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Zobrazení gay postav v anglickém románu

Diplomová práce

Autor: Jana Hynková
Studijní program: M7503 Učitelství pro základní školy (2. stupeň)
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Učitelství pro 2. stupeň ZŠ – ruský jazyk a literatura
Vedoucí práce: Mgr. Jan Suk, Ph.D.
Oponent práce: Mgr. Františka Schormová, Ph.D.

University of Hradec Králové
Faculty of Education
Department of English Language and Literature

The Portrayal of Gay Characters in Novels Written in English

Diploma Thesis

Author: Jana Hynková
Study programme: M7503 Teaching at Primary Schools
Field of study: 7503T063 Teaching at Upper Primary Schools - Specialization in
English Language
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Russian Language
Supervisor: Mgr. Jan Suk, Ph.D.
Opponent: Mgr. Františka Schormová, Ph.D.



Zadání diplomové práce

Autor: Jana Hynková
Studium: P18P0401
Studijní program: M7503 Učitelství pro základní školy
Studijní obor: Učitelství pro 2. stupeň ZŠ - anglický jazyk, Učitelství pro 2. stupeň ZŠ - ruský jazyk

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Diplomová práce s názvem Zobrazení gay postav v anglickém románu se zabývá genezí gay postav v literatuře od konce 19. století do 21. století. Práce se pokouší analyzovat a porovnat knihy, které měly vliv na vývoj LGBTQ+ tematiky v literatuře., konkrétně zkoumá *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) Oscara Wilda, *Faggots* (1978) Larry Kramera a *Simon vs the Homo Sapiens Agenda* (2016) od Becky Albertalli. Cílem je zjistit, jak se vyobrazení gay postav v literatuře během století změnilo.

BYRNE R. S. Fone. *Anthology of gay literature*. Columbia University Press, 1998.
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Vedoucí práce: Mgr. Jan Suk, Ph.D.

Oponent: Mgr. Františka Schormová, Ph.D.

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Prohlášení

Prohlašuji, že jsem diplomovou práci *The Portrayal of Gay Characters in Novels Written in English* vypracovala pod vedením vedoucího závěrečné práce samostatně a uvedla jsem všechny použité prameny a literaturu.

V Hradci Králové dne ...

.....

Annotation

HYNKOVÁ, Jana. *The Portrayal of Gay Characters in Novels Written in English*. Hradec Králové: Faculty of Education, University of Hradec Králové, 2023. Diploma Thesis.

The diploma thesis *The Portrayal of Gay Characters in Novels Written in English* examines the genesis of gay characters in literature from the late 19th century to the 21st century. The thesis attempts to analyse and compare books that have influenced the development of LGBTQ+ themes in literature. Specifically, it explores Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), and Becky Albertalli's *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda* (2016). The aim is to explore how the portrayal of gay characters in literature has changed over the centuries.

Keywords: portrayal, gay, LGBTQ+, The Picture of Dorian Gray, Simon vs the Homo Sapiens Agenda, novel, Oscar Wilde, Becky Albertalli

Anotace

HYNKOVÁ, Jana. *Zobrazení gay postav v anglickém románu*. Hradec Králové: Pedagogická fakulta Univerzity Hradec Králové, 2023. Diplomová práce

Diplomová práce s názvem *Zobrazení gay postav v anglickém románu* se zabývá genezí gay postav v literatuře od konce 19. století do 21. století. Práce se pokouší analyzovat a porovnat knihy, které měly vliv na vývoj LGBTQ+ tematiky v literatuře, konkrétně zkoumá *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) Oscara Wilda a *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda* (2016) od Becky Albertalli. Cílem je zjistit, jak se vyobrazení gay postav v literatuře během století změnilo.

Klíčová slova: zobrazení, gay, LGBTQ+, Obraz Doriana Graye, Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda, román, Oscar Wilde, Becky Albertalli

Abstrakt

Tato diplomová práce se zaměřuje na způsob, jakým jsou gay postavy vyobrazeny v anglických románech. Hlavním cílem této práce je analyzovat a porovnat proměny reprezentace těchto postav v anglické literatuře v průběhu staletí. Práce je rozdělena do dvou částí. Teoretická část je věnována objasnění termínům spojeným s LGBTQ+ komunitou, které pomáhají pečlivě zkoumat vykreslení zmíněných postav. Dále tato část obsahuje přehled zobrazování LGBTQ+ v literatuře od antiky po současnost, s důrazem na viktoriánské období. Na základě nastudovaných poznatků se diplomová práce v praktické části zabývá vybranými romány *Obraz Doriana Graya* a *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda*, jež jsou podrobeny hlubšímu zkoumání a rozboru se zaměřením na vykreslení gay postav. Z důvodu rozsahu práce bylo vypuštěno dílo *Faggots*, čímž došlo k zúžení diplomové práce.

V první kapitole teoretické části se zaměřuje na terminologii LGBTQ+ s důrazem na vysvětlení jednotlivých identit a orientací. Důležitým bodem je vysvětlení pojmů „homosexuál“ a „gay“. V dnešní době se většinou upřednostňuje používání právě termínu „gay“ kvůli jeho pozitivnější konotaci a zaměření na identitu.

Následující druhá kapitola předává informace o tom jaký vliv má reprezentace gay postav na společnost. Je velmi důležité si uvědomit, jakou moc má literatura a jiná média při utváření našeho chápání světa kolem nás. Jelikož má zobrazování gay postav v médiích významný dopad na společnost, média musí převzít odpovědnost a aktivně se vypořádávat se stereotypy, které se týkají nejen LGBTQ+ komunity. Podporou rozmanitého a pozitivního zobrazení LGBTQ+ postav může literatura hrát zásadní roli v prosazování inkluзивity a rovnosti.

Aby bylo možné analyzovat román *Obraz Dorian Graya*, diplomová práce se ve čtvrté kapitole věnuje životu Oscara Wilda. Zaměřuje se především na jeho sexuální orientaci a důležité události v jeho životě, které měly vliv na jeho tvorbu. Pátá kapitola teoretické části navazuje na život Oscara Wilda, s orientací na historický kontext viktoriánské Anglie konce 19. století, která je pro pochopení Wildeovy sexuality a jejího vlivu na jeho tvorbu zásadní.

V praktické části se diplomová práce věnuje rozboru vybraných románů se zaměřením na zobrazení gay postav obsahuje vlastní analýzu zkoumaných děl.

Na základě porovnání analýz obou románů jsem identifikoval výrazné rozdíly ve způsobu, jakým jsou gay postavy zobrazeny, čímž byly splněny cíle mé diplomové práce.

Simon vs. Homo Sapiens Agenda přináší současný a pozitivní pohled na gay postavy. Navíc zdůrazňuje skutečné vztahy a podporuje přijetí. Tento příběh nejen slaví různorodost, ale také přispívá k normalizaci LGBTQ+ identit, představuje naději a zdůrazňuje význam lásky, přijetí a otevřené komunikaci. Naopak román *The Picture of Dorian Gray* přistupuje k vykreslení homosexuálních postav temněji a tragicky. Spojuje homosexualitu s negativními charaktery a morálním úpadkem. Tento rozdíl v zobrazení odráží nejen dobu vydání románů, ale také společenské postoje k homosexualitě v daných obdobích.

Přestože hlavní postavy zkoumaných románů jsou dvě velmi odlišné postavy z různých literárních kontextů, je možné mezi nimi vyvodit potenciální podobnosti. Dorian Gray vede tajný život, který se odráží ve skrytém portrétu, zatímco před společností vystupuje jako okouzlující mladý muž. Simon zpočátku tají svou sexuální orientaci, tudíž zároveň před svým okolím skrývá svou pravou identitu. Z tohoto pohledu žijí obě postavy do jisté míry dvojí život. Další podobnost, kterou lze v obou románech nalézt, spočívá v tom, že obě postavy jsou ovlivněny společenskými normami a očekávanými, avšak obě různým způsobem. Dorian Graye pohání touha udržet si mladistvý vzhled a reputace ve společnosti, i kdyby to znamenalo dopouštět se destruktivního chování. Simon zpočátku váhá s přiznáním své sexuální orientace, jelikož se obává, jak budou reagovat jeho přátelé a rodina. Toto také odráží tlak a očekávání jeho společenského prostředí.

Je však důležité si uvědomit, že ačkoli mezi Dorianem Grayem a Simonem existují určité tematické podobnosti, jedná se o zásadně odlišné postavy v různých žánrech a časových obdobích.

Vliv těchto zobrazení na postoje společnosti je značný. *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda* přispívá k pozitivnějšímu a vstřícnějšímu dialogu o LGBTQ+ osobách a podporuje porozumění a empatii. Tragické zobrazení v Obrazu Dorian Graye však může posilovat škodlivé stereotypy a přispívat ke stigmatizaci homosexuality, což poukazuje na vliv literatury na veřejné mínění.

Vzhledem k tomu, že se postoje společnosti k LGBTQ+ komunitě nadále vyvíjejí, je zásadní si uvědomit význam rozmanitých a pozitivních zobrazení v literatuře. Přestože bylo dosaženo pokroku, potíže, kterým LGBTQ+ osoby čelí, přetrvávají, od společenských předsudků až po osobní boj s identitou. Média, včetně literatury, mohou díky své schopnosti utvářet vyprávění a ovlivňovat perspektivy hrát zásadní roli při překonávání těchto obtíží a podpoře inkluzivnější a soucitnější společnosti.

Je třeba si však uvědomit, že interpretace románů se může mezi čtenáři značně lišit a původní autorův záměr nemusí být zřejmý. Literární díla často obsahují vrstvy složitosti a čtenáři do procesu interpretace vkládají své vlastní zkušenosti. To, co jeden čtenář vnímá jako homo erotický podtext, může jiný interpretovat jinak, což zdůrazňuje subjektivní povahu literární analýzy. Faktory, jako je, osobní přesvědčení a společenský kontext, mohou ovlivnit způsob, jakým čtenáři dekodují implikované významy v textu

Závěrem lze říci, že zobrazování homosexuálních postav v románech zůstává dynamickým a vyvíjejícím procesem, který odráží a ovlivňuje společenské postoje. Prostřednictvím pozitivních zobrazení může literatura přispět k tomu, že svět bude pro LGBTQ+ osoby přijatelnější a chápavější.

Table of Contents

- Introduction 12
- 1. Definition of “Gay” and “LGBTQ+” 14
- 2. The Impact of Gay Character Portrayals on Society 17
- 3. Overview of the History of LGBTQ+ Representation in Literature 19
- 4. The Picture of Dorian Gray 26
 - 4.1 Cultural Context 26
 - 4.2 Oscar Wilde 28
 - 4.2.1 Wilde’s Sexual Identity 29
 - 4.3 The Picture of Dorian Gray 32
 - 4.3.1 Summary of the Characters 33
 - 4.3.2 Portrayal of Gay Characters in the Novel 35
 - 4.3.2.1 Basil Hallward 35
 - 4.3.2.2 Lord Henry Wotton 39
 - 4.3.2.3 Dorian Gray 40
- 5. Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda 42
 - 5.1 Cultural Context 42
 - 5.2 Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda 46
 - 5.2.1 Summary of the Characters 47
 - 5.2.2 Portrayal of Gay Characters in the Novel 48
 - 5.2.2.1 Bullying and its Impact 48
 - 5.2.2.2 Loneliness and Isolation 49
 - 5.2.2.3 Coming Out 50
 - 5.2.2.4 Simon’s Complex Character: Attraction and Self-Discovery 53
- 6. Comparison of the Portrayal of Gay Characters in The Picture of Dorian Gray and Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda 58
- Conclusion 61
- Bibliography 63

Introduction

The portrayal of gay characters in literature has undergone a significant evolution, reflecting the broader societal shifts in attitudes toward LGBTQ+ themes. This diploma thesis attempts to analyse and compare novels written in English that feature gay characters in their narratives. Specifically, Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), and Becky Albertalli's *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda* (2016) are explored. Due to the thesis' length, the literary work *Faggots* has been excluded, thus narrowing down the thesis. The selected works span different centuries, comprehensively exploring the portrayal of gay characters. The aim is to explore how the portrayal of gay characters in literature has changed over the centuries.

The theoretical part tries to explain the acronym "LGBTQ+" and the terms associated with its community. It attempts to establish the difference between the terms "homosexual" and "gay", emphasising the preference for "gay" as a more inclusive term. In examining novels with gay characters, it is essential to acknowledge the influential role of literature and media in shaping our perceptions of the world. Therefore, the theoretical part also focuses on the impact of gay character portrayals on society.

Furthermore, the history of LGBTQ+ characters in literature is described. The thesis tries to provide a brief history of the portrayal of gay characters from ancient times to the present day. It delves deeper into the historical and cultural background of the Victorian era which is connected to Oscar Wilde whose novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is crucial for this thesis. Special attention is given to Wilde's sexual orientation and the attitude of Victorian society toward homosexuality.

In the practical part of the thesis, an analysis and comparison are conducted between *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda*. Before delving into examining how gay characters are portrayed, each novel is prefaced with a brief summary of the cultural background, the plot, and the description of key characters. Afterward, the analysis delves into the portrayal of gay characters in each novel, examining the behaviours and descriptions of various gay characters. It is crucial to highlight that the analysis of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is more complicated due to the inclusion of homoerotic codes

implying homosexual portrayals. It is worth noting that the interpretation of these codes may vary among readers.

In the last part, the thesis then compares the portrayals of gay characters from the two novels, pointing out both differences and similarities. Despite some potential similarities among the characters, they are fundamentally distinct, belonging to different genres and time periods.

1. Definition of “Gay” and “LGBTQ+”

The portrayal of gay characters in English literature has transformed over time, mirroring the evolution of cultural norms, attitudes, and social trends. Including LGBTQ+ characters has enriched literature by offering readers various portrayals of human experiences. However, it is essential to clearly understand the terminology that forms the foundation of this exploration. By understanding the key terms, it is possible to examine the portrayal of mentioned characters carefully.

The term “LGBTQ+” stands as an acronym that refers to those who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or other labels describing a sexual orientation that is not heterosexual. This chapter aims to explain the terminology and the historical trajectories that have led to its contemporary form. The understanding of LGBTQ+ identities is important to appreciate how the portrayal of gay characters in English novels has evolved.

The acronym begins with “lesbian”, representing women who are romantically and sexually attracted to other women. “Gay” as a term refers to men who are romantically and sexually attracted to other men. It is a term that has been central to the LGBTQ+ community for decades, representing the experiences of homosexual men. “Bisexual” is a person who is attracted to individuals of both their own gender and other genders. Additionally, “Transgender” is a term used to describe individuals whose gender identity differs from the sex assigned to them at birth.

Furthermore, the term “queer” or “questioning” is an inclusive term that challenges norms and includes diverse identities. More specifically, the term “queer” represents individuals with various sexual orientations and gender identities that do not conform to traditional norms. (LGBTQ Terms and Definitions - Lgbtq, 2017). Additionally, this term recognizes the fluidity and complexity of human sexuality and gender. Moreover, “q” also stands for “‘questioning,’ as a way to acknowledge those who are exploring their gender or sexual identity” (Blakemore, 2023). Within this acronym, the “+” signifies the recognition of identities that may not be explicitly represented, signifying the inclusive nature of the LGBTQ+ community.

Throughout its history, the term “LGBTQ+” has changed in response to the evolving society. The term LGB (lesbian, gay, bisexual) began to replace the term “gay” in the 1980s

to refer to the broader LGBTQ+ community. “From about 1988, activists began to use the initialism LGBT in the United States” (LibGuides: Primary Sources: LGBTQ+: Welcome to the LGBTQ+ Primary Source Guide, n.d.). The LGBTQ+ community saw a rise in visibility during the AIDS crisis in the 1980s. During this period, LGBT became more commonly used and accepted, emphasizing the importance of the mentioned community.

Furthermore, the acronym LGBT has changed over time, with the addition of the letter “Q” to represent “queer” or “questioning,” acknowledging the fluid nature of identities. The term “queer”, which is currently used as a term to describe individuals who are not straight, has a complex history. “Originally a derogatory name for a homosexual, “queer” has been embraced by some in the non-heterosexual community” (Perlman, 2019). Additionally, the term “queer” also has roots in its traditional usage to describe oddness or weirdness, so it is understandable that some people still find the term offensive and hurtful. On the other hand, it is also a neutral term used by some members of the LGBTQ+ community. Therefore, it is important to respect individuals’ preferences and use the terms they feel most comfortable with.

It is crucial to note that the term “queer” is still a topic of debate within the LGBTQ+ community. While some people identify as queer and find it to be a more inclusive and accurate term for their sexuality or gender identity, others may not feel comfortable with it due to its derogatory past.

As mentioned above, the second letter in LGBTQ+ stands for “gay”. The term “gay”, has a unique role as it represents expression of same-sex attraction, typically referring to men. According to Bollinger (2017), the term “gay” has a fascinating linguistic evolution dating back to the 13th century when it originated from the French word “gai”, meaning “merry”. It later developed another meaning of “sexually immoral”. The statement suggests that these changes are not only linguistic but also inherently tied to broader historical and cultural developments.

It is also important to distinguish the difference between the word “homosexual” and “gay”. The main difference between these terms is that “homosexual” is a clinical term used to study the sexual behaviour of individuals, while “gay” is a term that primarily refers to a homosexual person or the trait of being homosexual.

According to Herek, et al. (1991) the term “gay” is preferred over “homosexual” in most contexts. This preference is due to the clinical history associated with the term “homosexual,” as well as its focus on sexual behaviour rather than romantic feelings. Some people within the LGBTQ+ community view the term “homosexual” as having a negative history. This has led to the recommendation of using alternative terms like “gay” and “lesbian” which are more inclusive. In the context of LGBTQ+ literature, “gay” is often used to describe male homosexuality, while “lesbian” is used to describe female homosexuality.

The term LGBTQ+ is the most used acronym today, and it is seen as a more inclusive and encompassing representation of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities. However, many other variations of the acronym exist, such as simplified version, LGBT+ or LGBTQIA+ adding intersex, asexual, and aromantic individuals.

In conclusion, the evolution of the term LGBTQ+ reflects a growing understanding and the evolution of the term LGBTQ+ reflects a growing understanding and recognition of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities. It is important to note that this terminology keeps changing, and individuals within the LGBTQ+ community may identify with different labels that resonate with their personal experiences. The term LGBTQ+ has a rich and evolving history, reflecting changes in societal attitudes, awareness, and the recognition of different sexual orientations and gender identities. The acronym continues to expand as society becomes more inclusive.

2. The Impact of Gay Character Portrayals on Society

LGBTQ+ representation in media, including literature, has been linked to increased visibility and acceptance of the community. Positive portrayals of LGBTQ+ characters and relationships between them can help members of the community feel seen and accepted. These portrayals normalize different identities and show the world in a more diverse light. According to a study by Calzo and Ward (2009) prejudice toward gay males and lesbians can be reduced if the audience is exposed to positive portrayals.

As mentioned, portraying LGBTQ+ characters and storylines in literature and media can shape how people view and understand homosexuality. For example, if a book or movie portrays LGBTQ+ characters positively, it can help break down stereotypes and promote acceptance. Research conducted by Levina et. al. (2006) discovered that watching a documentary with pro-homosexuality themes for a duration of 30 minutes might leave viewers with positive impressions that would persist for a minimum of ten to fourteen days following the viewing of said video. This is especially important for young individuals who are figuring out their identities and may be influenced by the media they consume. Seeing characters that reflect their own experiences and identities can provide LGBTQ+ individuals with a sense of validation and recognition. Furthermore, this portrayal can improve feelings of self-worth especially for mentioned young people who are in the process of exploring their sexuality.

In addition, positive portrayal of LGBTQ+ characters can promote understanding among viewers who may lack familiarity with various sexual orientations. By presenting the experiences encountered by those characters, media can foster empathy among readers. Positive and complex portrayals of gay characters can effectively challenge stereotypes and promote acceptance of the LGBTQ+ community. Åkestam et al. (2017) found that positive portrayals of homosexuality in advertising have the potential to influence how consumers view other individuals and encourage them to be more empathetic. This implies that the inclusion of positive representations of homosexual characters in advertisements can foster a sense of understanding among consumers. However, it is important to acknowledge that the increased visibility of LGBTQ+ characters in the media does not necessarily result in widespread social acceptance.

Furthermore, the effects of remembering homosexual characters in the media have also been examined by Bonds-Raacke, Jennifer, et al. (2007). Based on their study, remembering positive portrayals led to more positive attitudes towards gay men while negative remembering portrayals had the opposite effect. This suggests that the way gay characters are portrayed in media can shape attitudes and perceptions towards the LGBTQ+ community.

Since media can influence the public's opinion, the media need to be mindful of the impact their portrayals can have and aim for authentic and respectful representation. The portrayal of LGBTQ+ characters that is not complex, relatively negative, or stereotyped can do more bad than good to the LGBTQ+ community. For example, negative portrayals of LGBTQ+ characters, who were sometimes turned into sexually predatory characters, were seen after the 1970s. "Gays and lesbians were becoming more visible and vocal in public life however, their representation in media was becoming increasingly homophobic. At this time, gay characters were often represented as being dangerous, violent, predatory, or suicidal such as in the films *The Children's Hour* (1961), *The Boys in the Band* (1970), *Midnight Express* (1978), and *Vanishing Point* (1971). (2SLGBTQ+ Representation in Film and Television, n.d.). This form of portrayal is highly damaging to the community because it shows its members in a terrible light. Negative portrayals can evoke negative responses, while more authentic representation can reduce prejudice and support tolerance. Negative portrayals might result in the LGBTQ+ community being disrespected or feared. Moreover, this might lead to an increase in homophobia and a decrease in tolerance within our society. Simultaneously, this could affect the mental health of members of the LGBTQ+ who still face higher rates of mental health concerns, such as depression, anxiety, and suicidal thoughts, compared to heterosexual individuals.

In conclusion, it is crucial to recognize the power of literature or media in shaping our understanding of the world around us. The portrayal of gay characters in media has a significant impact on society. Therefore, the media must take responsibility and actively challenge stereotypes. By promoting diverse and positive representation of LGBTQ+ characters, literature can play a vital role in promoting inclusivity and equality. Moreover, authentic, developed, and positive portrayals can foster social empathy, and tolerance. As a result, we can help to create a more inclusive and accepting society.

3. Overview of the History of LGBTQ+ Representation in Literature

The portrayal of LGBTQ+ characters within literary works has undergone a great evolution. Books are like mirrors reflecting what is happening in the world. Moreover, how LGBTQ+ characters are shown in literature explains a lot about society's views and how these views have changed over time. It is important to understand the challenges and progress in how LGBTQ+ characters have been written about. From times when LGBTQ+ stories had to be hidden to today's world, where more voices are heard. Wynne (2021, p. 8) states that "The history of queer literature is filled with gaps. While the great Arab poet Abu Nuwas could openly write poems about same-sex desires, for much of recorded history, queer voices have been suppressed. Many of those who dared to write did so in private." Therefore, it is crucial to provide information about how the LGBTQ+ representation in literature has evolved from being stigmatized and misrepresented to being embraced and normalized.

As noted by Wynne (2021, p. 7-8), "While the representation of gay, lesbian and trans people can be found throughout the history of written literature, the concepts of sexual orientation and of gender identity are relatively recent." In light of this acknowledgment, the transformative journey of LGBTQ+ representation in literature becomes apparent, emphasising that while individuals with different sexual orientations and gender identities have been present in literature over time, the explicit articulation of these concepts have become clearer in contemporary works. By understanding this historical context and acknowledging the recent exploration of sexual orientation and gender identity in literature, it is possible to gain valuable insights into the evolving nature of how LGBTQ+ experiences are portrayed in literature.

Additionally, Woods (1999, p. 1) emphasises the importance of approaching discussions surrounding the concept of a "gay tradition" in literature with caution. Woods argues that every gay theorist stresses the need for caution when approaching this concept. Noteworthy is his observation that, if such tradition exists, it is not found in novels but mainly in verse, which refers to poetry. This statement could be interpreted as a reflection on the historical treatment of LGBTQ+ themes in literature, suggesting that poets may have been more inclined to express various sexual orientations due to the flexibility of the poetic form, compared to the more restrictive nature of novels.

In exploring LGBTQ+ representation, it becomes evident that this representation exists across various literary genres and dates back to Greek culture. “In poems, drama, and prose romance, in philosophy and the law, in sculpture and in painting, in graffiti written on rocks and on shards of pottery, the evidence is extensive that relations between men, as encompassed in desire, love, and sex, played an important role in Greek life and culture” (Fone, 1996, p. 11). Fone shows that exploring desire, love, and same-sex relationships is not tied to only traditional forms like poems and drama. This suggests that same-sex relationships were vital in shaping different aspects of Greek society, illustrating the diverse nature of LGBTQ+ representation in art.

More specifically, poetry has been a medium for expressing emotions, including love and desire. With its often symbolic and metaphorical language, it could provide a more subtle way to represent LGBTQ+ themes without directly challenging social norms. In the exploration of LGBTQ+ representation in ancient literature, particularly within the context of the *Iliad* (8th century BC) by Homer, significant insights arise from the works of scholars such as Woods (1999), Fone R.S. Byrne (1998) and Wynne (2021).

Woods (1999) emphasizes the influence of the *Iliad* as a source of one of the most prominent examples of male love in Greek culture. His statement acknowledges that the interpretation of their relationship has evolved over time. This insight contributes to a better understanding of how literary works from ancient times continue to influence perceptions of LGBTQ+ themes.

Furthermore, Wynne (2021, p. 2) adds to the discussion by highlighting subtle aspects in Homer’s poem. Although the epic poet never clearly states that the strong connection between Achilles and Patroclus is sexual, Wynne points out that many writers from the Greek classical period did refer to them as lovers. These perspectives contribute to a better understanding of interpreting ancient texts, revealing LGBTQ+ layers that extend beyond explicit statements in the text and are shaped by cultural and historical contexts.

The exploration of same-sex topics seamlessly extends into the works of Roman poets who were influenced by their Greek predecessors. “Roman poets regularly indicated their own involvement in homosexual activities, celebrating or lamenting their love for handsome boys” Fone (1999, p. 61). Recognizing these themes in Roman poets’ writings highlights how important same-sex relationships were in shaping the culture and art of that period.

Moreover, notable poets such as Catullus, writing during the Roman Republic, engaged with themes of love and desire, while also exploring same-sex experiences. “Many Roman poets celebrated homosexual love, but few more erotically and explicitly than Catullus in his “Odes”. This would later pose a problem for Western Christian scholars, who lionised the Roman ideal of masculinity while censoring descriptions of sexuality” (Wynne, 2021, p. 11). This shows the ongoing conflict between social norms and various portrayals in literature. Roman poets, like Catullus, delved into same-sex themes, but Western Christian scholars later struggled to accept these expressions. The clash mirrors a broader social dialogue, where evolving ideals in different cultural and religious contexts meet with the artistic freedom present in literature.

The celebration of homosexual love in *Odes* marked a departure from the traditional Roman ideals that were based on a set of virtues that were highly valued. According to Younan (2021), “Homosexuality within the Roman world is a much-debated topic. Over the years scholars have come to varying conclusions; some suggest same-sex relations were freely practiced in the Roman world, others argue they were both legally and socially condemned. However, neither argument has been able to reach a definitive conclusion.” In the light of these debates, within the context of ancient Rome, while same-sex relationships were not uncommon, the concept of homosexuality as a distinct identity did not align with the traditional Roman ideal. Given the patriarchal nature of Roman society, the approval of sexual activities was linked to the social status of the individuals involved. On the other hand, Fone (1998, p. 61) argues that “No Roman legal precedent has been discovered that categorically prohibits homosexual acts or that indicated any history of such prohibition.” However, this was possibly only true until the 4th century when homosexual acts may have been prohibited by the Roman law. This dynamic sheds light on the complex connection between societal expectations, diverse relationships, and the evolution of cultural values.

Transitioning to the Elizabethan era, a period marked by its own set of norms and literary expressions, it is possible to explore how LGBTQ+ themes were navigated in the works of writers like William Shakespeare. In the context of LGBTQ+ representation during the height of the English Renaissance, which was from the late 15th century to the 17th century, attitudes towards same-sex relationships were mostly negative. The understanding of same-sex relationships, including the treatment of individuals who engaged in homosexual acts, was influenced by the cultural, religious, and legal norms of the Elizabethan era.

Furthermore, in the 16th century, literary works often portrayed male beauty and passionate friendships as common themes. By emphasising the passionate aspects of male relationships, writers were able to explore homoerotic themes in a way that could be both intriguing and acceptable within the norms of the period. “English writers employed the conventions of friendship or classical allusion to denote homosexual desire, and such conventions were often strongly eroticised, even sexualised” Fone (1998, p. 152). Notable figures from the 16th century, such as Sir Francis Bacon, Sir Philip Sidney, Christopher Marlowe, and William Shakespeare, are often identified as authors who potentially incorporated homoerotic elements into their works.

Speaking of William Shakespeare, Wynne (2021, p. 14) mentions that “There is a playful, punning homoeroticism in certain sonnets that belie a purely aesthetic interest.” Wynne suggests that Shakespeare uses a playful approach to convey homoerotic elements, adding depth and complexity to the themes explored. Additionally, per Wynne’s suggestion, beneath what might be perceived as purely aesthetic or artistic expressions, there are instances where Shakespeare incorporates elements that carry subtle homoerotic undertones. Shakespeare often portrays deep friendships and bonds between men in his work. Although Shakespeare did not explicitly delve into homosexuality as modern literature might, some scholars have examined parts of his plays and sonnets for possible homoerotic themes.

Notably, some of Shakespeare’s sonnets, specifically those addressed to a young man (Sonnets 1-126), have been examined for possible homoerotic implications. “William Shakespeare summons sometimes specific and sometimes coded homoerotic strategies to explore the implications of an amorous relationship between men” Fone (1998, p. 189). The tone of these sonnets suggests a deep emotional connection and explores themes of love, and beauty. Consequently, debates have arisen due to the use of affectionate and admiring language, questioning the nature of the described relationship. It is important to note that scholars might interpret Shakespeare’s work differently and not everyone agrees on the presence of homoeroticism in Shakespeare’s work.

In examining the history of LGBTQ+ representation, a crucial era emerged in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Towards the end of the 19th century, aestheticism emphasised the beauty and aesthetic qualities of art and literature, often rejecting moral or societal values. According to Fone (1998, p. 266), “Homosexual writers linked a version of 19th-century aestheticism to the specifically homosexual, transforming homosexuality into a special kind

of aesthetic experience.” This connection between homosexuality and aestheticism allowed writers to express the emotional aspects of same-sex relationships in a way that went beyond accepted norms. The authors had to be careful since, at that time, England made any form of intimacy between two males illegal.

Although there were societal restrictions, men expressed their feelings through poetry. Notably, across Europe, both homosexual and non-homosexual authors wrote texts with homosexual subjects. Important literary figures like Oscar Wilde, Arthur Rimbaud, Paul Verlaine, and Byron contributed to this literature. The challenges faced by homosexual individuals led to a literary response, resulting in works that not only recognized but also supported sexual diversity. These works served as reflections of the societal difficulties of that time.

Nevertheless, a comprehensive understanding of the Victorian era’s attitudes towards homosexuality requires a more in-depth exploration, which will be undertaken in the forthcoming fourth chapter of this thesis.

The narrative shifts significantly as it explores the impact of the AIDS crisis in the 1980s on LGBTQ+ representation in literature. Literary works from this time shed light on early gay experiences with AIDS, emphasising the challenges faced by queer individuals amid growing homophobia. Shilts (1987, p. 8) offers a perspective by saying that “People died while scientists did not at first devote appropriate attention to the epidemic because they perceived little prestige to be gained in studying a homosexual affliction.” While the statement does not explicitly label the entire 1980s as homophobic, it does imply that biases affected the initial response to the epidemic, especially by viewing it as mainly a homosexual issue. This highlights the challenges faced by the LGBTQ+ community during that period, not only in dealing with health crisis but also with societal prejudices.

Moreover, it is crucial to mention that Shilts (1987) also emphasises how the news contributed to this biased perception by considering the epidemic as a homosexual problem of little interest to the general public. This observation underscores the influence of media in contributing to social biases and stigmas surrounding the epidemic, potentially affecting public awareness, understanding, and response.

Consequently, this shaped the themes and narratives within the works of literature. Writers faced the challenges by fighting these prejudices through their literary expressions.

More specifically, gay writers responded with sadness, anger, and, as described by Fone (1998, p. 729), “With renewed activism and with writing that sought to find triumph or at least hope even in tragedy.” The phrase “activist artists” highlights a commitment to advocacy within the artistic community. This indicates that their creative work serves not only as an expression of art but also as a form of activism in response to the AIDS crisis.

Furthermore, the lasting impact on literature by the AIDS crisis is also described by Woods (1999, p. 367) who states that “HIV will be seen to have shaped, not only the subjects of gay art, but also its forms. Activist artists have had to develop new methods and new combinations of materials. But even those who are working in traditional forms and genres have had strategies dictated to them by the state of their health. Many gay writers are writing short books.” The statement suggests that the AIDS epidemic has not only influenced the content or themes in literature but has also played a role in shaping the forms and structures of artistic expression.

After the AIDS crisis, LGBTQ+ representation in literature went through a significant change, becoming more visible and diverse. In the late 20th century, various experiences within the LGBTQ+ community were being recognised and authors started challenging stereotypes and addressing the impact of the epidemic. As society progressed, literature became more inclusive, exploring themes like resilience, love, and self-discovery. In the 21st century, LGBTQ+ narratives expanded even further, with a noticeable increase in diverse voices and perspectives. Moreover, contemporary authors explore the connections between sexual orientations, race, gender, and socio-economic background. This post-AIDS era in LGBTQ+ literature not only shows a wider acceptance within society but also reflects an ongoing commitment to telling genuine stories that contribute to a more thorough understanding of the LGBTQ+ experience.

In summary, the portrayal of LGBTQ+ characters in literature spans centuries, reflecting the complex interplay between societal attitudes, artistic expression, and individual identities. The journey from ancient cultures to contemporary times demonstrates a continuous dialogue, challenging norms and contributing to a richer and more inclusive literary landscape. This exploration underscores the importance of recognizing and understanding the historical context of LGBTQ+ representation, fostering a more comprehensive appreciation of the diverse and evolving nature of human experiences in literature.

Moreover, in earlier literary works, LGBTQ+ characters were often subjected to negative or stereotyped portrayals. Authors gradually started to question stereotypes, offering more genuine representations that mirrored the range of experiences within the LGBTQ+ community. Writers today openly delve into these concepts, adding to a more diverse collection of voices and experiences. It is essential to recognize that this evolution is ongoing, and contemporary literature continues to push boundaries and redefine norms. The inclusion and normalization of LGBTQ+ characters in literature not only reflect progress but also contribute to shaping perceptions and fostering empathy.

4. The Picture of Dorian Gray

4.1 Cultural Context

Delving into the cultural and historical background surrounding Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is crucial in unravelling the complex layers of the portrayal of gay characters in English literature. The Victorian era, marked by its distinct moral code and societal expectations, serves as a compelling backdrop for understanding Wilde's challenges in addressing themes that pushed against the boundaries of conventional thinking. During this period writers often led double lives, expressing themselves in their works because they could not live openly. Influenced by societal norms and the stigma of homosexuality, they created a public persona to navigate their private lives discreetly.

However, it is important to note that during the Victorian era, sexual preference was not distinctly viewed as an identity. The term was first used as a noun in the early 20th century. During the time of Oscar Wilde, the general perception of society was not to categorise these men explicitly as homosexuals. Instead, they would have been seen by the majority as individuals engaging in immoral behaviour (Wilde, 2011, p. 7). This reflects the moral judgment and societal disapproval attached to their sexual activities. Moreover, any sexual activities, public or private, between men were considered deviant.

In the 1860s "England retained the strongest laws against sodomy and continued the strict prosecutions of those apprehended in sodomitical acts as well as to raid known homosexual gathering places" (Fone, 1998, p. 265). This points to the fact that England out of all European countries remained extremely strict when it came to homosexual acts. In the Victorian era, the term "sodomy" referred to a range of sexual acts that were seen as unnatural. Moreover, Victorian society not only viewed these acts as immoral but also sinful. The prevailing moral values were deeply rooted in Victorian norms influenced by religious principles and societal expectations. This played a role in the eventual criminalisation of certain homosexual acts.

Fone (1998, p. 335) provides more details about the act that was passed and criminalised mentioned acts: "48 and 49 Victoria, C. 69 II: Any male person who, in public or private, commits to any act of gross indecency with another male person, shall be guilty of a misdemeanor." Additionally, the infamous trial of Oscar Wilde in 1895, under the provisions

of this act, highlighted the legal repercussions of homosexual acts during this period. This legal stance continued until later reform in the mid-20th century which started to decriminalise consensual homosexual acts among adults.

Authors such as Wilde, Byron, Rimbaud, and Verlaine explored homosexuality in their works. However, Wynne (1999, p. 183) suggests that writers during this period had to make personal decisions considering the risk of scandal if they openly expressed themselves. Wilde's tragic downfall served as a warning to those who dared to write explicit homosexual themes. To maintain secrecy, these authors often passed their work among friends or published in limited editions. According to Fone (1998) "To disguise the intent of a text, writers sometimes couched their works in coded language in order to allow the knowledgeable to participate in a special confraternity of knowing readers." In simple terms, using coded language allowed writers to share ideas discreetly, creating a sense of shared understanding among readers who could find the hidden meanings in the text. However, it is important to remember that as society progresses and becomes more accepting, readers may interpret codes with homoerotic undertones that even Wilde might not have intended.

Moreover, while discussing the mentioned authors, it is crucial to highlight the artistic and literary movement that emerged in the late 19th century during the Victorian era – Aestheticism. According to Fone (1998), this movement played a significant role in transforming homosexuality into a unique form of aesthetic experience. In essence, writers of this period used aesthetic language to portray homoerotic wants. Within the context of the aesthetic movement, the beauty of male friendship was explored. This is a valid point, especially because aestheticism, with its emphasis on appreciating beauty and the significance of male friendship, provided a framework through which writers could explore homoerotic desires.

4.2 Oscar Wilde

Oscar Wilde, a prominent writer from the late 1800s, represents a mix of art, cleverness, and rebellion. The author plays a crucial role in the exploration of the portrayal of gay characters in English novels. Wilde is important not only for his writing but also for boldly challenging Victorian norms, which is evident in both his creative works and his personal life. He was a great Irish writer of the Aesthetic movement, which emphasised aesthetic values over moral or social themes. His exceptional talent is evident in his works, including *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895), *A Woman of No Importance* (1893), *An Ideal Husband* (1895), and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890).

Wilde attended Portola Royal School, Enniskillen, where he fell in love with Greek and Roman studies, and after he returned from boarding school, he gained undergraduate degrees in classics at Dublin's Trinity College and Oxford's Magdalen College. There he received the Newdigate Prize for his poem *Ravenna*. "As a leader of Oxford's young 'Aesthetes' his pronouncements were mocked and marvelled at in equal measures first in, and then in national press" (Wilde, 2001, p. 6). Despite facing daily mockery and ridicule, he persisted in clothing himself with the ideals of aestheticism. One might argue that this contributed to his success by receiving a notorious reputation.

In the decade between his first appearance on the London scene and his only novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), he experimented with various forms and styles, including poetry, drama, essays, or public lectures. He consistently established his presence in the literary marketplace by provoking his audience (Wilde, 2001, p. 7). Notably, in 1882, Oscar Wilde experienced growth in popularity that significantly elevated his public profile. This increase in fame occurred during his visit to New York, where he engaged audiences with his public lectures.

After his return, Wilde lived in Paris for five months, where he met the leading figures of the Decadent and Impressionist movements. "Their anti-naturalism and ingenious interconnecting of art with perverse desires fascinated him, but as yet he had not hit upon a suitable form in which he could explore his fascination" (Wilde, 2001, p. 8). Consequently, Wilde turned to journalism in 1885 to support his lifestyle, before his first experiments with fiction.

“Five years before his death, Wilde went, almost overnight, from being one of Britain’s most celebrated figures to its most notorious sexual criminal” (Wilde, 2011, p. 1). Wilde, isolated and demoralised, faced financial challenges toward the end of his life. After his release from prison in 1897, his works were not as lucrative as they once were. As Wilde faced rejection by society, he did not regain his earlier financial success and died with limited means in 1900 in a hotel in Paris. Oscar Wilde is buried in the same city.

4.2.1 Wilde’s Sexual Identity

While Wilde is celebrated for his wit, flamboyant style, and brilliant plays, his personal life, particularly his sexuality, adds layer to the understanding of this literary icon. His experiences as a gay man in the Victorian era, marked by love and tragedy, provide background to the characters in his writings. Scholars have extensively explored Wilde’s sexuality, relationships, and the legal challenges he faced. His notable works, such as *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *The Importance of Being Earnest* are often examined for potential autobiographical elements and reflections of his understanding of desire. By delving into his works and examining the societal challenges he confronted, it becomes evident how Wilde’s personal journey influenced the portrayal of gay characters, especially in his novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. It is essential to approach the topic with sensitivity, recognizing the historical context of Wilde’s life, the complexities surrounding discussions of sexuality in the Victorian era, and the impact of societal attitudes on his personal and professional life.

According to Wynne (2021, p. 37) “Wilde led a dual life – publicly he was a husband and father, but he spent his more private moments “feasting with panthers”, engaged in passionate relationships with young men.” This statement highlights the fact that Wilde got married to Constance Lloyd in 1880s with whom he had two sons. Cyril was born in 1885 and Vyvyan in 1886. At the same time, Wilde was involved in romantic relationships with men. Therefore, publicly, Wilde presented himself as a husband and father, fulfilling societal expectations. However, privately, he engaged in relationships with men. Additionally, since at least 1866, Wilde had been living a secret life to keep his sexual orientation and affairs hidden from his family and society. However, in the very same year, he began a romantic relationship with Robert Ross. “The event has traditionally been viewed by Wilde scholars as a critical turning point in Wilde’s life” (Wilde, 2011, p. 10). This duality suggests a significant contrast between Wilde’s public persona, conforming to societal norms, and his private life, marked

by unconventional and taboo relationships. This reflects the complexities and challenges Wilde faced in navigating his personal desires within Victorian society.

However, recent scholars suggest that Wilde's secret homosexual life may have started even earlier. It is speculated that he discovered his homosexual desires during his time as an undergraduate student at Oxford in the 1870s and engaged in actions reflecting those desires. (Wilde, 2011, p. 12). Looking at Wilde's early years, especially his time at Oxford, provides clues about how his sexual identity developed. "Certainly it was at Oxford that Wilde met and befriended one of the most notorious sodomites of his day, Lord Ronald Sutherland Gower, now generally regarded as an important real-life model for the character of Lord Henry Wotton; and it was shortly after leaving Oxford that Wilde began a two-year cohabitation, in London, with the man who had introduced him to Gower, the onetime society portraitist Frank Miles. Miles is sometimes said to be the real-life figure on whom the painter Basil Hallward is based" (Wilde, 2011, p.12). In the intellectual atmosphere of the university, Wilde came across different ideas and people that could have influenced how he saw love and desire. The intellectual environment and the growing aesthetic movement were crucial factors in Wilde's initial exploration of his sexuality.

Wilde's sexuality left a permanent mark on both his literary works and his approach to analysing other works of literature. This influence is evident in the themes, characters, and narratives he crafted, reflecting his personal experiences and perspectives. Wilde's exceptional talent for poetry was evident in his early works, which explored themes of beauty, love, and desire. Some scholars argue that Wilde's early poems contain homoerotic subtext, reflecting the complexities of human sexuality and the societal norms of the time. Fone (1998, p. 335) supports this statement by saying that "Wilde's early poems reflect some of the coded homoeroticism of aestheticism" (Fone, 1998, p. 335). In his later works, like *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Wilde kept exploring these themes. This makes him an interesting subject for further study, especially in terms of the characters' relationships and the societal norms of that period.

Moreover, Wilde's unique perspective as a gay man in the Victorian era influenced his critical assessments of other literary works. "Both his alleged composition of *Teleny* and his actual writing of *The Portrait of Mr. W.H.* – an attempt to identify the object of Shakespeare's sonnets – suggest his interest in homosexuality as a subject of text" (Fone, 1998, p. 335). In his later works, like *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Wilde kept

exploring these themes. This makes him an interesting subject for further study, especially in terms of the characters' relationships and the societal norms of that period.

However, while Oscar Wilde expressed supportive views towards homosexuality, it is essential to recognise that the way he discussed homosexuality might differ significantly from the way contemporary discussions are portrayed. This emphasises the historical and cultural context, implying that Wilde's perspective on homosexuality should be interpreted within the context of the late 19th century and may not align with modern discussions on the topic.

In addition, Wilde had another important romantic relationship with Lord Alfred Douglas. This relationship was disastrous for Wilde, even though it did not start until a year after the publication of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Under Douglas' influence, Wilde followed a path of hazardous, and ultimately reckless actions. Consequently, Wilde faced severe consequences for expressing his sexuality, leading to his imprisonment.

Furthermore, Fone (1998, p. 335) sheds more light on this by providing the following: "Wilde was sued by Queensberry, with the result that Wilde's involvement with Douglas, his relations with a number of male prostitutes, as well as an interpretation of some of his writings advocating 'perversion' was more than adequate evidence to lead to his conviction of sodomy and his imprisonment for two years at hard labour." Examining the trial and its aftermath shows how society viewed unconventional sexual identities in Wilde's time and the personal consequences he faced for challenging established norms.

In conclusion, the sentencing of Wilde in 1895, as noted by Fone (1998, p. 345), "cast a shadow across the lives of most of those who might have wanted to reveal their homosexuality or write about it." However, in the 20th century, Western sexual liberation played a key role in restoring Wilde's reputation. As societal norms changed, Wilde's legacy emerged, becoming part of the broader story of sexual identity and societal acceptance. The enduring impact of Wilde's life and works demonstrates human resilience and the transformative influence of changing cultural perspectives.

4.3 The Picture of Dorian Gray

Wilde's only novel published in 1890, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, analyses the impact of passion on human characters. The narrative revolves around a young and handsome man Dorian Gray living in Victorian London, whose physical beauty is very captivating. Basil Hallward, a talented artist, and moral idealist, who, charmed by Dorian's character, decides to paint the portrait. The portrait is a success, however, Dorian becomes jealous of it.

Under the influence of Lord Henry Wotton's hedonistic ideas, Dorian wishes to remain forever young and transfer the aging process to the portrait. Henry introduces Dorian to a philosophy of self-indulgence and the pursuit of pleasure above all else. Henry's negative impact on Dorian's character is gradual yet persistent. This friendship becomes fatal for Dorian, transforming the once incredible young man into someone cruel and cynical as Dorian enjoys a life of pleasure and wrongdoing, his portrait turns more and more grotesque, showing the corruption of his soul.

Dorian's journey is a decline into moral decay, and the portrait becomes a visual representation of his inner corruption. The portrait ages and mirrors Dorian's increasing wickedness, while Dorian remains young. Over time, the portrait becomes the only evidence of Dorian's actions and crimes. This leads Dorian to destroy the painting. However, as Dorian stabs the picture, he ends up taking his own life. When entering the room, the servants see the portrait looking magnificent, but they also find a deceased ugly old man on the floor.

The Picture of Dorian Gray delves into beauty, hedonism's consequences, the corrupting impact of aestheticism, and morality. Dorian's choices not only ruin his life but also affect those around him. Moreover, the novel links aestheticism to homoeroticism, as it stresses the value on the beauty of one man by other men. Additionally, Basil Hallward's feelings suggest a romantic and homoerotic attraction. The exploration of sexuality and societal norms within the context of the characters' relationships and the norms of the time, is an interesting subject for further study. The uncensored version delves into scandalous and provocative themes of the Victorian era, including homoeroticism and darker human aspects. In summary, Wilde's novel is a story about the consequences of abandoning moral principles in pursuit of pleasure.

4.3.1 Summary of the Characters

Among the characters that possess homoerotic traits are:

Dorian Gray, the protagonist, is introduced as a young and attractive man known for his charm. His physical appearance could be described as ethereal, capturing the attention of those around him. After embracing a hedonistic lifestyle, his behaviour becomes increasingly reckless and immoral. Throughout the novel, he transforms from a naive youth into a cynical and pleasure-driven individual, driven by a fear of aging and willing to disregard the consequences for himself and others.

Although initially portrayed as amazing, Dorian displays several narcissistic traits. He is consumed by self-obsession, which consequently leads him to various immoral acts. It is the desire for eternal youth that drives much of his behaviour. Moreover, as a hedonist, he prioritizes pleasure, displaying selfishness in relationships, and exploiting others for his needs. Betraying trust, manipulating loved ones, and causing Sibyl's suicide, along with his actions showing a growing lack of empathy, serve as proof of his corrupted character. The consequences of his selfishness are portrayed throughout the novel, leading to his eventual downfall.

In summary, Dorian's character evolves from an initially charming and handsome young man into a hedonistic and morally corrupted individual, driven by a pursuit of pleasure and an aversion to the consequences of aging. While Wilde's novel does not explicitly label Dorian's sexual orientation, it explores themes of homoeroticism and the decadent society of the time, adding complexity to his character. Therefore, the novel leaves certain aspects of Dorian's character open to interpretation, allowing readers to engage with themes of homosexuality, morality, and the consequences of desire.

Basil Hallward is a talented painter, known for his devotion and genuine appreciation for beauty. In the novel, he symbolises artistic purity and sincerity. Additionally, he symbolises moral and aesthetic values, contrasting with Lord Henry Wotton and Dorian Gray. Basil's character can be viewed as naive since he overlooks the darker aspects of human nature, particularly Dorian.

Moreover, he is marked by his emotional investment in Dorian and his unwavering commitment. Basil's commitment to Dorian results in his tragic death, highlighting the

sincerity of his love and his concern for Dorian's safety and soul. Additionally, Basil is described as loyal, sensitive, creative, and smart. Therefore, Basil can be considered as positive character.

Lord Henry Wotton is a charismatic and influential nobleman known for his wit and intellect. Lord Henry is consistent in his hedonistic philosophy and provocative ideas. While Lord Henry plays a crucial role in influencing Dorian, he himself does not experience significant personal growth or transformation. Instead, he maintains his cynical and pleasure-seeking self. Therefore, he can be considered more of a static character as he undergoes no significant change in personality and beliefs.

Furthermore, he is portrayed as a manipulative character with a strong and harmful influence on Dorian. He often overlooks the consequences of his words since he does not directly act on them. In this way, Lord Henry manipulates Dorian to fulfil his own desires while maintaining his reputation in society. While Lord Henry is not explicitly portrayed as a villain, his philosophical influence contributes to the moral dilemmas faced by the characters in the novel.

It is also important to note that Lord Henry's negative views on marriage, women, and fidelity may contain homoerotic undertones. While Lord Henry is not explicitly homosexual, his fascination with male beauty and close connection with Dorian also hints at homoerotic elements.

4.3.2 Portrayal of Gay Characters in the Novel

The portrayal of gay characters in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* has been the subject of various interpretations. While the edited version of the novel does not contain explicit statements about homosexuality, it is possible to analyse it from the perspective of a 21st-century reader and offer insights into the potential same-sex attraction among the characters.

On the other hand, the uncensored version had more explicit homoerotic content than the published one. Wilde replaced those passages to make the relationships seem like friendships without any romantic feelings involved. The censorship implies that, especially the relationship between Basil and Dorian was likely meant to be seen as homoerotic.

Crucially, Dorian Gray's relationships with male characters can be understood as a reflection of the challenges of being homosexual in a traditional society. It is possible to look at the novel as an exploration of Wilde's experiences as a gay man through Dorian Gray, Lord Henry Wootton, and Basil Hallward. As the novel delves into aestheticism, immorality, and societal expectations, it provides further insight into Wilde's personal experience with homosexuality and his idea of pleasure.

4.3.2.1 Basil Hallward

Basil is captivated by Dorian's looks and character, expressing his strong feelings for Dorian multiple times. It is evident from how often Basil thinks about Dorian. It is important to note that Basil speaks highly of his interactions with Dorian. "*When our eyes met, I felt that I was growing pale*" (Wilde, 2011, p. 78). Basil's description indicates that he was taken aback by Dorian who had a very strong impression on him. Basil supports this statement by saying that "*I knew that if I spoke to Dorian, I would become absolutely devoted to him*" (Wilde, 2011, p. 78). This suggests an anticipation or awareness of the powerful impact Dorian's presence might have on Basil, evoking strong and lasting feelings of loyalty or attachment. Therefore, Basil speaks about Dorian in ways that imply he has more than friendly feelings towards him

Basil repeatedly mentions that he cannot show the painting of Dorian to anyone because he put too much of himself into it. "*The reason I will not exhibit this picture is that I am afraid that I have shown with it the secret of my own soul*" (p. 78). He is afraid the portrait will expose his true feelings for Dorian and reveal his obsession with him. Therefore, it can be

said that Basil's painting is an expression of his love for Dorian. Moreover, Basil's love for Dorian changes the way he sees art. Basil even believes that the art he has created since meeting Dorian is the best art he has ever made (p. 84). This highlights the importance of Dorian in Basil's life even more. Thus, it would be hard to deny that the feelings Basil carries for Dorian are not romantic.

Of course, one can argue that Dorian is just Basil's motive for art, and even if Basil himself says so, it would contradict his following statement. *"I find a strange pleasure in saying things to him that I know I shall be sorry for having said. I give myself away"* (p. 85). Basil openly says how satisfying it is for him to be able to be in contact with Dorian. However, at the same time, he feels guilty. This might suggest that he is aware that what he is feeling is not acceptable. More importantly, he might feel that his behaviour is immoral. Additionally, it suggests a vulnerability on Basil's part, as he shares aspects of himself with Dorian, knowing that it may not always be wise or beneficial for him. This indicates hints of homoerotic undertones.

Furthermore, Basil consistently emphasises the profound significance of Dorian in his life, conveying a heightened emotional connection. For example, he says, *"I couldn't be happy if I didn't see him every day... He is all my art to me now"* (p. 83). The repetition of this sentiment emphasises Basil's emotional dependence on Dorian's daily presence and implies a close connection beyond simple friendship. Moreover, Basil passionately declares, *"If you only knew what Dorian Gray is to me!"* (p. 84), which further reinforces the idea that Dorian holds a unique place in Basil's emotional and creative world.

Additionally, the portrayal of Basil as very protective of Dorian implies a deep emotional connection. Basil's fear that Henry's influence might be harmful to Dorian adds complexity to their relationship. This expressed concern for Dorian's safety suggests that Basil's feelings go beyond mere friendship. While trying to protect Dorian, Basil begs Henry not to destroy Dorian's innocence. *"Don't take away from me the one person that makes life absolutely lovely"* (p. 87). The use of the term "one person" suggests an irreplaceable source of joy in Basil's life. Moreover, the intensity of the language highlights the significant impact Dorian has on Basil's happiness. Therefore, it is possible to interpret Basil's statement as an expression of deep love and admiration.

Furthermore, Basil's reaction to Dorian's engagement sparks questions about whether his feelings go beyond friendship. It leads readers to wonder if his emotions are driven by romantic love or if he is simply acting as a concerned friend trying to protect Dorian. "*Dorian Gray is engaged to be married,' said Lord Henry, watching him as he spoke. Hallward turned perfectly pale, and a curious look flashed for a moment into his eyes, and then passed away, leaving them dull*" (Wilde, p. 131). Basil's reaction here suggests a strong and unexpected emotional impact. The description of him turning "perfectly pale" indicates a sudden and intense response, possibly of shock or surprise. The "curious look" in his eyes hints at a mix of complex emotions, including disbelief and maybe disappointment. This passage suggests that Dorian's engagement has a significant impact on Basil, evoking a strong emotional reaction. The use of physical descriptions, like turning pale and the changing expression in his eyes, conveys the depth of Basil's emotional turmoil in response to this news.

Delving deeper into Basil's response to the engagement offers further insights into his emotional state. Basil's emotional reaction to the changing dynamics between him and Dorian, as well as the influence of Lord Henry on Dorian's life, is captured in the following passage. "*A strange sense of loss came over him. He felt that Dorian Gray would never again be to him all that he had been in the past. His eyes darkened, and the crowded flaring streets became blurred to him*" (Wilde, p. 138). Basil's emotional reaction to Dorian's changing personality and behaviour can be interpreted as reflecting his romantic feelings towards Dorian. The "strange sense of loss" suggests a deep emotional connection between Basil and Dorian. Basil's eyes darkening and the surroundings becoming blurred indicate a heightened emotional state. Furthermore, the expression "the crowded flaring streets became blurred to him" implies that Basil is having a powerful emotional reaction, possibly crying. The blurring of the surroundings is often used in literature to convey tears. In this context, it adds to the portrayal of Basil's deep emotional response to Dorian's engagement, emphasising the impact it has on him.

While not explicit, these descriptions might be considered as potential homoerotic undertones in the relationship between Basil and Dorian. If one reflects on how Basil repeatedly compliments Dorian, it is not unreasonable to interpret it as a form of flirtation and in a typical heterosexual friendship this level of flirtation between two men is not common. However, it is important to keep in mind that interpretations of such codes can vary among readers, and the intention of the author may not always be clear.

On the other hand, the uncensored version from 2011 contains more explicit homoerotic subtext. One of these instances is when Basil explains his feelings to Dorian. *“Well, from the moment I met you, your personality had the most extraordinary influence over me. I quite admit that I adored you madly, extravagantly, absurdly. I was jealous of every one to whom you spoke. I wanted to have you all to myself. I was only happy when I was with you”* (p. 172). This quote is significant because it suggests a homoerotic subtext in the relationship between Basil and Dorian, with Basil showing strong admiration and affection for Dorian, surpassing the usual limits of friendship. Basil also admits to being jealous which suggests possessiveness and a desire for exclusive attention. In addition, the phrase *“I wanted to have you all to myself”* indicates a deep longing for an intimate and exclusive connection, possibly implying romantic or deeply emotional feelings.

Moreover, Basil confesses to having romantic feelings for Dorian, which expresses that his emotions go beyond what is a typical friendship. *“It is quite true that I have worshipped you with far more romance of feeling than a man should ever give to a friend”* (p. 172). The language used suggests a deep emotional, romantic attachment. Additionally, Basil hints at this attachment later in the same speech. *“There was love in every line, and in every touch there was passion. I grew afraid that the world would know of my idolatry”* (p. 172). In this case, Basil once again confesses his feelings for Dorian and his idolatry towards him. This passage was originally censored in the novel but has been restored in the uncensored version, published in 2011. Therefore, it is a significant passage that highlights the complex and intense relationship between Basil and Dorian, and the homoerotic undertones in the novel.

In conclusion, the portrayal of Basil’s feelings for Dorian suggests a profound emotional connection beyond friendship. Basil’s expressions of admiration, emotional dependence, and protectiveness hint at a relationship with homoerotic undertones, challenging societal norms. Furthermore, the uncensored version, with its restored passages, explicitly highlights the romantic nature of Basil’s attachment. Consequently, the complexity of their connection adds layers to the narrative, emphasising the significance of homoerotic undertones in Wilde’s exploration of love, art, and societal expectations.

4.3.2.2 Lord Henry Wotton

Lord Henry emerges as an interesting character within the story because he consistently expresses his admiration for Dorian's physical appearance and character. Henry's detailed description of Dorian's physical attributes, such as his "*finely-curved scarlet lips, his frank blue eyes, his crisp gold hair*" (p. 90), goes beyond mere observation. Instead, it implies a deeper level of appreciation that could be interpreted as containing homoerotic subtext. Moreover, the statement "*No wonder Basil Hallward worshipped him. He was made to be worshipped*" (p. 90), hints at a connection that extends beyond friendship and potentially carries homoerotic undertones. Furthermore, the repeated emphasis on Dorian's "*wonderfully beautiful face*" (p. 99) contributes to an aestheticized portrayal that carries echoes of romanticised attraction.

Despite Lord Henry being shown as heterosexual, his relationship is portrayed as challenging and lacking a happy ending. To some extent, he discusses marriage as if it were a burden. He sees marriage as necessary because it allows people to maintain a good reputation in public, however, he does not believe in its sentimental value. More importantly, the way Henry talks about marriage could be interpreted as a reflection of Wilde's own homosexual experiences. When speaking about marriage, Henry mentions that men are "*Forced to have more than one life*" (p. 132). This statement can be interpreted in several ways. One possible interpretation refers to the idea that people have to live multiple lives because they are not satisfied with the current one. He believes that people are always searching for something more, something that will give their lives meaning and purpose. On the other hand, it is possible to interpret it as a projection of Wilde's sexuality. Wilde, as a gay man in a conservative society, lead a double life. His marriage to Constance Lloyd and his affairs with men could have influenced this perspective.

Moreover, it is quite alarming how Henry speaks about women. His dislike for them could indicate a hidden jealousy he feels toward their relationships with Dorian. "*My dear boy, no woman is a genius; women are a decorative sex*" (p. 114). Furthermore, his belief that women lack depth aligns with his hedonistic and aesthetic philosophy. However, this could also reflect his unresolved sexuality. Henry's dissatisfaction in relationships with women might be linked to his true source of satisfaction, which could come from same-sex attraction, possibly embodied by the wonderful and youthful Dorian Gray. Thus, the hatred toward women, in this instance, may serve as a mask to hide Henry's true feelings or desires.

4.3.2.3 Dorian Gray

The novel contains hints of homoeroticism through the admiration of Dorian by other men, emphasising his beauty. Dorian becomes a magnetic force, attracting attention and adoration, as evidenced by the statement, “*There was something about Dorian that charmed everybody. It was a pleasure even to see him*” (Wilde, 2011, p. 179). While Dorian is admired by many men, he can also be seen as having homosexual traits himself.

In contrast to Basil, who is portrayed as kind and loyal, Dorian embodies the opposite traits. Dorian’s influence on those around him is a central theme of the novel. More specifically, his corrupting influence is seen as a major factor in the downfall of several young men. “*Why is it that every young man that you take up seems to come to grief, to go to the bad at once?*” (p. 215) The suggestion of a homoerotic subtext arises from the idea that Dorian’s influence involves more than just moral corruption. It may involve seduction into immoral and homosexual acts. In this interpretation, Dorian is seen as not only leading these young men astray morally but also convincing them to engage in socially unacceptable behaviours. This adds a layer of complexity to the dynamics between Dorian and the young men in the novel, suggesting a potentially homoerotic undertone to his corrupting influence.

Additionally, the belief that Dorian Gray has a corrupting impact on those close to him is emphasised by Basil’s statement: “*They say that you corrupt everyone whom you become intimate with*” (p. 216). The word “intimate” hints at a close relationship, and the idea of corruption suggests a negative effect on the moral character of the people involved. This supports the earlier point about Dorian’s corrupting influence leading to the downfall of young men. Considering Victorian societal norms, the notion that Dorian corrupts those he becomes intimate with aligns with biases against homosexual relationships. Thus, it adds weight to the idea of homoerotic undertones in these relationships.

Furthermore, in the relationship between Dorian Gray and the talented musician Alan Campbell, there is a suggestion of homoerotic subtext, especially considering their initial connection through music. Therefore, it is possible to claim that music was used as a form of coded language. “*In fact, it was music that had first brought him and Dorian Gray together, music and that indefinable attraction that Dorian seemed to be able to exercise whenever he wished*” (p. 233). This attraction and intimacy lasted for several months. The two men would often go to the Opera, however, Alan ended up disliking hearing music. This

shift allows for an interpretation where music symbolises Alan's attraction to Dorian and his hidden desires. By choosing to no longer engage with music, Alan might be rejecting his attraction to Dorian and his possible homosexuality.

When it comes to Dorian's relationship with Basil and Henry there is some implies attraction too. While Dorian does not return Basil's feelings, he seems to be fascinated by Lord Henry, the influence Henry has on him might have a homoerotic subtext. "*When he caught sight of Lord Henry, a faint blush coloured his cheeks for a moment, and he started up*" (p. 89). This fascination and influence Henry has on Dorian can be seen throughout the course of the story. Lord Henry's influence on Dorian extends beyond intellectual discussions. While he imparts philosophical ideas, there is an emotional and personal dimension to their relationship. "*For days after I met you, something seemed to throb in my veins*" (p. 115). Lord Henry's ability to shape Dorian's worldview and the course of his life implies a deeper connection that can be read as more than mentorship. While not explicitly sexual, his influence over Dorian's thoughts and actions carries an intimate and alluring quality.

In summary, the portrayal of most male characters is linked to the one trait they all share which is homosexuality. Their lives are portrayed as tragic, whether it is Henry's divorce, Dorian and Alan's deaths, or Basil's murder. It is possible to look at these characters and see their tragic endings as a form of punishment for their perceived immorality, particularly their homosexuality. On one hand, death can be seen as a consequence of leading an immoral life. On the other hand, it might be considered a release from a homophobic society, offering freedom only in death. Furthermore, this idea can be connected to Wilde's life as he faced imprisonment and eventually died in poverty. This suggests a reflection of societal punishment for his own homosexuality.

5. Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda

5.1 Cultural Context

The cultural context in which a work of literature is created can have a profound impact on its themes, characters, and societal resonance. The novel *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda* by Becky Albertalli is a product of the changing world, where attitudes towards LGBTQ+ individuals are evolving, and acceptance is growing. In the 2010s, a decade marked by significant milestones in the LGBTQ+ rights movement, a diverse world emerged, providing both progress in societal inclusivity and persistent challenges.

One of the key events that marked the progress of the LGBTQ+ community in the 2010s was the legalisation of same-sex marriage in the United States. According to HCR, the Supreme Court's decision in *Obergefell v. Hodges* on June 26, 2015, marked full marriage equality which meant that same-sex couples could legally marry in all 50 states and receive the same benefits and protections as opposite-sex couples. This was a landmark decision that changed the lives of millions of people and increased the visibility and acceptance of LGBTQ+ individuals and relationships. This law provides many legal protections and benefits to same-sex couples. Very important is that several sources suggest a positive association between health effects and legal same-sex marriage.

For example, Riggle, Rostosky, & Horne (2010) used an online survey sample of 2,677 lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) individuals. "The analyses revealed that participants in committed, or legally recognised relationships reported less psychological distress (i.e., internalised homophobia, depressive symptoms, and stress) and more well-being (i.e., the presence of meaning in life) than single participants" (Riggle, et al., 2010). This suggests that legally recognised same-sex marriages are linked to positive impacts on mental well-being. Notably, both male and female sexual minorities have experienced significant enhancements in their psychological state, particularly in relation to symptoms of depression and anxiety.

In addition, a different study from the California Health Interview Survey examined the connection between same-sex marriages and psychological distress. "Being in a legally recognised same-sex relationship, marriage in particular, appeared to diminish mental health differentials between heterosexuals and lesbian, gay, and bisexual persons" (Richard, et al., 2013). Overall, the research suggests that legal recognition of same-sex

marriage can have a positive impact on the mental health of sexual minorities, with benefits extending beyond the institution of marriage itself.

In the cultural context in which the novel was written, there was growing visibility and acceptance of LGBTQ+ individuals, especially among young people. An important development in the 2010s was the increased representation of LGBTQ+ individuals in the media, including TV shows and movies. The very popular TV show *How to Get Away with Murder* featured several LGBTQ+ characters, including Annalise Keating (played by Viola Davis), Connor Walsh, and Oliver Hampton. The show tackles themes of same-sex relationships, LGBTQ+ rights, and LGBTQ+ representation in the legal profession. This helped to challenge stereotypes and increase the visibility of the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals. Musical comedy-drama *Glee* featured several LGBTQ+ characters, including Kurt Hummel and Santana Lopez. The show covers issues such as bullying, coming out, and same-sex relationships. More recently, international TV shows and movies have provided accurate, and authentic representation of LGBTQ+ young people. For example, TV shows like *Sex Education* or *Heartstoppers* discuss topics such as homophobia, bullying, and exploration of identities which people across the world have been able to relate to and naturally make them feel seen.

According to a study by GLAAD (formerly known as the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation), the percentage of regular LGBTQ+ characters on broadcast television in the US increased from 4.8% in 2014 to 8.8% in 2020. According to another study by GLAAD, there were 775 series regular characters scheduled to appear on the scripted broadcast for the 2021-2022 season. 11.9% of those characters were LGBTQ. This was an increase of 2.8% from the previous year. This marked a new record of LGBTQ regular characters in TV series. (GLAAD, 2022). This is a great way to create a more inclusive society and normalise the fact that not all people are heterosexual.

Recently, there has also been an increase in the visibility of LGBTQ+ characters in literature, particularly in young adult (YA) literature. For example, *If I Was Your Girl* (2016) by Meredith Russo follows the story of Amanda, a transgender girl. The book covers important themes of identity, acceptance, and love. Other novels that contributed to the growing progress in LGBTQ+ representation in YA literature while providing relatable, complex, and positive characters include *Leah on the Offbeat* (2018) by Becky Albertalli,

Will Grayson, Will Grayson (2010) by John Greene and David Levithan or *It's not like it's a secret* (2017) by Misa Sugiura which features two girls of colour who fall in love.

In addition, the 2010s saw a great increase in LGBTQ+ support by very influential artists like Taylor Swift, Lady Gaga, Madonna, Katy Perry, Sam Smith, Troye Sivan and Kim Petras who have been advocating for LGBTQ+ rights and challenging heteronormative norms. Through their active involvement and the LGBTQ+ community gained heightened visibility across various entertainment mediums, resulting in a profound influence on the societal perspectives.

However, many LGBTQ+ individuals still face significant challenges and discrimination, especially when it comes to more conservative communities and rural areas. Although LGBTQ+ acceptance and visibility are increasing, the community still faces many obstacles including political and psychological ones. According to Russell & Joyner (2001), “homosexual adolescents were for years more likely than their peers to attempt suicide.” The environment for LGBTQ+ people has become more challenging as a result of a rising tide of hate crime violence against their community. It is stigma and discrimination that has a great impact on the self-esteem of LGBTQ+ individuals, especially young adults which often leads to higher rates of suicide or mental health issues. Unfortunately, many individuals who are exposed to homophobia, discrimination, and mistreatment tend to develop anxiety or depression, which in many cases leads to substance abuse. This can be supported by Mayer, Bradford, Makadon, Stall, Goldhammer, and Landers (2008) who state that LGBTQ+ individuals have higher rates of smoking and alcohol and drug abuse than heterosexual people. This proves that the situation in the world still has a negative impact on the health of LGBTQ+ people and the way they try to deal with the challenges.

It is important to note that discrimination against the LGBTQ+ individuals has persisted worldwide from 2015 forward, with varying degrees of severity in different parts of the world. LGBTQ+ individuals were affected in areas such as housing, employment, and healthcare. Human Rights Watch (2015) compared the amount of LGBTQ+ people who were living in countries where same-sex marriage was legal to those who did not have this luxury. According to HRW billions of people were living in countries where being openly part of the LGBTQ+ community could result in being punished, imprisoned, and in some cases even killed, compared to about only 800 million people living in countries with legalised same-sex marriage. In addition, as stated by Wynne (2021, p. 7), the struggle of LGBTQ+ individuals is

very much present. For example, in the USA transgender citizens are being attacked, LGBT hate crimes have higher rates in the UK and in most African or Asian countries, LGBT individuals still face criminalisation, in some countries, even the death penalty.

In summary, bullying and harassment still persist and LGBTQ+ youth are at higher risk of experiencing said harassment, bullying and exclusion, which can have a negative long-term impact on their mental health. In some parts of the world members of the LGBTQ+ community still face various forms of discrimination especially in the East, which can have a significant impact on their well-being and quality of life. The most common forms of discrimination include violence and hate crimes, in which LGBTQ+ people are targets of verbal and physical abuse.

However, in the Western world in recent years has been a notable shift in the societal attitude towards LGBTQ+ people. Many Western countries not only recognise marriage equality but also protect other rights of LGBTQ+ people, including the ability to change genders. These indiscriminate policies have been shown to improve the physical and mental well-being of LGBTQ+ individuals. In addition, these laws can help to reduce social stigma and discrimination against LGBTQ+ individuals.

It is important to mention that there has been a significant increase of the visibility of LGBTQ+ within popular media and influential personalities which contributes to the growing social acceptance. Despite the ongoing challenges faced by many LGBTQ+ individuals, there are also positive aspects to being LGBTQ+ in the current world which includes global progress towards equality. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that there remains a considerable amount of work to be done to achieve a more equal and fair society for LGBTQ+ communities.

5.2 Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda

Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda (2015) is a young adult novel written by Becky Albertalli. The story follows a closeted gay high school student, 16-year-old Simon Spier who has a very ideal life in a suburban area. Simon has loyal best friends and a seemingly perfect family that he can rely on. There is only one thing the closest people around him do not know which is Simon's sexual orientation and that he is communicating online with another gay boy, Blue.

Simon is emailing an anonymous person who goes by the name Blue and attends the same high school. The two bond over their shared experiences and struggle with their sexuality. Despite how happy speaking to Blue makes Simon, there is the issue of not knowing who he is because Blue is rather secretive about his personal information. Blue is simply not as comfortable with who he is as Simon who eventually starts to develop feelings for Blue.

One day when Simon checks his email on one of the school's library computers, he forgets to sign out and is later approached by a classmate named Martin who finds out about Simon's secret. Martin threatens to out Simon unless he helps him to date Abby, Simon's friend. To handle this conflict and prevent Blue and himself from being outed about their sexual orientation, Simon starts manipulating his friends. When Simon fails to match Martin up with Abby, Martin publishes a post on the school's website where he reveals Simon's sexual orientation and mocks Blue. Simon's friends find out that he has been manipulating their love lives and has been keeping secrets from them which results in them getting upset with Simon. Eventually, Simon becomes a victim of bullying and later realises that he must accept his identity. At the end of the story, the friend group reunites, Simon finds out who Blue is, and they become partners.

Throughout the book, Simon learns to accept and love himself for who he is and gains the courage to be open and honest with those around him. He also learns that his friends and family love and support him no matter what. *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda* is a coming-of-age story about acceptance, self-discovery, and the power of love and friendship.

5.2.1 Summary of the Characters

Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda by Becky Albertalli features the following characters;

Simon Piers, the protagonist of the novel, is gay and closeted. He is a high school student struggling to come to terms with his sexuality. The boy is uncertain about how to come out to friends and especially his family. Simon is portrayed as an emotional and sensitive person who struggles with feelings of insecurity and uncertainty. Quite often he feels lonely, misunderstood and confused about the world. His experiences with coming out are relatable to many readers and provide a complex protagonist. Despite his fears, Simon is portrayed as brave for taking the steps to come out and be true to himself. The protagonist can also be described as a humorous person who has a unique perspective on life and the world around him. Simon is a complex character who experiences growth and self-discovery throughout the novel.

Blue, an anonymous person emailing Simon, is also gay and attends the same high school as Simon, but Simon does not know his identity. Blue can be described as mysterious because his identity is not revealed to the reader or Simon until later in the novel. Despite the anonymity, Blue provides Simon with support and understanding as he navigates his coming-out journey. As Blue and Simon continuously support each other, they quickly develop close friendships because they relate to each other. This person is described as very companionate. Blue cares about Simon's feelings and well-being. Blue's experiences with coming out are relatable to Simon and provide a source of comfort and support for him. Bram Greenfeld is a classmate of Simon's who is revealed to be Blue. He is quite a popular and friendly high school student and is known for his easy-going personality. Bram delves into his struggles, such as insecurities and the expectations placed on him by his family.

Moreover, the secondary characters contribute to the narrative. Martin, initially selfish and manipulative, evolves throughout the novel, displaying increased empathy and personal growth. Abby, Simon's kind friend, who is crucial in his coming out journey. She offers him support and acceptance. Additionally, Leah, Simon's loyal best friend, adds depth to the story with her strong personality. She is a source of support and guidance for Simon. Together, Martin, Abby, and Leah add complexity to the narrative, each character evolving and contributing in unique ways to Simon's coming-out journey, challenging stereotypes, and illustrating the transformative power of understanding, acceptance, and personal growth.

5.2.2 Portrayal of Gay Characters in the Novel

This thesis explores the portrayal of gay characters and the themes surrounding their experiences. Specifically, stress is laid on on Becky Albertalli's novel *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda*, which illustrates how literature has evolved to represent the lives, emotions, and challenges faced by gay teenage boys. Within this narrative, Simon's experiences are portrayed with a depth that offers a genuine perspective on the joys and struggles of being a gay teenage boy. His journey toward self-acceptance is described in a relatable and respectful manner. Moreover, Albertalli shows the complexities of romantic love between two teenage boys while portraying homosexual relationships in a positive light.

The novel presents gay characters in a positive light. It shows the highs and lows of Simon's journey towards self-acceptance during which Simon's experiences offer a genuine perspective on the challenges and joys of being a homosexual teenage boy. His journey is described in a way that is both relatable and respectful. *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda* tackles complex and sometimes contradictory feelings that come with being homosexual, such as fear, worry, joy, and love. It does not shy away from portraying the challenges and difficulties faced by gay individuals, particularly in the form of bullying and stigma. This chapter explores various recurring themes, such as coming out, loneliness, and the unique struggles associated with sexuality.

The following sections will analyse the novel's portrayal of gay characters, the challenges they encounter, and the broader themes it addresses. In addition, the analysis will explore the author's approach to these themes and her contribution to a more empathetic portrayal of homosexuality in her novel.

5.2.2.1 Bullying and its Impact

Even though the book initially suggests inclusivity and positivity, the reader quickly finds out that Simon's journey will be slightly complicated. Based on the previous statement, it might be predictable that the protagonist may be portrayed as a victim of unfair treatment. Simon and his friends live in a place that is not as inclusive as it might seem and through Simon's internal monologue, the reader gets to understand the reality of homosexual characters. "*But Shady Creek isn't exactly a progressive paradise. At school, there are one or two guys who are out, and people give them crap. Not like violent crap. But the word 'fag'*

isn't exactly uncommon" (Albertalli, 2015, p. 21). From this perspective, homosexuality is portrayed as something unusual or unnatural that results in unfair treatment.

If homosexuality were considered normal, individuals of same-sex orientation would not be subjected to derogatory terms or be made fun of. Simon experiences this form of bullying for the first time after he is outed by his classmate. *"I hereby declare that I am supremely gay and open for business. [...] Or blue-jobs"* (p. 159). This kind of bullying can be categorized as emotional abuse or mental harassment because it often comes from a place of degradation and humiliation. *"'Where are you going Spears?' someone says. 'McGregor wants a turn.' And everyone starts laughing"* (p. 188). Simon is frequently subjected to situations that punish him for his sexual orientation, make him feel intimidated, and isolate him from his peers. *"The first guy's sign says, 'How you doing' Simon?' And the other guy in the skirt's sign says 'WHAT WHAT - IN THA BUTT !'"* (p. 190). Additionally, soon after this incident, Simon is once again exposed to being made fun of. *"'They changed the names of both of your characters to something inappropriate.' [...] Martin plays Fagin. I'm listed as 'Fagin's boy'"* (p. 219). The novel points to an unfortunate reality which is that not many people initially stand up for Simon except for his teacher and close friends. The way Simon is treated pushes the reader to believe that Simon's sexuality is a problem, even though it is meant to be a normal part of him.

5.2.2.2 Loneliness and Isolation

Simon finds it challenging to cope with this kind of treatment resulting in him feeling lonelier than ever. This portrays homosexuality as inherently linked to loneliness. The theme of loneliness occurs in the book several times and becomes more prominent when Simon is unwillingly outed and feels like he has no one to turn to. The first time the word "lonely" is mentioned in the novel is after Simon receives one of Blue's emails. *"Strangely poetic, and just completely different from anything I'd ever read before. I guess it was about loneliness. And it's funny because I don't really think of myself as lonely"* (p. 18). This allows the reader to see things from the viewpoint of a different gay character and what he is going through.

Blue, who is experiencing the feeling of loneliness becomes very relatable to Simon. Therefore, it can be argued that Simon probably feels the same way as he finds Blue's email fascinating. This is later proven to be true at the very end of the novel, which includes the first e-mails the boys exchanged. *"I guess I'm thinking it could be nice to talk to someone who can*

relate to how I'm feeling" (p. 312). Retrospectively this supports the idea that both gay characters had been feeling lonely for a very long time. Blue explicitly mentions feeling alone which often correlates with loneliness. *"Even writing this email makes me feel eleven times alone."* to which Simon replies *"But I know exactly what you mean"* (p. 343). This reflects an understanding of the shared struggle with loneliness, creating a potential bond between the characters. Moreover, the last quote highlights the theme of seeking connection and finding comfort in shared experiences, a common aspect in narratives involving LGBTQ+ characters.

Speaking of the protagonist himself, more specifically, after he comes out, he experiences heightened feelings of being misunderstood and lonely. Moreover, he feels very isolated and unimportant. The novel supports this statement, as shown in the following passage. *"It just feels like I'm on the outside somehow. Not all the time. Just sometimes. But yeah. I feel irrelevant. I hate that"* (p. 101). Simon articulates a profound sense of emotional isolation, expressing the feeling of being on the outside at times. This reveals his challenges with his self-worth. Moreover, the use of first-person narration makes the emotions stronger and helps reader to sympathise with him.

5.2.2.3 Coming Out

As stated earlier, Simon feels less lonely when he meets his online friend Blue to whom he can rely and who inspires him to "come out". This leads us to another topic - coming out. The term "coming out" is used to describe the process by which someone reveals their sexual orientation or gender identity. It is most commonly associated with LGBTQ+ individuals who reveal that they are gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or identify with other non-heteronormative sexual orientations. Therefore, it is important to analyse how the process of coming out is portrayed in the novel.

Before the boy is unwillingly outed, Simon deals with fear of being open about his sexuality. However, it is important to note that Simon is seemingly not scared of his own coming out. From his point of view, there is too much pressure put on the coming out process. He believes he should not have to come out and instead it should be normalised. *"The whole coming out thing doesn't really scare me. I don't think it does. It's a giant holy box of awkwardness, and I won't pretend I'm looking forward to it. But it probably wouldn't be the end of the world. Not for me"* (p. 5). Given the wording he used and the self-assurance in the beginning of his internal monologue, one might argue that Simon could be scared of coming

out. This choice of words highlights that Simon recognizes the social and emotional challenges that often come with this process. By saying that he does not look forward to it, he indicates that while he may not be afraid, he is not particularly excited about it. This suggests a certain degree of discomfort with the idea of coming out. More importantly, his feelings about coming out are portrayed as realistic and thoughtful, making the protagonist's perspective relatable and human.

Furthermore, as the story progresses, the idea of Simon being afraid of coming out becomes clearer. To clarify, he is afraid of the reaction of those around him. *"This gay thing. It feels so big. Its almost insurmountable. I don't know how to tell them something like this us and still come out of it feeling like Simon. Because if Leah and Nick don't recognize me, I don't even recognize myself."* (p.133). Simon's fear of his own coming out could be also backed up by the following excerpt from the novel. *"I'm not out yet, either. I guess a part of me wants to be, but a part of me's like...no"* (p.313). The sentence suggests that the main character is struggling with doubts or worries about revealing his true identity. While it does not definitively confirm fear, it suggests that he is not entirely sure about the decision. However, this hesitation could come from a place of fear.

It is worth noting that Simon demonstrates an awareness that individuals may not possess the same level of support as he does. He realises that some individuals might have to deal with the consequences of being open about their sexuality. Therefore, he does not want to out anyone as it is a very delicate thing. From this perspective, Simon is not portrayed as a stereotypical homosexual boy who only cares about his sexuality. On the other hand, he is selfless and attentive which portrays him as a positive LGBTQ+ character. *"The problem is, I don't know what it would mean for Blue. The thing about Blue is that he's kind of a private person"* (p. 6). This suggests that the protagonist is considerate of Blue's privacy and may be hesitant to take actions that could overstep Blue's boundaries or harm him in any way. The protagonist's concern for Blue reflects a deep respect he carries for the other boy. Although the passage does not offer an extensive portrayal of homosexuality, it does provide some insight into Simon's character.

On the other hand, it is possible to analyse the portrayal of gay characters through the eyes of Simon's friends and family. In this case, homosexuality is portrayed as a normal aspect of who he is. For example, when Simon tells his friend, Abby, that he is gay, she feels honoured to be the first one and reassures him of her acceptance by saying that she loves him.

Simon is met with yet another reassurance during Christmas by his sister who says “*obviously not something to be ashamed of, you know that right?*” (p. 160). Her explicit statement indicates a rejection of any potential stigma associated with homosexuality. This type of family support contributes to a narrative of unconditional love and understanding. By describing Simon’s friends and family as accepting and supportive, the novel contributes to a positive representation of LGBTQ+ characters.

The following passage describes a moment in which Simon announces his sexual orientation to his parents. His mother creates a safe space for him while using neutral language. “*Honey. That’s... God, that’s... thank you for telling us*” (p. 163). Simon’s mother’s initial response is characterized as positive. She expresses gratitude for Simon’s honesty and shows that she values her son’s trust. This response seems to reflect acceptance and support, which is a reassuring and heart-warming reaction for a teenage boy coming out as gay. In addition, the ellipsis indicates that Simon’s mother might be processing complex emotions in the moment. The reaction may suggest surprise or a struggle to find the right words. Importantly, her reaction is described as genuine and personal, which can be a positive representation of LGBTQ+ acceptance in literature.

In summary, the author offers a heart-warming portrayal of Simon’s journey as he comes out to his family. The initial reaction of his family emphasizes the importance of acceptance and communication within them. The portrayal of being gay reflects the idea that genuine love and open communication are extremely vital aspects of a healthy family dynamic. Furthermore, the author places a strong emphasis on the idea that there is no need for shame regarding one’s sexuality. Simon’s story challenges the stigma and discrimination often associated with being gay. In addition to Simon’s family, the novel also highlights the importance of supportive friends because these relationships provide a great support system for individuals who are in the process of coming out.

Overall, the novel portrays his journey as filled with both excitement and fear. These experiences are common for many LGBTQ+ individuals and provide a realistic portrayal of the challenges they face. Moreover, the author’s portrayal of gay characters encourages readers to embrace their true selves and create an environment of love and acceptance.

5.2.2.4 Simon's Complex Character: Attraction and Self-Discovery

Additionally, the portrayal of the main character, Simon, can be categorized into several elements, each contributing to a deeper understanding of his character. Specifically, these elements include his explicit lack of attraction to the opposite sex and his romantic and emotional attraction to the same sex. Through a careful examination of these elements, one can better appreciate how Becky Albertalli respectfully conveys the complexities of Simon's experiences and emotions of a gay teenager. This examination will shed light on the broader themes of acceptance, self-discovery, and love. In the following sections, the thesis will delve deeper into each of these elements and their impact on the narrative, ultimately contributing to a richer understanding of the portrayal of gay characters.

As previously mentioned, Simon explicitly states his lack of attraction to females. He manages to do it by providing insights into his dating history with women. Even though the boy tried to date the opposite sex, he found himself uncomfortable in those relationships. "*In eighth grade, I had this girlfriend. It was one of those things where you're "dating" but you don't ever go anywhere outside of school. And you don't really do anything in school either. I think we held hands. I guess we were supposed to make out. In that closed-mouth middle school way. So, here's my proudest moment: I ran and hid like a freaking preschooler in the bathroom. Honest to God, I stayed there for the entire evening. And then I never spoke to my girlfriend again*" (p. 13-14). Simon's description of the relationship conveys a sense of a casual and unemotional connection. This indicates that the relationship lacked genuine emotional depth and the absence of shared experiences and meaningful interactions suggests that the relationship may have been more about conforming to social norms than genuine emotional connection.

In retrospect, it is obvious Simon had zero interest in romantic relationships with girls given his indifference towards them and his reserved and quite plain description of his past heterosexual relationships. His realisation that he does not relate to what heterosexual males go through when dating serves as a further indicator that he is not interested in the opposite sex. Additionally, Simon describes his past relationships as "*a total mess. As for the other two: they were friends, and then I found out they liked me, and then we started dating. And then we broke up*" (p. 16). Describing it as a "total mess" suggests that conforming to normative expectations may have caused discomfort or confusion for Simon.

Simon's sexuality also becomes very clear from his self-talk, most specifically, when Abby tells him to pursue Leah. "*You looked so sweet tonight. 'Me and Leah?' I ask. But I'm gay. GAY. Gaaaaaaaayyyyy. God, I should just tell her*" (p. 52), "*I'm gay*" (p. 159), or "*They don't know I'm gay*" (p. 133). In the last passage, the protagonist is expressing a conflict within himself. Simon is aware of his own sexuality, as indicated by the repeated use of the word "gay." However, he has not yet shared this information with Abby. This passage highlights his internal struggle and reinforces his fear of coming out to others

Another characteristic of Simon's sexuality that recurs throughout the entire novel is that he adores and shows affection to the same sex. The following examples included in the novel express his adoration toward males. "*He has ocean eyes: just waves and waves of bluegreen. And sometimes when I look at Cal, I feel like we understand each other, and he gets it, and it's perfect and unspoken*" (p. 46). The phrase "ocean eyes: just waves and waves of bluegreen" creates a visual image that evokes the idea of depth associated with the ocean. This imagery can be used to convey the depth of emotion and attraction that Simon feels for Cal. Simon's description of Cal's eyes adds depth to the portrayal of Simon's feelings.

Simon also shows attraction to another character, Bram, who is later revealed to be Blue. "*He's this quiet black kid who's supposed to be really smart, but I've never heard him speak unless he's forced to. He leans way back into the corner of the couch, shuffling the toe of one foot against the other, and I never noticed it before, but he's actually kind of adorable*" (p. 64). Simon's realization that Bram is "kind of adorable" indicates a shift in his perception. It suggests that Simon is starting to notice and appreciate qualities in him that go beyond the surface. "*Also, Bram is cute. Like, really, really cute. He stands a foot or so back from the fence, totally sweaty, with a white turtleneck under his soccer shirt. And he's not really talking, but he has very expressive brown eyes. And light brown skin and soft dark curls and cute, knobbly hands*" (p. 194). The use of many adjectives emphasizes Simon's strong physical attraction to Bram, highlighting the intensity of his feelings. "*He looks at me I feel this happy sort of ache*" (p. 195). There is a combination of happiness and yearning which portrays homosexuality as an intense and meaningful aspect of the protagonist's life

The reader can notice the way in which Simon shows his attraction towards individuals of the same sex, which is by expressing admiration for their physical features. Whether it is their eyes, hair, or toned physique, Simon internally appreciates the physical side of those he finds attractive. He highlights their unique features and qualities that catch his

attention. *“He has a really nice, easy smile. You can tell it’s the kind that looks cute in pictures”* (p. 99). This passage illustrates how the author uses descriptive language to convey Simon’s attraction and adds depth to the character’s emotional experiences. The following passage serves as an example of how the novel portrays Simon’s attraction to other male characters. *“He pushes his bangs back and blushes, and good God, he’s adorable“* (p.136). In addition, the exclamation *“and good God”* adds emphasis and emotional intensity to Simon’s reaction. It suggests that he is deeply affected by what he is witnessing, indicating a strong attraction.

Besides giving compliments to the same sex, Simon’s admiration is also expressed by showing excitement in communicating with the same sex and noticing their behaviour. It is quite interesting to see how Simon observes other male’s behaviour. Simon is very careful when he observes them. This is an action straight male characters in the novel do tend to do. *“He smiles a little bit and looks back down at his desk. You never really know what he’s thinking. But I have this theory that Bram’s probably really funny inside his head. I don’t even know why I think that”* (p. 97). Simon’s thoughts about what Bram might be like *“inside his head”* indicate that Simon goes beyond physical attraction. This shows that his attraction includes a genuine appreciation for Bram’s personality traits, such as humour. *“I really do know you. You are smart and careful and weird and funny. And you notice things and listen to things, but not in a nosy way. In a real way. You overthink things and remember details and you always, always say the right thing”* (p. 258). Simon’s mention of Bram’s ability to notice and listen to things highlights his skill in genuinely and respectfully interacting with others. It implies that Simon values not only the person’s external qualities but also their intellectual and emotional qualities.

When interacting with other males, Simon usually feels nervous as well as excited, happy, and special. Notably, Simon demonstrates affection exclusively toward male characters who show interest in him. This aspect reflects the complexities of forming relationships for gay individuals, as they often navigate feelings of attraction and uncertainty, especially when dealing with individuals who may or may not share their sexual orientation. *“Honestly, I think I would like whatever Cal Price called me. He scoots over a few feet. I spend a full minute trying to think of something to say. ‘I don’t think I’ve ever seen you at a game,’ Cal says, pushing his bangs out of his eyes. And seriously, I can’t even. Because Cal’s bangs. Cal’s eyes. The fact that he apparently notices me enough to know I’m not at football games”* (p. 73). Simon’s response to Cal’s attention and his self-doubt regarding attending

football games also touch upon issues of self-identity and self-perception. These are important aspects of the portrayal of gay characters in the novel, as they often grapple with questions of acceptance, self-esteem, and belonging.

Ultimately, Simon is portrayed as a very gentle character who is positive towards the boys he fancies. This suggests that he has a kind and considerate personality which makes him relatable and endearing to readers. Simon's positive attitude toward the boys he fancies indicates that he is open to romantic possibilities and approaches these feelings with optimism. This portrayal humanises the character and makes him more relatable. The description of Simon feeling nervous, excited, happy, and special when liked by someone he also likes reveals the depth of his emotions. This characterization adds complexity to his character and highlights the intense feelings that can be associated with romantic attraction. Furthermore, his selective affection and thoughtful reflections on the boys he fancies contribute to a well-rounded portrayal of a gay character navigating the complexities of his romantic life.

Moreover, worth mentioning is the portrayal of the relationship between Blue and Simon. Their emotional connection is a vital part of the story. Ever since they start communicating they develop a very deep connection which can be supported by many examples from the novel. When Simon is being blackmailed, he is not only worried about hurting Blue but also about keeping secrets from him. Simon is not used to keeping secrets as they share many personal details in every email.

Simon vs. the Homosapiens Agenda is written in an interesting way in which every second chapter starts with an e-mail between the two boys. The e-mails provide the reader with a sense of safety and understanding. The teenage boys' relationship is described as very sweet, some could say naive to a degree as they are each other's first real love. Their love is portrayed in a very romantic, sweet and respectful manner. Simon and Bram are very happy, joyful and proud of being publicly together. In the end, everyone is supportive of the two of them and the bullying slowly fades away.

In this chapter, I have explored the portrayal of gay characters in *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda*, delving into the various elements of their experiences and identities. The story portrays Simon firstly as a teenage boy and secondly a homosexual male. This makes the main character complex and relatable in many ways. The novel portrays homosexuality as

accepted aspect of the characters' lives supported by understanding offered by friends and family, which sends a powerful message of inclusivity and love. The book helps to normalise and validate gay identity, while also exploring the challenges that come with being part of the LGBTQ+ community. It highlights that even in an accepting environment, individuals may struggle with their own feelings and insecurities.

Overall, *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda* proves the importance of LGBTQ+ representation in literature. It not only provides a heart-warming portrayal of gay characters but also reinforces the idea that love, acceptance, and open communication are vital components of healthy relationships. The novel challenges societal stigmas and discrimination associated with being gay, encouraging readers to embrace their true selves and create an environment of love and acceptance. This novel offers a relatable perspective on the journey of self-discovery, and beautifully captures the mix of emotions that accompany the coming-out process. These experiences mirror the experiences of many LGBTQ+ individuals and provide an authentic and empathetic portrayal of the challenges they face.

6. Comparison of the Portrayal of Gay Characters in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda*

The novels *The Picture of Dorian Gray* by Oscar Wilde and *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda* by Becky Albertalli, separated by time, societal context, and narrative styles, offer unique perspectives on the representation of gay characters in literature.

The primary difference between these two novels lies in the explicitness in which the authors address homosexuality. *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda* prominently features explicit LGBTQ+ themes, openly discussing and portraying the protagonist's experiences as a gay teenager. In contrast, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* only contains homoerotic codes, subtle cues and implicit representations that suggest a homoerotic theme without explicitly stating or exploring homosexuality in a direct manner. Therefore, while *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda* is direct in its portrayal of gay experiences, *The Picture of Dorian* subtly conveys homoerotic undertones through implicit elements in the narrative.

The social context plays a big role in causing the mentioned differences. *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda* is set in a contemporary, more accepting social context where LGBTQ+ issues are a central focus. The contemporary setting allows for a more positive and accepting portrayal of LGBTQ+ characters, reflecting changing societal attitudes and norms. Therefore, it aims to provide representation for LGBTQ+ teenagers and promote tolerance and acceptance. On the other hand, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was written during a time when homosexuality was heavily stigmatised, and the novel explores the theme of hidden desires and the consequences of living a double life. From this perspective, the novel captures the repressive environment and harsh consequences associated with homosexuality during that era. While it does not openly address LGBTQ+ identity in the same way as contemporary LGBTQ+ literature, it does indirectly hint at it through subtext and the relationship between the characters.

When I focus on the themes, the two novels are also significantly different. *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda* primarily deals with the personal and emotional aspects of Simon's journey. It emphasises the importance of being true to oneself and the positive outcomes of self-acceptance. In contrast, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* examines the negative outcomes of suppressing one's authentic self. It explores themes of vanity, corruption, and the moral decline of the main character. His refusal to acknowledge his actions ultimately leads to his

downfall. However, the biggest difference is that for Dorian the consequences are fatal and lead to his tragic death, while Simon's choices, particularly in terms of coming out and being true to himself, improve his life.

Additionally, it is possible to compare the tone and atmosphere of both novels. *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda* maintains a generally positive tone, emphasising themes of love, acceptance, and self-discovery within the LGBTQ+ community. The atmosphere creates a hopeful and uplifting narrative. Moreover, the positive tone is reinforced by the focus on genuine and positive relationships, which contributes to a warm and supportive atmosphere. In contrast, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is written in darker and more ominous tone, reflecting the tragic consequences associated with the characters involved in homosexual relationships. The tone and atmosphere differences arise from the distinct themes explored in each novel.

Furthermore, the portrayal of characters and their relationships is also significantly different. *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda* emphasises the genuine and positive relationships, while the relationships in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* are often tragic. Simon and his friends are portrayed as good-hearted and relatable individuals. Especially Simon's relationships with his friends and Blue are characterised by trust, openness, and mutual understanding. In contrast, many key male characters in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* are shown as immoral or having a bad impact on others. The portrayal of potentially homosexual relationships in this novel always lead to tragic outcomes.

While Dorian Gray and Simon Spier are two very different characters from distinct literary contexts, there are some potential similarities and thematic connections that can be drawn between them. Dorian Gray maintains a secret life in which he hides the portrait that ages and reflects the moral decay caused by his actions, while he presents a charming and youthful facade to society. Similarly, Simon initially keeps his sexual orientation a secret, communicating with his anonymous online friend "Blue" while hiding his true identity from those around him. From this perspective, both characters are living double lives to some extent.

Another similarity that can be found in both novels is that both characters are influenced by societal norms and expectations, however both in different ways. Dorian Gray is driven by the desire to maintain his youthful appearance and reputation in high society, even if it means indulging in destructive behaviour. Simon is initially hesitant to come out due

to fear of how his friends and family will react, reflecting the pressures and expectations of his social environment.

It is important to note that while there are some thematic similarities between Dorian Gray and Simon, they are fundamentally different characters in different genres and time periods. Therefore, the specific challenges they face and the resolutions to their stories are unique to their respective narratives.

Conclusion

This diploma thesis aimed to explore how the portrayal of gay characters in literature has changed over time. More specifically it examined the genesis of gay characters in literature from the late 19th century to the 21st century. The purpose was to analyse the portrayal of gay characters from different time periods. The literary works selected for purpose of the examination were initially *The Portrait of Dorian Gray*, *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda* and *Faggots*. However, due to the thesis's length, the literary work *Faggots* has been excluded, thus narrowing the thesis.

In conclusion, the portrayal of gay characters in novels written in English not only reflects the evolving societal attitudes towards the LGBTQ+ community but also serves as a powerful tool in shaping and challenging these perceptions. The exploration of two distinct works *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* reveals clear differences in the representation of gay characters and their impact on readers.

Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda offers a contemporary and positive portrayal of gay characters, emphasising genuine relationships and acceptance. The narrative not only celebrates diversity but also contributes to normalizing LGBTQ+ identities. The novel serves as hope, reinforcing the importance of love, acceptance, and open communication in healthy relationships. By portraying the challenges and triumphs of Simon, the author sheds light on the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals in a more accepting environment, inspiring readers to embrace their true selves.

On the other hand, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* takes a darker and more tragic approach to the portrayal of gay characters. The main male characters are often portrayed as immoral or negatively influential, contributing to a narrative that connects homosexuality with tragedy. This difference in representation between the two novels reflects not only the time periods in which they were written but also the societal attitudes towards homosexuality during those eras.

However, it is crucial to acknowledge that the interpretation of language used in the novels may differ significantly among readers, and the author's original intention may not be evident. Literary works often contain layers of complexity, and readers bring their own perspectives, experiences, and biases to the interpretation process. What one reader perceives

as homoerotic undertones, another might interpret differently, emphasising the subjective nature of literary analysis. Factors such as cultural background, personal beliefs, and societal context can influence the way readers decode the implied meanings within the text.

Furthermore, the impact of these portrayals on societal attitudes is noteworthy. *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda* contributes to a more positive and accepting dialogue around LGBTQ+ individuals, fostering understanding and empathy. However, the tragic portrayals in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* may reinforce harmful stereotypes and contribute to the stigmatisation of homosexuality, highlighting the responsibility of literature in influencing public opinion.

As societal attitudes towards the LGBTQ+ community continue to evolve, it is crucial to recognise the importance of diverse and positive representations in literature. While progress has been made, the difficulties faced by LGBTQ+ individuals persist, ranging from societal prejudice to personal struggles with identity. Media, including literature, with its ability to shape narratives and influence perspectives, can play a crucial role in challenging these difficulties and fostering a more inclusive and compassionate society.

In conclusion, the portrayal of gay characters in novels remains a dynamic and evolving aspect of literature that reflects, influences, and challenges societal attitudes. Through nuanced and positive representations, literature can contribute to a more accepting and understanding world for LGBTQ+ individuals.

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