her worth as a member of the science community, Lucy and Catherine set out on their new mission, to create a science group of their own, this time one that prioritizes the work of women.

A Lady for a Duke

A Lady for a Duke was written by Alexis Hall (she/he/they), a white-presenting British author. This novel is a historical novel, set in Britain. Viola (a veteran and trans woman) is given the chance of starting over due to a misunderstanding that leads to the public believing her male identity is dead. Seeing this as her one shot to live true to herself, Viola emerges from battle, a woman with no past and very few connections. Viola finds out that due to her public death, Justin (her best friend) has isolated himself, and it is due to her worry that the two begin talking, with Justin believing Viola is a ghost. The two become confidantes, but the truth of Viola's identity gets revealed to Justin. First blinded by rage of deceit, Justin begins to see things from Viola's perspective and eventually, the two become friends, and then romantic partners. They eventually marry, and having both always wanted a family, take to adopting children who are orphaned and giving them better lives.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

“If I know what love is, it is because of you.” – Hermann Hesse, *Narcissus and Goldmund*, 1993

Reading the Romance

According to Philips (2020), historically, romance novels have not been viewed as a form of true literature or of academic significance because the novels are written by women for women. Among other things, this has led to women’s literacy work often being limited to the footnotes of the study of literature. While, as Nankervis (2022) notes, novels have been written for and by women of all identities, the romance novels that have historically been published most often are those written by and for white, middle-class, cisgender, heterosexual women.⁴ For many decades, publishers confined Black romance authors to “all-Black” lines, such as Harlequin’s now dead *Kimani* line. According to Beckett (2019), some booksellers continue to shelve Black romances separately from white romances. Beckett (2019) believes that this is the result of the belief, held by many folks in the publishing industry, that putting Black couples on their covers could hurt sales, and that only Black-identifying individuals would want to read novels with Black protagonists. The long-term impact of this is a lack of opportunities and attention given to Black writers, and a resulting lack of representation within romance novels (Beckett, 2019).

⁴ While I will continue using the term women, it is important to remember who is receiving most of the representation and publishing deals (white, middle-class, cisgender, heterosexual women).

There is a strong association of the romance genre with women readers, as well as the assumption that romance, as a cultural form, is reflective of feminine pleasures (and fantasies). These novels offer an articulation about what it means to be a woman and are seen to centre the desires and contradictions of the feminine (Linzey & Carr, 2018). By dismissing romance novels, critics (including academics) also dismiss the lives of millions of women who read and enjoy them and ignore a possible point of entry for the understanding of different aspects of the feminine psyche. The disparagement of romance novels, specifically due to their association with women, has been described as misogynistic by multiple romance readers and writers, such as Sarah MacLean, a best-selling romance author (in Linzey & Carr, 2018).

According to the Romance Writers of America, one of the main defining elements of the romance novel is the hero. Romance stories often revolve around the heroine falling in love with the hero. In a typical heterosexual romance novel, the hero and heroine are expected to behave and interact with each other according to traditional gender roles (Thobaiti, 2019). Because of this, according to Thobaiti (2019), there is an unequal distribution of power between the hero and the heroine in the romance genre. Within the romance novel, the heroine's primary goal is gaining the hero's heart in order to receive his love, and this in turn is how her power is measured. Within this heteronormative view of romance, the romance novel is problematic because it puts the female character into a submissive position in relation to the male character, additionally representing a more toxic view of masculinity where women are expected to submit to men (Thobaiti, 2019).

The covers of novels from brands such as Harlequin feature shirtless men on the cover, as well as suggestive titles, lead to the biased belief that romance novels are only cheap paperback novels, a belief of which is further promoted due to misogyny. Roach (2010) argues that romance novels help women-identified readers deal with a paradoxical relationship towards men within a culture still marked by patriarchy and threats of violence (p. 2). According to the author, this is because romance novels act as a guiding text on how women and men should relate (p. 1).

The production of the romantic hero does not stop at the level of novel publication, but continues to appear, in various and complicated ways, in readers' (both fans and anti-fans, with the position not being fixed) practices online. Because readers don't passively consume romance novels, fictional characters can never be seen as finished products, and the romance genre cannot be adequately understood without considering paratexts⁵ created by readers (Thobaiti, 2019). Paratexts are especially important in understanding the views of anti-fans whose knowledge of the text often comes from fan reviews and discussions, often on social media such as Twitter (now X) Tumblr, TikTok, and Instagram, and other people's discussions, instead of doing a close reading of the source text themselves (Thobaiti, 2019). In "Afterlife of the Romance Hero: Readers' Reproduction of Romance," Thobaiti finds that an investigation of anti-fans' engagement with different issues in the source text can help us understand how the romance hero is perceived and defined by sources other than the source text, which allows for a greater understanding of the consumption of characters (p. 14).

⁵ Material associated with (but separate from) the main body of a book, and typically produced by someone other than the original author of the book(s), such as fan fiction.

In “Confluent Love and the Evolution of Ideal Intimacy: Romance Reading in 1980 and 2016,” Fekete (2022) argues that the reading of romance novels provides an escape and serves as a part of the cultural construction of intimacy, with the genre offering representations of what it considers to be good intimacy. Fekete found through surveys and interviews that views of intimacy have changed over time, with readers in 1980 wanting to read about emotional connection between romantic partners, and readers in 2016 wanting to read about both sex and emotional connection. However, one thing that did not change was that participants in both time periods were searching for stories where men went from being unemotional “alpha males” to caring lovers (p.4).

This shows that the desire for a love interest who can be caring towards their partner is something that is shared among generations of readers. The change in views of intimacy can be seen in the fact that heroines in newer romance novels have more sexual agency and gender equality, which in turn leads to more contemporary romance novels featuring more sexually explicit content (p.4). In turn, the concerns around explicitly sexual material being mitigated across a variety of mediums has led to the creation of novels that prioritize female pleasure; a departure from what was prioritized before, which was cis het representation, and the prioritization of the man.

Fekete (2022) explains that this change around the representation being prioritized can be explained by the change in who is reading and writing romance novels, with more opportunities for writers to publish their works (both independently, and through publishing companies) and romance novels now being more easily attainable for readers thanks to book format availability (physical books, e-reading devices, and audiobooks) (p.13). These books are now easier to obtain and easier to advertise due to social media

(Alarcon, 2023; Diaz, 2023). Additionally, it is worth pointing out that the age of those reading romance has changed as well, and that this could also impact the change of views of intimacy. In the past romance novels were mostly read by readers ages 35 to 54, and now are being read most by readers ages 18 to 34 (Doherty, 2023).

Romance novels tend to feature the same (or similar) story arcs due to their association with genre fiction. According to Roach (2010), in addition to acting as a form of escapism and establishing intimacy norms, romance novels serve another role. By acting as a guiding text about how women and men should relate, romance novels engage readers in a reparation fantasy of healing regarding male-female relations (n.p). It is by reading that the reader can maintain a fantasy that patriarchy ends (yet continues) and that they get a good man to love.

It is important to note that not all romance novels feature a heterosexual pairing. While queer romance novels serve many of the same goals (such as escapism, establishing intimacy norms), they focus instead on queer characters and pairings. These stories appear on bookshelves at a lesser rate than those focusing on straight couples, though the themes may be identical, and the novels can be written and read by the same individuals.

Sub-Genres and Age Ranges

Tobin-McClain (2000) argues that romance novels with alternate realities serve two primary functions for readers. First, they transport the reader either into an alternate, idealized world or a dystopian world, different than our own. This allows the reader to find healing in the alternate world, or the experience in the book echoes the reader's lived experiences (it is relatable, or easy to connect to). Examples of fantasies that readers can

explore in these idealized worlds include the “save me from the world of work” fantasy⁶ and the rebel fantasy⁷ (p. 302). Additionally, stories that take place in an idealized world allow readers to explore elements of contemporary gender identity, sexuality, and relationship dynamics that may not be possible to explore in stories set in the “real” world (p. 300).

Some romances sub-genres, such as paranormal romances, do not eliminate confusing or disturbing aspects of women’s real lives. Instead, they not only incorporate such elements but may encourage psychological work around them. In “Paranormal Romance: Secrets of the Female Fantastic,” Tobin-McClain (2000) states that paranormal romances usually start in an area called the fantastic but evolve into the marvelous, a space where the supernatural event is accepted as supernatural rather than explained away. In turn, they argue, these books allow for the exploration of the real fears and secret desires of women represented within the novel.

Meanwhile, within fantasy one of the key elements is the celebration of tolerance and diversity. In these novels, according to Snead (2014), sexist, racist, and homophobic cultures (and individuals) tend to be represented as ignorant, and by the end of the novel (or series) come to see the error of their way or face consequences. These novels not only explore the development of identity, social roles, and relationships, but often celebrate the creation of tight-knit relationships, which can also be seen as being found family. Often, these families tend to centre the main character, and in romantic fantasies,

⁶ Which can be seen in a multitude of ways, including falling in love with a wealthy man and not having to work again.

⁷ Which can be seen through the exploration of things readers wish they could do, but are too scared to or are unable to accomplish (physically, financially, emotionally, mentally)

the main pairing. In science-fiction romance, characters exist within a universe that can include time-traveling, dystopian (or post-apocalyptic) futures, or even take place in space. These novels tend to feature some type of science and explore and deconstruct love and romance. Campbell (2017) argues that because of this exploration and deconstruction, queer romance can often be placed within the genre and in these alternate universes and realities.

The main characters in the YA age range of fantasy novels tend to be teenagers with troubled pasts, or who are in the midst of some form of transition (Snead, 2014). Within these novels, Snead (2014) argues, characters who may feel lost get to grow to find friendship, community, and love, and occasionally end up overthrowing the current social order to create a better, more accepting one. The most defining element in the YA age range category of romance is that the main characters are under the age of majority. These novels, as the characters are minors, are written primarily for tweens and teenagers—although adults read YA romance as well. Due to the characters being within their developmental years, these books often explore topics such as love and identity (Crisp, 2009). YA romance novels, according to Crisp (2009), tend to have a notable lack of explicit coverage of things such as sex acts and drug usage, which are things can be found in the non-YA queer romance. In the end, for many readers YA romance novels serve as a space to explore and promote the acceptance of differing identities, such as queerness.

It is within sub-genres that queer romance flourishes, with the use of alternate universes and fantasies fuelling the plot of many stories. In some universes, homophobia may not exist, or the persecution of a supernatural character can serve as a metaphor for

homophobia. The transformation into a supernatural creature or the exploration of a fantasy world can be used to stimulate the process of coming out or transitioning. Within the more fantastical genres, the concepts of “forbidden love” are explored, and works as a symbol for societal views placed on queer relationships. Additionally, YA queer romance may introduce to individuals who may not have knowledge of queer topics or identities or create possibilities for self-recognition and acceptance for young queer folks living in relative isolation.

Queer Romance

Reading serves as an opportunity to reflect on social norms and values as aspects of personal world views. According to Span (2022), romance often “features a ‘capacity for eliciting readers’ identification” as well as centering the hero(ine)’s “central conflict to possibly mirror [the reader’s] own” (n.p). Romance novels continue to be bestsellers due to their emotionally gratifying feel-good factor gained through wish fulfillment fantasy. In turn, reading may serve as an act of self-care for readers.

Fekete (2022) states that romance novels act to (temporarily) fill emotional voids that an individual may have. The stories contain emotionality gratifying narratives of intimacy and provide an escape from the stress of daily life. This escape leads to a feeling of ease, as romance novels have a strong tendency to follow the same arc, where the lovers meet, there is a conflict, but they get their happily ever after in the end (Fekete, 2022). That sort of predictability, especially for those who may not have predictability in their daily lives, can aid in managing stress.

For queer readers, romance novels may serve as a form of escape from stereotypes and hatred they face due to their identities. According to Harris (2022), queer

romance novels promise two things: that there will be queer main characters and that the main pair will have a happy ending. Because of this, queer readers can be transported to a world where happy endings and their queer identity can co-exist, and where (found) families support them. Here, they can be stress-free and read about others who identify similarly to them and can feel a sense of community that they may not have in real life. As stated by Nankervis (2022) in their work, "Diversity in Romance Novels: Race, Sexuality, Neurodivergence, Disability, and Fat Representation," queer romance allows queer readers the chance to experience their happily ever after.

In "Gender Role Models in Fictional Novels for Emerging Adult Lesbians," Cook, Rostosky, and Riggle (2013) have argued that emerging adulthood is a development time frame that is characterized by identity exploration (p. 150). For queer identifying people who do not have role models readily available around them, the internet and books are influential in identity formation (p. 152). According to Blackburn, Clark, and Nemeth (2015), the internet and books influence queer identity formation because queer literature offers multiple and competing ideologies around sexuality and gender through conceptions of identities and disruptions of norms, which is especially important for queer individuals (p. 31). Reading queer novels gives young, queer people the opportunity to learn about gender and sexual identity. Makhijani (2021) further places a strong emphasis on the importance of queer romance, stating that novels that validate queer identities are especially important for teenagers who may live in small towns with no exposure to the queer community around them (p. 1). From a personal perspective, as a queer individual who grew up in a small town, I often felt isolated, and relied heavily on queer content to feel less lonely.

It is not only queer individuals who read queer romance. It is recognized now that individuals who do not identify as queer are also reading these romance novels (Harris, 2022). In “What Women Want: Gay Male Romance Novels,” Iannacci (2011) states:

What’s most surprising [about the popularity of queer romance novels] ... are the types of readers the books have hooked: Straight, married women...That may be because the authors, such as Iowa’s Heidi Cullinan, a 37-year-old suburban mother of two, are frequently heterosexual females, too (p. 1).

This is further supported by Gallant (2022), who found that 87 % of M/M romance readers are female (p. 1). According to an earlier study by Wood (2006), some queer romance genres, such as boys-love manga and slash fan fiction, are created by and for women and girls (p. 395; Jenkins, 1992). Additionally, it is worth noting that there is literature going back to the 1980s on the existence of slash-fic⁸ in fandoms, and the appeal of M/M romance to women writers and readers (where both were almost exclusively straight-cis identified women), which highlights that M/M fiction for straight women is not a new.

While some people have argued that the existence of M/M romance novels written by women is an example of appropriation, others disagree (for example, Foster, 2022). Lennox, an M/M author and a straight woman, states that “M/M fiction allows her to read about the ‘male body parts’ that interest her, though she is quick to point out that this experience is more nuanced than the straight male’s propensity to watch lesbian porn”

⁸ Fan-made fiction centering characters of the same sex in romantic relationships, despite the characters being straight in the original texts / cannon.

(in Gallant, 2022, p. 3). This point is further supported by Beecroft, another M/M author and straight woman, who states: “I have to disagree with that completely – what we do is not porn, False Colors [Beecroft’s second novel] has two or three sex scenes in it 333 pages of plot and three pages are sex. Are people ignoring the other 300 pages?” (in Iannacci, 2011, p. 3).

Queer romances have increased within the book market, with the sales of queer romance (both young adult and adult) doubling between 2020 and 2021 (Doherty, 2023). However, queer romance only accounts for three percent of the romance market (Doherty, 2023). Do queer romance novels invite readers to look at the queer couple as a sort of object or do they encourage readers to look with the queer couple from their perspective? This can only be seen through the exploration of how the readers consume these novels, and how they feel after reading queer romance.

Tropes and Stereotypes

Within the online reading community, one way to find suggestions for books one may want to read is through tropes. It is through tropes that books can be marketed to the right group, as well as sorted on shelves. Defined as a “a common or overused theme” (Merriam-Webster, n.d., n.p.), tropes exist in all forms of stories, and all mediums of storytelling. Tropes play a key role within works genre fiction, especially that of romance, and fans often dislike books that reject tropes they believe to be important (such HEA) or works that may suggest that the author was using the genre opportunistically without being knowledgeable about it. Websites like “TV Tropes” offer information about every trope featured in a TV show, movie, or book, making it even

easier for someone to find content based on those tropes. Examples of tropes include “the good guys win in the end,” and “the damsel in distress.”

Stereotypes are often oversimplified opinions or images (Beeghly, 2015). Due to this, stereotypes can become a form of trope, if used enough. Because they are rooted in oversimplifications, stereotypes can lead to tropes that propel negative views or opinions about who the people whose identities / lives they are oversimplifying, and that may be believed by those who consume the stereotypes (Kneeskern & Reeder, 2020; Koenig & Eagly, 2014). This is why it is important to amplify the voices of queer authors who avoid reproducing these negative representations and the harms they may cause, and who instead recenter tropes so as that demonstrate that long held stereotypes about queer individuals are wrong.

In the case of queer characters, there are multiple types of stereotypes, some of which even contradict each other. Gay (male) characters are often depicted as either being homophobic (and closeted), the gay best friend, or as very feminine (Colussi, 2022). Meanwhile, lesbians may be depicted as being a lesbian in a bid for male attention, always wanting kids, or appearing masculine (Colussi, 2022). Additionally, asexual and aromantic characters tend to be stereotyped as being rigid, or loveless (Carter, 2020). Transgender characters are often depicted as being evil or immoral, and represented as sex workers, murderers, or predators (Medina, 2021).

Spencer’s (2022) research on bisexual characters within YA novels found that even when bisexual characters were included, that they would uphold damaging stereotypes. Bisexual characters tend to be portrayed as promiscuous, murderous, or

as faking their bisexuality, with the bi men only dating men, and the bi women also only dating men (Medina, 2021). Additionally, bisexual characters are often represented as not specifying their sexuality (it is implied but not confirmed) but rather by displaying interest in characters of multiple genders or by being placed in a love triangle with a male character and a female character (Spencer, 2022). In the end, these characters often end up having to deal with mislabelling from other characters, who insist they are either gay or straight, due to “monosexism underpinning the common perception that homosexual and heterosexual are the only legitimate sexualities” (Spencer, 2022, p.3).

When consuming novels with queer characters, there are multiple stereotypes that lead to the negative portrayal of both the queer characters and the queer community. When the queer character is forced to confirm their queer identity to the public through methods such as blackmail, threats, or outing⁹ (which in turn makes their identity seem hidden and secretive), have a love that ends in death, or being represented as a predator, it can lead to the presenting of queer characters as villains (Colussi, 2022; Medina, 2021; Wiki Contributors, n.d.). An exploration into the stereotypes such as the framing of queer folks as villains can be found in “Queer Representation in the Horror Genre” by Lambert (2023).

Negative tropes and stereotypes continue to repeat themselves in different novels, and impact both readers and communities. Research has shown that literature has an influence on the belief and attitudes of readers of all ages (Kneeskern & Reeder, 2022). This means that readers, when shown constant negative stereotypes and tropes

⁹ Outing is defined as the practice of revealing someone’s sexual or gender identity without their consent.

of queer characters, may grow to internalize them (Franiuk & Scheer, 2013; Kokesh & Sternadori, 2015). This can also be true of queer readers, who can internalize homophobic and transphobic stereotypes, leading to a lower self-confidence (Cook, Rostosky & Riggle, 2013). One way the impact of these stereotypes and tropes can be combatted is through community, which aids in countering negative stereotypes with positive ones (Cook, Rostosky & Rigger, 2013). It is through seeing queer representation in all lights (not just negative) that different queer futures and possibilities become internalized, instead of simply internalizing negative stereotypes (Cook, Rostosky & Rigger, 2013).

Community

It is through online reading communities (such as Bookstagram and Booktok) that readers can find a space to interact and discuss romance novels with fellow readers and authors, as well as a community where they can argue about a character's choices and views with other readers. Online reader communities allow for the exploration of lessons that emerge for readers of romance novels, as well as the continuation of those stories. Online community spaces can also aid in the formation of friendships that revolve around reading romance, as well as other genres (Roach, 2010). This was seen to especially develop within the COVID-19 Pandemic, where social media such as TikTok and Instagram became a safe place to socialize while isolating (Doherty, 2023).

Goodreads is an online social media platform centred around the act of reading. On the site, you can create virtual bookshelves, allowing readers to track books that they want to read, books they have read, new releases, and to see what others are

reading. The site allows readers to leave reviews, and tag novels with what they feel to be appropriate tags, such as Romance, 2SLGBTQ+, Queer Lit, Lesbian Romance, M / M Romance, Bisexual Romance, and Transgender Romance. It is because of the usage of fan-assigned tags for books that I used Goodreads as a source for tracking book popularity among queer romance novels for this thesis. When using Goodreads, a new account was made in order to avoid influence from previous usage of Goodreads when collecting data.

It is worth noting that while Goodreads has its benefits, it also has flaws, with the major one being that people can 1-star bomb books¹⁰ (Howard, 2024). It is my observation that this tends to occur to minority authors, which results in attention being returned to white authors. This is why Bookstagram and Booktok are just as important as social spheres in the reading community as Goodreads, as they allow for multiple voices to be heard, and lessen the likelihood of review bombing occurring. This is because most reviews on Bookstagram and Booktok require a photo, video, or audio from the reviewer in order to gain views, which helps counter one person spamming the book with negative (or positive) reviews.

Bookstagram is what the reading community on Instagram calls itself. Here, users can post pictures of anything from the book they are currently reading, a thematic collection of books (such as queer romance, or books featuring the “enemies to lovers”

¹⁰ To 1-star review bomb is to spam negative reviews of a specific book with multiple accounts (some even creating accounts just for the review bomb) to ensure that the novel receives a bad star rating (2 stars or less).

trope), their bookshelves and reviews, as well as memes¹¹ related to different books (Dezuanni, et al., 2022). Due to the ability to comment and private message, Bookstagram users can communicate among themselves, exchanging book opinions and recommendations, and even becoming friends IRL (in real life / offline).

Booktok is the TikTok version of Bookstagram. The two are different in their capacities around posting, with TikTok prioritizing videos with music, and Instagram prioritizing photos. This in turn aids in the creation of social media content that is like YouTube or television. The content generated from these platforms (though more influentially, Booktok) affects the popularity of books, which also then impacts how many copies of the books are sold (Zara, 2022). Due to this, it is often easy to find tables or shelves at bookstores labeled “Booktok,” which helps consumers find books that are highly recommended by readers on the platform. While the posting formats can differ between the two, and Booktok is more popular, both platforms foster communication between readers, as well as the distribution of information around novels. This leads to novels seeming more interesting and being advertised to larger groups through citations from the novel, or tropes being highlighted for fellow readers. Having more information about novel choices in turn allows readers to find novels they may not have picked up just from what information they received through the title, cover, and book description on the back of the book. The social sphere online aids in connecting fans to each other, regardless of geographical location (Deller & Smith, 2013), and acts as a space for these communities of readers to interact with others who

¹¹ Defined for the purpose of this paper as an element of a culture (or system of behavior) passed from one individual to another by imitation or other nongenetic means, in this case the meme is a visual or auditorial element.

have a passion for the genre (Span, 2022). One group especially impacted by online fandom are 2SLGBTQ+ readers, with findings showing that the online community allows youth opportunities to contest 2SLGBTQ+ mass media depictions and problematic representations (McInroy, Zapcic & Beer, 2022). From personal experience, it is this space that aids in fellow fans communicating, becoming friends, and even the creation of found family.

Chapter 3: Theory

“Gay sex life, unlike straight sex life, is never a private matter. When a man and a woman walk hand in hand, it is their love that they make public. When two men walk hand in hand, it is their sex life that they make public... Our words are acts; our privacy is public. This reality stems from the nature of homophobia.” Rabbi Steven Greenberg, *Wrestling with God and Men: Homosexuality in the Jewish Tradition* (2004)

Queer Theory

Queer theory exists as a network of critiques and mode of close reading by queer theorists about gender performance, relationship dynamics, and desire. For this thesis, I have used the definition of queer theory developed by Richards, Bouman, and Barker (2017), who state that:

Queer theory necessarily celebrates transgression in the form of visible difference from norms. These ‘norms’ are then exposed to be norms, not natures or inevitabilities. Gender and sexual identities are seen, in much of this work, to be demonstrably defiant definitions and configurations (p. 62).

This definition sticks out to me because it highlights what I consider to be the true essence of queerness: its ability to expose and critique norms.

Kirsch (2000) defines queer as “the disassembling of common beliefs about gender and sexuality” (p. 33). In this sense, the activity of “queer” as a concept is the queering of culture. Meanwhile, as a theory, “to queer is to reject all categorizations as limiting and labelled by dominant power structures” (p.36). This means that diversity

within queer theory assumes that there is resistance to “normativity,” and dominant cultural values, and that power is attained within queer theory by refusing to conform to the practices of hegemony (p. 36). To be queer in this paradigm, is to not fit within the gender and sexual norms and roles held by social norms, and to celebrate that refusal.

Queer theory holds that that there are as many possibilities for genders as there are those filling them, however, many cultures dichotomize categories of gender and sexuality into either / or patterns (Kirsch, 2000, p.48). Because of that, in colonial European cultures, heterosexuality and homosexuality have been popularly posed as binary categories of sexuality, and thus opposing poles that neither recognizes nor acknowledge the difference between or among the two domains (p.48). The view that gender and sexuality exist as poles or dyads is visible within long held social norms; a major labour of queer theory is a critique of this binarism.

While same-sex activities and gender non-conforming identities have existed around the world throughout history, they may not have been labeled in this way (Lewis, 2016, p.25). It is true that language and identity fall within the center of gravity of queer politics in the economic North, however debates around identity and language are Anglocentric and sit awkwardly within a more international context (p. 26). This is because there are 2SLGBTQ+ folks who do not identify as queer due to a transnational lens,¹² as well as a critique that privileged queers¹³ have less in common with poor,

¹² As from a transnational lens, the identities and categories within the 2SLGBTQ+ (and even the title of queerness as a whole) may not exist or properly represent the true nature of non-cisgender and non-heterosexual identities around the world, and to use those identity titles serves as erasure of unique regional identities (Su, 2019)

¹³ Those who were most visible in academia and political movements (white, middle-class).

rural, racialized, Indigenous, transgender, disabled, etc. folks than did “straight” folks from these intersecting social locations. Just being straight did not confer privilege to lots of folks who did not see themselves represented in this dichotomy, and alienated lot of folks from queer theory and mainstream queer politics.

In this thesis, I used queer theory as a way of considering norms featured in romance novels. This can be seen in the interrogation of gender and relationship norms seen within romance novels, as it shaped and fuelled characters and themes alike. True understanding of queer relationship dynamics, queer stereotypes, and perception is only achieved through exploring mediums where they are represented. The key terms from queer theory I have used are “queer(ing),” “normative,” and “heteronormativity.”

Queer(ing) is defined here as the breaking of a normative mold, essentially representing those who are not any of the following: white, middle-class, cisgender, heterosexual, agnostic, abled-bodied. Additionally, to queer is to break that normative mold, especially in the sense of not being straight or cisgender (W/W, M/M, bisexual, or transgender). Normative is defined as fitting the assumed identity beliefs that prioritize the voices, opinions, and existence of white, cisgender (with a priority placed on men), heterosexual, middle-class, able-bodied, and agnostic. Lastly, Harris and White defined heteronormative as the held belief that being heterosexual is the normative experience for humans and all other life-beings (2018, p. 335).

The Gaze

Within this thesis, those most important terms for the gaze theory are that of the normative gaze, the oppositional gaze, and queer gaze. Theories of the gaze are the

belief that the normative view (often held by the creator and dominant culture) is also the same view of the consumer; this can be seen in how white cisgender heterosexual men make movies for white cisgender heterosexual men. Foundational theorists within gaze theory that have shaped how we see different gaze theories today include that of Foucault (systems of power), Mulvey (passive and active gaze), Berger (ways of seeing), hooks (oppositional gaze), Fredrickson, & Roberts (objectification theory). Oppositional gaze exists as a mode of resistance to the belief that the normative view is the only important view, while also devaluing the existence of all those who do not fit within that mold. Lastly, the queer gaze is a gaze created by and for those who do not fit within the normative sexuality or gender gaze, with a priority being placed on creation for and by the communities that are underrepresented. The queer gaze exists as a subcategory of the oppositional gaze.

Before diving in, it is worth noting that there is a privilege in the concept of the gaze as a whole. By this, I mean that the gaze tends to be framed in a way that assumes the type of consumer that is viewing the content – prioritizing those who are white, cisgender, straight, middle class, able-bodied, and usually agnostic.¹⁴ In this sense, the authors of books and / or directors of movies may frame characters in a way that benefits this assumed viewer, which creators may see as the “default” or as the most desirable. The consequence of this is the exclusion of other viewers. Those who do not identify within these normative categories must put on a mask when viewing and place themselves in a way that allows them to view from the benefitted gaze, instead of their

¹⁴ From this point on, this will act as my definition of the norm.

own. In turn, this is why it is important to have content creators of different backgrounds, and to read against the grain (Hall, n.d.)— both allow for the creation of stories for everyone, regardless of backgrounds, and act in resistance to the normative gaze.

The Normative Gaze

I define the gaze as an exchange between creator and consumer. The gaze acts as a frame to the story, shaping not only how consumers may view characters, but also how they feel about the characters and the story as a whole. This “normative” gaze is often the culturally dominant gaze, both in media as a whole and more specifically, for my purposes, in romance novels (Pullen, 2016) These novels, while more recently working to promote more gender equality, rely on heterosexual romances, and tend to be framed for heterosexual consumers, by heterosexual creators.

Pullen (2016) defines this gaze as being present in two contrasting ways. The first features one party looking upon another, with an aspect of being used. The second features gaze between two parties, often allowing for and enabling collaboration between both parties. These romance novels often employ the second way, with the two parties being heterosexual men and women, as both parties objectify and use each other as a form of partnership. This can especially be seen with the romanticization of men in straight romance novels being written by women, for women.

Women have been trained to view themselves in the same way men would, both consciously and unconsciously. They see themselves in the third person view because that is how they have been taught. As Final Girl (2023), an internet essayist and social commentator, states: “Most popularized fiction is created by a very specific

demographic of men for a very specific demographic of men, and this creates a disjointed phenomenon when representing women (and other marginalized groups)” (n.p.). Because of this, it’s no coincidence that a lot of mainstream media replicates patriarchal versions of gender norms, thus reinforcing the division between passive femininity and active masculinity (Jackson, 2023). After seeing the same representations over and over again, negative stereotypes can become internalized:

The gaze impacts the way women view themselves, having only witnessed themselves represented through the lens of how men view women, and rarely how women view themselves. Having subconsciously learned and internalized this gaze, this creates a disillusionment of the self. The male gazer is now not only an external figure within the lives of women, but an inescapable surveyor that lives inside of her own mind (*Final Girl*, 2023, n.p).

Similarly, Simone de Beauvoir (1974) argued that one of the fundamental characteristics of women is that they are constructed as Other to men (p.9).

Additionally, it is her belief that these norms in turn aid in the objectification of women, continuing until women aren’t seen as being fully human. She ends this by stating that men are seen as active agents, while women remain described as passive objects. This is especially highlighted when she states that “Man is defined as a human being and woman as a female – whenever she behaves as a human being, she is said to imitate the male” (p.47).

While the objectifying (normative) gaze was originally coined to describe the gaze experienced by women, it can be applied to the experience of queer individuals.

This gaze focuses primarily on a normative perspective and has been defined by Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) as individuals being treated as a body that is valued for its use to others for pleasure. Pullen (2016) states that the way that mainstream normative gaze operates upon queer men is not dissimilar to the way the gaze has been theorized in relation to the female body. The main difference here is the gender of the active viewer; Pullen imagines the active viewer being the female spectator, rather than the male that is typically assumed to be the active viewer (p.18). Moss (2019) points out that “queer gaze” is often used interchangeably with the lesbian or gay male gaze. By using these terms interchangeably, the normative gaze places 2SLGBTQ+ people within an “acceptable” (dichotomous) heteronormative framework, one that normalizes the gaze within different contexts.

As a member of the queer reading community, I’ve noticed that one common criticism among queer readers is that queer romance seems to be created to appeal to the normative (assumed) consumer, instead of the queer individuals represented within queer romance. The normative gaze allows romance novels to be filled with depictions of queer individuals that plays lip service to queerness, while catering to the normative market of romance novels (white, straight, cisgender, middle class, able-bodied, agnostic women). Often, romances that focus on queer suffering and coming out are created for straight individuals to sympathize for queer individuals.

Additionally, when romance focuses on suffering and sex alone, it can lead to the fetishization of queer individuals. This gaze can also occur when queer authors write queer romance for a generally normative romance audience, in turn leading to self-

objectification through writing about one's own identity (or in this case, group) in anticipation of being objectified. This can be seen in characters being written specifically in a way to be viewed, instead of in a way to allow readers to look with the character.

Meanwhile, when people of color are represented, it is often through tropes such as the black friend, or the black victim. These tropes act as a way to shape how people of color are seen by the public and are often the root of unfair stereotypes. This occurs due to the prioritizing of voices considered the norm, which leads to the exclusion of voices and consumers who do not fall within that norm.

At the end of the day, the normative gaze stands to represent those who are considered within the norm: white, male, middle-class, able-bodied, neurotypicals. For those outside that boundary (in any sense), the normative gaze only seeks to objectify. This can in turn bring harm to those not identified, placing misinformation and negative stereotypes in the mind of those who consume content with the normative gaze present. While it can be said that not all normative gaze is done on purpose, the impact is still harmful and isolating.

Within this thesis, I use the normative gaze to describe the mainstream. By this, I place popular non-queer romance novels in the category of the normative gaze. In the case of this thesis, focusing on romance, the normative gaze within the genre is created for primarily women. This is due to the societal expectation that only women read the romance genre, as the novels are primarily about women (Fanning, 2024).

Oppositional Gaze

According to Jackson's (2023) summary of Mulvey's work in 1973, the male gaze is a fantasy projected onto the female figure in film. By this, she stated that films are created for the male consumer from a male perspective, and that these forms of work project a male fantasy on to the female characters. In turn, this leaves women in moviegoing audiences two options: to take up the male gaze or to identify as the objectified women (Jackson, 2023). bell hooks (1992) adds that this assumes that all women consuming content are white, as Black women could not look at the white women onscreen like Black men or look at the white women onscreen and identify entirely with them as women either. Here, there is no space for a person of color to gaze upon characters, as the framework prioritizes a white gaze, instead of a more intersectional and inclusive one.

The oppositional gaze exists as a way for people to resist the dominant views and messages that serve to communicate their devalued status (hooks, 1992). hooks describe the gaze as a site of resistance, as those devalued learn to look in opposition and with critique (hooks, 1992). Oppositional gaze can be seen as the root of all forms of opposing gazes created by those not often represented, and who often get placed in the role of "the Other" (hooks, 1992, p. 95; Jacobs, 2016), with the priority being placed on people of color. This is because there is a power in the act of looking, and that act of looking serves as the place of resistance.

Within this thesis, I use the oppositional gaze as the building block and foundation of the queer gaze. Without the development of the oppositional gaze, the

queer gaze in itself would not exist. This is because both gazes (queer and oppositional) are defined as resistant of dominant messaging and views that can often be found within the normative gaze. It is through the existence of the oppositional and queer gazes that romance novels centering non-white women (who are straight and cisgender) exist.

Queer Gaze

Moss (2019) defines the queer gaze as a framework for embracing and normalising what society deems to be strange, and thus considered unclassifiable and difficult. This gaze seeks to unsettle power relations, by moving away from the focus of looking, and becoming a way of being, by placing oneself in the shoes of different characters and narrators. By focusing on the act of existing instead of looking, there are no active or passive subjects, just stories (n.p). In the end, the queer gaze aims to destabilize the normative gaze, providing and centering voices often not heard due to the prioritization of voices that fall within of the norm.

It is my understanding that through allowing queer characters to be, instead of looking at queer characters, that queer romance novels fixate on queer characters, but rarely objectify them. These characters can thus lead way to new ways of being that those who read may not be familiar with or may not be able to explore in the real world, as they allow readers to look with them, instead of looking at them (Halberstam, 2005). Often in queer romance written by queer authors, the fictional world is one free of power dynamics and hate, instead it focuses on being inclusive and loving, with the goal of forming community (Halberstam, 2005). This is often described by Halberstam as “the

act of telling a queer story that acts as more than a queer story, through the refusal of acknowledging the existence of a straight world” (2005, p.94.)

Moss (2019) argues that the queer gaze can only exist when it is filtered through the queer eyes of the writer, with queer characters, and that it moves beyond the confines of 2SLGBTQ+ to an inclusive outlook free from power struggles. By this way of thinking, a queer gaze moves away from the focus on looking, and becomes a way of being, this occurring through the removal of active and passive subjects (Moss, 2019). Moss’s definition of queer gaze thus differentiates queer gaze from its counterparts (normative gaze) and leads to it joining those such as the oppositional gaze, as the normative gaze stems from social power (that is buried with the act of looking), while the queer gaze, is one that unsettles power relations in many ways, making space for new ways of being (2019). It is my belief that, just as with queer theory, a queer gaze relies on the act of centering non-normative voices and characters.

Within this thesis, the queer gaze operates as the primarily lens of analysis for the chosen queer romance novels. It is because of the queer gaze, and the oppositional gaze, that queer romance exists. The queer gaze allows for the existence of voices and characters outside of the normative romance mold (white non-queer women).

Chapter 4: Method

“Queer people anywhere are responsible for queer people everywhere” Adam Eli, *The New Queer Conscience* (2020)

In my analyses of queer romance novels and readers’ reviews, I have attempted to answer the following questions:

1. For whom were these novels written? Were they written with a straight audience in mind or a queer one? Do they portray queer characters through stereotypes?
2. What kind of setting does each novel take place in? Is it a fantasy setting where homophobia and transphobia don’t exist, or is it based on the current world reality? Does it center a heteronormative view of romance?
3. What message is the novel offering about queer romance? Does it call attention to the prejudice faced by individuals who do not fit into heteronormative cultures, or does it bring a sense of hope for queer individuals?
4. What forms of representation are missing from the queer romance novels in my data set?

The goal of my analysis was to gain a better understanding of queer romance novels and their readers. Specifically, I wanted to learn more about the norms found in the queer romance subgenre, and to explore how members of the queer romance online reading community chose which books to read (and promote), why they read

them, and what they took from the novels, both during and after reading them. These questions were influenced not just by my identity as a researcher, but as a reader of the queer romance genre as well. Finding answers to the questions listed above was most easily done through analysis of popular queer romance novels and responses to them from the online reading community.

Methodological Considerations and Positionality

I have chosen two methods for this thesis, a textual analysis of five queer romance novels and an analysis of book reviews left by readers on Goodreads' online platform. Both methods rely on qualitative data, that was analyzed using textual analysis. It is my hope that through analysis I, and later the rest of the community, gain a deeper and more complex understanding around the creation and consumption of queer romance literature.

It is worth noting that part of this thesis focuses on book reviews, offering an analysis only of what is written down, and not potential hidden meanings within the words. Because of this, all the reviews were taken at face value, and my analysis involved exploring my personal understanding of the reviews individually and as a group.

As a member of the queer romance reading community, I carried the responsibility of community care both during, and after, the research. Readers whose reviews were included in this thesis remained anonymous, as they had not explicitly consented to being cited within my research. While Goodreads reviews are public, consenting of public reviews did not equal clear consent for inclusion within this

academic study. However, all reviewers remained anonymous, no contact was made between reviewers and myself.

Throughout this process, I aimed to focus on my community (the queer reading community) at large, as it is by being a part of the queer reading community that I locate myself. This dedication to knowledge, representation, and accessibility guided my research. It is my hope that by doing this research, and that by making it accessible, that I provided more knowledge to the queer community, both academic and not. In turn, it is also my hope that this research aids in discussions around who reads queer novels, and what is gained from those novels.

Methods of Data Collection

Books

To choose the five books to analyze, I used Goodreads, a site that allows readers to categorize books using tags (such as Queer), as well as give the books ratings. While it is hard to account for the algorithm (which may favor certain books over others) because there is little research into Goodreads' algorithm, the tags and ratings of the books are all fan controlled, which allowed for a general idea of the views of the book reading community at large to emerge. When searching the site, I looked for books that met my preset criteria within my preselected tags: Romance, 2SLGBTQ+, Queer Lit (there is no queer romance tag), Lesbian Romance, M M Romance¹⁵ (there is no gay romance tag), Bisexual Romance, and Transgender Romance. Once those tags

¹⁵ Which in this case stands for male loving male, as Goodreads does not allow the use of a backslash in its tags.

were put in place, I selected my books from those listed on the first page of suggestions generated by Goodreads.

To be selected for this research, a book had to be fictional and could not be a comic or graphic novel.¹⁶ The novels had to have a four-star rating or higher, and to have received at least 10 000 ratings, which guaranteed that the book was widely known and highly regarded within the online book community. Additionally, the book had to have a maximum of 500 reviews, and to have been published in between 2015 to 2022. If the book was part of a series, it had to either be the first book or readable without reading the rest of the series.

After going through all the tags, and pulling out the qualifying books, I was left with a list of 15 books. To shorten the list, books written by the same author were manually removed, and the remaining volumes were sorted by form of queer representation, to ensure that a diversity of sexuality and gender identities were represented within the final list of books. Author background diversity was also considered when choosing the books. To break ties, books with the highest rating were chosen. Of the list of 15 books on my original list, 40% featured racialized main characters. A total of 33 % featured transgender or nonbinary identifying main characters, with transwomen and nonbinary individuals each being represented in one book, and transmen being represented in two. Finally, 13% of the books were written by authors who publicly identified as straight and cisgender.

¹⁶ With comic including graphic novels and manga.

In the end, I chose five books: *A Lady for a Duke* by Alexis Hall, *Red, White, & Royal Blue* by Casey McQuiston, *The Lady's Guide to Celestial Mechanics* by Olivia Waite, *Cemetery Boys* by Aiden Thomas, and *Delilah Green Doesn't Care* by Ashley Herring Blake. These books are all written by queer identifying authors. Two novels focus on a W/W pairing, and two others focus on a M/M pairing, with one of each pairing featuring a bisexual character. One novel featured a straight relationship, with a transgender character.

While I tried to read each novel in the same mindset during the entire reading process of each novel, that was hard to maintain. Especially throughout the last three books. This occurred due to my reading preferences, but also my identity as a male-identifying queer romance reader. When it comes to consuming content, I try to stay as close to my own identity representation in terms of sexuality, which means I tend to read mostly M/M, with some (rarer) straight romance mixed in with my reading selection.

While I am unsure if this is felt by other readers, I feel a sense of dread when reading W/W, not due to an existing prejudice, but more so because it feels like an intrusion. I recognize that representation may exist as a sort of safe space, and due to that, I avoid reading W/W novels to ensure that I respect that boundary and safe space for W/W readers. This habit in turn led to hesitation and discomfort when starting to read the two W/W novels.

Additionally, during the reading process I came to notice a flaw in my novel selection. Originally, when selecting the W/W romance novels, I chose *Delilah Green Doesn't Care* by Ashley Herring Blake and *Gideon the Ninth* by Tamsyn Muir. However,

upon starting the second novel, I came to the realization that it was placed on the wrong list on Goodreads. While it had popped up under the Queer tag, the novel itself is not romance, it is more a fantasy and science fiction. The characters within the novel simply happen to identify as queer, and romance is not a popular tag put on the novel by readers in the community. Due to my assumption that anything tagged as queer would include romance, I made a mistake.

After reading the first chapter, I went back to Goodreads to verify my information and caught my mistake. Right after, my first move was to verify that the rest of the novels chosen and on my list of possible novels were classed as romance to avoid the repetition of my mistake. After ensuring that the rest of my list of novels and chosen novels were tagged as romance novels, I choose the next novel on the list with W/W representation. This novel ended up being number 6 from the list and had just barely missed the original cut. This left me to go purchase a physical copy to annotate while reading the first W/W novel, with *A Lady's Guide to Celestial Mechanics* arriving right when I finished the other W/W novel.

Goodreads

To avoid self-isolation and learn from community, I sought out the opinion of others within the queer romance reading community. Using popular reviews allowed me to participate in discussions with other romance readers. The data from these reviews aided in my own analysis of the chosen novels, and allowed me to better understand what they represented to other readers. Included reviews allowed voices other than my own to be incorporated into this work. I hope that reviewers whose reviews were

selected were diverse, but this could not be verified as Goodreads profiles do not include demographic details.

I collected the three most popular reviews for each of the five books in my data set, with popularity being determined by the most “likes” each of the reviews received. I focused on reviews found on Goodreads, as I find that their reviews are more organized and thought-out, while those found on Booktok and Bookstagram tend to be less detailed and well-organized.

Reviews were collected in a word document on the same day to ensure that the reviews were the most popular at the time of collection. Date and time (as well as duration of the process) of collection was written down to allow for possible future replicability, as well as to allow myself to give my committee and readers as much knowledge regarding the collection process as possible. Any trends noticed within the review data (such as if multiple popular reviews are by the same user) were highlighted and discussed in my analysis.

Queer Romance Novels & Date Collection

When starting the process of reading and analysis, I took each novel one at a time to ensure that I could really focus on each one. I kept the novels in categories to ensure a smooth reading process. In this case, the M/M novels were read first, as they were the ones I could most relate to as a queer masculine-leaning individual, then the W/W novels, and last the straight novel featuring a transgender lead. I read the novels over the span of five months, with a break month in the middle. I read *Red, White, & Royal Blue* in November, *Cemetery Boys* in December, and then there was a break in

January. After break, I read *Delilah Green Doesn't Care* in February, and *A Lady's Guide to Celestial Mechanics* and *A Lady for a Duke* in March.

Before starting the reading process, I ensured that each book had matching annotation keys (figure 1, see annex A). Within this study, an annotation key is merely a guide of what I chose to highlight for my analysis. By putting one at the start of each novel, I was able to ensure that I kept the same annotation key for all the novels. Additionally, I had an annotation key bookmark made, so that I always had the key on hand. These keys were found on Etsy and custom made by KoiTheGreat, who made the annotation key before deleting their Etsy account, and [shopbloomswirl](#), who made the bookmark. Both creators, who are readers themselves, worked with me to make a key that was simple but still caught my eye. Last, I went out to purchase (an almost concerning amount of) sticky tabs that matched the colors of the annotation key (see Appendix A, Figure 1).

During the reading process, I tried to keep the environment I read in similar for all of the novels, in case the reading setting had an influence on my analysis. The novels were read at my house and my work office – places where I have the best focus. This ensured that during the reading process it was quiet, with minimal distractions and comfortable seating.

Textual analysis allowed me to examine the books' structure, content, and meaning. It is by using the previously existing framework, which served to highlight which trends within novels I should focus on, that I was able to determine how each novel could be related both to the historical and cultural context in which it was

produced. This was done through an examination of the trends found in the types of HEAs the books offer their queer characters, and the ways in which identities are represented within them (Blackburn, Clark & Nemeth, 2015; Carter, 2020).

Directed content analysis is a form of qualitative analysis, which is used when there is already an existing theory or framework (Ho, 2023). The analysis relies on a previously existing framework to shape and centre research focusing on different content than the original study, which in this case is queer romance novels. Within this thesis, the existing framework used was developed and discussed by Blackburn, Clark and Nemeth (2015) and Carter (2020).

The existing framework created by Carter codes for types of happily ever afters (HEAs) as well as who initiates within the relationship in romances. I borrowed the coding of HEAs, considering, for example, if the relationship remains monogamous, and what future is expected of the relationship (e.g. marriage, living together, having kids). This allowed me to gain a better understanding of what futures might be expected for queer couples, which could be used in a comparative analysis comparing them to straight, cisgender couples. In their textual analysis of how asexual characters are represented and how they achieve a happy ending, Carter found four main ways that an asexual character could find a HEA: 1. the asexual character dates someone who was not asexual; 2. They enter into a polyamorous relationship; 3. the asexual character dates another asexual person; or 4. the asexual person enters into an open relationship (2020). In this thesis, I adopted Carter's coding keys and applied it to the queer novels in my data set. In this case, I looked for the HEA in each novel, asking: does the happily

ever involve monogamy or polyamory, does the HEA pairing involve two queer characters or one queer with a straight cisgender character?

The existing framework created by Blackburn, Clark and Nemeth (2015) focused on the concepts of identity, and the disruptions of norms within queer content. By borrowing their coding, I was able to pay attention to: how identity, and specifically queer identity, is framed within the novels; which norms are deemed acceptable; and, which norms are attributed to queer folks that may deviate from those attributed to straight cisgender couples. In Blackburn, Clark, and Nemeth's (2015) study, identities were categorized as either essential (key elements of identity), developmental (changing through the story), or post structural (alluded to but not made explicitly clear) (p.14). The concept "disruption of norms" explored disrupting the norms of being cisgender and / or heterosexual, disrupting the norm of the nuclear/ hetero family, and disrupting (or queering) existing relationship norms between characters (p. 20). Both keys were applied to my analysis without change.

Melding together these two existing frameworks allowed me to provide a deeper analysis of my data, to offer a more complex and well-rounded understanding of what forms of queer representation can be found in the chosen queer romance literature, and to build a better understanding of what is missing within current representation.

Throughout the process of reading each novel, I marked down any passage that fell within the following categories: norms and dynamics between characters; disruption of norms and dynamics established within relationships (familial, platonic, romantic,); stereotypes; concepts of identity; setting; and, happily ever afters. By analyzing the

norms and dynamics established between characters, as well as their disruptions, I gained a more well-developed and complex understanding of how relationships within the novels functioned in relation to the characters' established and developing roles, their personalities, and their histories. This gave me a fuller view of how queer characters were represented, as well as what motivated them within the story.

To be flagged as belonging to the identity theme, an aspect of the novel had to serve the purpose defining the main characters (those in the central romantic relationship). In all the novels examined in this thesis, relationships were limited to two characters. I focused on aspects of the narrative that discussed a character's personality, likes and dislikes, physical traits and behaviours, as well as self-identified and/or defining habits. These helped me create summaries of each main character, and supported my search for potential stereotypes. I also highlighted how the main characters identify, both internally to just themselves, and externally to those around them and the public, as well as each novel's setting.

The analytic category "norms and dynamics," as well as "disruption of norms and dynamics," was flagged by looking at each novel's central relationship at the start and the end of the novel. I considered this category to serve the purpose of defining the relationship between the two main characters, for example, by detailing what they first thought of the other character, whether they had known each other previously, and what their established dynamic was at the start. Meanwhile, I looked to the end of each novel to see if their relationship worked and to describe how the two characters interacted with each other in their happily ever after, and what their final relational dynamic was

the novel's end. Disruption of norms and dynamics were found in the middle of the novel, where the stories changed how the characters knew and related to each other. I considered these disruptions, as they caused changes from the initial dynamic between characters.

When searching for stereotypes within each novel, I primarily highlighted anything based on assumptions (based on gender, sexuality, race, or culture). The primary examples of stereotypes specifically related to sexism, racism, and geopolitical stereotypes (i.e. British people all drink tea). Meanwhile, things that were flagged as setting served the primary goal of scene setting. This included specific locations, time periods, social media mentions or usage, historical specificities (such as traveling by horse and carriage.)

Lastly, HEAs were marked only towards the end of the novel. The goal of this part of the thematic analysis was to highlight how the novels framed the main characters' relationship at the end of the novel, including getting married and / or having children, or officially becoming a couple. This was important to highlight, as I was curious about whether the queer characters were given a happily ever after, and if queer romance novels had the same HEA tropes as romance novels as a whole. This also allowed me to explore if queer characters in these novels were allowed to be happy, as well as if queer romance followed (and respected) the same tropes as romance novels as a whole. In the case of some novels, the HEA was found in the epilogue, otherwise, it was usually found in the last chapter of the novel.

After collecting and sorting my data, I began to use queer theory and gaze theory to examine the existence of established tropes and patterns within my data set. Regarding straight gaze theory, I considered how straight readers might perceive and consume these novels. Objectification theory offered a lens for analysis and criticism of the treatment of queer romance, and more specifically queer characters in romance novels, as objects instead of subjects in their own stories. Gaze theory was used to examine if queer romance novels invited readers to look at the queer couple or if queer romance novels invite us to look with the queer couple from their perspective (Halberstam, 2005).

Analysis of Reviews

When analyzing the reviews, I marked each review using a new name format to keep them anonymous (A1 - book 1, review 1). This was done to ensure reviewer anonymity, while also not claiming the reviews as my own work or opinions. The anonymity is important as readers may not have wanted the world to know they are reading these books (they may be in the closet) and they did not sign up for this research while writing the reviews (which may have existed before I even began my thesis). In turn, I planned on using these reviews to gain a better idea as to what the general queer romance readership thinks about the chosen books, as well as where these books stand among other books that they have read.¹⁷ Additionally, analysis

¹⁷ Past readership and opinions on books read before the chosen ones may have an influence on how they view the chosen book, as well as how they rate it. These past books may be queer romance novels, or just romance novels, or even just a novel period.

allowed for a better understanding of the creation of knowledge around these topics (Ritchie, 2014).

As I read each of the chosen reviews, I took note of any clear emotion that the reviewer chose to share, as well as the pros and cons of the book in their opinion. This was tracked using key words such as basic emotions,¹⁸ clear opinion statements,¹⁹ notes on how the novel made them feel, as well as any notes on representations within the novel. Additionally, any mention of authorship, reader's identity, the characterization of queer characters, and lessons learned from the novels were taken note of. Lastly, any mention of tropes becoming stereotypes, or tropes in general were noted. The goal here was to gain knowledge as to what readers feel during and after reading the novel, as well as what they took from the book after reading it.

Thankfully, this was made easier using an online platform, instead of verbally, as I was able to go back to what was said, instead of worrying about transcribing. In turn, using these notes, I was able to understand how readers felt about the novel during and after reading the novels. My hope was that by doing this, I could gain a greater understanding as to why people read what they do, and what benefits (and criticisms) queer romance brings to both the book community, and to the readers who are reading as well.

¹⁸ Such as happy, sad, angry, content, bored, amused.

¹⁹ Such as dislike, like, love, hate.

Chapter 5: Data Description and Analysis

“Straight and queer are products of a bipolar world. In the sanctuary of love there’s no straight, no queer. In love’s domain queer is straight, straight is queer. A heart full of love and light is radiantly nonpolar.” – Abhiji Naskar, *Canım Sana İhtiyacım: Amor Apocalypse* (2022)

Description of Book Findings

Within this section of Chapter Five, I offer a general description of my findings, without analysis. To do this, I describe the data I collected from each novel; analysis will be covered in its own section.

Setting

Text (title, author)	Narrator	Main Characters	Setting
Red, White, & Royal Blue by Casey McQuiston	Omniscient, or fly on wall	Alex & Henry	Modern day, 2015-2020, USA and UK
Cemetery Boys by Aiden Thomas	Limited third person	Yadriel & Julian	Modern day, 2010-ish, USA (LA specific)
Delilah Green Doesn't Care by Ashley Herring Blake	Multiple third person but from the view of the main two (every other chapter)	Delilah and Claire	Modern day, USA (Bright Falls and NY)
A Lady for a Duke by Alexis Halls	Third person focusing on Viola	Viola and Justin	1817, UK
The Lady's Guide to Celestial Mechanics by Olivia Waite	Third person	Lucy and Catherine	Regency Era, UK

Figure 2: Analysis Table 1

All five of the selected novels are narrated in the third person, and the narrating characters within these novels are always part of the main pairing. While *Red, White, & Royal Blue* and *Delilah Green Doesn't Care* feature two narrators (both from the main pairing), the other three novels only have one narrator (Yadriel, Viola, and Lucy). The narrator characters are very important because the narrator shapes how the story is

told, how the information is represented, and how the story moves forward. It is because of the narrator that the gaze in part exists, and knowing who we are seeing the story through plays a big role in determining how to analyze it and the gaze we are experiencing throughout the novel.

Three novels (*Red, White, & Royal Blue*, *Cemetery Boys*, *Delilah Green Doesn't Care*) were set in a modern world similar to our current one, with two having minor changes. In *Red, White, & Royal Blue*, there is a woman president in the USA. *Cemetery Boys* is set in a modern-day world in the USA, but one with supernatural elements: those who identify as Brujos can see and release the spirits of the dead, and Brujx can heal. The fact that these three novels are set in current time is given away through the existence of social media platforms like Twitter²⁰ and online news platforms in *Red, White, & Royal Blue*, the vehicles and modern school setting in *Cemetery Boys*, and through the mention of current dating apps such as Tinder in *Delilah Green Doesn't Care*.

By contrast, *A Lady for a Duke* and *A Lady's Guide to Celestial Mechanics* are set in Regency Era England (1811 to 1820). This is visible in the social norms and worldviews present within the novels, which demonstrates the view of women as objects to pleasure men, and where women and people of color are seen as having lesser value – seen with the casualness of characters dropping racist and sexist remarks.²¹

²⁰ Now known as X.

²¹ Which remarks which made me noteworthily uncomfortable.

The Regency Era is visible through the presence of horse-drawn carriages, instead of cars, and the act of exploring the world by boat instead of by plane.

The setting (as well as the genre) is important to analyse because it helps us understand the historical and cultural context of the narrative, which in turn shapes what can and can't happen. This is illustrated in *Cemetery Boys*, where healing individuals and aiding the dead to move on is a job the characters have and cherish within their culture. Additionally, we know that we are in the contemporary United States, because the laws that shape the story are similar to what readers in the United States are used to, and we know that current electronics such as mobile phones exist.

Stereotypes

While none of the novels are clear of containing stereotypes, two novels had more stereotypes than the others. In *Cemetery Boys*, one stereotype present was the view that transgender men aren't real men because they are not born male. This is shown through Yadriel's family not allowing him to participate in the cultural traditions tied to masculinity, even though he identifies as male. Julian supports Yadriel by constantly reminding him that his identity is valid, and even standing outside to make Yadriel feel safe when he uses the men's washroom for the first time (p. 207). The view that Columbians are all in gangs and deal drugs is another stereotype presented in this novel; it is shown in the way that other students in the school are not worried about Julian's absence because they believe he is in a gang and sells drugs (p.109). Yadriel does not believe the rumors about Julian being in a gang or selling drugs when they are first presented to him, and even goes out of his way to remind his friend who is with him

that these rumors are most likely false (pp.109-110). Due to this, *Cemetery Boys* presents its stereotypes critically.

In *Delilah Green Doesn't Care*, the stereotypes focus more on community, with the assumption that the ideal family is composed of a man and woman with two kids. Another, related stereotype is that a woman has to please her man, an ideal mentioned and reinforced by Delilah's stepmother. These ideals around family are frequently mentioned, with the belief that women only exist to serve men being upheld several times by Delilah's stepmother, with the stepmother reminding her children of this fact multiple times. The novel also shows that families can exist in multiple forms, for example, when Delilah agrees to co-parent Claire's child (p. 342). This seems to prove the earlier assertions about family structure wrong, and to show that healthy relationship dynamics can exist outside of heteronormative, patriarchal ideals.

In *A Lady for a Duke*, the stereotypes center on family and gender expectations, stereotypes that are primarily fueled by the internalized transphobia of the main character: no one would want to date a transwoman, the only way to have a family is through birth (thus supporting the view that children must be related by blood), and that all women should have a family with kids that they birthed. The view that one can only have children if they birthed them themselves is especially prominent in Viola's reaction to men showing interest in dating her, such as when Justin starts to make romantic advances and she turns the advances down due to her own internalized transphobia. In one scene, Justin states that he wants a future with Viola, and she immediately feels the need to remind him that she cannot have kids and thus is not the ideal woman (p. 223).

It is worth noting that transphobia is mentioned at the start of the novel in a content warning note, letting the readers know that it is present so as to not make people who experience transphobia uncomfortable. Additionally, while Viola experiences internalized transphobia, none of the other main characters are transphobic; the transphobia is merely internalized. This is highlighted when Justin finds out that Viola is transgender and makes sure she is accommodated – seen in his act of finding her riding clothing that are like what she learned to ride in (breaches) but are flowy enough for her to be able to tuck comfortably and still look feminine (Hall, 2022, p.116).

Of all the novels studied, *Red, White & Royal Blue* and *A Lady's Guide to Celestial Mechanics* have the most stereotypes. In *Red, White, & Royal Blue*, the stereotypes focus more on social status and gender roles. These include that the children of the crown (and of the president of the USA) must be picture perfect and they cannot be queer; that bisexual people date multiple people, which is represented by Alex being believed to be a flirt by others (McQuiston, 2019); that there is shame in being gay (and that sexuality is a choice, and those who “chose” to be gay are just confused or misguided); that all acts of men hanging out with women are fueled by the intent of dating, which is represented by the media sources constantly saying Alex is dating new women just because they were hanging out or in the same spot (and never actually asking him) (McQuiston, 2019, p.119, 307); and, that men are not allowed to display emotions.

In contrast to the other novels, *A Lady's Guide to Celestial Mechanics* casually brings up sexist and racist stereotypes, such as the idea science can only be done by white men. This view is repeatedly championed by white male scientists in the novel, although there are other characters that show an interest in science and thus contest that view. Characters in this novel also imply that women are of lesser value; this is hinted at through the prioritization of the work by men (such as science and painting) and devaluation of work by women (such as embroidery) (p. 228). Another stereotype featured in the book is that racialized men are not equal to white men; this is specifically mentioned within the novel when the white male scientists are talking about a Black scientist and state that he is of lesser value and intelligence than them (p. 51). It is worth noting that this is a view held by these specific characters, and is not supported by the novel as a whole.

None of the stereotypes explored within the literature review regarding gay men and lesbian women were present within the novels analyzed for this thesis. In the case of the M/M characters, there were no moments where the gay men were homophobic, and the men represented were not represented as needing to appear feminine to validate their queerness; the queer male characters were presented as all being different individual people, not as being all identical due to their sexuality (Colussi, 2022). An example of this can be seen in comparing the main pairing in *Red, White, & Royal Blue*, with one queer male focusing on being who others want them to be, and the other focusing on being who they want to be (McQuiston, 2019). In the case of W/W characters, there was no framing of anyone being a lesbian solely for male attention, or of engaging in public displays of affection specifically for the gaze of the men; neither

pairing was desperate to have children, and the women were all presented in different ways, they did not need to appear masculine to validate their sexuality (Colussi, 2022). An example of this can be seen in *Delilah Green Doesn't Care*, where public displays of affection are limited to only being done around friends (or alone) (Blake, 2022).

None of the stereotypes investigated within the literature review could be applied to the trans characters within these novels either. Neither Viola or Yadriel was ever framed as evil or immoral, even if they may have done something considered mean (Waite, 2019; Thomas, 2020). The same is also true in the case of the bisexual characters, as none of the stereotypes about bisexual individuals investigated within the literature review were present within the chosen novels (Blake, 2022; McQuiston, 2019; Thomas, 2020; Waite, 2019).

While most of the stereotypes and tropes applied to queer characters were not present, there were a few queer stereotypes within the general plots of these books. In the case of *Red, White, & Royal Blue*, the plot revolved around the main pairing being outed, as well as an exploration to the possible homophobic response to this outing. Additionally, the trope of queer love ending with the death of one or both members of the queer couple was explored within *Cemetery Boys*, although the two were saved by their love in the end (Thomas, 2020; Colussi, 2022).

Norms & Dynamics

Text (title, author)	Norms & Dynamics (established at start)	Disruption of Norms and Dynamics (transformed by end)	Conceptions of sexual and gender identities	Conceptions of families and homes	What inclusive queer ideologies are represented?
Red, White, & Royal Blue by Casey McQuiston	Alex & Henry hate each other, being queer in politics (or royalty) is seen as BAD	Alex & Henry are dating and out, start representing queer figures in politics and royalty	PS - start by thinking that being straight is the norm -> queer people exist and deserve to be able to love openly	D - Alex & Henry believe in following the image given to you by parents -> develop a more open view about it through the process of coming out	HV - both being outed is the cause of the drama
Cemetery Boys by Aiden Thomas	Yadriel and Julian, both see each other hinderances	Both Yadriel and Julian sacrifice their lives for each other, and see each other as partners.	D - starts out by establishing that queer folks (Specifically trans) are outcasts -> the process of coming out and becoming more stable in one's identity	E; Yadriel's family does not really change.	GA - looks primarily at Yadriel's family developing a more understanding view of his gender identity.
Delilah Green Doesn't Care by Ashley Herring Blake	Delilah and Claire ignore each other, do not interact, Delilah has no friends and dislikes her stepfamily	Delilah and Claire seriously date while co-parenting with Claire's ex, Delilah is friends with Claire's friends	PS - queer identities are normalized and blended into society at the same level as cishet individuals	PS - queer identities are normalized and blended into society at the same level as cishet individuals	QC - queer identities are normalized and blended into society at the same level as cishet individuals
A Lady for a Duke by Alexis Halls	Justin thinks that Viola's old self (his friend) is dead, Viola is hiding who she used to be to be taken as a "real" woman by society	Justin and Viola share their true identities, and get married, focusing on starting a loving family with children they adopted	D - start by thinking being trans or queer is not the norm -> develops into trans and queer identities exist in all times and spaces	D - main characters start off feeling alone and unaccepted, grows into acceptance and chosen family (that portrays the ideal family)	HV - GA - technically the plot revolves around the fact that Viola needed to "die" a man and then reemerge as a woman to exist as a trans person
The Lady's Guide to Celestial Mechanics by Olivia Waite	Lucy and Catherine are correspondents, Lucy knows she is a lesbian but keeps it hidden, and thinks Catherine is straight. Both think sexism sucks.	Lucy and Catherine are dating, with both supporting each other's work in science (astronomy) and art (embroidery.) They know that queer people exist around them and feel supported by that.	D - they go from thinking they are the only queers -> queer people exist all around her.	D - main characters start off feeling alone and unaccepted, grows into acceptance and chosen family	GA - stays pretty lowkey with queer visibility, as we only address 4 potentially queer people in the novel

P – post structural; D – developmental; E – essential; HV – homosexual visibility; QC – queer community; GA – gay assimilation

Figure 3: Analysis Table 2

All the novels examined in this thesis share a similar set of norms and dynamics. For this thesis, I defined (social) norms as what the main characters see as being the usual, what is expected, while dynamics define how the main pairing relate to each other. In the case of *The Lady's Guide to Celestial Mechanics*, *Delilah Green Doesn't Care*, and *Cemetery Boys*, the main characters identified as feeling disconnected from their family and their community. In *A Lady for a Duke*, Viola had to tell the world that she died, so that she could allow herself the chance to live as a woman. In *Red, White, & Royal Blue*, both main characters present publicly as straight; here, the impossibility of identifying as a queer member of a political or royal family is presented as the norm.

In the case of the W/W novels, one norm that I found was strongly upheld was consent. In both novels, before any intimacy is initiated between the main characters, they communicate their desires and seek / provide consent, and the act of asking for consent is present throughout each sexual act. This is not seen within the chosen M/M novels. This is not to say that conversations around consent are not important, but more so to highlight that prioritizing consent as a norm is especially present within romance written about W/W characters.

In *Delilah Green Doesn't Care*, *Cemetery Boys*, and *Red, White, & Royal Blue*, the main romantic pair have either met before the start of the book and dislike (in different intensities) each other, or meet at the start of the book and have no interest in one another. In *A Lady for a Duke* and *A Lady's Guide to Celestial Mechanics*, the main pairs already know each other and feel positively about one another.

Disruption of Norms & Dynamics

The disruption of norms and dynamics typically occurs either in the middle of the novel, or towards the end of the novel. To disrupt the previously held norms and dynamics in this case is simply to cause a change. In the case of all five novels, the main characters all develop a community that accepts them for who they are, and all the romantic pairs end up dating. In the case of both *A Lady for a Duke* and *A Lady's Guide to Celestial Mechanics*, the main pair end up in a relationship equivalent to marriage; while legal marriage would not be allowed by law in the worlds of these stories, both couples find ways to tie themselves to one another financially and through their social connections.

Conception of Sexual and Gender Identities

This section refers to how characters in these novels are represented as relating to and coming to know their queer identities. Blackburn, Clark, & Nemeth (2015) distinguish between essential, developmental, and post-structural queer identities in their discussion of queer elements and ideologies in queer novels: essential, which is equal to the bare minimum of knowledge and exploration regarding identity; developmental, which is to develop from one point to another in a linear way in regards to one's knowledge and acceptance of their identity; and post-structural, which is for the individual to develop a personal meaning and value in regards to their identity while exploring the process – one that they assign and define, rather than using culturally defined meaning and value. The difference between essential and post-structural is that essential is just point A to point B with no exploration on getting from one point to

another, while post-structural is not only point A and B, but the process from A to B and/or its situation in the greater view of society (Blackburn, Clark & Nemeth, 2015.)

In the case of *A Lady's Guide to Celestial Mechanics*, we have only bare bones information about the characters' sexualities, and this I classified it as essential. We know that Lucy loves women (Waite, 2019, p.41), and we know that Catherine loved her husband and loves Lucy (p.78), which shows that she is attracted to men and women. But there is no further exploration regarding their sexual identities; there is no change in how they are regarded by their community, or how they see themselves. Within the novel, Catherine laments that "a love silenced is something like death" (p.191), which in my experience as a queer individual, describes an experience held by many queer people who are not able to be true to their identity, or those who realized their identity "too late" and missed out on a potential relationship.

In the case of *Cemetery Boys* and *A Lady for A Duke*, the characters' conception of identity can be defined as developmental in terms of how their identity is accepted both by them and by the community (Thomas, 2020; Hall, 2021). The main characters go from a lack of public acceptance of their identities by their communities, to them being accepted. But outside of that, not much exploration happens regarding their identities. There is no moment where the characters are shown exploring their identities; there is very little questioning of their identity; none of the characters gets to interact with the queer community as a way of curating or exploring identity. In the end, the characters accept their or others' queer identities by jumping from point A, which in this case is being straight, to point B, which is identifying as queer or accepting someone as

queer. This can be seen in *Cemetery Boys* with Yadriel's family going from not accepting him (Thomas, 2020, p.13) to accepting him in one night (p. 335).

In the case of *Red, White, & Royal Blue* and *Delilah Green Doesn't Care*, the characters' conception of identity can be considered post-structural. In *Red, White, & Royal Blue*, the process of figuring out one's identity—for example how Alex puts together the fact that he is not interested in women—and coming out to the general public, are explored in detail. This is because the novel follows both main characters through their journey in revealing their sexuality to the public. The characters' conception of identity being post-structural is also shown by its impact on the society around them, through the reaction from the world to the news of their sexualities on social media posts, article titles, and signs held up outside their housing area (McQuiston, 2019, p. 335).

In *Delilah Green Doesn't Care*, queer identities are normalized throughout the book, queer identities are acknowledged as existing and queer folks aren't viewed as different from straight folks due to their identities. Because of this, the novel can be classified as post-structural, queer identities are normalized and blended into society at the same level as cisgender individuals. While there is no exploration of identities, this is because there is no need. The characters know they are queer and know that this is okay. This is seen in numerous ways but is especially highlighted when we find out that Claire is bisexual, as Delilah remembers when Claire came out, but the act of clarifying sexuality never has to be done again (Blake, 2022, p.32).

Queerness can be defined as the disassembling of common beliefs about sexuality in gender (Kirsch, 2000). A queer approach in research, and in life, simply means to suspend sexual and gender identities, and interrogating heteronormativity by acknowledging a variety of differing identities (Blackburn, 2015, p.15). In that case, by centering queer characters, these romance novels automatically disrupt norms by refusing to center straight and cisgender characters, which is the norm in other forms of romance. Additionally, queer theory celebrates transgressions in the form of visible differences from norms, which means that queer works are worthy of being celebrated, just for the accomplishment of getting published (Richards, Bouman & Barker, 2017).

Concepts of Families & Homes

As defined by Blackburn, Clark, & Nemeth (2015), norms about families and home is understood “to be grounded in the fictional notion that all families comprise a father, mother, and their biological children and that such fictional families live together, but without anyone else, in a home, usually a house that they are working to own” (p.34). Using the same three categories employed in the previous section (essential, developmental, and post-structural), I examine how the novels in my data set represented families and home. I found that three of the chosen novels fell into the developmental category as their views changed throughout the novels, with one of the two remaining novels falling into the post structural category as queer characters and unique family dynamics were normalized within the community, and the other novel falling into the essential category as there was no change in representation of families and home.

Red, White, & Royal Blue, *A Lady for a Duke*, and *A Lady's Guide to Celestial Mechanics* can be defined as developmental because the characters go from being represented as isolated and alone and believing that the only form of family is blood, to developing a community and (chosen) found family where they are welcomed and accepted. In *Red, White, & Royal Blue*, this is shown through each friend group becoming one big support system, while in *A Lady for a Duke* and *A Lady's Guide to Celestial Mechanics*, it is shown as Viola and Lucy slowly meet more people and get welcomed into the community.

In the case of *Cemetery Boys*, I'd place it between essential and developmental, but leaning more towards essential. This is because there is a primary focus on blood family and ideals. While a found family is present in the case of Julian, it was there from the start, but developed over the course of the novel. *Delilah Green Doesn't Care* remains post-structural. While the novel establishes from the start that queer identities are normal, and so are found families. Throughout the novel Delilah gains a found family she didn't have before as the story goes on and she experiences all the countdown events to her stepsister's wedding.

Blackburn, Clark, & Nemeth (2015) state that "queer literature more broadly, is the disruption of norms related to sexuality and gender as well as those related to families and homes," and based on my dataset, I would agree strongly. Based on the five novels in my dataset, most of the disruptions of norms are related to a change in how a character is represented as identifying, what/whom they consider to be family, and their relationship status. Blackburn, Clark, & Nemeth (2015) put this is very well

when they state: “what does queer literature look like? It offers multiple, variable, and conflicting conceptions of sexual and gender identities, including post structural ones. It disrupts normative notions of sexuality, gender, families, and homes” (n.p).

Ideologies

In the case of queer ideologies, there are new categories. For the sake of this thesis, queer ideologies are defined as ways of viewing the world in relation to queer identity. Following Blackburn, Clark, & Nemeth (2015) again, I looked for the three categories a novel could fall into with regard to ideology:

1. HV or homosexual visibility, which is when the act of being queer (or coming out) is seen as the “dramatic substance” of the story;
2. GA or gay assimilation, which is the view that people just “happen” to be queer (in the way people just happen to be blond) – here, being queer isn’t a big deal, but the characters aren’t integrated within the queer community;
3. QC or queer community, which queer characters are represented in the context of their communities and (found) families.

One novel that left me torn in terms of classification was *A Lady for a Duke*. The plot does depend on Viola coming out as trans; the drama lies there. But this is because of her previous self (her identity when she was passing as cisgender) being assumed dead. The drama lies in the reveal of identity because this means a character didn’t die. Otherwise, queer identities are reacted to as something that just happens to exist. Because of this, I’m torn about if *A Lady for a Duke* falls under HV or GA.

I classified *Cemetery Boys* and *A Lady's Guide to Celestial Mechanics* as HV, because the characters exist as queer without their identities being the root of the drama within the story. In *Cemetery Boys*, the drama lies in finding out that there is a murder ring going on in Yadriel's town, while in *A Lady's Guide to Celestial Mechanics*, the drama lies in the fact that women were becoming visible in the fields of sciences and arts. *Red, White, & Royal Blue* can be classed as HV, with the outing of both characters being the root of the drama and causing a mess for both characters. The characters go from hiding their relationship, to the world suddenly not only knowing that they are dating, but that they are also queer. The drama lies in their relationship going public without their consent, as well as the search for who leaked the information that outed them. There is even a whole section of the novel where Alex and Henry are told that queerness is bad for the presidential campaign and bad publicity for the royal family, as well as showing both of their experience of being sent on dates with women as a way of distracting the public away from questions about their sexuality (McQuiston, 2021, p.303).

Lastly, *Delilah Green Doesn't Care* falls under the QC categorization because queer identities are normalized. The drama of the story is unrelated to the characters' queer identities, and queer characters are seen in the context of community, instead of being a lone queer character of the group. Most of the characters around Delilah when she is in New York are queer women; one of Claire's two friends is represented as being queer (adding Delilah in at the end to a friend group that primarily identifies as queer). Being queer is never in the spotlight, but instead the act of becoming friends is.

The queer ideologies represented by the five chosen books examined in this thesis cover the three major categories identified by Blackburn, Clarke, and Nemeth (2015). Not only does this validate their research, but aids in further highlighting the fact that there are multiple queer ideologies present within queer romance novels, and that queer romance novels aren't limited to one ideological perspective.

Happily Ever Afters (HEAs)

When it comes to each book's HEA, the primary focus of my data collection was on how that was accomplished and what it was represented as meaning for the characters. While Carter (2020) focused on HEA for asexual characters, I applied general principles outlined in their research to queer characters as a whole in mine. The only change in this application was the codes used to categorize the novels. In this work, the categories of analysis I used were: queer character plus straight character, polyamorous relationship, two queer characters, and open relationship.

Of the five novels in my data set, four fall within the two queer characters in a relationship category. Only *A Lady for a Duke* was outside of this category, falling within the one queer character with a straight character category. In the case of the first four novels, all the characters in relationships identify as queer in some way; in *A Lady for a Duke*, the queer characters are those in the background and Viola. It is worth noting that the act of loving Viola, a transgender woman, does not make Justin queer. Justin explicitly identifies as straight, clarifying within the novel that he was not attracted to Viola when she identified as a man (Hall, 2021, p.207). Viola's transness is not represented as shaping Justin's experiences or identities at all.

All the novels concluded with a HEA. It is also noteworthy to mention all five central couples ended by entering into monogamous relationships. This is especially noteworthy in *Delilah Green Doesn't Care*, where Delilah starts off the novel labelled as someone who only does one-night stands (Blake, 2021, p.1). It is using this data that it becomes clear to see that when it comes to queer romance, or at least popular queer romance novels, monogamy is central to the HEAs for queer individuals. This in turn suggests that the HEAs promised by romance can (and should) apply to all novels of the romance genre, and not just those that centre straight individuals. It also highlights that monogamy is the most present relationship dynamic. Even popular queer romance does not seem to offer narrative closure (HEA) where polygamy is involved.

Analysis of Book Findings

Building from the description of book findings, this section explores the meanings that can be found in the descriptive material. It is here that I begin to find the answers to my earlier questions regarding queer romance novels.

Gazes

In regard to the concept of “the gaze,” I kept two things in mind in this analysis: filters and passivity vs activity. As a whole, the novels could be categorized as having a queer gaze, if they are written by queer writers. In the cases studied here, all five of the novels were all written by queer people—and most likely for queer people, as well. Further, following Moss’s (2019) theory, all the chosen novels fall under the queer gaze because there is no passive agent, just equal counterparts in action. This additionally

supports Pullen's (2016) view, where it is two parties collaborating, instead of having an active agent and a passive agent (with the act using one another to achieve their goals).

Another thing that was considered during my analysis was the privilege of the white gaze. It is worth noting that in three of five books in my data set, the romantic couple was white, and that most of the books were written by white authors as well. This ties back to the privileging of white individuals as readers and writers, discussed in the early sections of my thesis. While it felt like I (a white reader) was along for the ride, it is possible that that for racialized readers these novels might not have felt as relatable.

While all the novels could be categorized as falling under the queer gaze, this could all differ depending on the reader and their life experiences. I created a series of analytic categories to help me consider how books invite readers to "gaze" at their queer characters. "With them," described books in which you are reading about a couple as a friend who is along for the ride; in "becoming the character," the character feels like a placeholder for the reader; and "voyeur," describes a book that feels like the reader is being invite to watch the characters.

Out of the five books in my data set, four fell into the category of "with them." In the case of *Red, White, & Royal Blue* and *Cemetery Boys*, it felt like I was tagging along for the ride as a friend of the main couple, and I could easily identify with both sets of main characters. *Delilah Green Doesn't Care* and *A Lady's Guide to Celestial Magic*, also falls into the "with them" category, as it felt like I was reading about a friend. However, in the case of a *Lady for a Duke*, it felt like Viola was meant to be a placeholder for the reader, instead of feeling like a friend along for the ride.

When it comes to the act of objectification of characters, and idealized sexual or gender identities, I considered how I felt as a reader, as well as which stereotypes related to queer identity I could notice. In the case of *Red, White, & Royal Blue*, Alex's character did fall into the "promiscuous bi" stereotype, however it is possible this occurred due to the framing of being the first son (men as being players vs nerds), as opposed to being bisexual. Henry's character was framed more as a princely type of character; however, he did not fall into any super prominent idealized stereotypes that I could notice. As a whole, I do not feel as a reader that Alex or Henry were being objectified.

The uncertain categorization continues with *Delilah Green Doesn't Care*. One could argue that Delilah as a queer woman was objectified through the framing of her being someone who sleeps around for fun, although I would argue that that framing served in part to show the trauma she has from her childhood (which led her to be unable to make long term connections), and that by the ending, this framing disappears. One could also argue that by wanting to have sex with someone to anger your sister is objectification, this also soon becomes a pure love instead. I do want to note the discomfort I felt due to the mentioning of the act of lesbians scissoring as the sole method of sexual pleasuring each other, though I will not offer an analysis of this stereotypes, as I feel that as a queer man it is not my place to state if that act is something done, or a stereotype – one should turn to queer women for their opinion on this matter instead.

In the case of *Cemetery Boys*, it is hard to tell if any characters fell into any obvious objectification spots, as both characters are under the age of 18, and this book was additionally written and advertised for those under the age of 18 to read as well. However, the novel did address racial stereotypes faced by those with families originating from South America – as one character was seen as a “rebel drug dealing dropout with mafia parents” when the school environment was simply not accommodating, and the stereotypes were made from racialization and were not true.

Regarding *A Lady for a Duke*, and *A Lady's Guide to Celestial Mechanics*, it is my opinion that these two novels do not objectify or idealize any identity (gender or sexuality) or character. Both sets of main characters have flaws and make mistakes (some that could even be considered toxic), but the characters always make sure to talk through stuff in the end. It is by allowing the characters to have their own flaws that the novel avoids promoting the idea that queer people have to be perfect, just because of their identity.

Messages Identified

Broadly, each novel brought forth the message that while being queer is hard, being true to yourself is important, and eventually you will find your community. There was a big emphasis about being true to yourself and community present in all the endings. However, the more specific message taken from *Red, White, & Royal Blue*, was that being queer can be hard and that queer folks face different forms of hate, but it is important to be true to yourself; this is worth any suffering and there is light at the end of the tunnel. The message I took from *Cemetery Boys* was that you should never have

to prove your identity to anyone (e.g. the main character feeling the need to earn family approval around being a trans man) and that found family, who will always love you for you, are just as important as blood family. The emphasis on found family was repeated in *A Lady for a Duke*, in addition to its message about the importance of surrounding yourself with people who love you for yourself, as they will be the ones who support you, even through challenges such as coming out, or drug recovery.

When I finished *Delilah Green Doesn't Care*, the message I took from it was that everyone can find somewhere to belong, and that true friends and found family can become a community, even when one feels unwelcome in small towns; that is, community is especially important within a small cookie cutter town. Finally, the messages I took from *A Lady's Guide to Celestial Mechanics* are that science and art should be created and consumed by everyone, and not just white cis het men. As well as that it is only by supporting each other that minorities can rise in the face of adversity, and that no one is alone, even though it may sometimes feel that way.

The central message, which was present within all of the novels, can be summarized as: it is important to be true to yourself, and that you will find where you belong one day. These are messages I find especially important for queer individuals, regardless of where they are in the process of defining their identity. Due to living outside the norm, especially in 2024 where the politics are turning against queer people in multiple countries, it can be scary to be open about one's identity; it can feel like you are alone, and that everyone is against you. Because of that, I find these two messages to be of great importance to queer readers, and honestly, to those who don't identify as

queer as well. Everyone deserves to feel free to be open about who they are, and who they love, and everyone deserves to feel supported and loved by their community around them.

Trends Within Novels

Tobin-McClain (2020) argues that romance novels with alternate realities serve to transport the reader either into an alternate, idealized world or a dystopian world, different from our own. While none of the novels in my data set took place within a world with a majorly altered reality, there were small changes made in the worlds of two novels that make the narratives. In both *Red, White, & Royal Blue* and *Cemetery Boys*, a small piece of reality was changed, but otherwise the world in the novel was represented similarly to ours. In one novel, there is a female President of the United States and a queer Prince of England, and in the other, there are individuals who have the powers to heal and aid spirits move on from this world after death. As Tobin-McClain argues in another context, these changes allow readers to find healing in the alternate world, or the experience in the books in a way that echoes the reader's lived experiences (2000). From that point, both novels do present relatable experiences, with *Red, White, & Royal Blue* exploring the process of getting to know someone that was previously disliked and the experience of being out, and with *Cemetery Boys* focusing on getting to know someone new and being an outcast.

In the case of the singular YA novel, *Cemetery Boys*, the most defining element of YA novels was present, with that being that the main characters were under the age of majority. The novel did in fact explore the topic of love and identity (Crisp, 2009), and

those were the primary topics within it. Additionally, as stated, the main characters were teenagers with troubled pasts, and amid transition – with it being a ceremony of age in this case (turning from boy to man) (Snead, 2014). Because of that, the one YA novel of the chosen five (*Cemetery Boys*) supports previous existing research.

While queer romance flourishes in sub-genres of romance, I was surprised to find that most of the novels within the top 15 queer romance novels were not fantasy. Instead, these novels took place either in a specific period (such as the Regency Era) or in an only a slightly altered version of our current world. This suggests that queer romance can flourish in all genres but tends to stick to settings similar to ours. In turn, this highlights that queer romance is just like straight romance in that it can exist in both our world, and other ones as well.

When looking at the five novels in my data set, there were a few trends that popped out. First, all the characters represented were either white, or had South American roots. None of the characters identified as another race or ethnicity or nationality. All the novels took place either in the United States or the United Kingdom; two books took place in America, two took place in England, and one was split equally between the two. All the novels were originally written in English; three took place within a contemporary time period, and two were historical romance novels that took place during the Regency Era in England.

In terms of stereotypes, the ones visible during my analysis fell within the following categories: racism, social status, sexism, and family dynamics. Of these four, racist stereotypes and family dynamic stereotypes were those most represented. Of all

the others of the chosen novels, four out of five were white-passing, with only one being Latino-American. While I would normally sigh over the racist stereotypes, this time it was different. Both novels used racist stereotypes in a critical way, with these stereotypes being disproved to make a fact, that everyone is deserving of respect regardless of racial identity. Additionally, the same applies to the family dynamic stereotypes, as they were also used in a critical way that ended up with the disproval of said stereotypes.

I found only two stereotypes based upon queer identity in these books, with both focusing on sexual habits. These two stereotypes were split between one M/M novel and one W/W novel. Within *Red, White, & Royal Blue*, the sexuality stereotypes were primarily present in a way that was critical, with the stereotypes being disproven. This can be seen in the stereotypes of sexuality being a choice, that politicians and royals would receive bad press and a lack of support if they came out as queer, and that bisexual people are flirts and date around. In the case of *Delilah Green Doesn't Care*, the stereotype is found within an action, that of lesbians scissoring. I classified this as a stereotype because as a queer nonbinary person, I'm not sure if this is factual, or a stereotype that exists due to the existence of lesbian porn created for male viewership.

In the case of *A Lady for a Duke*, the stereotypes centered more around transgender identity, and they were also proved as false, serving as a critical view of the stereotypes. These stereotypes were all internalized by the primarily transgender character, and were disproved over the course of the novel. This can be seen in the stereotypes of trans women being seen as disgusting to cis people, no one wanting to

date trans women, and that trans women cannot have children. The conclusion of the novel shows that trans women aren't disgusting and are worthy of being dated (as she finds a long-term partner), and that trans people can have family in the form of found family and adoption.

While tropes can be fueled by stereotypes (often negative), it is my honest opinion that none of the queer characters were villainized through negative stereotypes relating to their sexuality or gender identity because these stereotypes were always quickly disproved (or were only used as a joke) to combat the negative queer stereotypes that exist (Cook, Rostosky & Rigger, 2013). The fact that these tropes were disproved right away in the novel aids in disproving potential negative or dangerous stereotypes so that they are not internalized by readers (Franiuk & Scheer, 2013; Kokesh & Sternadori, 2015).

Defined as "a common or overused theme" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.), tropes exist in all forms of storytelling, from movies to books. It is through tropes that books can be marketed to the right group, as well as sorted on shelves, and within the online reading community. One way to find suggestions for books one may want to read is through tropes. Each of the five chosen books can in turn be simplified by its tropes. *Red, White, & Royal Blue* featured a version of "altar diplomacy," where instead of being arranged to be married, the two main leads are arranged to be friends for political reasons, even if they don't like it. Additionally, one could argue that the trope of unresolved sexual tension is present within the first half of the novel.

In the case of *Cemetery Boys*, the trope of “first love” is present, as is that of “star-crossed lovers” because both main leads almost die to save each other (thus being torn apart by death). Additionally, the trope of all the girls (or in this case, boys) want “bad boys” also being present, with Julian being framed as the bad boy through stereotypes placed on him by their peers. This can also in part be applied to *Delilah Green Doesn't Fail*, with Delilah being framed as the bad girl. In my opinion, the trope of “broken bird” could be applied to Delilah, as she has problems maintaining relationships (both romantic and platonic) due to her childhood and first partner, this in turn gets fixed by the end of the novel.

Within *A Lady for a Duke*, instead of a damsel in distress, it is the trope of “distressed dude,” where Viola ends up saving Justin from himself. One could also argue that the “not like other girls” trope is present through Viola, however I do not believe that should be counted in this case due to Viola’s mindset of being different is purely due to internalized homophobia. *A Lady's Guide to Celestial Mechanics* features a version of “costume porn”, where without fail, attention is placed on aspects of both women's outfits in detail. In turn, all five of the novels analyzed featured a happily ever after.

Outside of these, there were a few additional trends that I noticed after reading the novels. Firstly, the only Young Adult novel of the five was M/M, with the main characters being in high school. The other M/M novel featured characters of university age, thus both M/M novels centered students. All the other novels had some form of sexual content and discussions around the characters' futures. This in turn means that

YA novels are less likely to be found for queer novels, despite what I originally believed. When looking at the top 15 queer romance novels, most of them feature either students in university or characters that are older than that.

Within both M/M novels, the future of both pairings was not discussed, with the novel ending after the couple gets together. Meanwhile, both W/W discussed the act of “becoming a family,” with the future being established between the pairings before the end of the novel. This is seen in *A Lady’s Guide to Celestial Mechanics* through the merging of their careers, explorations, and finances together (Waite, 2019). Meanwhile, it is seen in *Delilah Green Doesn’t Care* through Delilah moving from New York to Bright Falls, and agreeing to parenting with Claire (Blake, 2022). *A Lady for a Duke*, the only novel with a straight pairing, went into the most details in regards of the future, with the epilogue showing us the formation of an idealized family dynamic²² several years in the future (Hall, 2022).

It is my opinion that each novel in my data set can be summarized in four parts. As a whole, the novels follow the following progression: establishment of relationship, figuring out relationship titles,²³ conflict, and then happily ever after. In the case of *Red, White, & Royal Blue*, the two hate each other, slowly become friends, then lovers, get outed in regards to their sexualities and relationship status, but then get their happily ever after by being true to who they are. In *Cemetery Boys*, the two boys meet for the first time, slowly become friends and then develop mutual crushes, almost get torn apart

²² One man, one woman, and children.

²³ This can be anything from friends to lovers, enemies to lovers, or one-night stands.

by death, but they manage to live and start dating. Within *A Lady for a Duke*, Viola and Justin meet, Justin talks about marrying Viola, Viola's identity comes out upsetting Justin, Justin realizes why Viola did it and they get married. In *Delilah Green Doesn't Care*, Delilah reunites with Claire, the two start sleeping together, Delilah runs away to New York and Claire thinks she was abandoned, Delilah comes back, and they start dating. Lastly, in *A Lady's Guide to Celestial Mechanics*, the two meet, they start sleeping together and dating, both begin fearing the other isn't serious about them, but they talk it through and stay together as a couple.

While we now have our book data, it is time to cover the data pulled from the top three most popular reviews for each book. This leaves a total of 15 reviews to cover.

Readers' Reviews

It is through online reading communities that readers can find a space to interact and discuss romance novels with fellow readers and authors. For the sake of this study, I focused primarily on Goodreads, and the reviews left under each of the five books in my data set. Online community spaces, such as Goodreads, aid in the formation of friendships that revolve around reading romance, as well as other genres of novels (Roach, 2010). The social sphere online aids in connecting fans to each other, regardless of geographical location (Deller & Smith, 2013), as well as acting as a space for these communities of readers to interact with others who have a passion for the genre (Span, 2022). One group especially impacted by the online fandom²⁴ are 2SLGBTQ+ readers, with findings showing that the online community allows youth

²⁴ Defined as a group or community of fans who share a specific interest.

opportunities to contest 2SLGBTQ+ mass media depictions and problematic representations (McInroy, Zapcic & Beer, 2022). A considerable amount of knowledge around texts, including that of romance texts, comes from media and other people's discussion (Thobaiti, 2019).

Goodreads is a social media sphere that houses lists of most books published within the past five decades. On this site, fans are able to put these books on "shelves" (otherwise known as personalized lists, with labels such as "To-Read" or "Completed") and give the novels ratings (on a 5-star scale) and write reviews for others within the reading community on the site to see. Fellow readers can "like" a review if they agree with it, and the reviews are posted under the information of the book for others to rely on when choosing what to read. On the platform, readers can "friend" each other to receive notifications on their "feed" (the page they get when they log in) when their friends shelve, read, or review a novel.

For the sake of this thesis, I chose the five most popular reviews under each novel, taking the three reviews as a summary for the general reading community's opinions regarding the novels; this is because the top three reviews would be the most liked and agreed upon by the community (through their "like" function). After choosing each review, I removed the username on the review to maintain anonymity, and then scanned them for any words that fell within my list of priorities. These include general emotions or opinions (happy, sad, dislike, like,) aspects of the novel (smut, fluff), and thoughts regarding characterization, setting, or relationship dynamics.

Red, White, & Royal Blue

When it came to the reviews and ratings for *Red, White, & Royal Blue*, it seems like the general audience felt the same thing. Giving it a two out of five-star rating, the audience cited being discombobulated and displeased. In the end, the general view was that the book wasn't terrible, but that there were so many small issues that built up, making it feel overly political while not digging deep enough into the political world, leaving the readers feeling like they were reading idealized political fanfiction. This was put best by reviewer A1, who stated:

THE POLITICS: This is, by far, the WORST thing about this book. It's what got my first read to drop from presumably 5 to 3.5. Single-handedly. And it's even more gruesome the second time. This is the most idealized, grotesque, good-versus-evil look at politics I have EVER SEEN. In this book, the Democrats are a rainbow-wearing gloriously diverse coalition of kumbaya-singing angels, and everyone else is a villain we won't talk about. Democrats are 100% motivated purely by the love of Doing The Right Thing, and they have never done anything wrong, ever, in their lives. The American people love them implicitly and will turn historically red states blue just to show them that. It's not only sickening, it's damaging. DO NOT IDEALIZE POLITICIANS. THEY ARE NOT CELEBRITIES.

All the reader reviews in my data set cited similar feelings: that the romance was unconvincing as it was “99% smut”²⁵ (reviewer A1). Reviewer A1 cited that they disliked the novel because it felt “too cheesy”, and that the novel was “painfully unaware of how jarring it was”. Meanwhile, reviewer A2 stated that the novel was “unrealistic” and “left the characters facing no consequences for any of their actions”, which in turn made the characters unlikeable. Reviewer A3 states that because of these reasons, the whole novel felt as if it was being read with “rose-colored glasses on”.

If I had to summarize the general feeling of the reviewers (who all noted they received a copy of the book to read and review for their honest opinions), it would be through reviewer A3, who states that “by and large, the people who write this stuff [with stuff meaning M/M romance] are... white women writing for a white woman audience.” With over 6000 review likes between the three reviews, I personally believe that these opinions are ones held by a lot of readers.

In turn, the reviews of *Red, White, & Royal Blue* confirm part of my original theory that readers feel like queer novels are being written with a specific group (white women) in mind. However, this is not due to the reasons I originally thought, which was that this occurs due to non-queer authors writing queer romance, as McQuiston identifies as queer. Instead, I believe it is possible that the focus on politics within the novel felt off for many readers, especially with readers making sure to mention the use of politics within their reviews. My personal belief here is that this novel would have been better split into three novels, allowing a more nuance presentation of the politics and more

²⁵ With smut meaning sexual content.

time to build the romance. While cheesiness is common for romance (and why some read it in the first place), multiple commenters noted that the romance felt like it was just about sex and the politics was overly simplified, making both aspects feel unnatural.

Cemetery Boys

With reviews spanning from four and a half stars to five out of five stars, it is very clear from the reviews that the readers of this book felt much more positively about this book when compared to *Red, White, & Royal Blue*. Citing characters that felt realistic, lovable, and not to be forgotten, the primary view of *Cemetery Boys* is that the story and characters are handled with care and relatability.

When it comes to the author, readers cited feeling like the author treated them with tenderness and care. They claimed that this can be seen in how familiar their heartbreaking stories are, and how it left the characters being described as lovable by the readers. Additionally, readers highlighted the author's ability to handle tropes through its shifting and “smacking upside the head” (B1) given to them. One reviewer even stated that while the novel was heartbreaking, it left them with their “heart glowing” and “unable to stop smiling” (B2).

One part of a review (by reviewer B1) that really stood out of me was the highlighting of the novel's ability to address the middle-ground area experienced by queer individuals after coming out, stating:

I think oftentimes in queer YA books the queer protagonist is either wholeheartedly embraced by their family, or shunned by them completely. But few novels venture into the vast area in between where it feels like the people

around you are embracing you with an arm, but pushing you back with the other, and how painful and taxing it is to navigate that. Yadriel's family claims to accept him as a boy, but throwaway comments like his dad asking him to “stay [there] with the rest of the women” or his grandmother telling him he'll always be “[her] little girl” cut like a knife, swift and deep. Yadriel did not know how to fit love and resentment into the same cupboard. He loved his family and community and wanted to belong with them, but their failure to embrace him the way he deserved to be embraced hurt, and Yadriel struggled with how to reconcile the two.

This is a feeling that I believe is felt by transgender individuals like myself, who are coming to terms with being themselves freely and openly.

Delilah Green Doesn't Care

After reading and summarizing the reviews for this novel, the one word that came to me was being torn. One reviewer gave it no stars (although they also said they loved it and put it on their shelf), one gave it two out of five stars, and another gave it five out of five stars. It's clear that there is no consensus between these readers. The reviews cover all different sentiments towards the novel, leaving no base uncovered.

For those who disliked the novel, the root cause seems to be based on of the characters, as well as their relationship dynamics. The no star reviewer stated that the relationship seemed to only be rooted in sex (and not banter – which they cite as something they look for in romance novels between characters), that the sex comes out of nowhere; it is very clear that the reader did not find the story relatable, and that it was

lacking, in their opinion. Additionally, the reviewer added that the characters were unlikeable and one-sided (even going as far as to call them “a barrel of monkeys” (C1)).

Meanwhile, those who loved the novel disagreed, stating that the novel left them feeling happy and seen. These reviewers mention that the novel delivers everything you would want in a romance and that it is full of little moments that leave the characters feeling familiar and real, with depth and nuance. Reviewer C3, when talking about the characters, stated:

[The story is] a really kind and heartfelt narrative full of nuanced characters and I loved it so much. I adored Claire and Delilah's connection, there was such passion and intensity between them but there was also so much tenderness and I loved how vulnerable they were with one another. I love the way this story handles Claire's parenting woes, as she became a mother at a very young age and she's constantly worried about whether she's doing what's best for Ruby and being the best parent she could be. It was just really great and I liked seeing how her parenting anxieties were handled. As for Delilah, I loved seeing how her lonely childhood led to an isolated adult life and how she struggled to break those cycles, her childhood traumas were just handled so deftly.

It is worth noting that not only are the characters applauded, but the story telling is as well, with both reviewers (C2 and C3) saying the storytelling is generous, nuanced, and fun. If I had to sum up the view of those who liked the novel, it would be through the quote of the novel being “a celebration of found family and a beautiful exploration of the

way home and freedom, in the right context, with the right person, can feel like exactly the same thing” (C2).

A Lady for a Duke

The consensus between reviewers is very clear about how great this novel is, with two reviews giving it a four out of five, and the last reviewer not giving it a rating²⁶ but talking only positively about it. While the readers applauded the novel, the pacing and length of the story was mentioned as the most defining flaw of the book, with one reviewer stating (D3):

I think my only issue, significant as it was, with this story is that the pacing fell way off the map in the middle of the book. The whole plot felt drawn out and muddled, and I missed the feelings I had in the beginning of the book. I feel like the initial plotline only stretched so far, and then side plots were brought in to flesh it out and then things felt watered down, if that makes sense. I wanted that emotional intensity back.

However, reviewers came to a consensus that this flaw was easy to ignore due to how great the novel was. Additionally, reviewer D2 stated that they appreciate romance novels (like this one) that “face head on that sometimes there isn't a single right course of action, and that people's rights and needs sometimes come into direct conflict”.

Described as “the perfect mix of angst/tension and also slice of life moments” (D1), the novel was described as refreshing, fluffy, and light-hearted. It was stated more

²⁶ This is due to their review being attached to the action of them placing the novel on their “have read” shelf – where shelves stand as a tool to organize different books by the user.

than once that the characters were not portrayed through rose-colored lenses, being that the characters were not portrayed as perfect. One part of the reviews for this novel that especially stood out to me was when a reader stated that “on page sex in books with trans characters is so important to me because I love when authors treat these books with the same heat and sexual tension as any other pairing” (D3.) This especially resonated to me as a transgender person, because sometimes with transgender representation, it feels as if the trans characters aren’t being held to the same level of passion and exploration as cisgender folks.

A Lady’s Guide to Celestial Mechanics

Like *A Lady for a Duke*, the consensus on *A Lady’s Guide to Celestial Mechanics* is very clear. This is because two reviewers gave it five out of five stars, with the other reviewer not giving it a rating²⁷, but only saying positive things about it. This seems to be due to the way the story (within the context of the novel’s time period) and its characters are portrayed and treated.

If there is one thing highlighted by all the reviewers, it’s the ability of the story to cover so many issues (such as sexism and internalized homophobia) that come with the historical period, while still treating the characters as people and with respect. This was especially highlighted by (E3) who stated:

That is one of the things that amazes me the most about this book: it focuses on and deals with homophobia in a culture and how it is internalized by the lead

²⁷ This is due to their review being attached to the action of putting the novel on their “have read” shelf.

characters, but it focuses that energy towards development and crafting tenderness and love between these two characters.

I think there is a lot of value in lit that talks about and deconstructs historical homophobia, but it should be noted, in saying that, that much of this type of literature is written by and for the heterosexual lens. This book is absolutely not that. Side queer characters are involved and given their own non-tragic stories... and the pain and trauma of homophobia is only used to explain the character's internalized homophobia and build their characters, and only subtly.

In turn, the novel's ability to do just that left readers deeply impressed with the care, thoughtfulness, and love clearly put into the novel.

Described as a "perfect blend of plot and romance" (E3), *A Lady's Guide to Celestial Mechanics* is a slow-burning, passionate, intense novel. However, the novel is not without its flaws, with a reviewer pointing out how the novel erases the actual accomplishments of women scientists of that time period, to make a point about the erasure of women scientists; the reviewer cites the work of Caroline Herschel²⁸ in that time period as an example (E2.) While this should be noted, it is the only flaw noted by reviewers in the context of the novel.

Discussion

Looking at all the reviews together, there are a couple trends that can be seen between novels and readers' opinions of them. In general, reviewers are torn between

²⁸ Caroline Herschel (sister of the discoverer of Uranus) was a famous and respected astronomer who discovered eight comets.

representation in W/W and M/M novels being good or bad, with one of each getting a low number of stars, while the other of each receives praise. My understanding of this connects to who is writing the novel and who is reading it. Twice, reviewers noted that it is white women who are writing these novels for white women; both comments were made in regard to *Red, White, & Royal Blue*. Originally, I had assumed that viewers would be critical of straight / cis writers writing queer characters and queer romance, however, this was not the case. When it comes to the authors of the five novels in my data set, all identify as queer, which makes the theory of only non-queer women writing queer romance for women to read partially untrue.

When I started this thesis, I had four questions. Firstly, for whom were these novels written, were they written with a straight audience in mind or a queer one, and do they portray queer characters through stereotypes? It is my belief after this research that the answer to this is that the novels were written for a general audience, but with queer readers in mind, as the stereotypes within these novels were primarily represented critically and were disproved by the end of each novel.

Secondly, what kind of setting does each novel take place in, is it a fantasy setting where homophobia and transphobia don't exist, or is it based on the current world reality, and does it center a heteronormative view of romance? The answer to this question is that the stories take place in realities similar to ours (either present day with small changes, or in the past), and the stories are all rooted in worlds where homophobia and transphobia exist but are not the primary focus of the novels. The novels may touch on heteronormative views of romance, but each one finds a way to

queer heteronormative expectations, making the views inclusive of readers of all sexualities.

Thirdly, what message is the novel offering about queer romance, does it call attention to the prejudice faced by individuals who do not fit into heteronormative cultures, or does it bring a sense of hope for queer individuals? While the novels take care to not ignore the existence of homophobia and transphobia, they do so with a critical lens. Each novel has a happily ever after that disproves traditional queer stereotypes, which appears to leave readers with a sense of hope for the future.

Lastly, what forms of representation are missing from the queer romance novels in my data set? The first category to jump out of my mind is polyamorous identities, as they are not represented in any of the novels in my data set. The second category is interracial relationships, as only one of the novels featured an interracial couple.

In the case of *Red, White, & Royal Blue*, the author identifies as nonbinary and queer, and it is very possible that the author could at times identify as more masculine with interest in men. Meanwhile, in the case of *Delilah Green Doesn't Care*, the author identifies as a woman who is bisexual. This means that both novels where authors' identities were mentioned in reviews (A3 and C2) were written by people of that same (or similar) identity as those being represented.

The major determinants of whether a reviewer felt a queer romance novel was considered good or bad seemed to lie in two different categories. One, the pacing of the novel, which helped readers determine if they liked the novel or not. If the novel was too long, or felt drawn out, that could lead to a lower rating. Second, if the characters were

seen as unrealistic and unlikeable, it then becomes harder for readers to feel motivated in regard to connecting to and finishing the book.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

“In films, we are voyeurs, but in novels, we have the experience of being someone else: knowing another person’s soul from the inside. No other art form does that.” – Donna Tartt, *Chatelaine Interview* (2013)

As stated wisely by Lucy within *A Lady’s Guide to Celestial Mechanics*, “Truth doesn’t belong to any one scholar: it requires all of us” (Waite, 2019, p. 218). When I started this thesis, I was especially interested in who was reading queer romance, what they looked for in queer romance novels, how they felt during and after the reading process, and how (and with whom) they identified in terms of the characters in these novels. Because I wanted to be queer centred within my research, I limited the research to focus on the most popular queer novels. While searching for the top five queer romance novels, I discovered that twelve of the fifteen most popular queer romance novels were written by authors who are openly queer identifying. This led me to the conclusion that most of the popular queer romance novels are written by queer identifying authors.

Based upon the results in my research, my general conclusion is that the queer romance novels are written by queer individuals for the general public, but that they do prioritize queer audiences / readers. This conclusion is based upon the fact that the majority of the queer romance novels were written by queer authors, and that most readers paid attention to queer representation (and would, in their reviews, call out representations they felt to be inaccurate). Additionally, the gaze at work in the five

novels I examined very rarely felt objectifying, leaving readers feeling like they were following along with their friends (the main characters) as they navigated their love story.

Most of these novels were set in a contemporary setting that acknowledges the existence of homophobia and transphobia. None of these novels ever validated inequalities faced by queer characters²⁹. Even in the case of historical queer romance novels, homophobia and transphobia were never celebrated. However, while the existence of these inequalities (among others as well) was present in the novel settings, it was never the sole focus of the novel, with the novels instead focusing on its impact on the main characters' growth as a person.

While the novels did center queer romance, it is arguable that the novels held a more heteronormative view of romance (and happily ever afters). This can be seen in norms held by the characters, such as that of queer futures centering idealized families (two parents, kids and a house), though with queered twists such as found families (kids being adopted, family by choice not blood, lack of gendered norms). It is because of the queered twists that it is my belief that the heteronormative view of romances and HEA are easily ignored, and do not seem to bring up any potentially harmful stereotypes.

In regards of conceptions of sexual and gender identities, all novels either fell in the developmental category or the post-structural category³⁰ (Blackburn, Clark &

²⁹ Compared to media where a reason is given for homophobia and transphobia – such as queer characters being villains.

³⁰ With developmental meaning characters go from not accepting to accepting, and post-structural meaning that the world in itself has normalized and has queer identities blended in within society.

Nemeth, 2015). The novels had a mix of developmental, post-structural, and essential views of families and homes, while having HV, GA, and QC queer ideology representations (pp.14-20) All novels ended with HEAs that consisted of monogamous queer relationships (Carter, 2020).

Representation is something readers keep in mind. In fact, when leaving reviews, readers would often point out if the representation of queer characters felt accurate to them and accurately reflected their lived experiences. When it came to the portrayal of the main characters in these novels, most often readers are left feeling as if they were experiencing the story and romance through a friend's eyes, meaning that they did not leave readers feeling objectified or idealized, with only few moments of questioning if something felt wrong with the representation (such as the act of scissoring being mentioned).

Queer romances contain multiple messages, however, there were a couple that I felt were prominent within the five novels I studied. First, is the importance of being true to oneself. This theme is central to all of the books. Second, is the message that everyone can find somewhere they belong. I felt that each book wanted to convey this to its readers. An example can be found in the form of a found family. These two themes were shown throughout all five of the novels and presented a heavy focus on the impact of identity and community. It is through these messages that a sense of hope for the future is present within the chosen queer romances, even though they are set in a more normative reality where transphobia and homophobia are present. The novels focus on positivity about the present and the future. While making sure to acknowledge that

prejudice exists, they highlight that the prejudice can be surpassed. All five novels had stereotypes relating to sexuality and gender present within them. Additionally, all five had a HEA.

In terms of representation, there generally seemed to be romance novels for every gender and sexual identity. Where representation becomes difficult is in popularity and attention, as novels with some identities are currently more popular than those of other identities. For example, based on my research: there are more queer romance novels centering queer men than queer women; there is a better mix of age ranges for M/M than W/W; and, there are more adult W/W than YA W/W romance novels. Additionally, it was easier to find content about transgender men than transgender women. Lastly, there was far more white representation than representations of characters of any other race among both the novels in my data set and those featured on Goodreads.

Queer romance novels continue to be a booming voice within the book sphere, and especially in the romance genre. While the current novels could be said to cover many gender identities and sexualities, it is my belief that more work could be done to prioritize publication and representation of more than just white voices.

To date, there has been very little research that centres queer narratives in romance novels. I can only make assumptions about why this is the case, but there is one thing I CAN do, and that is to do my own research and hope that it can lead others to choose to study queer romance as well.

Contributions

It is my hope, both as a researcher and as a member of the reading and queer communities, that this research will benefit the community, and provide a beneficial contribution to the academic sphere of queer studies and gender studies, as well as romance studies and literature studies. It is also my hope that this research may be the basis for further research into queer romance readership and authorship. In the end, my goal while writing this is to contribute and give back to my communities.

This study has allowed for the creation of a deeper understanding on why an individual may choose to read queer romance novels, how they choose the novels they read, and what they believe they gain from reading them. This research also offers a general view of some online reading communities, as well as their different views of different forms of (queer) romance novels. Finally, this work provides an understanding as to what stands out to a reader both during and after the reading process. In turn, this understanding creates a clearer view of what readers take from the experience of reading queer romance novels.

Limitations

It is my opinion that to not address the limitations of a research, is to not acknowledge the full extent of one's research. While my thesis brings forth many benefits and contributions to the queer romance community, it is not without its flaws. It is my hope that by listing these flaws, more researchers down the road may pick up where I left off and move forward to further research this topic and bring forth more benefits and contributions to the community.

First, there are some limitations associated with using book reviews as a source of community opinion. For example, I was only able to access reviews in English, which excluded anyone who cannot communicate in English fluently. Secondly, the reviews had to be posted by March 20th 2024, any reviews made after that date could not be included. Thirdly, because this is a Master's thesis, I can only include so many reviews before this paper begins to get too long. In turn, this limits the amount of community opinions I can include. Fourthly, by only focusing on the most popular (via likes) reviews, outlier opinions were not brought to my attention due to not receiving as many likes as the popular opinions. Lastly, by limiting my review sources to Goodreads, I thus ended up excluding the opinions of those who are not on Goodreads.

With myself as a researcher, there are also limitations. Firstly, there are outside barriers that may have impacted both myself and the reviewers that cannot be controlled for. Outside barriers can include life changes (mentally, physically, financially, health wise) that could impact how the data was written and analysed. Secondly, as I was the only person conducting this research, it is possible that there may be some unconscious bias, both in regard to the analysis of the novels, as well as the analysis of the book reviews that may go unseen by myself. While I tried to control for bias, it would be unethical of me to not acknowledge that unconscious bias may have led to views and opinions not shared by the online reading community or the 2SLGBTQ+ community, and while I tried to create and support views held by the community, it is possible that my analyses and conclusions may not represent the views of the entire community.

Future Research

Regarding future research on the topic of queer romance, it is my hope that this thesis offers research that can be built upon to further our knowledge on the topic. There are a few ways that this research could be used as a building block. Firstly, researchers could (and should) look into the author's perspective, interviewing them on how they identify and who they write for. Secondly, a deeper dive could be done regarding reviewers, possibly enquiring directly to the readers on their feelings and thoughts about queer romance novels.

One area that becomes especially clear through this research is the lack of data and exploration of romance novels that centre a "why choose" dynamic, which can also be framed as polyamorous relationships. Future research should consider investigating the happily ever afters present within polyamorous romance stories, as well as the identities of those present within them. It would be interesting as well to view which tropes and stereotypes are present within these stories, and what the most represented gender and sexuality dynamics are within them.

It is my belief that future researchers should prioritize diversity of characters, readers, and authors, ensuring people of all backgrounds and backgrounds participate in the research. If possible, a broader range of queer romance novels should be considered (more than five books). In addition, research could also be done regarding the elements of queer romance novels that are not primarily in English, as localization may play an impact on data. Lastly, further research can be done regarding the

application of this research to non-monogamous relationships within queer romance, as no non-monogamous relationship was included within this data set.

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Appendix A: Figures

Figure 1

Annotation Guide

