

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



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Senior Seminar  
December 10th, 2019

**Abstract**

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

## Acknowledgments

I first would like to thank my advisor and seminar professor Beck Krefting, whose assistance turned this paper from a jumble of nonsensical ravings from the mind of a madman to more coherent ravings from said madman.

I would also like to thank Professor Jacque Micieli-Voustinas, who served as my secondary faculty advisor and honors thesis advisor, for helping me create the queerest teen television show there ever was (as well as tossing me some great suggestions for already existing shows to watch).

Since I am already halfway there, I would like to thank the whole American Studies department team (Professors Pfitzer and Nathan as well as Sue Matrazzo) for their unwavering support as I essentially moved into the lounge full time. (For more details, see the acknowledgments of Kit Meyer).

I'd also like to thank Professor Wendy Lee in the English department who, although not an American Studies scholar, has always been supportive as a mentor and manages to keep the chaos that is my mind grounded and focused.

My classmates were another resource that I could not have succeeded without, between peer reviews and moral support as I trudged through this daunting project.

A special thanks goes out to a few of these classmates. Kit Meyer, for joining me for endless hours on the Tisch third floor, and forever cementing our butt-prints on the lounge chairs. Charlotte Sweeney, for listening to my constant barrage of stress and never telling me to shut up (although I would have deserved it). Liza Pennington for acting as my sounding board during the honors thesis process, and allowing me to continue talking even when she had other work to be doing at our job in the office.

My housemates also deserve thanks, as I left my thesis literature strewn across our apartment for the whole semester unapologetically, and they graciously never told me to clean my shit up.

Finally, I would like to thank everyone who supported me in my journey to come out and explore the topic of queer studies further, as not everyone is so lucky to have the same unbelievably supportive academic and personal networks that I do.

## Table of Contents

### Thesis

Abstract.....	2
Acknowledgments.....	3
Introduction.....	5
Lit Review.....	8
Methods.....	13
From Trope to Triumph and Back Again: Riverdale’s Kevin Keller.....	16
Rewriting the Social Contract: The Society’s Sam Eliot and Gareth “Grizz” Visser.....	29
“Queer Utopia,” <sup>1</sup> Almost: Pretty Little Liars: The Perfectionists’ Dylan Walker.....	42
Concluding Thoughts.....	50
Works Cited.....	54

### Honors Thesis

Foreword.....	57
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<sup>1</sup> Jill Gutowitz, “The ‘Pretty Little Liars’ Spinoff Is Unhinged Queer Camp,” (*Vice*, April 2, 2019).

## Introduction

Let's play a little game. Try to name all the straight<sup>2</sup> characters you have seen on television. That pop you just heard? That's your brain trying to wrap itself around the sheer magnitude of names and people that just came rushing in. That number is quite possibly in the thousands. Now ask yourself how many of those characters are teens. How many of those teens can be visibly, physically romantic and sexual? You still have a massive number. If you only include straight teens of varying racial and ability diversity in that number, it gets smaller, but still remains high. Let's try something else. Try to think of all the regular queer<sup>3</sup> characters you have seen on television. I can wait, it probably won't take you long. You likely came up with around five, maybe ten, or if you, like me, are committed to finding every show that includes queer characters in existence, you probably could get into the twenties. I know for a fact that the number cannot go higher than 395, because that is the total number of queer characters on television, and if you are at that number, I envy how much time you have to spend watching TV. Now think about how many of those queer characters are teens. It could be all of them, if you spend most of your time on Freeform, but it is likely a significantly smaller number. How many of them have had romantic relationships on the screen? Have they been able to share kisses with other queer individuals? What about sex? The number keeps shrinking. How many queer teen characters that can physically romantic inhabit multiple subordinate identities? Your number is probably around one, if even. That number is too low.

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<sup>2</sup> When I use the word "straight" throughout this paper, I am referring to straight, cisgender identifying people specifically.

<sup>3</sup> I choose to use the word queer throughout this paper as an umbrella term for anyone who occupies a non-normative sexual or gender identity.

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

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

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

streaming services.<sup>5</sup> This is the highest representation of LGBTQ identity on television that GLAAD has ever found in their fourteen years of running the study.<sup>6</sup> With ever-increasing numbers of representation, how are these characters being depicted on screen, and are they allowed to exist and live in the same way that straight teens are? Just how queer can these queer teens be?

So what exactly is my “gay agenda” in this study? I will unpack three televisual teen dramas—*Riverdale*, *The Society*, and *Pretty Little Liars: The Perfectionists*,—and how they treat their queer teen characters alongside straight teens. Straight teens can live how they want, do whatever (and whoever) they want, and exist without the weight of a non-normative sexual identity on their shoulders. Can queer teens act in the same ways as their straight counterparts on these shows? What acts are queer teens allowed to perform on the screen, and what is withheld from view? Finally, *when* and *how* can queer teens act in these similar ways? In order to accurately gauge the equality of queer and straight teen representation, it is necessary to analyze what the dominant group *is* allowed to do in order to understand what the minority group *should* be able to do. This research is necessary because only a qualitative study comparing minority rights to majority rights can effectively gauge equality. Doing so for queer teens in order to elucidate the necessary changes that should be made on American teen television could not only help in inspiring more equal representation, but also make it so all queer teens who are coming to terms with their sexuality can see representations that reflect them, and not just their straight peers. By using straight teen discourse as a control for what is considered “acceptable” for contemporary television and studying the differences between queer and straight character arcs,

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<sup>5</sup> “Where We Are on TV Report.”

<sup>6</sup> “Where We Are on TV Report.”

the disallowances afforded to queer teen characters are unveiled, suggesting that although numbers of representation are ever-increasing, true equality remains at arms length.

### **Literature Review**

Representation of queer people in the media, television specifically, has been a focus of scholarship since the early 1990s. The scholarship on these representations draws primarily from media and film studies and queer theory, although sociological and literary studies do factor in as well. I found four themes in research surrounding queer characters on television that are relevant to this paper. One of the earliest themes is the study of queer television in the 1990s, a time when queer characters were finally breaking into the television landscape. While much has changed since then, there are a multitude of similarities between earlier and more contemporary queer television. Another theme focused on the benefits and consequences of the coming-out narrative, and what the effects are of the popular plot device on queer representation. Often accompanying discussion of the coming-out narrative was the question of how different tropes of queer characters affected queer representations on the screen. The final theme outlined the trend that queer characters are either completely subsumed by heterosexual society, or are othered and barred access to dominant social structures. While each of these research trends are essential in moving forward, many of them (like queer teens on television) are one-dimensional in that they only study one aspect of the queer character in their analyses. I argue that queer teens can only be holistically represented when they are allowed to act in similar ways to their straight counterparts, without being absorbed into heterosexual structures.



Many of the studies on queer teen representation on television, or even those on queer representation as a whole, date back to the 1980s and are important in thinking about how these narratives have changed over time. Larry Gross, in 1989, argued that there were no representations of “plain” queer folk on television, they always had to exist as either deviant or exceptional.<sup>7</sup> He then argues that TV socializes American society to believe what they are shown.<sup>8</sup> These negative representations are harmful not only to queer people who see themselves vilified or overly exceptionalized, but also to heterosexual society that acquires a misunderstanding of the queer community.<sup>9</sup> In Gross’s argument, representation of queer individuals has a significant effect on the American people consuming these characters. When queer characters do not exist in the canon, that affects the American people as well. Mark Lipton notes that many queer people have been forced to invent queer subtext as a means to create representations where they are lacking, because it simply did not exist in reality.<sup>10</sup> Along similar lines, Jose E. Muñoz advances the concept of disidentification, defining it as the ability “to read oneself and one’s own life narrative in a moment, object, or subject that is not culturally coded to ‘connect’ with the disidentifying subject.”<sup>11</sup> All of this to say, if queer characters are not present, queer individuals will find a way to relate to the content in one form or another. Therefore, the lack of representation has just as much of an effect on American society as the types of representation. However, Julia Himberg contrarily argues that “the relationship between television and its viewers is far more complex and thus cannot be reduced to the assertion that

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<sup>7</sup> Larry Gross, *Remote Control: Television, Audiences & Cultural Power* (London: Routledge, 1989), 137.

<sup>8</sup> Gross, *Remote Control*, 135.

<sup>9</sup> Gross, *Remote Control*, 135.

<sup>10</sup> Mark Lipton, “Queer Readings of Popular Culture: Searching [to] Out the Subtext,” in *Queer Youth Cultures*, ed. Susan Driver. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010), 168.

<sup>11</sup> Jose E. Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 12.

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

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

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<sup>12</sup> Julia Himberg, *The New Gay for Pay: The Sexual Politics of American Television Production* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2017), 4.

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

<sup>14</sup> Davis, “‘Saying It Out Loud’” 132.

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

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

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<sup>15</sup> Sean Robinson and Bernice Alston, "Lavender Identity and Representation in the Media: The Portrayal of Gays and Lesbians in Popular Television," in *The Millennials on Film and Television: Essays on the Politics of Popular Culture*, ed. Betty Kaklamanidou and Margaret Tally, (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2014), 40.

<sup>16</sup> Johanna Schorn, "Coming Out into the 21st Century: Queer on Contemporary TV," *Narratives at the Beginning of the 3rd Millennium* (2013).

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

While assimilation is often the ultimate goal for queer teen characters, not all can assimilate, no matter how hard they try (nor should they have to). Queer teens are othered through tropes, such as the “gay best friend,” the “depraved bisexual,” the “armoured closet gay,” and, present in many queer narratives, the “bury your gays” trope.<sup>21</sup> The “gay best friend”

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<sup>17</sup> Davis, “Saying It Out Loud,” 129.

<sup>18</sup> Himberg, *New Gay for Pay*, 10.

<sup>19</sup> Eve Ng, “A ‘Post-Gay’ Era? Media Gaystreaming, Homonormativity, and the Politics of LGBT Integration,” *Communication, Culture & Critique* 6, no. 2 (2013), 275-276.

<sup>20</sup> Suzanna Danuta Walters, *All the Rage: The Story of Gay Visibility in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 76.

<sup>21</sup> “Gender and Sexuality Tropes,” *TV Tropes*,

<https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/GenderAndSexualityTropes>.

is the effeminate, sassy, sidekick of a typically white female protagonist, the “depraved bisexual” is the sexually promiscuous character that is driven to licentiousness by their sexuality, and the “armoured closet gay” is the closeted queer character who is outright homophobic to others.<sup>22</sup> The “bury your gays” trope is the killing off of queer characters after they have served a small purpose (usually a coming out narrative).<sup>23</sup> For a long time, queer characters operated solely within these tropes, and many of them still are, for this is how the straight, white, male dominated television industry understands queerness. These tropes are not all bad, and can be used strategically to combat the very tropes they depict, but they simply cannot be the sole depiction of queer teens on the screen.

Building from the literature, I intend to study not only queer narrative arcs, but how they exist in relation to straight arcs. Most scholars of queer studies unsurprisingly focus on the queer characters alone, and how just those characters are represented. However, failing to simultaneously study straight characters in relation to the queer characters omits an important comparison in analyzing representations. If heterosexuality is the norm, the actions that straight characters are permitted within the shows become the norm for how all people *should* be able to act. When straight characters are having sex on a television show, the queer characters should be able to as well. If no one is having sex, however, then it is not a failed representation of queer sexuality because there is no representation of sexuality whatsoever. Studying queer arcs in relation to straight arcs illuminates the differences between the “normal” and the “abnormal,” and the aspects of queer culture that society still finds unacceptable become noticeable in their absence.

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<sup>22</sup> “Gender and Sexuality Tropes.”

<sup>23</sup> “Gender and Sexuality Tropes.”

## Methods

This paper examines the representation of queer teens on television, and requires a specific set of methods to do so effectively. I will employ a multiperspectival analysis, focusing on a representational analysis paired with close readings of three televisual texts. By turning to the texts themselves as the primary focus, rather than including symptomatic effects and production elements, I isolate the representations themselves and study the final iterations of what the public is seeing, rather than why or how these representations came to be. The fusion of close-reading and representational analyses will allow for a deep look into the contemporary moment of queer teen representation on the screen, in relation to their heterosexual counterparts.

My representational analysis focuses on the portrayal of queer characters on teen drama television shows—specifically *Riverdale*, *Pretty Little Liars: The Perfectionists*, and *The Society*. A representational analysis studies different identity groups in texts. In this case I focus specifically on the queer teen community. Larry Gross employs this mode of analysis, as do many of queer studies scholars. He notes that “[h]ardly ever shown in the media are just plain gay folks, used in roles which do not center on their deviance as a threat to the moral order.”<sup>24</sup> His study elucidates the problems in past representations where queer characters would operate as villains, rather than as “normal” people. It also looks at how representation functions to not only look at specific queer characters, but to also make greater claims about queer representation across television. This method allows for access to a deeper meaning in texts, that not only comments on the specific case studies I have chosen, but on the greater representations across the

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<sup>24</sup> Gross, *Remote Control* 137.

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

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

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<sup>25</sup> Robinson and Alston, "Lavender Identity," 32.

queer characters, while giving each character the time they deserve, is a difficult task. One of the ways I aim to combat these obstacles is by acknowledging my own positioning as a queer man. I personally would like to see queer narratives a specific way, and while I attempt to remain as objective as possible, it still will affect my close reading. I also focus on specific character arcs rather than the shows as a whole in order to narrow down the specific content I am interested in analyzing

Tackling queer representation could utilize any number of methods, but the specific choices I have made work not just to analyze queer characters, but their place in a larger narrative of teen television. Conducting a representational analysis of the teen drama genre of television and performing close-readings of specific shows that successfully depict certain aspects of queer identity maintains a focus on the specifics of representation. Ultimately, queer representation comes down to how queer teens are actually depicted, not what was intended in production or the symptoms in the world that led to these representations. While those factors are important, queer representation needs to be the best it can be in its final form, and these methods allow me to synthesize just how these final products succeed and fail in their representations. I use the representational and close-reading methods of analysis to study how queer teens in the contemporary moment see themselves on the screen, and if they deserve better (spoiler alert: they do).

### **From Trope to Triumph and Back Again: Riverdale's Kevin Keller**

The CW's *Riverdale* introduced Archie Comics to the television world, following the dark and twisted stories of Archie, Betty, Jughead, and Veronica through their high school years.



*Riverdale* weaves through many storylines. The first season follows the investigation of murdered classmate, Jason Blossom. Intermixed with the primary plot are scandalous romances, fights between friends, extracurricular decisions, parental drama, and secrets that haunt the characters. The four main characters work together to investigate and eventually solve Blossom's murder (surprise, the father did it), often getting frisky along the way. Season two ups the drama with the serial killer known as "The Black Hood," who ends up being Betty's father, loose in *Riverdale*. The show also ramps up the romance quotient in this season. With the four main characters all coupled off, sexual relations and romantic involvement seems to dominate most episodes, even with a serial killer on the loose. Sure, they argue and fight and cover up murders, but they are teens in love and that's what *Riverdale's* audience wants. In season three, sex is basically guaranteed in every episode, and it could be between anyone, from the heterosexual to the homosexual couples (although their sex is portrayed differently, but we'll get to that). The "big bad" of this season is "The Gargoyle King," an apparent master of mind control through a game titled "Griffins and Gargoyles." The Gargoyle King is probably the scariest, and most outrageous, villain yet. With each season, *Riverdale* exponentially increases drama and romance. Kevin Keller, the primary, and for a long time only, queer character evolves alongside the straight characters on the show. While Kevin's journey is necessarily different, this distinction from his straight counterparts is a double-edged sword, leading to many positive moments in a queer storyline while still often positioning Kevin as unable to act in the same way his straight peers can.

We are introduced to Kevin Keller in the first five minutes of the first episode, an indication that queer characters will be represented without hesitation in *Riverdale*, yet the

character we are presented with is a stereotype. Well-dressed in a button down shirt and tight jeans, he lays on Betty Cooper's bed while she is half-naked and putting on makeup. The pair talk about a boy that Betty "likes," Archie, and Kevin gives his advice on how to grapple with the issue of "millennial straight guys"<sup>26</sup> Kevin, however, differs from many other queer teen on TV as he forgoes the coming-out narrative that so often consumes queer teen representation on television. Schorn, on the coming out narrative, suggests that it is so common because "[t]he character does not just happen to *be* gay—their gayness is a topic of interest, one that needs to be discussed and digested by the rest of the cast and, by extension, the audience."<sup>27</sup> *Riverdale* avoids diminishing Kevin into a case study on how heterosexual characters can grapple with his identity, but rather a teen who happens to be gay. While Kevin forgoes the coming-out narrative trope, he opts instead to play matchmaker for straight people. After Betty discloses the object of her desire, Kevin then moves to the window, where he ogles a shirtless Archie Andrews through the window, exclaiming, "Archie got hot!"<sup>28</sup> Betty, still only wearing a bra, joins him at the window and the two look over at him, and Kevin states that Archie's abs are "six more reasons for you to take that ginger bull by the horns."<sup>29</sup> The entirety of Kevin's first appearance centers around the discussion of and shared objectification of a straight male character, all while helping a straight woman, Betty Cooper, woo him. He is the gay best friend (GBF) to Betty Cooper's straight cisgender white woman. This portrayal paints him in a way that Robinson and Alston write "may lead to the assumption and stereotype that lesbians, and especially gay men, are highly 'sexual' beings, and that every action, interaction, feeling or thought revolves around their

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<sup>26</sup> *Riverdale*, Season 1, episode 1, "Chapter One: The River's Edge," written by Roberto Aguirre-Sacasa, aired January 26, 2017, on The CW, 3:41.

<sup>27</sup> Schorn, "Coming Out into the 21st Century," 39.

<sup>28</sup> "Chapter One: The River's Edge," 3:57

<sup>29</sup> "Chapter One: The River's Edge," 4:06

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

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

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<sup>30</sup> Robinson and Alston, “Lavender Identity,” 40.

<sup>31</sup> “Chapter One: The River’s Edge,” 9:40.

<sup>32</sup> “Chapter One: The River’s Edge,” 9:56.

<sup>33</sup> “Chapter One: The River’s Edge,” 9:55

<sup>34</sup> Himberg, *New Gay for Pay*, 8.

entire queer community. Due to this burden, queer is all he can be. Later in the episode, in his first interaction with mean girl Cheryl Blossom (who later turns out to be queer herself), he quips, “Is cheerleading still a thing?” and she replies, “Is being the gay best friend still a thing?”<sup>35</sup> Well, Kevin Keller demonstrates that it, in fact, is still a thing. He is sassy, well dressed, and attached to the hip of Betty Cooper, present only to make quips about fellow classmates or discuss boys.

Towards the conclusion of the first episode, at Riverdale High School’s homecoming dance, Kevin hurries over to Betty to gossip with her about a boy who propositioned him in the bathroom. He emphasizes that “His name may be Moose but I’d describe a certain appendage of his as horse-like,” making an overt sexual innuendo without allowing the audience to see the propositioning itself.<sup>36</sup> He can be sexual, but not on the screen. Maura Kelly notes that “exploration of queer sexuality, much less the first sexual experiences of queer teenagers, is still lacking,” and that it was usually “sexual identity rather than the sexual desire or experiences that were the focus.”<sup>37</sup> Kevin is indicative of this, as at the conclusion of the episode him and Moose travel to Sweetwater River to hook-up in some regard. Their exchange goes:

Moose: For the record, I'm not gay.

Kevin: Obviously not, Moose. You're on the football team. But if you were gay, what would you like to do?

Moose: Everything but kiss.

Kevin: I love a good closet case. So, let's start with skinny-dipping and then see what happens?<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> “Chapter One: The River’s Edge,” 17:30.

<sup>36</sup> “Chapter One: The River’s Edge,” 33:30.

<sup>37</sup> Maura Kelly, “Virginity Loss Narratives in “Teen Drama” Television Programs,” *Journal of Sex Research* 47.5 (2010), 4.

<sup>38</sup> “Chapter One: The River’s Edge,” 44:00.

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

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

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

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

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<sup>39</sup> Davis, “Saying It Out Loud,” 129.

<sup>40</sup> Davis, “Saying It Out Loud,” 129.

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

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

worse.”<sup>43</sup> The concepts of “good children” and “stray[ing] from the path,” while possibly indicative of the serial killer loose in Riverdale, serve dually as a commentary on Kevin’s non-normative behavior. He has transformed from one of the “good gays (those who feel they are ‘born with it,’ those who are in a ‘committed couple,’ those who go to church, those who have kids, those who have weddings, those who want acceptance)” to a “bad gay...(those who celebrate their preference as a *choice*, those who prefer multiple partners, those who criticize the nuclear family...)”<sup>44</sup> Kevin shrugs off the homonormative identity and adopts a new, sexually liberated one. Yet, even in this, he still is seen doing nothing more than kissing another man. When Kevin refuses to conform to heterosexual norms, and is (finally) seen non-romantically but sexually involved with someone, gunshots go off. This chain of events suggests his deviance is partially responsible for getting people hurt, and could get him hurt as well.

Once Kevin begins to develop some sexual freedom in the town of Riverdale, he finds himself criticized by affluent, straight, white, apparently all-knowing Betty Cooper. Betty confronts Kevin about his cruising, worried the “Black Hood,” a serial killer plaguing the town of Riverdale, will attack him, but Kevin refuses to stop. In quite possible the most socially aware moment surrounding queer identity in *Riverdale*, Kevin responds:

You act like we’ve got the same set of options. You live in this pale pink world of milkshakes and first kisses, and “Am I going to date Archie or Jughead?” Except for when you’re exploring your BDSM sexuality, which again you’re allowed to do. But I’m not, because why? This is what I’ve got, Betty. Me, these woods, so please don’t come here and tell me it’s disgusting. If you can’t accept what I do, whatever I do then we’re just not really friends.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> *Riverdale*, Season 2, episode 3, “Chapter Sixteen: The Watcher in the Woods,” written by Roberto Aguirre-Sacasa, aired October 25, 2017, on The CW, 0:30.

<sup>44</sup> Walters, *All the Rage*, 76.

<sup>45</sup> “Chapter Sixteen: The Watcher in the Woods,” 29:45.

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

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

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<sup>46</sup> Robinson and Alston, “Lavender Identity,” 40.

<sup>47</sup> “Chapter Sixteen: The Watcher in the Woods,” 22:04.



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

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<sup>48</sup> Schorn, “Coming Out into the 21st Century,” 44.

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

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

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

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

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

<sup>51</sup> “Bizzarodale,” 11:23.

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

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

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<sup>52</sup> Kelly, “Virginity Loss Narratives,” 3.

<sup>53</sup> Kelly, “Virginity Loss Narratives,” 3.

<sup>54</sup> Davis, “Saying it Out Loud,” 130.

where they are accepted without question. The homophobia present primarily stems from older generations; Cheryl's mother sends her to a conversion therapy center, and Moose's father explains that as a child he was sent to the same camp, attempting to stifle his son's sexuality because his too was stifled. "Bizzarodale" builds to its peak when Moose's father and a band of ROTC cadets dressed as season three "big bad," the Gargoyle King, kidnap Kevin and Moose after intercourse. They drag them out to the woods and force them to drink from two chalices, one of which is poisoned. Just as Kevin is about to drink, the kidnappers are caught by the police, and *Riverdale* miraculously avoids falling into the "bury your gays" trope. The acknowledgement of homophobia is necessary in television that strives for equal representation of queer characters, as it still exists rampant in the world today. Larry Gross writes that television shows are "the primary sources of the common information and images that create and maintain a worldview and a value system," and while I do not believe that TV shows are the only factor in influencing America's views on queer individuals, people who do not know even one queer person may take these representations as truth.<sup>55</sup> When homophobia is erased from the screen, it suggests that the problem does not exist, and allows heterosexual audiences to simply ignore the subject. Conversely, if this homophobia was *too* prevalent, it would become an outlet for homophobic viewers to satisfy their own hatred towards queer people. *Riverdale's* acknowledgement of homophobia is important, but continues to "preserve the status quo by representing homophobia and heteronormativity as the domain of 'others'" i.e. Cheryl's evil mother and Moose's closeted, stifled queer father.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Gross, *Remote Control*, 132.

<sup>56</sup> Peters, "Privilege of Knowing Better," 193.

Kevin Keller's autonomy, compared to that of the straight characters on *Riverdale*, is constantly shifting. He starts as the gay best friend, becomes a regular, sex-addled teen, and subsequently falls into obscurity, eventually succumbing to a cult that seems only able to manipulate queer minds. In comparison to his straight peers, Kevin is not afforded the ability to visibly act on physical manifestations of his sexuality, the same maturation of his relationships, or equal screen time. However, even amongst the issues of Kevin's representation, in relation to his straight counterparts, Kevin is *almost* equal to them. Although he can't get naked with his boyfriend on screen, he is in multiple relationships, is allowed to hook-up with men who he is not seriously involved with, forgoes the coming-out narrative, and (eventually) exists as more than just a queer man. Furthermore, as *Riverdale*'s representation increases to focus on more than Kevin as the sole queer character, his burden of representing the queer community is lightened, allowing his character to develop in ways that don't feed into tokenism. However, Kevin is still not afforded *all* the same opportunities as *Riverdale*'s straight characters are, diminishing queerness in some way, no matter how seemingly insignificant.

### **Rewriting the Social Contract: The Society's Sam Eliot and Gareth "Grizz" Visser**

Netflix's *The Society* follows a group of teenagers who become stranded in a world with no adults, no rules, and until they create it, no society. Working with an ensemble cast, *The Society* has no sole main character, and follows different storylines in the lives of a multitude of teens as they attempt to navigate the new, unfamiliar landscape which they must operate within. The world of "New Ham" (the chosen name for the new world) functions exactly how you'd expect an entire town run by teenagers would; sex, drugs, arguments, games, laziness, and

violence are not restrained by adults, and therefore run rampant in New Ham. With the lack of adults also comes a complete wipe of societal norms, which consequently allows for more development of queer relationships. In *The Society*, the queer relationship is kept a secret, but it grows naturally rather than being thrown together because both characters are queer. This case study elucidates the importance of a naturally developing queer relationship and the inclusion of intersectional queer identities. The show also features a differently abled queer character, Sam Eliot, and his struggle with that identity. Sam also grapples with his religious beliefs and his sexuality. When there are no longer adults in control of religion, Sam can exist as both queer and Christian, rather than being forced to choose one identity by the clergy. The absence of adults and a social contract in *The Society* allows for queer characters to form their identity (mostly) without societal pressures, dealing with homophobia, ability, religion, family structures, and relationship growth in an unhindered way. Even with this apparent freedom, restrictions remain on what queer characters can do on screen, still unable to visibly perform the same graphic sexual acts as straight teens are, and the representations are limited to two white gay males.

Sam Eliot is the sole openly queer character in the first episode of *The Society*, and remains that way for over half of the first (and only) season. Similar to Kevin in *Riverdale*, Sam forgoes a coming-out narrative; he is out from the beginning of the first episode. However, while he is out to his classmates and the world, his sexuality is not known to the audience until late in the first episode, when his brother Campbell calls him a “little fag” and demands that he not come home that night.<sup>57</sup> Homophobia is what introduces Sam’s sexuality to the audience. By portraying a non-closeted and well-educated character as homophobic, viewers (who are often

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<sup>57</sup> *The Society*, season 1, episode 1, “What Happened” written by Christopher Keyser, aired May 10, 2019, on Netflix, 54:18.

liberal, white, and affluent) are no longer “symbolically freed from any implication in unconscious, inferential, overt and systemic homophobia.”<sup>58</sup> When a white young affluent straight character acts homophobically, the show resists “render[ing] the valued viewer as observers of homophobia rather than people capable of holding such beliefs.”<sup>59</sup> The homophobic moment also comes before the adults in the world disappear, and there are no specifically homophobic moments in the new world. *The Society* does not hide the problem of homophobia, but uses it in the first episode to demonstrate another character’s underlying psychopathy, suggesting that homophobia is a belief held only by diagnosably evil people.

One of the primary differences between Sam and the other queer teen characters on television is that Sam is deaf. The foregrounding of a disabled, queer character in a television show is infrequent at best in the modern television landscape. We as an audience know he is deaf before we know he is queer, as in his first appearance on the screen is him signing with his parents and his brother. This overlap of queer and disabled identities rarely appears on the screen. Robert McRuer writes:

[D]espite the fact that homosexuality and disability clearly share a pathologized past, and despite a growing awareness of the intersections between queer theory and disability studies, little notice has been taken of the connection between heterosexuality and able-bodied identity, perhaps because able-bodiedness, even more than heterosexuality, masquerades as a nonidentity, as the natural order of things.<sup>60</sup>

Sam inhabits two non-normative identities that makes him distinct from his straight counterparts in a different way than other queer teens are. He is distinct from his heterosexual and able-bodied

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<sup>58</sup> Wendy Peters, “The Privilege of Knowing Better: Female Millennial Demographics and the Representation of Homophobia on Teen TV,” *Queer Studies in Media & Popular Culture* 3, no. 2 (June 2018), 198.

<sup>59</sup> Peters, “Privilege of Knowing Better,” 201.

<sup>60</sup> Robert McRuer, “As Good As It Gets: Queer Theory and Critical Disability,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 9, no. 1 (2003), 79.

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

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

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

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<sup>61</sup> The actor himself, Sean Berdy, is deaf, which may have factored into Sam’s different ability as a character, but may also simply be accurate casting.

<sup>62</sup> *The Society*, season 1, episode 3, “Childhood’s End” written by Christopher Keyser, aired May 10, 2019, on Netflix, 17:00.



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

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

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

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

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

<sup>65</sup> Robinson and Alston, “Lavender Identity,” 43.

Furthermore, Sam is allowed to grapple with his religious and sexual beliefs alongside his straight counterparts, like Helena. He is told what many queer people are told by those devoted to God, that in some way, queerness is abnormal. The issue of intertwined identities is clearly not new to Sam, as he has “wonder[ed] how [he]’d ever pull that off,” discussing the suppression of his sexuality. This statement suggests that, for at least some time, he planned to attempt to stifle acting on his sexuality in favor of his devotion to God. Sam is simultaneously relieved and concerned about his likely death as a “perfect Christian virgin,” playing into the idea that all sexuality, not simply his queerness, would be a sin before marriage in the eyes of God. His idea of perfection not only surrounds his non-normative sexuality, but all sex. While Sam grapples with this identity, so does one of his fellow heterosexual classmates, Helena, and her refusal to consummate her relationship with football player and Guard member Luke. She refuses to have penetrative sex before marriage because of her faith, and struggles with her sexual and personal identity as she becomes essentially the pastor of the new society. *The Society* no longer “mark[s]...out the dichotomies between...heterosexual versus homosexual” like many past television shows do, but intertwines the issues of the homosexual and heterosexual characters.<sup>66</sup> Both queer Sam and heterosexual Helena struggle with their relationship between God and sexual identity. Sam struggles to identify his own sexuality in relationship to the church, however his struggle is all theoretical as he has no love interest at this moment. Helena grapples with her sexual desires literally with boyfriend Luke, eventually having sex with him before marriage, which she previously resisted. Once again, religion still exists but social structures are stripped bare, allowing for more freedom and choice in sexual decision making, rather than

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<sup>66</sup> Lipton, “Queer Readings,” 32.

adhering to rules that are thousands of years old. Allowing both straight and queer characters to grapple with religious beliefs in similar ways delineates the freedom of all sexualities to operate within the same space and have the same issues, rather than separating the two identities completely. In the same episode, Luke proposes to Helena, forming a traditional heterosexual nuclear family in the same episode that a non-normative family is formed; all sexualities can form a family in the new structure.

While Sam struggles to find his place in this new society, another queer character begins to discover his sexuality. Grizz, a football playing, nature-loving jock who has a sensitive side and knows Latin, slowly falls for Sam over the course of the season. He discovers his sexuality in an introspective way, rather than as a spectacle for the other characters. Robinson and Alston note that the coming out is often “the reactions and feelings of the heterosexual characters and not the celebration of the homosexual character’s true identity.”<sup>67</sup> Grizz avoids this by coming to terms with his sexuality without actually ever saying “I think I’m gay” before kissing Sam. He also does not solely exist as queer, we have seen him grow through previous episodes. The coming-out story here is done right; we have seen Grizz exist and grow as more than queer in the earlier episodes, so the reveal of his sexuality to Sam and the audience does not overtake his other character traits. We know he loves nature and to garden through his volunteering to lead an expedition to explore the forest and find farmable land. We know that he is tough—he plays football—is seen constantly as “one of the guys,” and is a member of the new society’s police force, known as “The Guard.” These interactions with others are important, as Robinson and Alston note “when these characters are viewed in realistic social encounters with friends,

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<sup>67</sup> Robinson and Alston, “Lavender Identity,” 40.

families, and partners, it reinforces their similarity to heterosexuals and legitimizes their right to their sexuality.”<sup>68</sup> Grizz is allowed to hang out with his bros, kiss the boy he has a crush on, and interact with heterosexuality society without being ostracized for his sexuality. The freedom to exist as queer allows him to exist on his own terms, rather than being defined by others. He also can operate equally to his straight peers, free to explore his sexual identity at least personally (as he is not out to the whole society yet), a luxury which many queer teen characters do not have.

Rather unsurprisingly, Grizz and Sam, the two queer males, slowly build up feelings for each other, despite Sam’s previous claim that there’s “no one [he]’d want.”<sup>69</sup> However, in lieu of pairing them off quickly and subsequently diminishing them into side characters, their relationship is allowed to grow naturally. This natural growth allows for the queer romance to form parallel to heterosexual romance, allowing for the same depth of emotion. The first interaction between these characters comes in the prom episode, when Grizz sits down with Sam, and they talk amongst dancing heterosexuals. The conversation is mundane, centered around Sam teaching Grizz sign language and about how Sam hated high school. While this interaction appears insignificant, it is the first step in building a relationship in a natural way, rather than simply sticking two characters together solely based on sexuality. *The Society* partially subverts the “stereotype that gay men must simply settle for whatever relationships they can find” by building an authentic connection between Grizz and Sam, a luxury which straight characters are always afforded.<sup>70</sup> While they are the only two queer characters and do end up together, and

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<sup>68</sup> Robinson and Alston, “Lavender Identity,” 43.

<sup>69</sup> “Childhood’s End,” 17:00.

<sup>70</sup> Kylo-Patrick R. Hart, “Representing Gay Men on American Television,” *The Journal of Men’s Studies* 9, no. 1 (October 2000), 290.

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

In *The Society*, as in most teen dramas, when it comes to the act of intercourse, queer teens are not afforded the same abilities as straight teens. As Sam and Grizz's relationship develops, they become physically intimate, an act which is often a luxury for queer teens on television. The burgeoning couple share a heartfelt moment, not discussing their sexuality, but their childhood. Sam explains how he went deaf, what sounds he remembers, and what sounds he wants to hear, like Grizz's voice. The focus on queer romance without the need for explicit conversation around sexuality further allows for Grizz and Sam to grow as a couple comparable to heterosexual couples. Queerness exists, but not as a spectacle. Sam and Grizz share a kiss, and albeit more passionate than many of the other queer kisses on TV (I've seen a lot of them), that is still the limit of physical intimacy the relationship is allowed. The camera cuts away while the couple is still fully clothed, and it is not until the next episode that we see them lying, naked, in bed together.<sup>71</sup> If this was the case for heterosexual coupling on *The Society* as well, that would be an acceptable omission. However, when graphic moments like Helena performing oral sex on Luke, and Kelly and Will tearing off each others clothes can occur, queer teens should be able to do the same.<sup>72</sup> Kissing with tongue is a good step in the right direction, but we need some queers to go all the way before we can have true equality on teen dramas.

After the couple invisibly fornicates, Grizz reveals his personal experiences struggling with sexuality to Sam, allowing for his sexuality to be visible without it consuming his character

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<sup>71</sup> *The Society*, season 1, episode 7, "Allie's Rules" written by Christopher Keyser, aired May 10, 2019, on Netflix, 46:26.

<sup>72</sup> "Childhood's End," 49:41; *The Society*, season 1, episode 8, "Poison" written by Christopher Keyser, aired May 10, 2019, on Netflix, 14:44.

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

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<sup>73</sup> “Poison,” 6:40.

<sup>74</sup> “Poison,” 6:53.

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

<sup>76</sup> “Poison,” 7:20.

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

Stigma still exists around queer people in New Ham, and bierasure continues to permeate the new society. In true queer romance fashion, as soon as we see a relationship form between Sam and Grizz, it all begins to crumble. When Sam agrees to act as the father of Becca's child, and part of that responsibility is telling other people that he is the biological father. All those around Sam are shocked, including two women who approach Becca and Sam, unsubtly asking "so Sam, you're, uh, you're the dad?"<sup>77</sup> When they walk away, one says "What? You know he's gay." and her friend responds "Sexuality is fluid."<sup>78</sup> U.S. society still "tends to divide sexuality into a binary; people are expected to identify with and conform to one of two sexual identities—gay or straight."<sup>79</sup> By both acknowledging problems around queer discourses and then unpacking and dismantling these beliefs, *The Society* can place its queer characters as equal to straight characters without erasing their sexuality completely. Grizz, however, does not take this news well. He knows that Sam is not bisexual, and angrily asks "You gonna be like one of those secret married gay dudes from the dinosaur age? We gonna sneak around?... We might be in a new fucking universe and we also might starve in here. How do you want to live Sam?"<sup>80</sup> Hiding one's sexuality is painted as a practice for a primitive time, not the contemporary moment. The stigma around sexuality is not erased, but it is diminished in New Ham as the new social contract is formed.

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<sup>77</sup> "Poison," 28:10.

<sup>78</sup> "Poison," 28:27.

<sup>79</sup> Ron Becker, *Gay TV and Straight America: The Importance of Gay-Themed TV*, 1–12, (Rutgers University Press, 2006), 7.

<sup>80</sup> "Poison," 38:45.



*The Society* succeeds in its ability to normalize queer characters into the new social structure created by the teens of New Ham. Sam, a gay, differently-abled man is in the room where it happens, able to hold a significant societal role when teens are allowed to rewrite the social contract. Freedom to explore his sexuality as well as his faith and desire for a family creates a multi-faceted queer character not defined solely by his sexuality and equal depth of character to straight teens. Grizz, a closeted football player, is a member of the policing force and one of the closest advisors to Ally, the leader of New Ham. In *The Society*, the queer relationship is not a spectacle nor is it deviant—it grows naturally, as any other relationship on television would. However, *The Society* fails to fully elevate its queer characters to the same status as straight characters; Grizz and Sam are barely visually sexual while Helena and Luke have graphic oral sex on prom night, demonstrating that while queer characters appear as equals in the new world, the allowances for what can be shown on screen remain different. They are also the only two queer characters, both white males, leaving a lack of diversity in identity. While Sam inhabits intersecting subordinate identities, in order for queer representation to reach equality with straight representation, there need to be more than just white gay men on the screen. Ultimately, *The Society* does a phenomenal job on societal normalization of queer characters while still depriving its queer teens of the same diversity of identity and romantic/sexual visibility that straight teens possess.

**“Queer Utopia,” *Almost: Pretty Little Liars: The Perfectionists*’ Dylan Walker<sup>81</sup>**

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<sup>81</sup> Gutowitz, “Unhinged Queer Camp.”

I. Marlene King's *Pretty Little Liars: The Perfectionists* on Freeform transforms the traditional teen narrative into a diverse wonderland, where all identity groups are not only existent, but important. A spin off of Freeform's hit series *Pretty Little Liars*, the show follows a group of college students at Beacon Heights University (BHU) as they navigate not only the competitive college landscape, but a world of secrets, blackmail, and murder.<sup>82</sup> Nolan Hotchkiss, resident bad boy and Perfectionists group leader, is murdered, and his squad are all suspects. Ava Jaloali, a felon's daughter and aspiring stylist, Caitlin Park-Lewis, a brilliant political mind and the daughter of a queer woman of color senator, and Dylan Walker, a musical prodigy and out gay man, all must come together to protect themselves from whoever killed Nolan. Returning characters Alison DiLaurentis, English teaching assistant and bisexual woman, and Mona Vanderwaal, head of BHU's Recruitment and Admissions and former tormentor of the original cast, help these students out along the way. Weaving their way through mistakes, secrets, and lies, the Perfectionists operate in a world that is constantly threatening them. Oh, and that world is described by Jill Gutowitz as a "queer utopia" where queer characters exist in force, they can be openly sexual, and even run for senate seats (and win!).<sup>83</sup> *PLL: TP* allows its diverse cast of queer characters to be prodigies, boring, and deviant simultaneously, as well portraying sexual desire in a similarly graphic nature to the intimacy of straight characters on the show. However, in the midst of this "queer utopia," the issues that inevitably accompany a non-normative sexual identity are barely touched upon, and while these same issues are not faced by straight characters, in order for queer teens to exist as both queer and equal to straight teens, the struggles they face must be shown rather than hidden.

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<sup>82</sup> While the show is set in college, I include it in my study of teen dramas due to both the age of most characters still in the teens and the marketing of the show towards a primarily teenage audience.

<sup>83</sup> Gutowitz, "Unhinged Queer Camp."

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

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

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

<sup>85</sup> Becker, *Gay TV and Straight America*, 7.

limiting” and he’s “surprised [Dylan] agreed to it.”<sup>86</sup> When Dylan confesses that he was the one who suggested it, Nolan says “So if you and I are going to hook up, we should do it sooner rather than later” and “I want you to kiss me.”<sup>87</sup> Moments later, Dylan gives Nolan a peck on the lips, and there is a moment where the show taunts you, like that will be the extent of the relationship, as it is in so many shows. But *The Perfectionists* fulfills queer sexual desire in a way uncommon in cable television. Dylan and Nolan crash back against a wall, pulling off each other’s clothing and moving quickly into the bedroom, where they fall on top of each other and the scene cruelly cuts away.<sup>88</sup> A number of queer stereotypes come into play in this scene, such as the trope of the depraved bisexual in Nolan, and the overly horny and non-committal gay man in Dylan. However, the inclusion of graphic queer sexual activity, *especially* in the first episode of the series, before any comparable straight content appears, is revolutionary in the world of teen drama. And don’t worry, the queer sex doesn’t stop there.

Throughout the sole season of *PLL: TP*, Dylan is visibly sexually active, rather than the invisible or even borderline asexual representations of queer teens in other teen drama narratives (like *Riverdale* and *Gossip Girl*). There is queer romance in almost every episode (although some of this is reference back to the first steamy scene between Dylan and Nolan). Dylan and boyfriend Andrew kiss on-screen more times than most of the straight characters on the show, and they are broken up for half the season. However, *PLL: TP* avoids hypersexualizing Dylan, as he is equally sexual to his straight peers. In episodes nine and ten, there are moments where Dylan and Andrew lay in bed naked, kissing, touching each other, unabashedly queer and sexual.

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<sup>86</sup> “Pilot,” 29:17.

<sup>87</sup> “Pilot,” 29:20.

<sup>88</sup> “Pilot,” 29:25.

<sup>89</sup> They even climb on top of one another, how scandalous! These moments are often preceded or followed by a straight couple getting physical, but Dylan can be physical in the same way as his straight counterparts, which is a key aspect of creating equal and authentic representations of queer teens. Becker notes that in the 90s, networks struggled with how to “deal with homosexuality without having to tackle the problem of same-sex intimacy,” and that “chastity was the price gay characters paid for admission to primetime television in the 1990s.”<sup>90</sup> Programs are now allowing queer characters to *appear* sexual. Many shows still “push...boundaries in their depictions of heterosexual sex with frank dialogue and steamy sex scenes” while “the vast majority of gay and lesbian characters ha[ve] no sex life—at least not one that viewers g[e]t to see.”<sup>91</sup> While Becker focuses on television in the 90’s, these problems continue to permeate the landscape of American television, particularly regarding teen narratives. *PLL: TP’s* queer-teen sex positive narrative allows for queer characters to exist as equal to their straight counterparts in their visibly sexual but not fetishized or demonized relationship. Finally, some good queer lovin’.

Dylan is one of the lucky queer characters who also gets to exist as more than just a representation of his sexuality. He is a musical prodigy, one of the best of the best. In order to be accepted to the fictional BHU, which is “ranked as one of the most challenging programs in the US,” he has to be exceptional.<sup>92</sup> Dylan’s cello performances comprise much of the show’s musical score (primarily with haunting covers of pop hits like “Poker Face,” but that’s neither

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<sup>89</sup> *Pretty Little Liars: The Perfectionists*, season 1, episode 9, “Lie Together, Die Together” written by I. Marlene King, aired May 15, 2019, on Freeform, 13:35; *Pretty Little Liars: The Perfectionists*, season 1, episode 10, “Enter the Professor” written by I. Marlene King, aired May 22, 2019, on Freeform, 6:29.

<sup>90</sup> Becker, *Gay TV and Straight America*, 148.

<sup>91</sup> Becker, *Gay TV and Straight America*, 179.

<sup>92</sup> “Pilot,” 0:27.

here nor there). Dylan's musical talent bleeds between the diegetic and non-diegetic sounds of the show, working to maintain his presence in the show even while off-screen. Television and the media often "deny and exclude the existence of normal, unexceptional as well as exceptional lesbians and gay men."<sup>93</sup> *PLL: TP* does not. At Beacon Heights, queer and exceptional is the norm, not the outlier. Dylan's main personality trait is not his sexuality, it is his love for music that drives him. He even says "Music was never just my way out, you know, I mean, it's everything..."<sup>94</sup> Straight teens never have their personalities confined to their sexuality, and queer teens should be no different. Sasha Pieterse, who plays Alison, notes that "Dylan is the first gay male character in the *Pretty Little Liars* series, and the best part about it is that it's not really addressed. I don't mean it's not spoken about. It's just normal because it is. It's not like the network was like, *Well, we have to have this demographic in here*. Nothing was pushed."<sup>95</sup> In the effort to normalize queer characters on the small screen, *PLL: TP* creates a multi-faceted queer character who can mesh with the dominant culture without his sexuality disappearing into it. Dylan's musical talent positions him from the beginning of the show as more than solely queer. By doing so, his sexuality becomes just a part of him, rather than his whole identity, which is how straight characters sexuality is frequently depicted. Kissing boys is only one part of Dylan's life (even if it is one of the more fun parts).

Even with his exceptional musical talent, Dylan is undeniably a somewhat boring character, which, while seemingly problematic, is important in portraying a diverse array of queer representation equal to straight representation. He spends most of his time wrapped up in

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<sup>93</sup> Gross, *Remote Control*, 137.

<sup>94</sup> "Pilot," 33:00.

<sup>95</sup> Tracy E. Gilchrist, "'The Perfectionists' Ups the Queer Quotient of 'Pretty Little Liars,'" *The Advocate*, March 20, 2019.

his relationship, which is in jeopardy because he cheated on his boyfriend. Dylan plays his music and cheats (on his boy and on an assignment) while trying to figure out who killed Nolan, but doesn't do much. We know he has a troubled past in his small town, which is one of the more interesting facts we learn about Dylan, but this backstory is almost completely concealed until the final episode. However, Dylan as a boring queer character is just as important as a more dynamic queer character. While I would love to see only exceptional queer characters dominating my screen, in reality, queer people can be just as dull as straight people (and we have all seen some *dull* straight teen characters). Not only is "television...capable of making queerness 'ordinary,' serial, mundane"<sup>96</sup> in the contemporary moment, it can also show "just plain gay folks."<sup>97</sup> Some queer characters should be villainous, some should be exceptional, and some should be ordinary. That's just the way that people are. In order for queer teens to exist in the same ways that their straight counterparts do, there are going to need to be some dull queer teens on television (God knows there are some dull straight ones).

While *PLL: TP* is in many ways an exemplary example of queer representation, the focus on the positives lacks a space to discuss the issues that accompany a non-normative sexual identity. In the concluding episode of the season, Dylan's backstory begins to work its way into the open, revealing his personal struggles coming to terms with his identity. Luke, a man from Dylan's small town who bullied him for being gay, appears at BHU. Until episode ten, *PLL: TP* is a show that mentions homophobia but keeps it almost wholly off screen. Dylan notes throughout that "I grew up in a small town, alright. A small town where you weren't allowed to be different," and "as an out gay kid in a small town, I didn't have a single person to stand up for

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<sup>96</sup> Davis, "Saying It Out Loud," 137.

<sup>97</sup> Gross, *Remote Control*, 137.

me.”<sup>98</sup> The omission of homophobia appearing on-screen suggests that “the characters and spaces with greatest access to social power and cultural capital are implicitly rendered ‘advanced’, innocent and post-homophobia.”<sup>99</sup> At BHU, where everyone is exceptional, there is no homophobia. And the problem of an idealized, post-homophobic world continues as Dylan confronts his bully only for Luke to confess that he too is queer. Dylan panics when he sees Luke, saying “I went to high school with that guy. He bullied me for being gay. He is the reason that I left and I never looked back.”<sup>100</sup> He continues expressing his outrage later in the episode, saying, “Just when I think I’m getting my life together he’s here and it’s like I’m 14 all over again. Afraid to show my face at school ‘cause that guy’s gonna make my life a living hell.”<sup>101</sup> Dylan acknowledges homophobia, but confines it to small town America. Luke also only appears at BHU to apologize, and furthers the issue on television where homophobia is “ascribed to members of a marginalized group – closeted teens – and rendered easily resolvable.”<sup>102</sup> In an attempt to bring homophobia into focus in order to move past it, *PLL: TP* continues a trend of absolving viewers of association with homophobia, and ascribing the blame onto the lower classes and the stereotypically uneducated middle America. However, a teen narrative without any mention of homophobia does a disservice to queer experience. Dylan can be equal to his straight counterparts, but only by escaping the parts of America that are a problem and therefore escaping homophobia, rather than being successful *despite* homophobia. Plus, now that he is free, homophobia does not exist, and he can live happily ever after in his queer bubble.

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<sup>98</sup> *Pretty Little Liars: The Perfectionists*, season 1, episode 2, “Sex, Lies and Alibis,” written by I. Marlene King, aired March 27, 2019, on Freeform, 11:54.

<sup>99</sup> Peters, “Privilege of Knowing Better,” 192.

<sup>100</sup> “Enter the Professor,” 10:10.

<sup>101</sup> “Enter the Professor,” 12:41.

<sup>102</sup> Peters, “The Privilege of Knowing Better,” 201.



While I primarily focus on Dylan for this case study, it is important to acknowledge that Dylan is only one of many queer characters present in the show. Alison DiLaurentis, a returning character from the original *PLL* is openly bisexual and married (then later divorced) to a woman, Nolan Hotchkiss is bisexual, Caitlin Park-Lewis has two mothers, one of whom is of color, Andrew Villareal (Dylan's boyfriend) is gay and of color, and Luke, Dylan's bully, is gay as well. While these characters (excluding Alison) do not receive as much screen time as Dylan, the presence of a multitude of queer identities means that no one character must represent the entire queer community. Many shows insert on queer white male character who comes out and then falls into the shadows, only appearing when there is a need for a gay best friend to help the affluent white female protagonist shop or get ready for a date. Not in *PLL: TP*. Gutowitz notes "queerness isn't just present...its common....queer people are senators, murderers, scammers, or are married and have children with Shay Mitchell."<sup>103</sup> Finally, Gutowitz writes (comedically, but importantly), that the show is "a serialized erotic thriller made specifically for horny queer teens."<sup>104</sup> There is a queer representation for (almost) anyone in the show, and they are visible, powerful, sexy, and dominating.

*Pretty Little Liars: The Perfectionists* is queer in (almost) all the best ways. Queer characters can express their romantic and sexual desires in public, they can move about the world unhindered by but present in their identity, and they can be exceptional, mundane, and problematic all at the same time. The show obliterates tropes like the depraved bisexual, because, as Gutowitz points out, "if everyone is a depraved bisexual, then no one is really a depraved bisexual."<sup>105</sup> Sexual fluidity is allowed, and the binary between gay and straight that permeates

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<sup>103</sup> Gutowitz, "Unhinged Queer Camp."

<sup>104</sup> Gutowitz, "Unhinged Queer Camp."

<sup>105</sup> Gutowitz, "Unhinged Queer Camp."

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

### **Concluding Thoughts**

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

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<sup>106</sup> "Pilot," 14:50.

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

<sup>108</sup> Gutowitz, "Unhinged Queer Camp."

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

Each of the three case studies analyzed in this paper work to elevate queer characters to the same social status as their straight counterparts, but each only tends to do so in a limited way. Because of these limitations, none of the shows manage to position their queer characters as able to act and exist in *all* the same ways as straight characters. In order for queer representation on television to move past tokenism and flat representations of a constantly growing community, the strengths of these individual shows need to work together and create a world in which all the amazing, progressive aspects can exist simultaneously. A teen televisual world in which bisexual, gay, lesbian, transgender, asexual, intersex characters of all different religions, races, ethnicities, classes, family structures, and political orientations can be visibly sexual or romantic, can operate within heterosexual society without being absorbed into it, and can exist as more than their sexuality. While clearly unreasonable to expect one show to represent every different

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

After looking closely into three teen narratives in the contemporary moment, it is clear that significant progress has been made surrounding queer teens on television. Queer characters used to exist solely as deviant threats or ridiculed tropes, often getting killed off and never allowed any form of visible romance. Now, queer characters can be somewhat visibly romantic, have relationships, be stars of the show, and exist as dynamic characters. However, there remains a significant gap in what is portrayed on television. All of the queer teen characters analyzed in this paper who are able to come close to acting in the same way that straight characters are gay white cisgender men. Less than half of the queer characters on broadcast television are people of color, and a fewer percentage of queer characters of color are teens, and an even fewer percentage of those characters are afforded the same abilities as their white queer counterparts, much less their straight counterparts.<sup>109</sup> There are also significantly more queer males on television than there are queer females. Only forty-three percent of queer characters on American television are women, yet fifty-one percent of Americans are women.<sup>110</sup> Representation of transgender individuals is abysmally low, with only twenty-six out of three hundred and twenty-five queer characters identifying as trans.<sup>111</sup> If you look at trans people of color, the numbers continue to get lower. Only a little over two percent of queer characters have a disability, and while one of those is represented in this paper, that number is still extraordinarily low. The numbers surrounding queer representation are low to begin with, but looking at representation of intersecting subordinate identities it becomes clear that there is a significant

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<sup>109</sup> “Where We Are on TV Report”

<sup>110</sup> “Where We Are on TV Report”

<sup>111</sup> “Where We Are on TV Report”

gap in who is shown on television, and certainly who can occupy the same spaces as straight characters. First and foremost, this host of identities should appear across the landscape of teen television. Visible and common physical and romantic attraction must also be shown in order to reach equality. These are the immediate steps that the television industry should be taking, using the strengths of these shows and synthesizing them so that one show can do it all. Every year representations get better. All we can do is keep fighting for the equal representations that queer teen characters deserve. *That's my gay agenda.*

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## Foreword:

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