

Sometimes It's Not a Switch, It's a Dial

An analysis of the genderqueer narrative in Symptoms of Being Human, and the effects of genderqueer representation in young adult literature

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Summary

This thesis explores how and why literary representation of genderqueer narratives are important through an in-depth analysis of the young adult novel *Symptoms of Being Human* by Jeff Garvin, published in 2016. The thesis asks what the novel might teach its reader about the genderqueer experience, especially given the rarity of genderqueer representation in current-day popular media, and how the novel might influence the future of genderqueer realities. Through a close reading of the novel, I inspect Garvin's implied readers and how he appeals to them, addressing both the positive and the negative aspects of how the representation is portrayed in the novel. Chapter 1 highlights theories on the reader and the structural choices Garvin has made in order to appeal to his implied readers, while Chapter two is devoted to discussing the queer theory presented in the novel, whether explicitly or implicitly, looking at why representative narratives are important when it comes to marginalized and stigmatized queer groups. I argue that the novel offers an essential introduction to complex theories and terminology regarding nonconforming gender experiences, paving the way for future genderqueer narratives and experiences.

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Table of Contents

Introduction	1
i. What is ‘Genderqueer’?	2
ii. What do the Numbers Tell Us?	3
iii. Reading and Empathy.....	8
1 Reception Theory in Reading <i>Symptoms of Being Human</i>	11
1.1 The Adolescent Reader.....	13
1.2 The Oblivious Reader	20
1.3 The Genderqueer Reader	27
1.4 Conclusion	32
2 Queer Theory and The Genderqueer Experience in <i>Symptoms of Being Human</i>	33
2.1 Gender in queer theory	34
2.2 Performativity	36
2.3 The Charmed Circle.....	41
2.4 Realism or Exaggeration?.....	44
2.5 Conclusion	48
Conclusion.....	49
Works Cited.....	52

Introduction

There *aren't* words for what I feel, because all the words were made up by people who never felt like this.

(Garvin, 2016, p. 179)

Growing up, I often found myself reading novels and watching television shows presenting LGBTQ-narratives that I hoped to relate to. However, it was not until I turned 23 years old that I first came across the term 'genderqueer', and even then, it was only through online media such as blog posts, YouTube-videos, and Instagram communities that I first found gendered narratives that diverged from the binary ideas of 'male' and 'female'. Back in September 2015, I accidentally came across the mention of nonbinary gender identities in a YouTube-video. I found myself quickly diving into a corner of the internet where I had not been before, searching vigorously through posts and videos with the tags 'genderqueer' and 'nonbinary'. I found my understanding of gender rapidly expanding while pieces of my own identity and gender experience started to fall into place. To quote the protagonist Riley from the novel *Symptoms of Being Human*: 'I could never go back to seeing it the old way; I could never go back to not knowing what I was' (Garvin, 2016, p. 40). Through the simple act of recognizing nonconforming gender experiences as something real and valid, this stranger on the internet allowed their viewers to approach the subject matter with the same respect and seriousness – showing us that gender nonconformity was not something to be ridiculed or mocked, but something to be acknowledged and valued. To the YouTube-creator, it might just have been another video. To me, it changed my perception of self entirely.

Statistics show that the genderqueer individual is too often met with confusion or negativity, often resulting in discrimination, harassment, and a sense of isolation or otherness, reflected in the findings of the 2015 US Transgender Survey (2016). This thesis will argue that genderqueer representation in young adult literature, if executed well, can help reduce the stigma surrounding genderqueer experiences, and consequently encourage a sensible and critical discourse surrounding the general structures of gender in society. I aim to look at Jeff Garvin's young adult novel *Symptoms of Being Human* (2016) in light of these statements, and argue how the novel affects and informs the reader. I intend to present findings on how empathy can be affected by reading, as well as theories on reading reception amongst adolescents, and combine these with relevant queer theories on gender, nonconformity, and performativity. In light of these theories, I wish to argue that the novel *Symptoms of Being*

Human can guide readers towards self-examination, empathy, and to better understand genderqueer realities. The fundamental research question of the thesis is as follows: What is Jeff Garvin's novel *Symptoms of Being Human* teaching the reader about the genderqueer experience? I intend to look at Jeff Garvin's young adult novel *Symptoms of Being Human* as an exemplary instance of genderqueer representation in popular media, and subsequently investigate whether or not the novel can bring positive effects to the perception of genderqueer experiences¹. The goal is to examine what roles Garvin has assigned his readers, which literary strategies and tools he has used, and what effects these choices can have on the reader and their impression of genderqueer reality. The introduction to this thesis will present relevant statistics on the genderqueer population in the U.S. as well as genderqueer representation in popular media in order to establish the position of the genderqueer experience in society today, followed by relevant research on how reading can enhance empathy. Chapter one will go in depth on an analysis of *Symptoms of Being Human*, looking at the structure of the novel with a particular focus on the adolescent reader as recipient, along with the implied readers in the text, and how the protagonist Riley functions as a spokesperson for the genderqueer narrative. Chapter two will inspect Garvin's presentation of the genderqueer narrative in relation to relevant queer theory, and how the novel reflects theories on gender by Judith Butler and Gayle Rubin. The second chapter offers a closer look at possible issues in the novel's representation of the genderqueer narrative, what influence these issues might have on the reader, and what influence the novel generally can be said to have on genderqueer representation.

i. What is 'Genderqueer'?

It is a rule of thumb that one should never start a speech with a word definition from the dictionary. However, when it comes to the discussion on nonconformity in relation to gender and queer theory, being able to do this is a brand-new luxury; as a matter of fact, the term 'gender nonconforming' was added to the Merriam-Webster dictionary only this April (2019):

¹ The terms 'young adult' and 'adolescent' will be used interchangeably when addressing the literary genre

gender nonconforming, adjective

variants: or less commonly gender-nonconforming \ 'jen-dər-, nän-kən-'fər-miŋ \

Definition of gender nonconforming : exhibiting behavioral, cultural, or psychological traits that do not correspond with the traits typically associated with one's sex : having a gender expression that does not conform to gender norms

(Gender nonconforming, 2019)

This addition of 'gender nonconforming' to the dictionary is doubtlessly a significant event when it comes to the development in destigmatizing genderqueer realities. Luckily, terms such as genderqueer, cisgender, and the gender-neutral prefix Mx., were added as early as April 2016 (Lopez, 2016). Nevertheless, it is quite evident that this terminology is young, at least in terms of being officially recognized by dictionaries such as the Merriam-Webster or the Oxford English Dictionary, and subsequent research and theories surrounding gender nonconforming individuals is still lacking. Recognition like this is nonetheless of massive importance in the establishment of queer, and especially gender nonconforming and genderqueer, experiences as valid and acknowledged. In light of this recent addition of gender nonconformity to the dictionary, it is necessary to establish that this thesis focuses not only on gender nonconforming narratives in general, but on *genderqueer* narratives in particular; that is, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, narratives that are 'denoting or relating to a person who does not subscribe to conventional gender distinctions but identifies with neither, both, or a combination of male and female genders' (Genderqueer, n.d.). By genderqueer, I refer to any and/or all gender experiences that fall outside the binary framework of 'man' and 'woman', and instead approaches gender as a scale of femininity and masculinity, or, as Riley in *Symptoms of Being Human* says on the categorizing of gender, 'sometimes it's not a switch, it's a dial' (Garvin, 2016, p. 28).

ii. What do the Numbers Tell Us?

Whereas my personal struggles with insufficient information and representation of genderqueer identities may be unchangeable, the future might bear different fruits for genderqueer individuals. One argument could be that the increase in genderqueer representation acts as a mediator for such change. Today, the statistics are finally showing an increase in genderqueer narratives gaining visibility in traditional media such as television, films and literature, no longer confining these narratives to the darker, less visited corners of online platforms. Although they might still be rare, we can now come across a nonbinary

character in an HBO production such as *Billions*, genderqueer fusions of genders in the Cartoon Network show *Steven Universe*, or even as characters in online first-person-shooting games like Electronic Arts' *Apex Legends* – additionally, we are beginning to see genderqueer representation emerge in contemporary literature. One might argue that a shift has happened in the way we commonly perceive gender; where the binary opposites of ‘man’ and ‘women’ were previously the norm, slivers of nonconformity are making it through to the world stage. While it is hard to determine which came first, the chicken or the egg, or in this case, the genderqueer representation or the increase in people identifying as genderqueer, it is nonetheless interesting to see how the appearances of genderqueer narratives in popular media coincides with an increase in people who reportedly identify outside the gender binary. This increase is confirmed in a survey conducted by The National Center for Transgender Equality. The survey, conducted in 2015 and published in 2016, is called the U.S. Transgender Survey, or the USTS, and offers statistics on the transgender population in the U.S., with regards to everything from education or economy to discrimination, mental health, and harassment. The number of transgender people who completed the survey in 2015 had no less than quadrupled since last survey, done in 2008, and the 2015 report had nearly 28,000 respondents in total. What is perhaps even more interesting is that the report showed that 35% of all respondents identified as nonbinary or genderqueer. This means that the group of genderqueer respondents were the majority group, amounting to a higher percentage than all the other participating groups, as 33% of respondents identified as transgender women, 29% as transgender men, and 3% as cross-dressers (NCTE, 2016, p. 45). And yet, most people understand being transgendered, or ‘transsexualism’, solely as a process of transition from gender-norm A to gender-norm B (i.e. man to woman or woman to man). Fewer understand what the terms ‘genderqueer’ or ‘nonbinary’ indicate in terms of gender experiences – some even argue that genderqueer experiences are not valid at all. Among the respondents identifying as genderqueer, 44% answered that they usually let people assume they are cis-gendered without correction, and 86% choose not to confront the misunderstanding because ‘most people do not understand so they do not try to explain it’ (2016, p. 49)². Why is it that so few people know what the term ‘genderqueer’ entails, when genderqueer trans people make up the majority of the transgendered population in the U.S.? Is it possible to argue that representation mediated through literature can change the future experiences of genderqueer individuals?

² Cis-gendered: Identifying with the gender you were assigned at birth

Finding a text that presents a realistic genderqueer narrative, especially when limiting the search to fictional literary texts, can prove to be a challenging task. In the research done in preparation for this thesis, I came across a fair share of titles that contained relevant genderqueer narratives. However, the majority of these were set in fantastical or dystopian universes removed from reality, presenting nonconforming characters in non-realistic settings, thus increasing the gap between reader and text rather than bridging it. If the genderqueer experience is set in an obviously fictional reality, how can we expect the reader to fully understand the genderqueer narrative as something that real people experience in the real world? In universes with gender fluid assassins playing battle royale (*Mask of Shadows* by Linsey Miller), with gender neutral entities switching bodies every day (*Every Day* by David Levithan), or with intersex gender fluid magic users joining the circus (*Pantomime* by Laura Lam), we can argue that the reader is encouraged to read these stories to experience an *escape* from reality rather than promoting an understanding of the true realities of genderqueer individuals. Furthermore, other contending novels offered protagonists who were simply too hard to relate to – whether it be because they were rebel youth living alone on the streets of New York (*Brooklyn, Burning* by Steve Brezenoff), or because they spent the majority of the narrative believing they were actually a lizard (*Lizard Radio* by Pat Schmatz). I was looking for something more relatable: A classical young adult structure, following a teen who spends their days going to school, arguing with their parents, hanging out with friends, falling in love, being genderqueer. The goal was to find a novel that, through simplicity in structure and plot, could offer complexity in characters and identities, and promote understanding and exploration of realistic nonconforming gender experiences. Jeff Garvin’s novel *Symptoms of Becoming Human* is just such a novel. Incidentally, it is also the highest ranking of all the novels mentioned above as of June 2019, according to member reviews on the digital reading platform Goodreads (n.d.), where the readers themselves rate and review literature, and where no less than 10,195 readers have recorded their opinion on this novel in particular, granting it the first place spot on the list of available genderqueer novels.

It is necessary to ask *why* the search for a realistic genderqueer novel was so challenging to begin with. Unfortunately, LGBTQ representation, especially representation of nonconforming gender narratives or genderqueer narratives, make up a miniscule percentage of the narratives presented in current-day popular media. It is important to note that the following statistics are gathered from American publishers and television networks, and might vary either positively or negatively when compared to local publishers and networks in a

given country or region. However, given the grandeur of American media and its weight on the international media scene, an examination of American numbers will give us a realistic idea of how the situation is in the rest of the Western world.

Author Malinda Lo has been tracking the numbers of young adult (YA) books about LGBTQ characters since the beginning of the 2000's, collecting data on novels published by mainstream publishers in the US. Her criterion for counting a title as an LGBTQ representative novel is that the LGBTQ character must be a main character, or the plot of the novel must be primarily concerned with LGBTQ issues; supporting characters or subtextual gay story lines are not included in her statistics (Lo, 2017). Lo's most recent findings were published on her blog in October 2017, and focuses on young adult novels published from 2003 up until 2016. Her findings generally support the impression that we have seen an *increase* in LGBTQ narratives from the beginning of the 21st century until today. Just between 2015 and 2016, Lo finds an increase from 54 LGBTQ YA books in 2015, to 79 LGBTQ YA books the following year, or an increase of 46,3% in one year only. There is no reason to believe that the number of LGBTQ narratives should not have continued to rise in the years 2017–2019. However, LGBTQ issues relate to both sexualities and gender identities, and queer gendered experiences are in turn more commonly represented through binary trans experiences, i.e. female-to-male or male-to-female narratives – not through the portrayal of genderqueer experiences. As such, Lo has taken a closer look at exactly what *kind* of LGBTQ representation is found in the different novels she has examined. Lo created the category 'Gender-destabilizing Main Character', which she defines as 'characters who change gender, usually in a speculative fiction context, but are not necessarily transgender' (Lo, 2017). While the experiences of cross-dressing characters indeed act to 'destabilize' gender norms, they are not actual transgendered or genderqueer experiences, and usually 'revert' back to their assigned gender in the end (Brugger-Dethmers, 2012). Only Lo's category of 'Nonbinary or Genderfluid Main Character' fit this thesis' model of genderqueer representation, where the character in question does not identify as male or female, or does not have a fixed gender identity. What Lo found in her research was that such genderqueer representation make up a trivial 1% of all LGBTQ YA novels of 2016. Given that the total number of such books in 2016 was 79, this means that this one percent amounts to no more than a single novel. We can speculate that this might indeed be the novel *Symptoms of Being Human* by Jeff Garvin, as the novel was published in February of 2016, making it the only genderqueer narrative published in YA fiction in 2016.

To further widen our understanding of the scope of general genderqueer representation in popular culture, we can look at genderqueer representation as it is seen on television. In this year's annual TV Diversity report, the *Where We Are on TV Report – 2018* by GLAAD (Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation), we find statistics reflecting the trend shown in Lo's numbers. For 2018, GLAAD reported a record high percentage of LGBTQ representation, where 8,8% of broadcast scripted series regulars were LGBTQ characters. This constitutes a total number of 75 LGBTQ characters of the 857 characters counted in total. Of these 75 LGBTQ characters, 26 are transgender characters. Four of these are in turn nonbinary characters – making up approximately 5% of all LGBTQ characters in television. Out of context, this number of a mere four nonbinary characters might not seem like much, but it is a 400% increase from 2017, where GLAAD counted only one nonbinary character (GLAAD, 2019, p. 14), who happened to be the first nonbinary character ever recorded in GLAAD's reports. This serves as further evidence to support the claim that not only is LGBTQ representation steadily increasing, so is representation of the genderqueer narrative. However, both GLAAD's and Lo's research indicate that the representation available is sparse at best.

These statistics offer a fundamental insight to the current situation of genderqueer individuals. To individuals not actively invested in queer culture and -communities, the genderqueer population may come across like an insignificant minority, especially given how the genderqueer narrative is presented, or usually *not* presented, in popular media. To this common public, the genderqueer population is made visible through representation, whether it be on television, in literature, or otherwise, and as such, it is important to look at these representative narratives and ask whether the image put across reflects the reality of genderqueer experiences. When looking at the actual numbers of transgendered people who identify as genderqueer and/or nonbinary, we find that the percentage is in fact quite a lot higher than what is reflected in mainstream media. Given that the representation available is unfortunately sparse, it becomes more important to analyse the existing representation. Is the portrayed genderqueer experience honest to the common genderqueer experience in real life? Is it over-simplified, exaggerated, untrue? What expectations does the representative narrative create? These are all important questions when looking at genderqueer resources in popular culture, and as such, questions I will apply to my reading of Jeff Garvin's *Symptoms of Being Human* in asking what the novel teaches its reader on the genderqueer experience. Is it possible to argue that this lack of representation contributes to the lack of understanding

amongst the general public? It might prove necessary to look at representation and how it affects *empathy* in order to examine this claim closer.

iii. Reading and Empathy

This thesis aims to view literary representation as a key component in normalization of genderqueer experiences, and as an effective tool to minimize stigma towards nonconforming gender expression. It is natural to assume that representation, both in popular culture in general and literature specifically, carries a certain amount of influence in this regard, the general claim being that literature could enhance self-knowledge, make people aware of the plights of suffering minorities, and encourage readers to become more willing to take action to help these minorities (Koopman, Hakemulder, 2015, p. 1). In short, the hypothesis could be to suggest that feelings of empathy towards characters in literary texts can be transferred to empathy towards similar individuals in real life. Fortunately, we are not the first to bring about this hypothesis; a multitude of tests have been performed regarding empathy and changes in empathic behaviours in readers when confronted with representative literature. Several such studies showed noticeable positive effects on various empathic measures, such as the reader's role-taking ability and their motivations for prosocial behaviour and altruistic conduct (Koopman, Hakemulder, 2015, p. 4). Janet Alsup argues that readers of empathy-inducing literature, i.e. any kind of literature reflecting the feelings and struggles of individuals or groups of individuals, were able to more accurately understand what was going on in video recordings of social scenes (Alsup, 2014, p. 34). It is interesting that, although readers relate to the written word and are usually not confronted with the visual presentation of facial expressions, body language, or audial indicators such as intonation and volume, the mental process in which these scenes are envisioned still acted as useful training for the readers to better understand real life visual and audial cues. This internalization of read experiences is more closely discussed in chapter one, where we will look at how and why especially adolescent readers are more susceptible to this. However, studies show that all readers, regardless of age, can experience a noticeable change in empathic emotions after reading literary texts encouraging empathy (Koopman, Hakemulder, 2015).

When mentioning this increase in empathic abilities within readers, Alsup refers to the Lichter and Johnson test from 1969. In this test, a group of children were tasked to read stories of 'multi-ethnic characters', which in turn markedly improved their attitudes towards

African Americans (Alsup, p. 34). The fact is that many such tests of empathy in readers have been performed, such as the Bilsky-experiment in 1989, the Bird-experiment in 1984, or the Kidd and Castano test in 2013, listed in Koopman and Hakemulder's essay *Effects of Literature on Empathy and Self-Reflection: A Theoretical-Empirical Framework* from 2015. In Bilsky's experiment in 1989, high school students were randomly assigned to a story and compared to a control group. After reading, the participants were tested on their ability to put themselves in the position of another person, in addition to answering a *Prosocial Motivation Questionnaire*. The participants scored significantly higher on both measures than their control group, showing evidence of the empathic effects of reading representative narratives (Koopman and Hakemulder, 2015, p. 4). The Bird test, 1984, demonstrated that the inclusion of literature programs in schools could enhance scores on the Worden Critical Thinking Test, a test indicating that participants actively process written and spoken information, and that they are more likely to be involved in questioning, activation of background knowledge, divergent thinking, exploring the relations among ideas, and grappling with real-life issues (Koopman and Hakemulder, 2015, p. 10). The Kidd and Castano test, 2013, focused on the influence of fictional literary narratives compared to non-fictional ones, and through five experiments with different texts, they still found higher empathy scores for the participants who read fictional literary texts than those who read non-fictional texts. This enhanced influence by fictional narratives makes sense, Koopman and Hakemulder argue, turning to theorist Keith Oatley, who noted that narrative fiction constitutes a simulation that runs in the part of our minds we use in daily life to plan actions in order to attain goals – the cognitive process of imagination is the same when reading a literary narrative. Oatley refers to this type of simulation as role-taking, arguing that reading can help us experience and understand certain emotions better than we would outside a literary narrative (Koopman, Hakemulder, 2015).

Koopman and Hakemulder introduce a structure of empathic development through the process of reading. Firstly, readers already have certain dispositions when it comes to their empathic sensitivity to others, which Koopman and Hakemulder dub 'trait empathy'. This initial sense of empathy is a personality variable, and although it could be developed more strongly through one's previous exposure to representative narratives, it could just as much be entirely independent of reading behaviours. Taking this 'trait empathy' into account, the second development happens through reading, where readers are typically shown to experience new empathic responses towards literary characters. Since this empathy is not

inherent in the reader but rather brought forth by the narrative they are exposed to, Koopman and Hakemulder has dubbed it ‘narrative empathy’. Lastly, after reading, the empathy gained through the literary narrative can be reactivated when the reader is presented with living beings who are similar to the characters depicted in the text, resulting in ‘real-life empathy’, along with a possible increase in senses of sympathy and compassion (Koopman, Hakemulder, 2015, p. 3–4).

To summarize, narrative empathy has a tendency to promote higher real-life empathy. When applied to the research question ‘What is Symptoms of Being Human teaching the reader about the genderqueer experience?’, one inevitable answer is that the novel, presenting a genderqueer representing narrative, will teach the reader to feel empathy with the genderqueer experience, and lead the reader to possibly inhabit higher real-life empathy after having read the novel. Subsequently, the lack of empathy towards genderqueer experience can be contributed as a natural consequence of the low frequency of genderqueer representation both in television and in literature, as shown in the statistics presented by GLAAD and Lo. Furthermore, it becomes increasingly important to look at literary narratives such as *Symptoms of Being Human* if what Kidd and Castano theorized is true; that the fictitious literary narrative is more impactful than other literary texts. Representative novels such as *Symptoms of Being Human* may then very well act as crucial influencers in a movement towards a more open discourse regarding nonbinary gender experiences, and in the curation of a safer society, more accepting to nonconforming gender expressions.

1 Reception Theory in Reading

Symptoms of Being Human

Anyway, it's not that simple. The world isn't binary. Everything isn't black or white, yes or no. Sometimes it's not a switch, it's a dial. And it's not even a dial you can get your hands on; it turns without your permission or approval.

(Garvin, 2016, p. 28)

Symptoms of Being Human is a young adult novel written by Jeff Garvin, published in February 2016. The novel will henceforth be referred to by the abbreviation *SoBH*. Jeff Garvin is an American author, musician, and actor, and *SoBH* is his debut novel. The novel portrays the life of the genderqueer teen Riley Cavanaugh, and allows the reader to follow Riley through the process of starting at a new school, facing harassment and abuse, finding a community and a voice, and finally coming out as genderqueer to friends and family. Author Jeff Garvin is a cis male, and is in a heterosexual marriage. Through my research, I have found no indication of Garvin identifying as queer, and this thesis will consequently approach him as an LGBTQ-ally rather than a queer voice. When it was first published in 2016, *Symptoms of Being Human* reached #1 on Amazon in the Young Adult category and was featured on book recommendation lists by companies such as Audible, Barnes and Nobles, Goodreads, et.al. (Garvin, 2016). The novel was on the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of Best Fiction for Young Adults in 2017, as well as being a finalist for the Lambda Literary Award the same year. The novel reached #1 on Amazon for the second time when it was released in paperback in December 2017 (Garvin, 2017). As of this current moment, the novel has an outstanding review of 4.7/5 stars from 163 reviews on Amazon, and 4.18/5 from an impressive 10,195 ratings on Goodreads. In short, the novel is having great success, implying that the genderqueer narrative of protagonist Riley Cavanaugh was a narrative young readers were searching for. This chapter will analyse what kind of reader Garvin imagined while writing, and which structural and linguistic tools he has utilized in order to appeal to this reader.

The narrative structure of *Symptoms of Being Human* is primarily chronological, starting with an *in medias res* introduction to Riley's life. When the narrative begins, we only know that Riley changed schools because something happened. The story is presented through a first-person narrative, and is written only in present tense. While we follow Riley in a linear time structure, analeptic flashbacks are allowing us to learn about Riley's past, and what

'incident' led them to change schools and seek therapy. It is revealed in a conversation with Riley's therapist and again in a later conversation with Bec that 'the incident' in question was a suicide attempt. It is in the conversation with Bec that we also learn that the reason for Riley's school transfer was an assault in the locker room at their old school – another plot point only revealed through flashbacks. These flashbacks are mediated both through Riley's own associations as well as through dialogue with Doctor Anne and Bec. In addition to employing flashbacks, Garvin also plays with proleptic foreshadowing to a certain extent. We find an example of this at page 223, where Bec mentions that she used to visit the abandoned building 'until the football guys found it' (Garvin, 2016). This ends up being the place where the football guys find and assault Riley. Foreshadowing is also used in a conversation with Riley's therapist, where she asks what would happen if the anonymous stalker was to out Riley to their parents (p. 238), which in turn ends up being the case. These foreshadowings allow the reader insight to the story outside of Riley's narrative, teasing the observant reader. This strategy can be deployed to shape the reader's expectation of what is to come, and in order to keep the reader's attention and interest. Additionally, by adding these foreshadowings, Garvin disarms some of the violent impacts of the foreshadowed scenes when they actually occur, having indirectly prepared the reader for what is to come. This claim is supported by the fact that the foreshadowing is only being deployed in preparation for two of the novel's more critical and violent turning points; Riley being outed, and the sexual assault on Riley.

The only perspective we follow is the internal focalization of Riley's thoughts, observations, and their experienced dialogues. At no point are we shown scenes where Riley is not present, and all observations are made through the lens of Riley's perspective. The narrative structure is linear with no parallel narratives, which in turn allows the reader to not risk distraction by structural complexity, but leaves us to focus primarily on Riley's internal emotional development. When taking a closer look at the novel's course of action, we find a somewhat steady increase in pressure from the first page (starting a blog, beginning at a new school), gaining momentum until it reaches its climax the night where Riley is outed, fights with their parents, and is subject to sexual assault, all occurring on the same night. Catharsis is achieved slowly, but surely through the reconciliation of Riley and Bec, Riley beginning to open up to their parents, and finally where the novel closes, with Riley's attendance at a panel at the Trans Health Con, where we are left with an open ending. We are led to imagine that Riley's troubles are still somewhat prevalent, but that everything has now changed for the

better. Given that Riley is the mediator of the narrative, the language is reflecting that of a well-spoken and well-read teenager. We see this reflected in dialogue and blog posts as well as in Riley's inner monologues, where their word choices seem well thought out, but not overly complicated. Tools such as similes and metaphors are often applied in order to explain more complex ideas and feelings, especially when applied to gender terminology and in Riley's therapy sessions – metaphors such as 'it's not a switch, it's a dial' (p. 28), 'you're the bottle' (p. 237), or similes like 'it's like I have a compass in my chest' (p. 29) or 'like I'm in a costume' (p. 30). We find, however, that the width of Riley's thoughtful language tends to diminish when tension is increasing. We see this especially when Riley experiences anxious episodes; the pace often quickens, the descriptions become direct and uncomplicated, the sentences shorten. We can attribute this to being conscious choices made by Garvin, letting the simplicity of the language allow the reader to be enveloped in the story, rather than struggling to comprehend what is happening and how.

1.1 The Adolescent Reader

As the research question asks what *SoBH* teaches the reader about genderqueer experiences, it is first necessary to determine who the reader is, and how they learn. Protagonist Riley is still in school, and as they are allowed to drive, it is safe to estimate their age to be somewhere between 16 and 19. In other words, Riley is a teenager – and the audience is subsequently primarily adolescent readers. A lot of Riley's narrative is shaped by the fact that they are genderqueer, but that is not to say that Riley is still a teen with normal teenage problems that other normal teenagers can relate to when reading the novel.

“So how do I cope with it?” I say.

“You are coping. You're taking meds. You're going out with friends. Standing up for yourself. Writing about it. Screaming at your parents.”

“And that's normal?”

“For a teenager in your situation? I'd say so.”

(Garvin, 2016, p. 110)

In the introduction to this thesis, it was established that readers can experience an increase in empathy through reading representative narratives. Furthermore, when searching for a fictional literary text containing a genderqueer narrative, most search results were novels in the category of young adult literature. Curiously, the USTS report also showed that 61% of the people who identified as genderqueer in the 2015 survey were between ages 18 to 24,

which in turn was the youngest age group. The report thus states that the nonbinary respondents were more likely to be younger (National Center for Trans Equality, 2016, p. 46). Not only is the young adult genre of literary fiction the genre most open to themes and topics relating to questions of identity, otherness, and conflict (Appleyard, 1991), but the majority of genderqueer individuals are in the age bracket of the target audience for this sort of literature. In the following subchapter, I wish to examine the position of the adolescent as reader. How does the adolescent reader differ from the adult or the juvenile reader? Are we right in assuming that young adult literature carries more impact than other genres tend to do? And first and foremost: Who *is* the adolescent?

We can go as far back as to the ancient Greeks and still find remnants of a theory on adolescence. Aristotle has been reported to write around 350 BC that “Youth are heated by nature as men by wine” (Alsup, 2014, p. 25). The eccentricism and flair of adolescence is also well depicted through the literary ages, perhaps most infamously in Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* from 1567, where the two teenagers were so engulfed by their passion and emotions that they decided their teenage love was more important than life itself. The actual science of adolescence, however, has a somewhat shorter history. The most famous early study on the subject was done by psychologist G. Stanley Hall, who in 1904 published a massive study on adolescence. Stanley Hall wrote about adolescence as a “time of storm and stress” (Alsup, 2014, p. 25) (Appleyard, 1991, p. 96), dating the scientific subject of adolescence to be about 110 years old today. Hall’s studies and publications on the subject ignited a new interest in the field of developmental studies, opening the possibility of researching adolescence not only as part of childhood or adulthood, but as its own developmental stage. However, the structures put forth by developmental theorists such as Hall, Piaget, or Freud are not sufficient for those of us who are curious to study how modern adolescents think, how they evolve, how they learn, and most of all, how they read. If the goal is to understand the adolescent reader as they might have been imagined by Jeff Garvin when writing *Symptoms of Being Human*, a broader understanding of the modern adolescent is required. As such, this thesis will use the theories of J. A. Appleyard, and his views on how adolescents experience reading.

Appleyard developed a model of the roles of readers at different developmental stages. Laying the foundation of his model, Appleyard celebrated the developmental theorist Erik Erikson, whose developmental theories shaped much of the ideas on developmental psychology throughout the 1950’s and 60’s. Erikson introduced his theory of personality, consisting of eight stages. The fifth stage in particular, titled *Fidelity, Identity vs. Role*

Confusion and covering the age 12–18, became highly relevant to the emerging theories surrounding adolescence. In this stage, Erikson describes an adolescent who is searching for a sense of belonging, an understanding of their different sets of roles, and who is accumulating their own sense of self (Erik Erikson, 2019). Erikson presents the argument that adolescence is least stormy for the privileged teen – or when ‘the young are gifted, well-trained, and ride the wave of whatever technological, economic, or ideological trend is dominant’ (Appleyard, 1991, p. 98). Erikson argues that lack of privilege, or a feeling of ‘otherness’, might bring the identity-searching adolescent to value ideology and autonomy, and encourage them to chase self-realization in ways their more privileged counterparts will not. The less fortunate adolescent, on the other hand, will begin to look for various arenas that allow them to express their authentic inner selves (Broughton, 1978). The inner self, according to Broughton, is seen as authentic, whereas the outer self is merely a role to be played, an appearance put on for others (1978, pp. 83–89). While Erikson’s theory appeals to adolescents’ general approach to teenage life, it also translates quite elegantly to the adolescent’s experience as a reader, searching out texts that might mediate expressions of identity with which the adolescent reader ‘in a time of storm and stress’ can identify. Appleyard argues that some of the classical trials and tribulations of adolescence, such as intensified sexuality, grandiose and naïve idealism, self-consciousness, moodiness, rebellion, etc, are all manifestations of discovering the subjective self and subjective experience as something unique to each individual (Appleyard, 1991). Erikson’s approach to the ‘stormy’ teen reflects the narrative expressed in Garvin’s *Symptoms of Being Human*, where we follow a genderqueer teen through the trials and tribulations of modern-day adolescence. Their sense of alienation drives protagonist Riley through a continuous search for like-minded peers and for safe arenas where Riley can express themselves as their authentic, genderqueer self. This search for an autonomous identity is something most adolescent readers can relate to, helping the non-genderqueer adolescent reader to identify with Riley’s struggles regardless of gender identity.

Broughton’s mention of authenticity is interesting, as it is a recurring theme when talking about the cultivation of identity. Existentialist philosophers claimed that authenticity served as ‘an antidote to the sense of meaninglessness and lurking danger of essentialism’ (Holt, 2012, p. 5) presented by modern society, particularly through the increasing involvement of mass media. Heidegger presented a solution to this meaninglessness, saying that true authenticity could only be achieved ‘once the individual starts making active choices about who to become’. Each individual has the responsibility to take active part in the shaping of their own

beliefs, morals and projects, and they should consequently be willing to act on those beliefs (Holt, 2012, p. 6). While the idea of authenticity can be applied to any person exploring their identity, be it adolescent, child, or adult, this idea of proactive authenticity is manifested even more so in queer narratives. The act of ‘hiding’ or actively suppressing your authentic self has for a long time been a big part of LGBTQ narratives, as individuals who identify outside the heterosexual cis-gendered norm are put in a position where they are forced to make an active choice to whether or not they want to ‘come out’ in order to live as their authentic selves. Whereas no one expects an individual to come out as straight or cis-gendered in order for them to live their authentic selves, the queer individual will often feel the need to come out in order to live their lives fully. This aspect of queer narrative plays a central role in *Symptoms of Being Human*, where the protagonist Riley struggles with coming out to their parents, portraying the act of coming out as a personal catharsis. ‘I’ve been carrying around this pressure inside me for so long,’ Riley’s inner monologue states, ‘I want to let it go. I need to let it go. I need my parents to know who I am. I am ready to come out’ (Garvin, 2016, p. 244), establishing Riley’s desire to live as their authentic self.

Appleyard’s model offers a suitable guideline to how we can approach the modern adolescent reader, helping us to understand what they look for in their reading experiences, and to understand why they look for it. In his book *Becoming a Reader: The Experience of Fiction from Childhood to Adulthood* (1991), Appleyard presents a suggestive model for how we can categorize different readers and their approaches to reading, and chose to divide his model of readers into five distinguished roles. The roles we take on as readers are primarily determined by the goals we as readers have as we read – whether it be to better understand society, understand the self, for textual and contextual analysis, or purely for entertainment, according to Appleyard’s theory. Appleyard notes that these roles ‘do not describe the unique experience of an individual reader with a particular book’ (1991, p. 15), and that the roles as they are described cannot capture the gradual and multifaceted process of development, or account for personal history, culture, class, intelligence, personality traits, and so on, but rather that his categories function as broad labels. The adolescent reader falls into Appleyard’s role of *the reader as thinker*.

[Adolescents] have discovered that their own judgments and feelings, the motives of other peoples’ actions, indeed the whole intelligibility of the world are up for grabs and that they need to sort these things out and that reading helps.

(Appleyard, p.116)

Appleyard's model suggests that the adolescent reader most commonly falls into the category of the Reader as Thinker; the adolescent reader is attracted to stories that deal with more complex portrayals of moral, sex, death, sin, and prejudice. Whereas the juvenile Heroic Reader prefers stories with an evident polarization between hero and villain or good and evil, the Thinking Reader is more inclined to read stories where good and evil are mixed up in the confused and turbulent emotions of the characters that inhabit them (1991, p. 100). We can understand this partly through what has already been established on adolescence in general, being conceived as a 'time of storm and stress' containing sudden physical changes, emergence of sexuality and desires, self-consciousness, ambition and drive, rebellion and crisis. It is natural that the adolescent reader requests a similarly chaotic manifestation of reality and characters in the stories they choose to read.

There are three key criteria all Appleyard's adolescent interview objects reported they were looking for when approaching a new text: A sense of involvement, a sense of realism, and that the text made them *think*. When Appleyard's subjects spoke of the topic of involvement, they often applied it to attaining a sense of identification with a character, or through idealizing a character. For some, identification was a way of articulating and trying out potential aspects of their identity which were at that point still competing for priority (1991, p. 103). Adolescents sometimes seek out portrayals of nonconforming narratives in order to establish whether or not the narrative can offer some clarity in their own sense of self, which again confirms the necessity for nonconforming representation. As such, the representation of the genderqueer narrative in *Symptoms of Being Human* can serve as a tool for adolescent readers to 'try out' Riley's genderqueer identity and learn whether this identity is something that resonates with them. In the process of accepting or ruling out the genderqueer identity, the narrative inevitably lets the reader learn about, and empathize with, the genderqueer experience through reading. Identification and involvement for the adolescent reader does not only transfer to a sense of likeness, but also to a sense of 'I want to be like this character'. Given this information, it also becomes essential to examine *Symptoms of Being Human*'s protagonist Riley, and how they function as a role model for adolescent readers.

The adolescents also reported that they focused on the realism of the story. Where the previous roles of readers look to more fantastic and romantic narratives to present real life structures in a more approachable manner, the adolescent reader is explicitly requesting realism in their narratives. The teenagers interviewed by Appleyard consistently used realism

as a criterion for a good story, implying that the adolescent reader, whether subconsciously or not, makes judgments comparing the truthfulness of what they read to the truthfulness of their own experience (1991, p. 108). Realism in this sense includes both a realistic presentation of complex characters and situations, as well as putting them in realistic scenarios; this does not necessarily mean that all adolescent readers prefer the genre of realism to genres such as fantasy or science fiction, but rather that they require the scenarios to be logical, functional, and to have a realistic portrayal of cause and effect, regardless of literary genre. Appleyard's adolescent reader was often attracted to more tragic narratives, as opposed to the romanticism of the hero-narratives popular with the younger Hero/Heroine-reader. The adolescent reader is curious to read stories including darker topics such as suffering, identity struggles, violence, or even death, as the adolescent reader has grown to realize that the real world 'is not the green world of romance but a much darker and more dangerous place' (1991, p. 110). Having established that realism is key in adolescent literature, this thesis will examine Garvin's approach to realism versus fiction in his novel, and in turn ask why the literary reality of *Symptoms of Being Human* is presented the way it is.

In addition to a need for identification and realism, the teenagers of Appleyard's research say that a good story is one that encourages them to *think*. The adolescent reader appreciates the opportunity to reflect about the complexity of characters, their motives and feelings, and in turn how these do or do not resemble the reader's own motives and feelings. While the adolescent reader enjoys more complex narratives, they are still not equipped with proper theories of interpretation, such as the college student or the adult reader. As such, the adolescent reader interprets, but shallowly, often benefitting from explicit presentations of more critical approaches or underlying themes (1991, p. 112). Consequently, it is possible to conclude that the adolescent reader is still more impressionable than the college student or adult reader, who have been taught how to critically confront literary texts and know how to apply these strategies when reading.

Erikson's, Broughton's, and Appleyard's theories have granted us an understanding of the sociological and structural aspects of adolescence, and in turn how these have changed over time. Nevertheless, it is still necessary to question whether adolescence can be deemed an independent phase in our physical and biological development. The teenage brain is proven to work differently from the brain of the juvenile or the adult; their preferences, reactions, and ideologies differ. The reaction patterns of the adolescent brain, especially how it reacts when

reading, should play a central role when we confront or analyse adolescent fiction. When confronting the impact of representation and mediation in *Symptoms of Being Human*, it becomes essential that we understand how the adolescent brain internalizes and vicariously experiences literary narratives.

In their chapter *Brain and Behaviour: The Coherence of Teenage Responses to Young Adult Literature* (2012), Heath and Wolf examine the workings of the adolescent brain, both when confronted with digitalization of mass media as well as how the adolescent functions as a reader. Heath and Wolf write that adolescence is a time of increased potential for linguistic fluency and range of genres. The adolescent can handle more complex semantic structures than the juvenile, processing more extended texts, decoding and encoding more extensive vocabulary and dialogue, sustaining longer visual attention, and that they are generally developing their skill of meaning-making along with their understanding of consequence. The act of reading triggers the adolescent brain to create its own imagery, stimulating visual thinking and mental modelling, along with understanding and envisioning action and consequence in future scenarios. These reactions all take place in parts of the brain that work in coordination with language centres (Heath, Wolf, 2012, p. 144). In short, the act of reading triggers modal overlapping in the brain where the adolescent reader has to create their own mental scenarios, both in the sense of imagery and the sense of understanding certain cause-and-effects. This brings forth the curious cognitive phenomenon *future memories*. Future memories refer to the scenarios and images the adolescent reader creates in their own head as they read. The extraordinary aspect of such future memories is that they allow successful readers to embody the action they are reading about, which in turn simulates associated movements deep within the neural structures of the brain. These future memories enable the adolescent reader to ‘remember’ affordances that certain environments or situations could provide (Heath, Wolf, 2012, p. 147), despite not having physically been through the experience in question. Janet Alsup further elaborates on this tendency in her chapter *More Than a “Time of Storm and Stress”: The Complex Depiction of Adolescent Identity in Contemporary Young Adult Novels* (2014). She addresses the uniqueness of the adolescent reading experience, stating that ‘at no time in our lives, other than infancy, do we experience greater brain flux and synaptic growth’ (Alsup, p.29). Just like future memories are applied to the readers’ experience of situations and scenarios, a similar neurological response occurs when young readers identify emotionally with characters. This emotional bonding creates a sense of *joint attention*, according to Heath and Wolf; ‘[...] behaviours in the textual world

that they perceive as ‘like me’ serve as proxy for their own behaviours without the inefficiency and dangers involved in their actually taking the risks that literary characters may pursue’ (p. 146). In her article, Alsup points to additional brain research that has unveiled a phenomenon referred to as *mirror neurons*, further confirming and elaborating the theory of future memories and joint attention:

These mirror neurons exist in conjunction with other neurons in the premotor cortex and fire when certain actions are performed; mirror neurons also fire when only *observing* or witnessing an action being performed (Schreiber, 2011). Going a step further, mirror neurons have been linked to the limbic system, which controls feelings and emotion (Jacoboni, 2008).

(Alsup, p.34)

This means that the adolescent reader, if successfully immersed in the reading process, is able to gain a sense of personal experience through reading; the brain still reacts partly as though the experience is real. Whereas the fully developed adult brain is quicker to distinguish between fiction and reality, the adolescent brain is quicker to, through immersive reading, map literary scenarios as though they were real, self-lived experiences, and thus allow an adolescent reader to internalize fictitious narratives to a greater extent than what can be expected of more developed critical readers. An adolescent, then, who is continuously testing out new aspects of identity along with gaining an increasing understanding of the world at large, is able to test out hypotheses and situations through textual simulation. Instead of leaving home to go on an adventure, the successful reader might gain a similar neurological experience simply through reading *Huckleberry Finn* or *Tom Sawyer*. Instead of having to battle for survival in a dystopian future, a reader can gain an understanding of the emotions and consequences in such a situation through reading *The Hunger Games* or *Divergent*. And ultimately, instead of trying to imagine what may be like to be a genderqueer teen in modern every-day life, they can simulate the experience through reading about Riley’s life in *Symptoms of Being Human*. In a neurological sense, the adolescent reader is able to quite literally live vicariously through the stories they read.

1.2 The Oblivious Reader

In this section, I will look at the implied reader in *Symptoms of Being Human*, questioning what readers Garvin might have envisioned as his audience when curating Riley’s narrative and experiences. This idea of ‘implied readers’ was popularized by Wolfgang Iser in his book

The Implied Reader (1974), and has become a regular approach to literary analysis along with its counterpart ‘implied author’. The term ‘implied reader’ refers to the author’s image of their reader, in some ways the ‘ideal’ recipient of the text. This reader has been imagined by the author while they were producing the text, and consequently, any literary text will contain traits and structures referring back to this implied recipient. If we look at a children’s picture book as an example, our initial assumption might be that the author wrote the text with only the child in mind. However, the author may have been aware that the book could be read aloud by an adult, and added parts in the book not only with the child reader in mind, but also making sure the adult would enjoy the book. Thus the implied reader is no longer just the child, but also the parent or guardian. An investigation of the text in question can reveal more information about the implied reader the author envisioned; for example, if the text is portraying Scandinavian culture as the normalized culture, one can assume that the implied reader might be a Scandinavian, as they would be familiar with that culture. Furthermore, what is implied in the reader is not necessarily something the author has consciously applied – for instance, if a text only contains white characters, the author might have had an implied reader who is also white, without being aware that they have made this assumption about their reader. *SoBH* is a young adult novel, in that its main themes are identity, fitting in, finding a ‘cause’, while we are following the narrative of an adolescent protagonist. However, it is not certain that the adolescent Garvin has imagined was the genderqueer adolescent. On the contrary, many aspects of Garvin’s novel might imply that he could have envisioned a reader who has little to no previous knowledge of genderqueer terms and experiences. When confronting the question of the *implied* reader of *SoBH*, I will look not only at the adolescent reader as Garvin’s implied reader, but also contest that Garvin’s ideal reader is an oblivious reader – the reader who is unfamiliar with the terms and ideas related to genderqueer experiences, or is unsure how to handle individuals with nonconforming gender identities. What structural choices has Garvin made in order to educate this reader?

Bridging the divide between the modern adolescent reader and the implied oblivious reader, Garvin has chosen to introduce a whole new textual plane to his novel; the digital plane. First, it is possible to argue that this inclusion of a digital aspect acts in favour of the realism of the novel. Garvin’s envisioned contemporary teenage reader is doubtlessly affected by digital presences in one way or another, and the inclusion of not only a digital blog-format, but a format that opens for comments, likes, and questions, reflects the digital reality of most modern-day adolescents. Many young adult readers might also relate to Riley’s sense of

otherness, and how they choose to bring that search for peers to an online platform. Like Erikson argued, the underprivileged adolescent is more likely to actively search for mediations of like-minded narratives. While Erikson's adolescent was limited to the world of books and television, the modern-day adolescent is more likely to turn to online communities and forums in order to attain this sense of belonging, just like Riley does. Along with structural changes in compulsory education regulations along with other changes in Western family traditions (such as when to start a family of one's own, when to get a job, when to 'grow up'), the increased industrialisation and technological development has allowed the modern adolescent to experience their teenage years in a completely new way, granting them more freedom of speech and freedom of expression than previous generations. Turning the coin, the modern teenager is also subject to more conflicting impressions and far more manipulated content than before. The emergence of digital technologies now allows us to carry the world in our pockets, having our smartphones with us wherever we go. As Janet Alsup states in her article *More Than a "Time of Storm and Stress": The Complex Depiction of Adolescent Identity in Contemporary Young Adult Novels* (2014), the online social world creates yet one more world in which teenagers must interact, exhibit an identity, and keep themselves safe. At the end of the day, teens can no longer return home as if it were an oasis of safety and peace. The computer is still there, as are the texting and messaging (Alsup, 2014, p. 32). If we are to understand the complexity of modern-day adolescence, we also have to understand that adolescent identities today are constructed within a vortex of media texts and images designed to influence their thinking (Alsup, 2014) in addition to all the other trials and tribulations that have always been part of adolescence.

Through Riley's blog posts, we are allowed to read how Riley chooses to front their identity online, furthering our understanding of Riley and how they view themselves, encouraging our empathic understanding of Riley's genderqueer experience. This ability to create a sense of identity through a digital medium is becoming an increasingly essential part of modern-day adolescent identity curation through platforms such as Instagram, Facebook and Snapchat, where teenagers are frequent users. For teens and university age students, emerging literacies associated with digital media are highly relevant to their current and future lives as language users, Thorne and Reinhardt point out (2008, p. 560), adding that the modern-day adolescent has developed the ability to express and curate their identities online, and even create additional, purely digital identities through fictitious characters, online games, online role-play, or in writing fanfiction. Through digital mediation of their identities,

teenagers find themselves in a position where they can explore different sides of their identities, test out different roles and consequences, and reach out to peers, in a risk-free way – just like Doctor Anne tells Riley at page 27: ‘She prescribed an anonymous blog so I could interact with people “like me” in a “risk-free” way’ (Garvin, 2016). Digital creation of identity can thus be said to offer the same risk-free arenas for identity ‘testing’ as fictitious literary narratives do. When writing on technology, identity and expressive activities from a pedagogical viewpoint, Thorne, Sauro and Smith state the following:

Emerging arrays of online environments now constitute primary settings through which routine constructions of identity are created, and curated, through the use of textual and multimodal expression, some of which arguably involve new literacies, communicative genres, hybrid linguistic varieties, processes of group formation, and social practices.

(Thorne, Sauro, Smith, 2015, p. 216)

Indeed, we can see this exact tendency of multimodal identity expression along with new communicative genres and social practices reflected in Garvin’s novel, as Riley gains a following on their blog, who leave comments and questions for Riley to tackle. It is also interesting to see that most of Riley’s blog posts include an audio track in addition to Riley’s profile picture being a picture of musician David Bowie – all artists in the novel are artists who exist in real life, and the inclusion of these musical cues allow Garvin’s reader to listen to Riley’s recommendations and further gain an understanding of Riley’s expressed sense of identity through audial impacts. With this inclusion of the blog-format to his novel, Garvin has thus opened up the possibility of giving the reader not only a textual, but an audial experience of the narrative.

Analysing the multimodality of Garvin’s novel, it is necessary to do a closer inspection of the digital format that Garvin has chosen to include: Bloglr-posts. Given the name Garvin has granted the blogging platform, it is quickly associated with the real online platform Tumblr – a blogging platform owned by Yahoo, allowing users to post text, pictures, videos, links, audio and questions to their personal Tumblr-accounts and “Tumblr feeds”. Just like Garvin’s Bloglr, Tumblr-posts are often accommodated with hashtags and music, and allow for direct responses from other users. Additionally, Tumblr allows for questions from other users as well as anonymous users, just like its fictional twin Bloglr. Furthermore, the Tumblr-format and its subsequent literacy can be assumed to be a literacy most current-day adolescent readers are more or less fluent in. According to TechJury and Statista, 43% of all U.S. internet users between the ages of 18 to 24 used Tumblr at the beginning of 2019. When looking at the

statistics of all millennials across the globe, they reported that 69% of them are Tumblr-users (Petrov, 2019)³. As of December 2016, the year of *SoBH*'s publication, Global Media Insight reported that Tumblr had no less than 230 million monthly active users (Global Media Insight, 2016). In other words, the Tumblr format is not by any means a foreign one to the millennial or current-day adolescent reader; when Riley says that they have 'read and "liked" and reblogged dozens of posts by "people like me" all over the country' (Garvin, 2016, p. 27), these are terms Garvin's implied reader is familiar with – although this might change for future readers, given that the digital literacy may change along with the ebb and flow of new platforms replacing the old. As of now, however, just like he has chosen a simple and more common YA structure for his narrative, we find that Garvin is again adding a format that, to the digital adolescent reader, is a familiar one. When the reader is relieved of the challenge of interpreting a fictional and foreign digital infrastructure and is instead presented with a structure most already know and understand, Garvin is free to utilize this format to further develop Riley's expression of identity. Simultaneously, this allows Garvin to provide his readers with the same answers and explanations Riley offers their blog-following.

This brings us back to the claim that the Bloglr-format bridges the gap between Garvin's implied adolescent reader, and his implied oblivious reader. Implying a gap between the two roles of readers might not even be entirely correct; their relation may be more like an overlapping venn-diagram. A noticeable percentage of Garvin's adolescent readers may just as well be oblivious to genderqueer narratives, just like some of his genderqueer readers, or readers familiar with genderqueer terms and experiences, may be adolescent readers. Nevertheless, when 86% of misgendered nonbinary individuals report that they leave correction be because they expect that 'most people do not understand' (NCTE, 2016), it seems safe to assume that this insufficient distribution of genderqueer familiarity is reflected in *SoBH*'s target reading audience. Garvin's utilization of the blog-format is arguably deployed in order to confront this 'obliviousness', as it offers a mode of mediating foreign terms, concepts, and corrections without breaking Riley's narrative. Through presenting terminology in the format of a personal blog, the terms are still mediated through Riley's voice. We are allowed to read the explanation of complex terms *not* through reading non-fictional footnotes or stale descriptions, literary modes proven to have less impact on our senses of empathy, but instead mediated through Riley's description of their own personal

³ When reading these statistics, it is important to note that the age group of users between ages 13–18 is not mapped, and it is uncertain whether this age group is merged with the 18–24 group or constitutes its own percentage.

experiences. As Riley writes their blog-entries through the first-person narrative, the reader's connection to Riley's narrative extends into the blog format, encouraging increased empathy, for instance when the reader is learning of Riley's experiences with dysphoria. Rather than stating that 'dysphoria is a sensation of incongruence between mind and body', for example, Riley words it through personal experiences, and writes that 'some days – maybe half the time – I feel alien inside [my body]. Like the curves and angles are in all the wrong places. Like I was born with the wrong parts. It's a heavy, suffocating feeling – my doctor calls it dysphoria – and it makes concentrating in class (not to mention surviving in the halls) nearly impossible' (Garvin, 2016, p. 29). The previously oblivious reader is then not only introduced to a foreign term, but is allowed to vicariously experience the sensation of dysphoria through Riley's descriptive narrative. The creation of Riley's blog acts as the trigger where the novel begins, and Riley's early blog-posts offer the reader an introduction to relevant LGBTQ terminology early on in the novel. Through Riley's blog posts, Garvin offers explanations on nonbinary gender identities (p. 28–29), on how internal gender experience and external gender expression are independent of each other (p. 58), an explanation of the term "cis" (p. 115), in addition to adding multiple descriptions of Riley's personal experiences with dysphoria (p. 29, 30, 38). The digital aspect of *SoBH* thus works as one of the primary tools for Garvin to appeal to his implied oblivious reader, while not 'breaking' Riley's personal narrative. In regard to asking what the novel teaches the reader of the genderqueer experience, the blog-format is allowing Garvin to teach his reader complex gender theories without compromising the integrity of Riley's narrative. Additionally, by adding a digital format familiar to most readers, the reader may identify closer to Riley, learning that Riley has a blog 'just like they do' or curates an online presence 'just like them'. This plays into the criteria presented by Appleyard's adolescent reader, enabling them to identify with the character, as well as the addition of a digital presence adds to the realism of the novel – in turn allowing a deeper immersion into the narrative, and subsequent internalization of Riley's experiences as genderqueer, leading to increased empathy in the reader.

The inclusion of Bloglr-posts also invites the notion of a double implied reader in the text. We are no longer looking only at Garvin's implied reader for his novel, but also Riley's imagined reader for their blog. In other words, we have to consider Riley's implied blog audience through Garvin's expectations of his own implied reader – who does Garvin imagine Riley would imagine as their audience? As the novel progresses, Riley's blog following grows, and Riley's implied blog reader changes as a result of this. Where the first blog-posts

are more personal, Riley gains an increasing distance to their blog followers as their numbers grow. The first blog posts are introducing Riley's genderqueer experience, their experience of dysphoria, what it means to be nonbinary, as these are the themes Riley's doctor has proposed they express through their blog. As the story progresses, Riley's blog becomes more of a place where they answer questions and comments. Simultaneously, Riley has found a community in the support group QueerAlliance, which might have erased Riley's need for online expression, as they have found a community outside the digital sphere. Curiously, the last blog-post Riley writes is as early as page 182–183, containing only a short apology to the transgender girl Andie, who, after reaching out to Riley's blog for advice returned home only to be violently abused by her father. After this blog-post, the digital presence in the novel turns from mediating personal blog-posts and a supportive online community, to serve only as a mediation of anonymous harassment and threats. However, the reader may gain a better understanding as to why queer individuals search for communities online, and what impact these communities can have to the genderqueer adolescent. The quotation below shows an example of just how much impact Garvin grants Riley's online presence, which in turn may be feelings mirrored in digitally active adolescent readers.

These five hundred new followers – these strangers – have read my most personal thoughts. My most embarrassing feelings. My secrets. All at once, I feel naked. [...] People appear to actually like what I've shared. More than that, they seem to take comfort or inspiration from it, and that makes me feel... I don't know. Like I matter.

(Garvin, 2016, p. 98)

“But you're going to have to help us navigate this whole thing. We're old and set in our bipolar ways.”
“*Binary*, Dad,” I say.”

(Garvin, 2016, p. 296)

The Bloglr-format is not the only tool Garvin uses in order to defuse the confusion oblivious readers may feel when confronted with foreign terms and ideas on gender, although it serves as the primary mode to explain said terms and ideas. However, Garvin chooses to actively include the oblivious reader – not only through comments on Riley's Bloglr-page, but also through Riley's friends Solo and Bec, journalists at the Trans Health Conference, and lastly, but perhaps most importantly, through the portrayal of Riley's parents, as shown in the quotation above. Garvin has chosen to portray Riley's parents as supportive and kind, but still as somewhat 'old-fashioned', at least in their knowledge of nonconforming gender

experiences. As such, not only is the adolescent reader partaking in Riley's sympathy to their parents' obliviousness, but it can also be read as Garvin allowing for an implied adult reader, one who is perhaps also oblivious of most genderqueer terms and expressions, to feel welcome in a narrative that might initially come across as aimed primarily towards adolescents and/or genderqueer individuals. In other words, Garvin is including the adult reader in his implied audience. When Riley reconciles with their parents towards the end of the novel, their mother says that '[...] this is all very new to us. I mean, we understand gay and straight. And we know there are transgender people. But, until you said it out loud, neither of us had heard of 'gender fluid' [...] We had to look it up' (Garvin, 2016, p. 296). As we can read from this quote, Riley's parents are portrayed as humble and curious, and Riley's reaction is in turn to be including and understanding rather than hostile or disappointed. In general, Riley's parents are described as caring and worried, but also as confused. Riley's reaction to their confusion is to be kind and empathic, understanding that not everything is obvious to everyone, especially when it comes to topics as complex as nonbinary gender identities. Through depicting Riley's reaction, Garvin may indirectly be telling his adult oblivious readers that it is okay to not be fully educated on these topics, relieving the adult oblivious reader of possible shame or frustration tied to their lack of knowledge. In other words, Garvin has made active choices in order to not only include adolescents in his image of the implied readers, but also adults, and generally readers who are unfamiliar with genderqueer experiences. This priority on the oblivious reader is quite sensible. As previously argued, the lack of knowledge on genderqueer experiences can be assumed to be the general condition of Garvin's audience. By appealing to the oblivious reader in the ways he has, Garvin has most probably appealed to the majority of his readers. However, this leaves us with a necessary question: What about the genderqueer people?

1.3 The Genderqueer Reader

Having looked at how Garvin has appealed to his implied adolescent reader, his implied oblivious reader, and even his implied adult reader, a primary group of readers have been left out of the equation. How does Garvin appeal to his genderqueer readers? Does he appeal to them at all? While his novel is undoubtedly appealing to the genderqueer reader, as the genderqueer narrative is so rare, it is not a given that Garvin has considered what impact his fictitious narrative can have on the genderqueer reader in particular, or what stereotypes or

misconceptions he may be perpetuating in the novel. Nevertheless, the novel deserves praise for being one of the first to ever represent a genderqueer narrative in this way, leading to many positive responses, both from genderqueer and non-genderqueer readers, such as the review in the quotation below:

Okay, *Symptoms of Being Human*, why do I like it? Well, it's all about a genderfluid person, and reading about how they experience gender and navigate real and online life is so flipping affirming. [...] I relate so much, it's painful. And validating. When I read this book I feel less like a freak because, you know, there's a totally fictional character out there who also feels kind of like me. So I'm not alone – me and this imaginary person are in it together.

(Ash Hardell, 2018)

This quote comes from genderqueer author and YouTuber Ash Hardell, who identifies as nonbinary, and devotes their channel primarily to informative videos on queer diversity. In their video from December 2018, Hardell mentions *SoBH*, saying that the book felt affirming and validating. Looking again at the findings from Lo and GLAAD, this reaction is no surprise, as genderqueer experiences are rarely ever mediated in popular media. Finding a novel that not only includes the genderqueer narrative, but also allows room for explanations, understanding, and acceptance, has proved to be a challenging task, and the relief when finding a narrative one can actually identify with can be a powerful experience. However, it is possible that Garvin has been granted a free pass simply because the genderqueer audience is relieved that their narrative is being represented, somewhat uncritical of the more problematic areas of the text. The novel, when inspected more closely, does not necessarily offer its genderqueer audience the best reading experience. It might even be possible to argue that Garvin actively chose not to appeal to an implied genderqueer reader outside of the fact that he represented their narrative, and rather kept his primary implied audience restricted to oblivious readers who need an introduction to the genderqueer reality. *Symptoms of Being Human* is one of very few narratives available in classical media that offers a genderqueer story set in a realistic universe, while offering such an extensive introduction to genderqueer terminology and experiences. The novel is a young adult novel, aimed at readers who have the ability to internalize what they read as though they are experiencing the story themselves, through the activation of future memories and joint attention. When compared to the interpreting college reader or the pragmatic adult reader, Appleyard points out that the adolescent reader might lack the necessary tools to critically confront some of the issues in the texts they consume; the more immersed an adolescent reader is in the fictitious reality they read, the less they are able to critically confront the material, not necessarily being able

to pick which parts of the narrative to internalize and which to disregard. In other words, Garvin does not necessarily have to envision a critical reader, and has arguably prioritized uncritical readers who are grateful for this sort of representation. As such, it is necessary to highlight some possibly harmful aspects of the novel. What is the characterization of Riley actually teaching the reader about genderqueer reality?

The first aspect that needs confrontation, is that of Riley's privilege. While Riley is a minority on the grounds of being genderqueer, and experiences discrimination and abuse as a result of this, it is important to point out that Riley is otherwise in a position of privilege. Firstly, Riley is white and able-bodied. Furthermore, they are portrayed as a child from a high standing family, and their father is running for congress. We learn that Riley was previously attending a private school, having a privileged access to high-end education. Additionally, we learn that Riley has previously been admitted to a psychiatric hospital, and visits a therapist every week, in addition to getting extraordinary appointments when necessary – in other words, Riley is in the fortunate position where they can afford professional help in order to cope with their anxiety and gender identity. Riley's therapist also seems to be familiar with issues related to gender identity, which in turn can be rare amongst health professionals. Riley benefits from economic privilege as well as having a good health system available. This may lead a genderqueer reader to gain false expectations of what services may be available to them – unfortunately, not all health professionals are experienced with trans issues, and professional help can often be expensive or unavailable. Riley's educated therapist is not the only instance of unrealistic support surrounding Riley. Their parents are supportive, and as it happens, Riley's friend Bec is familiar with trans issues, in turn introducing Riley to a support group called 'The Q', or 'Queer Alliance'. Regarding Riley's privilege, it is necessary to mention that they live geographically close to this support group, and furthermore that the leader of this support group 'discovers' Riley and makes it possible for Riley to be a participant at a panel debate at a national Trans Health Conference. Non-genderqueer readers might get the impression that services such as these are readily available to genderqueer individuals, where the truth is that Riley's support system is extraordinary. Garvin mentions these aspects of Riley's privilege in his author's note, acknowledging that this may not be the situation for most other genderqueer individuals, writing that 'very few trans or genderqueer teens are so lucky, and almost none have access to the kind of resources or media platforms Riley does' (Garvin, 2016, p. 335). However, the question of Riley's privilege is not

mentioned in the actual literary narrative except once, in the following quote, where Riley explains that they can make genderqueer-jokes, but that Solo should not:

“That’s totally unfair,” Solo says. “You’re a rich white kid, why can’t I make fun of you?”

“I don’t make the rules, Solo. I just represent.”

(Garvin, 2016, p. 315)

If we are to disregard the author’s note as an addition to the text and not a part of the narrative itself, then the aspect of Riley’s privilege passes by unmentioned and unchecked. The above comment is more a case of humorous banter between friends, and primarily highlights the difference between Riley and Solo, not the difference between Riley and the general condition of genderqueer realities.

Yet the perhaps most interesting privilege Garvin grants Riley, is possibly also the least confronted privilege; the privilege of reach. Riley’s blog gets featured on a queer resource page, rapidly gaining followers – but the big break is arguably when Riley has offered advice to the trans girl Andie, who lands on national news when she is abused by her father, and the news outlets include Riley’s blog in the reports on the incident. Over the course of the novel, we follow Riley from starting an insignificant blog, to having over 48,000 followers, becoming a spokesperson for genderqueer experiences within just a couple of weeks. While this might happen occasionally, it is curious that Riley’s only ‘claim to fame’ is the fact that they are genderqueer. The reality of the genderqueer experience is that it rarely leads to such fame and recognition. While one might find peers online and be active in online communities and even local communities and politics, the role of spokesperson is rarely one that occurs over the course of a few weeks. The reader is indirectly led to believe that a genderqueer identity can lead to fame, and quickly. This expectation is not confronted by Garvin in the novel, and as such is allowed to pass by uncriticised, allowing the reader to believe that an experience like Riley’s might just as well be the standard for genderqueer teens reaching out to a community online. How, then, is the genderqueer reader supposed to react when it turns out that starting a blog does not instantly lead to finding a community? For many, the search for a community and recognition is a long and challenging process, and may sometimes be a tiresome and lonely experience. It seems somewhat unbalanced that Riley should be subject to the amount of abuse and harassment Garvin has included under the cover of ‘realism’, and yet they gain internet fame with no questions asked, or no counter-narrative offered to even out the uneven portrayal of influencer-privilege portrayed through Riley.

Garvin mentions this in his author's note, but again, Riley's unrealistic experience with internet fame is not confronted in the actual narrative. Garvin's disclaimer might thus pass unnoticed by genderqueer readers who are led to have unrealistic expectations of what their reality 'should' be like, as *SoBH* is one of the few novels offering a role model for them to follow. In a climate where the genderqueer role model is almost unavailable to the genderqueer reader in search of someone to relate to, they may subsequently not have other narratives to compare Riley's story to. *SoBH*'s influence as a role-establishing novel consequently increases, as there are few other narratives to contest the explanations, experiences, and stereotypes in *Symptoms of Being Human*. This, of course, is not Garvin's fault. The problem is rather the fact that his novel is one of very, very few.

Another notable consequence of making Riley such a spokesperson, is that Garvin indirectly teaches the non-genderqueer reader that it is okay to expect gender nonconforming individuals to be patient educators when confronted with uncomfortable questions or ignorance, because after all, Riley handled it well. To the genderqueer reader, they are confronted with a genderqueer role model who puts an uneducated audience before themselves, prioritizing their questions even in situations where their own health may be compromised – after all, Riley defied their anxiety disorder in order to live up to the role as spokesperson. However, it is not a given that all genderqueer individuals are comfortable with this role. In recognizing genderqueer experiences, one also has to recognize that gender identity, just like sexual preference, is not a choice. While teachers choose to become teachers, a genderqueer person cannot simply choose not to identify as genderqueer. Genderqueer individuals are often considered representatives or spokespeople without actively choosing this role, or more importantly, without being able to refuse it. To the curious bystander, their question may just be one simple question, but to the genderqueer individual, it may be the fifth question posed only that day. This is not to say that no genderqueer people are comfortable with the role of educator and spokesperson like Riley in *SoBH*, but it is necessary to point out that this presentation of the genderqueer educator is problematic. Furthermore, being genderqueer does not make a person an instant expert on queer theory and terminology, and genderqueer individuals might be misinformed, judgemental, ignorant, or affected by internalized transphobia, just as much as any other person. Elevating the genderqueer individual to a position of automatically qualified expert may lead readers so expect that most genderqueer people have the same amount of insight and knowledge as Riley, when the fact is that Riley's amount of knowledge is extraordinary;

Riley is a character written by an adult man who has put extensive research behind his novel. Not all genderqueer individuals are so well thought out; after all, they are not novels, they are people. Nevertheless, Garvin somewhat uncritically presents Riley as a natural spokesperson, as though it is what to be expected of them, simply because they chose to mediate their genderqueer identity online. Just like genderqueerness does not equal instant fame, neither does genderqueerness equal an instant comfortability with educating others on the subject of gender nonconformity. Only at the very end of the novel does Riley's father communicate this, telling Riley that 'I know you feel accountable to your community. And that's admirable. But you don't owe it to them. You don't owe it to anyone' (Garvin, 2016, p. 317).

1.4 Conclusion

Alsup, Heath and Wolf highlight the biological aspects of adolescence, pointing out that the adolescent brain is able to internalize literary narratives through immersion in literature, and that the adolescent brain is subsequently not always able to tell read experiences from actual real-life experiences. In other words, Garvin is confronted with an all-consuming impressionable reader, and it is impossible for anyone to pick and choose which aspects of the narrative this reader will absorb and which they will disregard. While Riley's narration of the genderqueer experience offers the reader an extensive insight to what it means to be genderqueer, it is possible to argue that Riley comes across as an unrealistic role model and representative of genderqueer realities. It is possible to perhaps assume that the genderqueer reader, although appreciative of finding genderqueer representation to identify with, are not the intended main audience for the novel, and have to make way to the less educated audience. When asking what the novel teaches the reader about the genderqueer experience, one can argue that the novel prioritizes the oblivious reader, and presents them with complex theories in a manageable manner, encouraging the empathic link between reader and protagonist, subsequently teaching the implied reader 'the basics' of genderqueerness. Genderqueer representing narratives are few, and *SoBH* can arguably be said to be a satisfactory novel to introduce readers to gender nonconformity – however, it is important to highlight the less fortunate parts of the novel, and perhaps be aware of these when introducing young and impressionable readers to the novel.

2 Queer Theory and The Genderqueer Experience in *Symptoms of Being Human*

In this chapter, I will present a closer examination of how the genderqueer experience is portrayed in *SoBH*, and how the representation available in the novel might affect the trajectory of genderqueer realities. Having discussed what *readers* the novel is appealing to, chapter 2 will take a closer look at exactly *what* the novel is teaching its reader regarding queer theory and genderqueer realities. In order to properly understand how representation affects queer realities, it is necessary to look at gender's role in queer theory. Consequently, this chapter will focus on Judith Butler's ideas on gender as performance, and how this theory is presented in *SoBH*. In order to estimate some of the possible effects of a narrative such as Riley's narrative in *SoBH*, I will look at normalization in relation to nonconformity, visualized through Gayle Rubin's model The Charmed Circle. If the goal is to answer what *SoBH* is teaching its reader about the genderqueer experience, it is necessary to look at the current reality of genderqueer experiences and compare them to the reality presented in Garvin's novel. Furthermore, it is necessary to pose the question of whether one should prioritize realism in a narrative like this, or whether the focus should be towards normalizing a non-tragic genderqueer reality. Exactly what is the novel teaching the reader of the genderqueer experience? Is it realistic, or perhaps unnecessarily pessimistic?

When it comes to queer theory as an academically acknowledged field of study, it can be seen as one of the newer scientific fields, not gaining proper independence until the early 1990's. Queer theory as its own literary school can be said to have branched off of feminist theory and its inspections of gender representation in literature, taking some of the approaches of feminist theory into queer theory and its approaches to literary texts. In addition, queer theory offers a perspective on human sexuality that can sometimes resemble the psychoanalytic approach, especially in its approach to experiences of shame and sin related to the sexually queer experience. Combining multiple schools, queer theory embodies both understandings of gender and sexuality, while simultaneously handling issues of otherness, discrimination, self-loathing, and possible acts of normalization of nonconforming identities. Given the steady increase in queer narratives, both through classical media such as novels and television, and on smaller stages such as online forums, YouTube videos, social media

profiles and influencers, queer theory is now just as crucial to literary theory as other theoretic schools have proved to be. As Parker notes in his book *How to Interpret Literature: Critical Theory for Literary and Cultural Studies* (2015), today's queer theory was previously primarily referred to as 'gay' or 'lesbian studies'. The problem with terminology like this is the tendency to portray 'homosexual' and 'heterosexual' as binary opposites, when modern queer theory shows that both queer sexualities and queer gender identities are far more varied than just that of 'homosexual' versus 'heterosexual'. This leads us to the subject of gender as it is confronted in queer theory.

2.1 Gender in queer theory

Anonymous: your a fag
[...]

Alix: Dear Anonymous, while I'm eager to illustrate for you the difference between sexual orientation and gender identity, I think we had better start with a more fundamental concept: Apostrophes.

(Garvin, 2016, pp. 42–43)

Queer theory is somewhat complex in that it refers not only to queer sexualities, but also to queer gender experiences. It is highly important to note that these two aspects can be completely unrelated to one another; being gender nonconforming does not inherently mean that one's sexuality is affected, just like Riley points out to the anonymous comment on their blog in the quote above, including an essential part of queer gender theory in *SoBH*. Being sexually queer does not inherently mean that one's gender identity is affected, and having a queer gender identity generally has little to do with who one is attracted to. Nonconforming sexualities and nonconforming gender identities are united in the fact that both are considered nonconforming, or queer, and that the communities of trans people and gay people have historically shared the same spaces, but apart from this, the two subjects are somewhat unrelated. This divide between queer sexualities and queer gender identities is as such important to remember when discussing gender nonconforming narratives, as there is no explicit need to discuss a genderqueer character's sexuality. This has nevertheless caused some problems for the less educated spectator. Garvin confronts this issue in his novel, having Riley answer the above anonymous question on their blog, but also through their confrontations with their parents. When Riley first tells their parents that they are genderfluid, their mother's initial response is to ask if that means that Riley is gay (2016, p. 252). To non-

LGBTQ familiar spectators, the queer sphere can seem confusing, and the simplest conclusion can be to think that all ‘queer’ equals ‘gay’, disregarding the divide between sexualities and gender identities, perhaps not even being aware that this divide exists. This tendency can be somewhat attributed to the use of the term ‘transsexual’. ‘Transsexual’ has been the medically correct term for individuals who experience incongruence between their gender identity and the gender they have been assigned at birth. The suffix ‘sexual’ in this term is unfortunate, as transsexualism inherently has nothing to do with sexuality, only with gender identity. The term often triggers negative associations, having been used negatively as a slur, and has historically been used primarily to refer to individuals who experience transness within the binary – i.e. male-to-female (MTF) or female-to-male (FTM) – and is rarely associated with nonbinary gender expression. Thankfully, this term has finally been changed in the International Classification of Diseases 11 of May 2018, where the diagnosis of ‘Transsexualism’ was officially removed and renamed. Rather than having ‘Transsexualism’ be classified as a psychosomatic disorder, the new chapter ‘Conditions related to Sexual Health’ includes the new diagnosis ‘Gender Incongruence’ – renaming the condition while simultaneously removing it from a category of ‘disorder’ to a category of ‘conditions’. In addition to removing the semantic association with sexuality from the term, this new term and definition additionally abstains from the previous binary approach to gender, as it defines ‘Gender Incongruence’ not as a wish to ‘be accepted as a member of the opposite sex’ as in the previous edition, the ICD-10 (WHO, 2010), but as ‘a marked and persistent incongruence between an individual’s experienced gender and the assigned sex’ (WHO, 2018). Not only does this change further express that gender identity and expression is unrelated to sexual preference, but the rephrasing of ‘opposite gender’ to ‘experienced gender’ opens for a nonbinary understanding of gender, both in social discourse and within medical institutions following the ICD. This new edition of the ICD was officiated by the WHO (World Health Organization) May 25th this year, 2019, and is expected to come into effect January 1st, 2022 (WHO, 2019). These brand new changes to international frameworks prove that narratives such as the narrative presented in *SoBH* are more relevant than ever before. As such, one could argue that Garvin is preparing his reader for the coming change in medical terminology. When posing the question ‘what is *SoBH* teaching the reader about the genderqueer experience?’, this inclusion of Riley’s explicit explanation of the divide between sexuality and gender is definitely providing the reader with necessary information of the structures within queer theory.

2.2 Performativity

In order to understand the existence of genderqueer identities, one has to have a certain understanding of gender as a social construct. If one is to approach gender purely from a biological standpoint, claiming that your gender and your sex are inextricably linked, then the discussion of genderqueer representation and influence can be rendered rather meaningless. However, the act of claiming that gender is strictly biologically determined is a simultaneous disregard of all sociocultural expectations genders inhabit. In English, we are lucky enough to have the linguistical distinction between *gender*, the sociocultural identity, and *sex*, the biological marker. Whereas sex refers to the physical traits distinguishing men and women from one another, the term *gender* is arguably referring to the socially constructed roles we apply to the categories ‘men’, ‘women’, or lately also to categories such as ‘nonbinary’, ‘genderfluid’, ‘agender’, ‘genderflux’, and so on. Having been taught that gender and sex are term sometimes used interchangeably, and having learnt that most people have a gender identity that coincides with their birth sex, the process of disconnecting the notion of gender from the notion of sex can be challenging. Perhaps this is exactly why Garvin has chosen to challenge his readers on our inherent need to connect sex and gender.

One of the key structural choices that make *SoBH* entirely unique, is the fact that Riley’s birth sex is never revealed. This allows the reader to get to know Riley solely through their actions and thoughts, and we as readers are relieved of our preconceptions of gender – as Garvin himself states in his author’s note, ‘I got to know Riley not as a “boy” character or a “girl” character or a “transgender” character, but as a human being – and I knew this was the experience I wanted my readers to have, too’ (Garvin, 2016, p. 334). In removing Riley’s birth sex from the equation, Garvin erases the assumptions and expectations brought on by gender stereotypes that we as readers inevitably apply when reading. We do not dismiss Riley’s emotions as ‘girly’, and we do not dismiss their rage as ‘boyish’. Whereas the knowledge of Riley’s birth sex could have compromised our understanding of Riley’s genderqueer experience, the lack thereof allows us to get to know Riley regardless of gendered expectations and rather directly through their expression of identity. This unique feature makes *SoBH* stand out from most other trans and gender nonconforming narratives, where the more common narrative is to follow binary trans protagonists who transition from known gender A to known gender B. For readers who may not be familiar with genderqueer

and nonbinary narratives and experiences, the secrecy surrounding Riley's birth sex allows the reader to get to know the narrative without being influenced by gendered stereotypes.

However, if the reader is used to the binary structures of society, as one can assume most readers are, some readers might inevitably find themselves searching for clues as to what Riley's birth sex may be, as some of us are programmed to look for a biological sex to account for different gendered expressions. Actively choosing to leave these clues out of Riley's narrative, Garvin is putting his readers in the unpleasant position where they are forced to confront their need to know what Riley's birth sex is, and their excessive need to think of gender in binary structures. Garvin has left out any indicator of what sex Riley could have been born with, sticking to gender neutral terms, evening out masculine tendencies with feminine. Riley could not decide between a Power Ranger-toy or a Bratz Doll, they struggled with choosing the right paint colours, the right books, the right clothes, 'hated their haircut' (p. 42) – even when talking of their previous school, where Riley was abused in the locker room, Garvin avoids mentioning the genders of Riley's abusers, as that would give away Riley's birth sex, never revealing what gender Riley might have been assigned at birth. And yet, Garvin includes a multitude of situations where the curious reader might expect him to slip up, forcing the curious reader to dig for any sort of clue. It is possible to assume that some readers might feel increasingly frustrated, as we are so ingrained with the thought that we need to know someone's sex in order to fully comprehend their gender. However, this frustrated and curious reader can actually find their frustrations reflected in the novel; the same kind of birth sex curiosity is mediated in the novel, too, but only through the actions of bullies and abusers. For instance, Riley is met with the following scenario on their first day at their new school:

“Holy shit, guys.” She lowers her voice to a stage whisper, but I can still hear what she says:

“Is that a girl, or a guy?”

A fit of giggles erupts from the group around her. My face goes hot. I walk faster, trying to escape the whispers.

“No,” another girl says. “That has to be a...”

“Yeah, but look what it's wearing.”

It. She called me *it*.

(Garvin, 2016, p. 5)

While the withholding of Riley's birth sex can be said to lead to an un-biased reading of Riley's genderqueer experience, some readers may still find themselves asking the exact same question as the school harassers; is that a girl, or a guy? Having the question explicitly asked

in the novel, Garvin shows that he predicted the presence of a curious reader asking the same question, and furthermore actively chooses to portray this curiosity as a negative trait. The question of Riley's birth sex is mediated purely through negative experiences for Riley, the first explicit scene being the one quoted above, appearing as early as page 5. While an unknowing reader might think it okay to ask such a question out loud, perhaps even think it okay to call a gender nonconforming person 'it', this situation is showing the reader how uncomfortable and hurtful it might feel to the genderqueer person on the receiving end of such comments. This tendency is continued throughout the novel, where the people who continuously try to determine whether Riley is a boy or a girl, are perpetually portrayed as negative influences. The reader curious of Riley's birth sex is thus put in the position of the bully and abuser, perhaps even to the point where they find themselves identifying with Jim Vickers, the school bully who goes to the extent to sexually abuse Riley in order to figure out what genitalia they have. However, Vickers, as well as the remaining harassers and abusers in the novel, are all depicted as villainous figures in the narrative. Additionally, if we are to look at the people who accept Riley and do their best to understand Riley's genderqueer gender expression, such as Solo, Bec, and later Riley's parents, we find that they are all portrayed as positive and supportive characters. As such, Garvin can be said to indirectly critique the curious reader, showing them that the inherent need to categorize people into the binary positions of 'man' or 'woman' is not only unnecessary, but can even be directly harmful to genderqueer individuals. Through subjecting Riley to a myriad of unpleasant situations caused by their reluctance to conform, from harmful comments in the school halls to sexual harassment in a locker room or sexual abuse at the novel's apex, Garvin shows the binary-thinking reader what sort of consequences binary gender structures can have on genderqueer individuals. While this vilification of the reader's inherent curiosity regarding birth sex is arguably somewhat extreme, it is possible to argue that it serves as a sufficient motivator to get the readers to question *why* they have this curiosity, and in turn *what* this curiosity could lead to. When perpetuated by the wrong people, such as Riley's bullies, Garvin shows that such curiosity can be severely harmful.

We perpetuate the gender structures that we are taught, and it can sometimes be hard to re-learn how to think gender – but nonetheless possible. This brings us to the theory of performativity, one of the key theories in understanding how binary gender structures can be disrupted or discarded entirely, and to the gender theorist Judith Butler. Having been criticized for presenting her views in far too complex a language (Nussbaum, 1999), Butler's

theories can seem a bit daunting at first glance. However, the essence of her gender theory is quite simple – gender, Butler argues, is a social construct, built through acts of repetition. Garvin presents this theory in his novel, having Riley mention that our binary approach to gender is ‘what society has taught us from birth’ (2016, p. 59). Butler’s argument similarly proposes that identity is *performed* rather than being a static essence, thus often being referred to as the theory of *performativity*. In Butler’s argument, we are all products of the acts we see performed around us, and in turn how we choose to repeat these gendered acts. Given that no two performances are identical, repetition of gender and/or identity performances inevitably lead to variation and continuous process. Butler herself notes that gender ought not to be construed as a stable identity. Rather, gender is ‘an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through *stylized repetition of acts*’. Our stylization of bodily gestures, movements and various senses of style constitute the ‘illusion of an abiding gendered self’ (Butler, 1990, p. 332). In other words, any action that might be deemed in any way ‘gendered’, is only gendered because of our inherited preconceptions of what gender should be and how gendered identities should be performed. As an example, having long hair is only considered feminine because we are taught that it is feminine, and through perpetuating this idea in our repetitions of gendered acts. However, another example is that of pants; previously, it was unthinkable that a woman would ever wear pants, whereas now, our gendered perception of pants has diminished, proving that gendered structures are indeed susceptible to change.

We create our ideas of how to ‘properly’ perform gender through the ways in which we have seen gender been performed previously and by how it is performed by our peers. Through performing gender, while at the same time observing how it is being perpetuated and performed in similar ways over and over again, we produce a taken-for-granted idea that certain ways are natural and right (Parker, 2015, p. 191). Hence, we punish those who fail to do their gender ‘right’ (Butler, 1990, p. 331), whether it be through informal sanctions such as bullying, exclusion, violence or other, or through formal and institutionalized sanctions such as discrimination, fees, or imprisonment. However, Butler argues, because there is no such thing as an ‘essence of gender’; genders can in turn neither be true nor false, neither real nor apparent, neither original nor derived. Because gender is construed through repetition, its existence is solely upheld through our perpetuation of the gender performances we are taught; ‘the tacit collective agreement to perform, produce, and sustain discrete and polar gender as cultural fictions’ (Butler, 1990, p. 331). In other words, gender is a social construct, and so the

sanctions put upon nonconforming gender expression can be challenged through socially reconstructing our idea of ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ ways to perform gender.

This perception of gender as nothing but repeated performances grant us as ‘performers’ great power over how we decide to further perform and perpetuate gender. It is perhaps necessary for us to realize that we have a responsibility in how we choose to accept and perform gender. In addition to the withholding of Riley’s birth sex, Riley’s narrative also explicitly reflects on the core ideals of Butler’s theory, for example in this quote from Riley’s blog post at page 59:

I can’t blame you for trying to categorize me. It’s a human instinct. [...] We see gender in two dimensions because that’s what society has taught us from birth. But, are you ready for a shocking revelation? SOCIETY NEEDS TO CHANGE.

(Garvin, 2016, p.59)

Not only is Riley’s quote appealing to what they call the ‘human instinct’ to categorize, something society has taught us from birth, i.e. gender as performed – but Riley encourages their blog audience, and subsequently the readers of *SoBH*, to take a stance and change these conceptions of gender. Utilizing the Bloglr-format again, Garvin mediates Butler’s theories while still retaining Riley’s narrative integrity. Many things have changed since Butler’s essay on performativity in 1990 – especially regarding the technological tools making it possible to communicate with people all over the world. The modern teenager, just like Riley, has the ability to curate their identities online, reaching out to like-minded people across the globe. This opens up a whole new sphere of influences. In other words, the modern individual is exposed to a widened field of gender performances, in addition to having a new arena where they can test out new, more unconventional performances. While not everyone feels comfortable gender-bending in a busy shopping street on a Monday afternoon, we are now presented with the opportunity to express nonnormative gender ideas through textual discourse such as digital presence in addition to vicarious experiences through literary fiction. Those of us who identify with a less normative gender identity find that we have the opportunity to express our queer gendered identities in safe spaces online, and subsequently gaining the confidence necessary to express these gender identities outside of the digital sphere. Technology has allowed anyone with access to the internet the possibility to search for like-minded people all over the world, enabling the nonnormative individual to trade their sense of loneliness and otherness for a sense of community and fellowship through globalized digital communication – just as seen in Garvin’s *SoBH*, not only through Riley’s own blog-

posts, but also through their relationship with digital sources of information, educating Riley on genderqueer experiences (or, if we are to apply Butler's terms, exposing Riley to new gender performances open for repetition) previously unavailable to them. Riley writes that they, like me, stumbled across nonbinary gender identities by accident, and 'voraciously inhaled' any information available.

I voraciously inhaled every blog post and YouTube response I could get my eyes on. At some point during my research, I came across the term "gender fluid". Reading those words was a revelation. It was like someone tore a layer of gauze off the mirror, and I could see myself clearly for the first time. There was a name for what I was. It was a thing. Gender fluid.

(Garvin, 2016, p. 40)

As shown in *SoBH*, the modern-day digital availability puts us in a position where our perceptions of gender are influenced not only by local peers and predecessors, but just as much by how we see gender being performed on television, in literature, in popular culture, and online, creating a wider frame of reference to which we can compare our gendered performances. This widened frame of reference combined with the increased online mobilization of queer communities allows for a growth in acceptance towards nonnormative gender expressions, which, in turn, allows for the emergence of visible nonnormative gender performances outside of safe digital spheres. As LGBTQ representation gains visibility, our catalogue of possible acts of genders expand, changing how gender is perceived globally. In granting genderqueer performances a spot on the world stage, these performances can in turn can be repeated and adjusted by others who are looking for the 'right way' for them to perform *their* gender identity. Just like Butler herself wrote:

The task is not whether to repeat, but how to repeat, or, indeed, to repeat and, through a radical proliferation of gender, to *displace* the very gender norms that enable the repetition itself.

(Butler, 1990, p. 337)

2.3 The Charmed Circle

When talking about marginalized groups, and particularly when confronting the issues of lack of representation in regard to LGBTQ narratives and the even more narrow topic of genderqueer representation, it is common to stumble across the terms 'normativity' and 'normalization'. As the terms themselves imply, they refer to what is considered part of the 'norm' or the 'normal', and the antonyms must in turn inevitably be deemed 'abnormal',

‘other’ or, in the original sense of the word, ‘queer’. In order to establish the concept of normalization in relation to queer theory and subsequent genderqueer narratives, I have chosen to apply Gayle S. Rubin’s model *The Charmed Circle*. Gayle S. Rubin developed a hierarchical model of sex, which she named the ‘charmed circle’. This model was first published in the essay *Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality* in 1984. Rubin argues that certain desires and behaviours are considered to be within a ‘charmed circle’ of normalized, generally accepted traits and desires. Anything within the charmed circle is deemed good, normal, and natural. Rubin presents some examples of such ‘charmed’ traits, such as being heterosexual, married, monogamous, same-generation, vanilla, and so forth. Consequently, other traits have to fall outside of this circle and into what Rubin named ‘the outer limits’, which she exemplifies as traits such as being homosexual, unmarried, promiscuous, casual, cross-generational, etc. Although Rubin primarily employed her model to theories on queer sexualities, the stigmatization of gender nonconforming identities indicates that individuals who are transgender are also on the outside of the charmed circle. Anything within the charmed circle is ‘good’ or ‘right’, while everything falling outside of the circle’s limits is deemed ‘bad’ or ‘wrong’. Just like Butler argued, we tend to punish those who fall into the category of ‘bad’, through both informal and formal sanctions, which will hereby be referred to as ‘condemnation’. In *SoBH*, for example, Riley is faced with numerous informal sanctions (or condemnation) because of their ‘wrongful’ expression of gender. This hierarchical structure can be applied to more than just queer traits and desires, and is a fitting model to visualize general boundaries between what is considered ‘normal’, i.e. traits that are normalized, and what is considered to be ‘unnatural’ or ‘unconventional’. Just like gender is a social construct in the eyes of Butler, Rubin argues that we are taught the boundaries between what is considered ‘right’ and what is considered ‘wrong’ through the society surrounding us. As these structures are also socially constructed, so they can be socially broken; however, we have a tendency to perpetuate pre-existing generalizations. It is essential to note that this model is a simpler visualization of a very real systematic issue; anyone who might find themselves on the outer limits of what is socially acceptable, are also susceptible to discrimination, incrimination, violence and even murder on the grounds of their otherness. The inclusion of queer experiences into the charmed circle is not only a ‘favour’ to the ‘other’ who wants to be ‘like everybody else’ – normalization of queer experiences and identities allows refuge to the queer individual, increasing their safety in society at large.

This theory of condemnation of nonnormative identities can be mediated in many ways. In *SoBH*, for instance, Garvin applies physical condemnation through Riley's experiences with harassment and abuse provoked by their genderqueer expression. This inclusion of external attacks may be the most evident inclusion of the consequences of nonconformity in the novel, both through the portrayal of Riley's experienced alienation by classmates, but also through the depiction of other queer characters in the novel, who all seem to struggle with tragedies caused by their nonconformity. The novel also shows how it is possible, perhaps even natural, for nonconforming individuals on the outside of the charmed circle to internalize the condemnation they face, and direct similar negative thoughts towards themselves. These tendencies can be found in parts of the novel where Riley expresses shame of being genderqueer, for instance thinking that 'sometimes I feel guilty for being how I am [...] something they don't quite understand and tend to handle alternately like a glass figurine and a feral cat' (2016, p. 36), or even blaming themselves after being assaulted, feeling that they caused the assault 'by refusing to just be normal' (2016, p. 277).

The perhaps most curious inclusion of the condemnation of the 'uncharmed' in *SoBH*, however, is the attitude of Riley's friend Solo. Riley experiences harassment at school, where Solo proceeds to state the following:

"You invite it," he says, "because you dress in a way that makes it nearly impossible for people to tell if you're a boy or a girl."

(Garvin, 2016, p. 92)

Garvin allows the character Solo to vocalize an internalized idea of nonconformity as inherently bad, and additionally that the negative consequences of nonconformity are inevitable; Riley's only choice is either to be subject to harassment, or to stay closeted or muted in their gender expression. Solo's character develops throughout the novel, retracting this statement at the end of the novel and admitting that it was not okay to say that (p. 273). However, the impact of the initial comment can feel shocking to the reader, as Solo had been portrayed positively up until that point. While Garvin might attempt to use Solo's character development to show readers how people's ideologies can change, it is possible that the initial comment can lead the reader to believe that Solo represents a true statement that nonconformity inevitably leads to condemnation, and Riley is to blame when they chose not to conform. It is possible to argue that Garvin never explicitly acquits Riley of the blame for the negative situations that occur. When asking what *SoBH* teaches its reader, the answer in

this situation is somewhat unclear. It is possible that the attentive reader sees Solo's character development as proof that it is not the nonconforming individual who is at fault, but their abuser, and that people can change their opinions. On the other hand, it is possible that the reader has internalized Solo's initial statement that Riley's abuse is their own fault. In general, it is possible to argue that the occurrences of the charmed circle-structure in *SoBH* leave us with an uneven distribution of blame as both Riley blames themselves in addition to Solo blaming them, and that this issue is arguably not confronted directly enough.

Nevertheless, we can already see how the charmed circle has expanded since Rubin's introduction of the model in 1984. The homosexual narrative is becoming increasingly included into normality, as well as relationships without marriage or more casual relationships. The goal of LGBTQ representation would be to allow the queer individual more inclusion in the charmed circle, so as to decriminalize, include, and respect queer experiences the same way we do the heterosexual, the cis-gendered, the monogamous, etc. Being on the inside of the charmed circle offers the privilege of not having to be ashamed of your identity or desires, in other words the privilege of being included into the 'norm' instead of the 'deviation'. In order to make this charmed circle expand, it is of vital importance that we allow for 'bad', i.e. unconventional, narratives to be told in order to show they are not, in fact, all that bad.

2.4 Realism or Exaggeration?

The subject of blame and consequences of nonconformity is definitely a problematic subject in the novel, leaving the reader with a somewhat unsatisfying conclusion. The novel has a general tendency to accentuate the negative aspects of being nonconforming, the plot being driven primarily by the challenges Riley faces because of their genderqueerness. This is where it becomes increasingly necessary to pose the question of exactly what the novel is teaching the reader about the genderqueer experience. While the novel does an impressive job of introducing an oblivious reader to genderqueer terms and experiences, it is possible to argue that it prioritizes shock value above realism or consideration of genderqueer readers.

One of these possibly harmful aspects of the novel is the portrayal of tragedy. Tragedy can often be a problematic area in queer literature, being caught in the crossfire of realism and normalization. While on the one hand, readers, especially adolescent readers, appreciate

realistic portrayals of narratives, on the other, the portrayal of queer realities as tragic-laden realities can perpetuate a normalization of queer tragedy. In the matter of *SoBH*, being one of the first genderqueer narratives in contemporary young adult literature, realism carries an even higher value, as it is important to communicate the gravity of the hardships of genderqueer experiences. Not only does a realistic tragic narrative reflect some of the real stories of genderqueer individuals, it further encourages the reader to feel empathy towards these tragedy-ridden individuals. Consequently, Garvin, when writing a novel on a nonconforming gender fluid teen, puts himself in the awkward position where he has to find a balancing point between reality and literary influence. As stated in Appleyard's findings on the adolescent reader, adolescent readers explicitly value a certain amount of realism in their stories. It is also of a certain importance that Riley's genderqueer experience in *SoBH* is realistic, given that *SoBH* seems to be one of very few titles addressing such narratives at all. As such, there is a certain necessity for realism in order to allow the unfamiliar reader to gain insight into, and empathy towards, the real tribulations of genderqueer reality. For on these reasons, it is possible to understand why the harassment Riley encounters show little to no censorship or modification. While Riley's narration is the primary mediator of the story, the lines of other characters are, naturally, not controlled by Riley's vocabulary and moral. This becomes painfully evident whenever we are confronted with the harassment Riley faces. Garvin frequently uses slurs such as 'freak', 'dyke', 'faggot', and 'tranny'. Additionally, one anonymous blog content goes to the extent to encourage Riley to commit suicide:

Anonymous: who wants to love a dickless sewn up faggot dyke tranny
Anonymous: why don't u just go to the bathroom right now
Anonymous: and take all ur pills and kill urself

(Garvin, 2016, p. 229)

This raises the question – should a certain amount of moderation be applied when confronting harmful language in literary texts? A study at Iowa State University in 2010 determined that half of all LGBTQ youth are victims of cyber bullying on a regular basis (Alsup, 2014), and including examples of this strengthens the realism of Riley's narrative. However, while it is definitely important that Riley's experience reflects those of real genderqueer teens, including the negative sides of nonconformity, Garvin is at the same time indirectly subjecting his genderqueer readers to the same level of verbal assault. If what we have found on vicarious living through immersion in reading is correct, then we can assume that the adolescent reader internalizes Garvin's slurs as a natural consequence of nonconforming expression. This can

be hurtful both to the genderqueer reader, who has finally found a story they can identify with, but in turn has to be subject to Garvin's name-calling and worse, and to the empathic reader, who wants to learn about the genderqueer experience, and is taught that it is normal for genderqueer people to be subject to abuse. For genderqueer readers who may have been subject to similar harassment in real life, Garvin might also be triggering unpleasant memories and traumas. While it is essential to convey the hardships of nonconforming experiences to some extent, it is easy to tip the scales toward a harmful normalization of abuse. Arguably, Garvin's choice of rather frequent use of slurs can be said to remove some of the gravitas from hard-hitting slurs such as 'faggot' or 'tranny', words that on their own qualify as abusive hate speech. The frequency and intensity of the abuse Riley is put through is perhaps doing more harm than good in the presentation of genderqueer experience, perpetuating harmful conceptions of how life is for queer people, risking genderqueer-identifying readers to stay closeted or hidden from fear, or having non-genderqueer readers write off hard-hitting abuse as 'a normality'. Indeed, a realistic narrative is key both when writing for an adolescent audience and when expressing a queer narrative – however, it is important to be aware of how fictitious abuse and harassment can perpetuate and perhaps to some even justify real-life abuse and harassment.

Lastly, it is necessary to devote some time to the queer bicharacters of *SoBH*, and how the novel handles tragedy in the queer experience. There are a multitude of queer bicharacters presented in the novel, primarily through the support group Queer Alliance or as followers on Riley's blog, such as the transgirl Andie, genderqueer Morgan, transwoman and QueerAlliance leader Mike-Michelle, transwoman Bennie, transman Chris, and Bec's trans sister Gabi. Each and every one of these queer bicharacters are accompanied by tragedy. Andie's tragedy serves as a catalyst for the narrative, as she is abused by her father and lands on national news after reaching out to Riley's blog for advice. Andie is first introduced through a blog question where she is suicidal and reaching out for help, which in itself is a dark portrayal of queer reality, and the tragedy of her story escalates when we learn of her assault. Bec's sister Gabi committed suicide at the age of thirteen, writing in her note that her family would be better off without her (Garvin, 2016, p. 225). Mike-Michelle is forced to pass as a man when she is around her child. Bennie is going through a painful divorce caused by her coming out as trans. Morgan was disowned by their Christian family for being genderqueer. Chris is constantly misgendered at work and has learnt that his work insurance will not cover his medical transition. While most of these are characters we know little about,

we still get to know their tragedies. Having their tragedy play such a large role in their characterizations, a reader might subconsciously jump to the conclusion that tragedy is a defining factor of most queer realities, and that tragedy is consequently to be expected. Riley is no exception, having been subject to sexual abuse at their previous school and having tried to commit suicide, being verbally harassed, publicly outed, and finally sexually assaulted. Again, this begs the question of whether or not it is possible to find the balancing point between realism and normalization of tragedy when it comes to the portrayal of queer experiences. While it is true that many gender nonconforming individuals experience severe cases of harassment, abuse, assault, and discrimination, it is important to ask whether this pessimistic narrative actually offers an honest portrayal of gender nonconforming realities. To compare, the US Transgender Survey of 2015 showed that 48% of all respondents had been victims of sexual assault in their lifetime (2016, p. 198), and 46% reported having been verbally harassed because they were transgender (2016, p. 202). These staggering numbers prove that the struggles portrayed in *SoBH* are very much real. Nevertheless, if we are to flip the coin, this also means that 52% of all the USTS respondents had never been victims of sexual assault, and 54% had not experienced verbal assaults because of their gender identity in over a year. If one is to argue that realism is the priority in Garvin's novel, then approximately half of his queer characters should have more positive narratives; and yet, they do not. Perhaps more importantly, this begs the question of the intention behind *Symptoms of Being Human*. While there is arguably a general need for representation of queer narratives without an overshadowing presence of tragedy in popular media, this novel might be more a case of having to establish the extent of a problem before trying to solve it. The problem Garvin confronts is arguably not how genderqueer individuals face abuse and discrimination, but rather the massive lack of knowledge of genderqueer realities in the general public. Yes, the novel can indeed be said to sometimes perpetuate toxic expectations of tragedy in queer experiences, but at the same time, an oblivious reader might very well need to be exposed to this borderline exaggerated amount of tragic narratives in order to understand the gravity and reality of queer experiences.

2.5 Conclusion

Through our insight into Riley's thoughts and musings on gender identity, the reader is introduced to the idea that our perceptions of gender are socially constructed, and that it is possible to deconstruct or change these constructs. Through the depicting of queer tragedy, Garvin shows the reader the actual consequences of our internalized 'charmed circles' and how these structures of what is 'good' and what is 'bad' actively affects nonconforming individuals, and how it can feel to be on the outside of this charmed circle. By spreading empathy and understanding of the genderqueer experience, one may argue that the influence of *SoBH* could still encourage a positive change for the genderqueer experience. However, *SoBH* does not seem to have the intention of changing the pre-existing conditions of genderqueer reality through a positive portrayal of the queer experience, but rather to inform the reader of the existence of genderqueer narratives and in turn what challenges genderqueer individuals often face – albeit sometimes to an extreme somewhat removed from actual genderqueer reality. In conclusion, *Symptoms of Being Human* tackles many major topics of queer theory in a way where the reader can easily wrap their heads around them.

Nevertheless, there are still some aspects that are somewhat more problematic, and there are areas in this novel where Garvin unfortunately perpetuates stereotypes and expectations that can actually be harmful to the genderqueer community.

It is possible to conclude that the novel is written solely with the intent to teach the reader about the 'problem' that is genderqueer stigmatization, instead of focusing on solving the problem through positive and multidimensional portrayals of genderqueer reality. Garvin is helping the reader diagnose the problem, and it is possible that educating the reader on harmful gender structures and the necessity for normalization can lead us closer to solving the problem.

Conclusion

To change something, you have to say things out loud. Do things. Take chances. Take a stand.

(Garvin, 2016, p. 328)

There is a somewhat uneven divide in research material between the fields of sexualities and the fields of gender in queer theory. Extensive research has been done on sexually queer experiences; gay and lesbian literature has been around for centuries, and despite having been extensively criticised, banned and destroyed, excluded and silenced, we can still find a multitude of gay and lesbian texts dating back in history. It is hard to distinguish which came first, the queer literature or the change in acceptance in society, but the two are indubitably tied to each other and influence one another – just like the visibility of genderqueer narratives is tied to the general acceptance of genderqueer individuals. More and more countries allow for same-sex marriage, and discrimination laws often protect those who are being discriminated against because of their sexuality. However, we have yet to find the same multitude of acceptance and representation of the genderqueer experience. Although representation is slowly increasing, the nonbinary genderqueer narrative is still very much lacking from the general mediated discourse. Nevertheless, we can still find trails in history pointing towards gender nonconforming and genderqueer experiences, showing that queer gender experiences are just as much part of the human history as queer sexualities are. Along with the appearance of more genderqueer representation, the global recognition of nonconventional gender identities is slowly spreading, whether it be through introduction of legal third gender markers, through changes in the ICD, or through normalizing the act of asking someone's pronouns.

Robert Dale Parker devotes a chapter in his book *How to Interpret Literature: Critical Theory for Literary and Cultural Studies* to Queer Theory. In this chapter, he notes that before the 'invention' of homosexuality, people might engage in same-sex erotic acts, but they would not be *homosexual* – as no such thing yet existed. From the emergence of a new sexual discourse began the evolution of language describing a multitude of sexualities. The French philosopher Foucault did a series of publications on the matter of sexuality and sexual discourse, arguing that the sudden need to judge and repress nonnormative sexualities ironically brought forth a massive discourse of sexuality in general. Foucault described this development as 'the age of multiplication: A dispersion of sexualities, a strengthening of their

disparate forms, a multiple implantation of “perversions” (Foucault, 1978, p. 37). The most prominent of these different ‘perversions’ was the birth of ‘the homosexual’. We have later found that the increase of discourse on sexuality has led us to gain a broader understanding of what it means to be homosexual, and in turn also what it means to have queer sexualities outside of homo- and heterosexual desire, such as bisexuality, pansexuality, and asexuality. It is possible to argue that the same pattern has occurred in relation to nonconforming gender identities. Where at first they were rarely spoken of and mainly kept secret, the gender nonconforming individuals faced condemnation and alienation when the term ‘Transsexual’ came about in the 1920’s, and, just like homosexuality, was deemed a disorder (Transsexual, 2019). However, the emergence of queer theory and subsequent queer gender theory showed that a discourse on gender had been created. The more visible the nonconforming gender narrative became, the more variations of gender identities gained visibility, creating a discourse on gendered structures, on gender performativity, and on nonbinary gender experiences. This discourse might never have been provoked into existence if it was not for the initial condemnation of nonconforming gender expressions.

Garvin mediates a reflection of Foucault’s views on sexual discourse in his novel, having Riley reply to a question on their blog with the statement ‘You know what’s fucked up? People tolerate secrecy’ (Garvin, 2016, p. 117). Indeed, queer experiences throughout history have often been heavily influenced by secrecy and shame, precisely because our modern queer discourse was provoked by the initial condemnation of nonnormative desires and relations. However, the case of secrecy versus visibility is a double-edged sword; while secrecy can ensure safety for the queer individual, few things are known to be changed by silence. We find this tendency repeated over and over again, whether it is with civil rights movements, women’s rights movements, gay’s rights movements, or the subject of this thesis; the genderqueer rights movement – change is not achieved through shame or silence, but through a mediated discourse. One such discourse is the narrative presented in the novel *Symptoms of Being Human*. As with any other novel, there are negative aspects that can and should be addressed; however, the novel can be said to have achieved its primary goal: Educating the reader on what it means to be genderqueer. It is not a novel that intends to portray a thoroughly realistic reflection of genderqueer reality, and it is not a novel that necessarily shows a multidimensional portrayal of genderqueer experiences – but it is a novel that teaches the reader in general terms what it means to be genderqueer, and encourages the reader to understand and be emphatic to genderqueer experiences. Being one of the first

fictitious literary texts that offers the reader a realistic genderqueer narrative, albeit one written by a cis person, it seems irrational to expect that Garvin can be perfectly aware of all the influences his novel contains. While the novel itself does a good job of educating the reader, most of its impact can still be attributed to the fact that the field of genderqueer representation is still quite barren. The story of Riley and their narrative *has* to be inspected thoroughly, as Riley serves as one of just a very short list of representatives of genderqueer narratives in classical media. My hopes are that genderqueer representations, such as that in *Symptoms of Being Human*, will foster visibility for ever more genderqueer narratives, until the field is filled with a multitude of gender nonconforming experiences – showing the public that there is nothing shameful about performing your gender just the way you want to.

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