


A comparative analysis of the depiction of queer characters in Hartinger's *Geography Club* and Entin's film adaptation

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Literature is very important when referring to problems experienced by individuals, talking about life and life around individuals. Though interesting and entertaining stories can be told, various forms of stories can stimulate and inspire readers, especially when conveying human values through the means of 'character' (Alvinindyta 2018:8, 10). The depiction of fictional characters is a pivotal literary element in exposing and informing a target audience of an identified social issue. Therefore, the fictional characters depicted within literary texts may be used to allow more individuals to become better acquainted with the gender identities that form part of cultures and traditions in heteronormative societies (Uys 2020:3; Uys, Romylos & Nel 2021:3; The Other Foundation 2016:23). This article aims to show how Brent Hartinger depicts queer characters in his 2004 queer text *Geography Club*. Entin's 2013 film adaptation is also included to carry out a comparative analysis of the novel and the film, adding more depth to the article and broadening the scope. The aim of the investigation on which the article is based was to allow more readers to become better acquainted with gender identities that form part of cultures and traditions in heteronormative societies. A qualitative approach was followed, using hermeneutics as the strategy of inquiry. The conceptual and theoretical framework was queer characters as a queer literary element, whilst the data generation method was document analysis. The main findings were that there are four possible types of queer characters (Cart & Jenkins 2006) presented that may be applied to depict fictional characters of a queer literary work, and Hartinger (2004) and Entin (2013) depict their queer characters accordingly to inform readers and possibly change ingrained perceptions of various gender identities.

Keywords: queer; gender identities; literary element; queer characters; heteronormative societies; *Geography Club*; Brent Hartinger.

Introduction

Literature is very important when referring to problems experienced by individuals, talking about life and life around individuals. Furthermore, literature is 'pleasure and understanding' (Alvinindyta 2018:8). Though interesting and entertaining stories can be told, various forms of stories can stimulate and inspire readers, especially when conveying human values through the means of 'character'. Character – like plot, theme, language, etc. – is an important literary element contributing to understanding and pleasure (Alvinindyta 2018:8, 10). Minderop (2005:2) elaborates that '[c]haracter can also be a person, community, race, mental and moral attitude, the quality of reasoning, famous people and characters in literature'. Accordingly, fictional characters represent human beings through traits, behaviours and descriptions that deserve love, attention and support (Alvinindyta 2018:13). Thus, the depiction of fictional (queer) characters is a pivotal (queer) literary element to reveal and inform a target audience of an identified social issue (e.g. religious zealotry, prejudice and abuse, the search for identity, human immunodeficiency virus [HIV] and acquired immunodeficiency syndrome [AIDS] and suicide). Therefore, it is important to analyse an author's depiction of their characters who can contribute to an implied message to be delivered and the possible change of ingrained perceptions to occur. Hence, the following research questions have been formulated for this article:

- What is a definition of young adult fiction?
- What is a definition of queer and queer identity?
- What are the different types of queer characters?
- How are queer characters depicted in Hartinger's (2004) queer literary text *Geography Club* and its 2013 film adaptation?

The underlying aim of the article is to allow more individuals to become better acquainted with gender identities that form part of cultures and traditions in heteronormative societies. In doing

so, possible challenges and experiences in heteronormative societies from the point of view of fictional queer characters are exposed and discussed (Uys 2020:3; Uys, Romylos & Nel 2021:3; The Other Foundation 2016:23).

Literature review

Young adult fiction

Hartinger's (2004) queer novel *Geography Club* is young adult fiction for teenagers, adolescents and adults (who are generally 10–25 years of age; Belbin 2011:134; Moore-Porter 2019:17). Glaus (2014:408) describes young adult fiction as texts in which the main characters are teenagers who deal with issues or challenges to which teenagers – or young adults – of the real world can relate; this is invaluable regarding their journey into adulthood. Belbin (2011:134) states that reading is a crucial receptive skill, and when one reads imaginative works, one is allowed to see the world from others' points of view. Belbin (2011:138) further explains that it is the responsibility of fiction to 'ask the right questions' and to provide answers accordingly (i.e. the moral message of the literary work). With this in mind, young adult fiction and its educational impulses are aimed at emerging readers, because young adult fiction caters to 'its own specific concerns, providing a vital place for reflection and escape during adolescence, the most difficult phase of many people's lives' (Belbin 2011:140–141). Moore-Porter (2019:2) agrees and contributes that reading plays a role 'in the growth of the mind'. Rosenberg (2011:1) also observes that 'teenagers will find reflections of their own experiences (in literary works), that first striking confirmation that the agonies of adolescence are universal'. Thus, young adult fiction is important for this specific target audience regarding change, growing up and finding oneself. Therefore, young adults need to be prepared for possible challenges they might face or experience in the 21st century.

Glaus (2014:407) explains that meaningful encounters with complex, sophisticated, interesting and diverse literary texts may prepare all individuals for 21st-century challenges. Crumpler and Wedwick (2011:65) and Glaus (2014:410) add that adolescent readers can navigate and engage amongst literary works that speak to their 'emerging identity, their need to explore alternative roles, the complexity and variability of their developing cognitive ability, and their shifting reader roles'. Hence, Riley (2010:298, 305, 307) emphasises that it is important that young adult fiction be used effectively, realistically and responsibly to, for example, promote social justice activism and critical reflection – one can consider the themes that emanate and how fictional characters are portrayed. Young adult fiction impacts young readers as stereotypes may be questioned, and systems of privilege and power are not overlooked (Riley 2010:307). For instance, Moore-Porter (2019:4) mentions that if there is a lack of minority characters (e.g. queer individuals) in a selected literary work of the language classroom, said individuals do not encounter characters of their own background. It also means that individuals of the majority

group (i.e. heterosexual individuals) have limited exposure and encounter with characters who are different when compared with them. With this in mind, the reading and the teaching of a queer literary work might be the only place for heterosexual and queer individuals to encounter fictional queer characters, as they do not always have this opportunity in their daily lives. Blackburn and Clark (2011:246) contribute that queer literature can show the kind of double life queer individuals 'live and negotiate within the heterosexual matrix'. The union of the literary texts' worlds and the readers' lived worlds enables one to use language to interrogate heteronormativity through queer discourses. One should not just look at one story or one point of view but include literary texts of a diverse nature – this exposure to understand the feelings and thoughts of some characters in a text can improve a reader's ability to understand those 'who are different from them in the world outside the text' (Moore-Porter 2019:122).

Dyer (2014:24) concludes that young adult fiction should be used to promote, for example, healthy identity formation in adolescents as this genre of literature is often relevant to their cultural and social environments. Literature allows individuals to think about complex ideas and relate these to relevant events in their lives, which ultimately impacts their self-identity (Moore-Porter 2019:23). For queer individuals, literature can represent a queer character's queer journey, helping an individual to accept or celebrate their own gender identity.

Queer

It is important that the term, queer, is defined as its meaning is fundamental to this article. Generally, it seems 'queer' is seen in a negative light:

Of a person: homosexual (frequently derogatory and offensive).
In later use: denoting or relating to a sexual or gender identity that does not correspond to established ideas of sexuality and gender, especially heterosexual norms. (Oxford English Dictionary 2022e)

Based on the given quotation, 'derogatory' and 'offensive' are the key verbs here; individuals who are 'different' are seen negatively. The PFLAG Organisation (2021) – Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays – agrees that, previously, the term had a negative use, specifically when used pejoratively to individuals who are gay. There are still times when the LGBTQIA+ community (which includes lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex and asexual individuals, amongst others) dislikes using the term. However, in a more positive light, queer can also be referred to as an umbrella term when referring to individuals whose gender identities and sexual attractions are 'differing in some way from what is usual or normal' (PFLAG Organisation 2021). The PFLAG Organisation (2021) contributes by explaining that the LGBTQIA+ community also uses queer to express their inclusivity, defiance and fluid identities in the larger heteronormative community. In other words, queer can be used as an inclusive term referring to the LGBTQIA+

community, whose gender identities are different from heterosexual or cisgender people¹ (Uys 2020:32–33; Uys, Romylos & Nel 2021:1; Merriam-Webster 2021). As a result of this article, when the term ‘queer’ is used, it does not refer to the rejection of gender identities but to their inclusion instead.

Queer identity and queer theory

Butler (1988:519–520) explains that gender is not a locus of agency or a stable identity from which various acts proceed. Rather, it is an identity that is tenuously constituted through a stylised repetition of acts through time. Hence, gender must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily enactments, movements and gestures of various kinds establish the impression of a long-lasting gendered self. Butler (1998:531) continues to explain that ‘gender is not passively scripted on the body, and neither is it determined by nature, language, the symbolic, or the overwhelming history of patriarchy’. Hence, gender is what is invariably and incessantly presented under daily constraint with pleasure and anxiety. With this in mind, Ruhsam (2017:1) mentions that queer theory critically examines how power works to legitimate and institutionalise certain expressions and forms of gender and sexuality whilst stigmatising others. Whilst lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender studies seek to analyse queer individuals as possessing stable identities, queer theory challenges and problematises norms of gender and sexuality, rigid identity categories and the violence and oppression that such hegemonic norms justify. In conclusion, queer theorists refuse the belief that gender and sexuality are ‘essentialist categories determined by biology that can thus be empirically judged by fixed standards of morality and truth’ (Ruhsam 2017:1). Therefore, queer theory destabilises gender and sexual identities, encouraging and allowing unfettered and multiple interpretations of the cultural phenomena.

Queer characters

Cart and Jenkins (2006:xx, 17, 134) clarify that fictional queer characters generally comprise four types (but are not limited to only these types): a character who is outed or comes out as queer, a character who is influenced by the environment or is born queer, a character who experiments to determine their own gender identity and a queer character who is included in the heteronormative worlds of nonqueer texts. The gender identity of the outed character,² usually by another character, is made known without permission (which can be regarded as an illegal act against the human rights of a citizen of countries such as the United Kingdom, South Africa, etc. to other individuals; Equality and Human Rights Commission 2016). An example of such a character is Melanie from Jeanette Winterson’s 1985 novel *Oranges are not the Only Fruit*.

1.The Oxford English Dictionary (2022c) defines ‘cisgender’ as an individual whose sense of gender and personal identity corresponds to their sex at birth. For example, a cisgender man agrees that the sex (i.e. male) assigned to him at birth is correct.

2.The Oxford English Dictionary (2021) defines ‘outed’ as an individual who exposes another individual’s gender identity (when the second individual in question has not declared it themselves yet).

This same category also applies to a queer character who openly and freely shares their gender identity with others around them. An example of such a character is Ben from Jay Bell’s 2011 novel, *Something like Summer*. Concludingly, being outed is regarded as negative compared to being out. The second type links to the nature–nurture debate on whether the environment can influence queer individuals. This same category also applies to characters who are born queer. In other words, characters might be influenced (nurtured) from birth by factors (such as guardians, parents, online platforms [such as Netflix and Showmax], the society at large, religious leaders or other life events) (Cook 2021:9), which expose these characters to various gender identities. An example of such a character is Ben from Bill Konigsberg’s 2013 novel *Openly Straight*. Then there is also the case that queer characters may simply be queer from birth without any external influencers playing a role (Cart & Jenkins 2006:xx, 17, 134) – thus, from this point of view, being queer is considered natural. An example of such a character is Simon from Becky Albertalli’s 2015 novel, *Simon vs the Homo Sapiens Agenda*. The third type of queer character has to do with curiosity and experimentation – an individual gets into different situations (such as partying and online dating) and is exposed to various gender identities one way or another. Through this experimentation, individuals can determine their own gender identity based on what they liked or disliked (Cart & Jenkins 2006:xx, 17, 134). A possible example of such a character is Tim from Jay Bell’s 2012 novel *Something like Winter*. The last type refers to queer characters who form part of heteronormative worlds, but the literary text in question is not queer themed. An example of such a character is Albus Dumbledore from J.K. Rowling’s 2007–2021 *Harry Potter* and *Fantastic Beasts* series. Additionally, Brent Hartinger’s 2004 novel *Geography Club* alters this fourth type of character: a nonqueer character, who is heterosexual, but assumed or believed to be queer in a queer text’s context. An example of such a character is Brian Bund. Considering the information given concerning the types of fictional queer characters, one should also be aware that these characters provide unique views – regarding beliefs and values – that represent, interpret and describe another character, event or scene. By the same token, these queer characters can also be interpreted, described and represented from other characters’ points of view (Cart & Jenkins 2006:xx, 17, 134). As a result, fictional queer characters are a pivotal literary element of queer literature as readers become more and better aware of the challenges shared and experienced by these queer characters in question (Uys 2020:28–29).

Research methods

Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics, or literary hermeneutics (when applied to literary texts), refers to the interpretation theory (*interpretatio*) used to analyse literary works. Furthermore, Dilthey’s *The Rise of Hermeneutics* was published at the beginning of the 20th century, which became the foundation for human sciences (as it is devoted to ‘a theory of understanding’). It

outlines the nature of self-reflection and philosophy, and it is viewed as an 'approach to meaning, a way of investigating the significance, and the significance of significance' (Malbon 1983:207; Szondi & Bahti 1978:17).

Malbon (1983:212) also elaborates that hermeneutics includes different meanings of *hermeneuein* and *hermeneia*, the Greek verb and its noun form, respectively. Moreover, BibleHub (2021) mentions that *herméneuo* (with *ερμηνεύω* being the original Greek word) means 'to interpret'. The Greek god Hermes, who is the messenger of the gods and the inventor or discoverer of writing and language, is also linguistically linked to *hermeneuein*, *hermeneia* and *herméneuo* – the linguistic root can refer to the language(s) that were discovered or invented, and later interpreted, by Hermes. Henceforth, *hermeneuein* has three meanings: to express, say or speak; to comment, interpret and explain; and to translate. Gadamer (1976:117) concludes that using the 'hermeneutic circle', hermeneutics may be applied to literary works to analyse textual data.

Discussion

The researcher of this article deems it necessary that a brief synopsis of Hartinger's (2004) queer novel *Geography Club* is given to better understand the application of hermeneutics as the strategy of inquiry to the novel and its 2013 film adaptation in question.

Geography Club³

A group of closeted high school students, who feel like outsiders because of their diverse gender identities in a heteronormative town and school environment, are too scared to form an openly Gay–Straight Alliance, so they come up with the Geography Club, the most boring after-school club name they can think of, to give themselves a time and place to socialise twice a week without being vulnerable (Entin 2013; Hartinger 2004). They also believe they are the only queer individuals at their school and that this hidden support group hides away their true identities (Blackburn & Clark 2011:226; Curwood, Schliesman & Horning 2009:42; Norton & Vare 2004:66–67). Hartinger's (2004) novel *Geography Club* and its film adaptation (Entin 2013) are thus a queer text and film that focus on the fear queer students experience in a heteronormative school environment. The theme of prejudice and abuse⁴ manifests through the eyes of five distinct fictional queer characters: Russel (gay), Kevin

(gay), Min (bisexual in the novel; lesbian in the film), Terese (lesbian) and Ike (gay in the novel; a confused bisexual who is actually gay but with a possible connection to transsexuality in the film). Entin (2013) also includes additional secondary characters: Ike's girlfriend Samantha (straight-acting,⁵ but secretly a lesbian); Kevin's gay uncle Glenn, together with his boyfriend Eddie; and Ms Toles (queer ally⁶). Additionally, Brian (assumed to be gay in the novel, but not in the film) is also analysed as a type of queer character.

Russel

The main protagonist of *Geography Club* is Russel Middlebrook (Uys 2020:115; Entin 2013; Hartinger 2004; Van Aswegen & Mayo 2011:61). He is a closeted gay character who is alone, lonely and afraid at Goodkind High School. Ironically enough, the secondary school is named 'Goodkind' (Hartinger 2004:3); however, the environment is heteronormative, where queer individuals are barely tolerated. Hartinger (2004:11–15) introduces Russel as a character who is willing to use online sites to meet queer individuals and agrees to meet a complete stranger, who is also queer, in the middle of the night at a picnic gazebo. Though this can be considered dangerous, as Russel is meeting an assumed stranger in a public space when the rest of the community is most probably asleep and absent, Brown (2006:325) mentions that Russel and the stranger (who turns out to be Kevin Land, a popular baseball player [novel] or football player [film] at Goodkind High School) choose to use the setting of the picnic gazebo as a safe and spatial strategy that would allow them to become acquainted face to face. Because of the two characters who are familiar with the time and place of the setting, they are reasonably sure that no other individuals would be around the picnic gazebo on that particular night who would interfere with their discreet meeting. In contrast, in the film adaptation, Russel and Kevin choose to meet in the middle of the day where other people are conversing at the park, which may be implied as a safer place and time to meet a stranger. At this point, Russel and the film viewer do not know that Kevin is the other gay individual. Russel and Kevin bump into each other at the meeting place, and it becomes clear that both individuals are very anxious, because they do not want their gender identity (i.e. gay) to be known by a fellow peer of the same school. Kevin, though, realises that Russel is in his school and does not make it clear that he is there to meet him in the first place. Thus, Russel is indirectly stood up because of Kevin's fear.

As the reader of Brent Hartinger's 2004 *Geography Club* becomes familiar with the novel, it becomes clear that 'geography' and 'location' are significant to its context. Accordingly, Brown (2006:320) analyses 'Middlebrook' (the

3. It should be noted that the author of this paper focused on this specific text (2004) and its film adaptation (2013) because of its portrayal and education of diverse gender identities and their 21st-century challenges in a heteronormative school environment. A comparative analysis of the novel and the film adds more depth to the article's topic. Additionally, though *Geography Club* forms part of a series of young adult fiction, *The Russel Middlebrook Series*, the context (i.e. the heteronormative school environment) of the second text changes to that of a summer camp where the focus is not on the 21st-century challenges experienced by queer individuals in a heteronormative school environment. Thus, the focus is only on the first novel in the series. It should also be noted that *Geography Club* is not the only queer text that can be used as an example of an author's depiction of fictional queer characters that may be used as a queer literary element to expose and inform a queer and nonqueer target audience. However, the focus remains on *Geography Club*, as the author needs to consider the length of the article.

4. Although 'prejudice and abuse' is one of the main themes that manifest in the queer text, this article aims to analyse how the author and director depicts queer characters.

5. The Oxford English Dictionary (2022f) defines 'straight-acting' as a queer individual who does not exhibit characteristics or behaviours perceived as stereotypically, typically or overtly queer. A queer individual who is straight-acting is most of the time still in the closet and afraid for their gender identity to be known.

6. The Oxford English Dictionary (2022a) defines 'ally' as an individual who joins, combines or unites in association, friendship and kinship for mutual benefit or a common purpose. Accordingly, a queer ally is an individual who joins in an association or friendship with queer individuals to, for example, prevent queerphobia.

surname of Russel) and explains that this specific surname conceivably suggests that the gay protagonist is 'in the middle of a flowing stream'. In other words, he is unlikely to stay in one location as he can take action either with or against the stream. As a result, experiencing Russel's emotions and observations through his eyes, it becomes clear to the reader that as he navigates the 'emotional and developmental turbulences of adolescence', he endures turbulent waters.

During the commencement of the novel and the film, the students of Goodkind High School regard him as an average straight individual who is single, not necessarily popular and absent from playing any sports. Considering the various popular geographical locations (identified by Russel), he forms part of the Borderlands of Respectability but not the Land of the Popular or, luckily, Outcast Island (Hartinger 2004:54). These locations are not identified in the film. Still, the viewer does become aware that football players (like Kevin, Nolan and Jared) are popular, geeks (like Russel, Min, Terese and Ike) are respected, and outcasts (like Brian) are abused. Yet Russel's popularity increases when he joins the baseball team (novel) or is put on the football team by Kevin (film) to secretly be closer to and interact with him in a public space. Henceforth, Russel has a change in location: instead of being an inhabitant of the Borderlands of Respectability, he is now a migrant in the Land of the Popular. Nonetheless, his popularity decreases once his gender identity is exposed. Additionally, Hartinger (2004) and Entin (2013) depict Russel as both a character who is most certainly queer-born and is aware that he is queer, and a character who is later outed as queer. In the novel, Russel makes it clear to the reader that he has no attraction towards the opposite sex: '[t]hat was about all I remembered, but keep in mind I don't exactly have a photographic memory when it comes to girls'; '[...] I had kind of made it a point not to be alone with a girl' (Hartinger 2004:65, 77). These quotations also contribute to the rumour (novel) or the pamphlets (film) that fellow peers spread, specifically the two girls (Kimberly and Trish in the novel; only Kimberly in the film) who assumed Russel must be gay – 'Are you gay or something?' (Hartinger 2004:118); 'Kimberly: Fag!' (Entin 2013) – as he did not want to sexually participate with Trish (novel) or Trish and Kimberly (film). Even though the rumour that Russel is gay turns out to be accurate, he soon embraces being openly gay. Near the end of the novel and the film, he becomes one of the pioneers of the novel's Gay-Straight-Bisexual Alliance or the film's Gay-Straight Alliance at Goodkind High School. In conclusion, Russel matures emotionally, because he does not allow loneliness and fear to make him feel alone anymore, even if it costs him Kevin Land.

Kevin

Hartinger (2004) portrays Kevin Land as a primary character who is also queer, though the novel is not told from his point of view. Similarly to Russel, he is a closeted gay character with a much bigger fear of losing his current

popularity status at Goodkind High School. As was previously mentioned, Goodkind High School barely tolerates queer individuals, thus resulting in rejection. Hartinger uses Kevin, too, to portray what (dangerous or unrationalised) actions queer individuals might take to keep their gender identities secret, such as connecting with an unknown peer during the night when it is assumed that no other individuals would be around. Kevin also makes it clear to Russel that he does have some sexual experience ('If they knew I screwed around with guys-!'; 'I [Russel] wasn't jealous at the thought of Kevin having sex with girls'; Hartinger 2004:22, 123), allowing the reader to assume that Kevin has met other individuals at other times as well and not just Russel – regarding the film, Entin (2013) does not make Kevin's sexual experience with the opposite sex⁷ known, but his fear of being exposed is. For example, at the school, when Russel wants to greet Kevin after they kiss at the camp and are seen by Min, Kevin acts as if he does not know who he – Russel is. He fears their secret could get out at the school:

Russel: That day at the park ... was that you? Or is that just ... some coincidence?

Kevin: No, I, uh ... I recognized you from school. You know, I was gonna say something, you know. I just, uh...

Russel: Freaked out.

Kevin: Exactly.

Russel: And then you made me feel like a complete idiot. OK, then.

[...]

Kevin: I want to hang out with you. In school and stuff. [...] But I don't want people getting suspicious. You know, like, 'What are they doing hanging out all of a sudden?', you know.

Russel: So ... you got me a jersey?

Kevin: No. I got you on the team. (Entin 2013)

From the expositions of the novel and the film, Kevin fashions part of Goodkind High School's Land of the Popular. Hartinger depicts him as an individual Goodkind deeply respects (his peers, except Russel, and soon Min, Terese, and Ike – are unaware of him being gay). Unlike Russel, Kevin wants his popularity status to remain the same and, consequently, embarks on an action to keep his gender identity hidden: in the novel, he, together with fellow jocks, verbally abuses Russel (even though they are in a relationship) – 'He don't want a wiener – he wants a big ol' sausage!' (Hartinger 2004:203). In the film, Kevin only informs Russel that he is not part of the football team anymore:

Kevin: You're off the team.

Russel: Fine.

⁷Though Kevin is gay, his sexual experience with the opposite sex may indicate that he has been bi-curious at some point. The Oxford English Dictionary (2022b) defines 'bi-curious' as a heterosexual individual interested in having a sexual relationship or experience with an individual of the same sex. For a homosexual individual (i.e. Kevin), they are interested in having a sexual experience or relationship with the opposite sex. This is interesting regarding the novel, as this piece of information further alludes to Kevin's additional hook-ups.

- Jared: Can't believe we didn't see it.
- Nolan: We almost let a girl like you into our group. Who'd have thought it?
- Russel: You know you can't technically kick me off the team, right?
- Jared: Oh, we know. But who's gonna stop us? Later, bro. (Entin 2013)

To not be sent to Outcast Island, Kevin verbally abuses Russel in the novel and kicks him off the team in the film. At the end of the novel, Kevin – out of fear – not only loses his relationship with Russel and his friendships with the remaining members of the Geography Club (Loch 2016:67), but he also does not partake in the Gay–Straight–Bisexual Alliance at Goodkind. Concerning the film, Kevin was never part of the Geography Club and only loses his relationship with Russel; he does not want to join the Gay–Straight Alliance as there are heterosexual individuals who stand outside Room 317 to identify who the queer individuals and their allies are (Entin 2013). Russel also highlights the irony that Kevin's parents are probably the only parents in their town who accept or celebrate gender identities. In contrast, Kevin and many other parents (such as Russel's father or Samantha's parents) reject them:

- Russel: I have a dad that is ... that is pressuring me into going to Yale and living the same life that he did. And that includes having a wife. You have the only parents in this entire town ... that don't give a shit what you are.
- Kevin: It's not about them. This is about me. I don't want to be gay, Russell. I just wanna play football, you know. And I just wanna get a scholarship. I just wanna be normal, Russell. (Entin 2013)

With this in mind, Kevin does not have to fear his parents' rejection. He knows they are open to gender identities, whereas Russel, and many other queer individuals, either know or are fairly sure their parents will reject them.

Additionally, Brown (2006:320) analyses 'Land' (Kevin's surname) and explains that his surname proposes that he is basically immovable, inert and fixed. Compared to Russel (who was willing to go against the 'stream' of Goodkind High School's barely tolerant attitude towards queer individuals), Kevin, a popular jock who enjoys his current popularity, is disinclined to reveal his gender identity, which will cause him his loss of status.

Moreover, Kevin is regarded by Goodkind High School (except for the members of the Geography Club) as an individual whose gender identity is heterosexual and a very popular individual who partakes in sports, specifically baseball (novel) or football (film). By the same token, Hartinger (2004:129) also portrays Kevin as a character who was queer-born and who is aware that he is queer: 'I guess I've always known'. The reader may also consider him an experimental character concerning his gender identity, as he confides in Russel that he has had sexual intercourse with the opposite

sex (which can be considered 'bi-curiosity'). Nonetheless, Kevin (unlike Russel) does not embrace being openly gay to remain an inhabitant of the Land of the Popular – Kevin's maturity level, hence, remains the same, because he becomes lonesome again and still fears that his gender identity might become known to Goodkind High School. In conclusion, Hartinger (2004) and Entin (2013) depict Kevin as a character who may be used to show the desire young adults experience to be or to remain popular, even at the cost of being deceptive about their true gender identities.

Besides the two gay characters that have previously been discussed, Min (as a bisexual character in the novel and a lesbian character in the film) is analysed next.

Min

Another primary character of the *Geography Club* is Min. Hartinger (2004) depicts her as a character who identifies as bisexual – 'Actually, I think bisexual is probably more accurate' (Hartinger 2004:31). Even though she has a girlfriend, Terese, Min is also attracted to the opposite sex – there is a mention in the novel that she is attracted to Kevin, too – 'Oh, Russel, come on. He is hot. Bisexual, remember?' (Hartinger 2004:46). Contrastingly, Min clarifies to the reader that she would have gone crazy in Goodkind High School's heteronormative school environment without the support of Terese. Hartinger further depicts through Min – as well as Terese – the extent to which they will go to be together:

- So we never told anyone. Not just that we're together. Not even that we're friends. We meet in this old warehouse down on Fracton. All these years, my parents think I've been doing volunteer work down at the YMCA. Twisted is what it is. Really sick and neurotic and twisted. (Hartinger 2004:47)

Henceforth, not only are Min and Terese dishonest to their friends (excluding the members of the Geography Club) to sustain the impression that they are not even friends in the school context, but Min is also being dishonest with her parents. They believe she is at a safe place as she is supposedly helping out at a charity, whilst she is – contrastingly – at a (dangerous) warehouse – 'You can't have a relationship hiding in a warehouse in the middle of the night' (Hartinger 2004:207). Regarding the film, the viewer knows that she is a lesbian as there is no mention of her interest in the opposite sex. Furthermore, Min, Terese and Ike are the original pioneers of the Geography Club; therefore, Min and Terese use this safe location to meet and continue their relationship.

Correspondingly to Russel, Min does not form part of Goodkind High School's Land of the Popular, but she is an inhabitant of the Borderlands of Respectability. She is automatically unpopular (not to the extent of being abused and bullied but at least to be disrespected) because of being an intelligent individual. Her gender identity is assumed to be straight. Min, compared to Kevin, Russel and the remaining

members of the Geography Club (Terese, Ike and Belinda⁸), demonstrates the highest level of maturity. As Goodkind High School is disrespecting Brian for being 'different', or 'queer', Min (and the straight member of the group, Belinda) is the only queer character who empathises with Brian and wants him to join their Geography Club to support him – at this time, Russel, Terese and Ike (and Kevin, concerning the novel) are fearful of what might happen to them once the students of Goodkind High School know their secret.

Moreover, Hartinger (2004) and Entin (2013) depict Min as a character who is queer-born and knows that she is queer – it is made clear to the reader and the viewer that she is comfortable with her gender identity, but at times also not ready to be open about it to avoid being abused. Nevertheless, Min is one of the pioneers who establish the Gay–Straight–Bisexual Alliance (novel) or the Gay–Straight Alliance (film) at Goodkind High School to prevent queerphobia in their heteronormative school context as well as to support queer and nonqueer individuals. Fortunately, Min's maturity in the novel is transparent to Russel and Ike, as they, together with Belinda, Brian and herself, in the end, decide to reject living in loneliness and fear. Regarding the film, Terese substitutes for Belinda and does not reject the idea of the Gay–Straight Alliance and is another pioneer as well. Concludingly, Min helps some of the other characters to develop in maturity.

Terese

Hartinger (2004) portrays Terese as a closeted lesbian character her peers already mock for resembling a lesbian – she has a less feminine (i.e. butch) physique whilst also being a soccer player. Entin (2013) does not elaborate in the film that Terese's masculine physique is mocked, but the viewer most probably identifies this themselves as she does not look 'girly' (when compared to Min).

Throughout the novel, Terese forms part of Goodkind High School's Borderlands of Respectability, unlike Russel, who travels from one location to the other. Furthermore, Terese, when compared to Min (and Ike), shows immaturity in the novel when she joins her peers in laughing at Brian when he is humiliated yet again in the cafeteria – 'I couldn't help but notice that Terese, sitting with the Girl Jocks, was laughing' (Hartinger 2004:182). She is also one of the few members – out of fear – who does not want Brian (the abused outcast) to join the Geography Club, as she does not want to be disrespected and seen as an outcast. She is also willing to lose her relationship with Min to remain hidden. However, the same cannot be said regarding the film:

Terese: What are those?
 Min: Flyers. At least they will be. We're to make this club a thing, guys.
 Terese: And if I don't wanna be out?
 Min: Well ... then you can join again when you're ready. Sorry, babe. We gotta do this. (Entin 2013)

8. In the novel, Belinda is a heterosexual character in need of a support group and becomes the first nonqueer member of the Geography Club. In the film, Belinda does not exist.

At this point, Terese wants to leave the Geography Club, because she is not ready to be out yet, but as she stands at the door, she takes a deep breath and changes her mind and returns to the rest of the members. Therefore, Hartinger (2004) and Entin (2013) portray Terese as a character who is queer-born and who knows that she is queer.

Ike

Ike is depicted as the third gay character in Hartinger's (2004) *Geography Club*. Ike is a closeted gay character who mentions in the novel that he has attempted to commit suicide as his gender identity became too problematic for him:

It was a long time ago. I was 14. It was so stupid. Someone told me you could kill yourself if you drank dishwashing liquid. It just made me really sick. I had to go to the hospital and everything. But when I drank it, I really wanted to die. I told everyone it was because my Science Fair project hadn't won a ribbon, and my parents actually believed me. But the truth was, I was just tired of trying so hard to not be gay. (Hartinger 2004:41–42)

He mentions to the Geography Club members that he is seeing a therapist, but the reader does not exactly learn of the events that lead to him wanting to take his own life. Besides the Goodkind High School heteronormative environment, Ike has experienced some form of pressure for being different, be it at home, possibly in a place of worship or in another public setting. However, Entin (2013) portrays Ike differently. In the film, Ike indirectly and confusingly identifies as bisexual, but the viewer basically knows from the get-go – just like Min and Terese – that Ike is flamboyantly gay:

Ike: I mean, I did tell her [*Samantha*] that I was 80–20, but she didn't mind.
 Min: 80–20?
 Ike: 80% straight, 20% gay.
 [...]
 Ike: For real. I already get messed with and I'm 70% straight.
 [...]
 Ike: For real, there's no acceptance for a 50–50 guy in this school.
 [...]
 Ike: Aww, you guys are gonna make this gay boy cry. This 100% gay boy.
 Min: We know, Ike.
 Terese: Yeah, no shocker there. (Entin 2013)

Entin (2013) portrays Ike as a character who is confused about his gender identity, and that, to some extent, he is rejecting being gay. Nevertheless, at the end of the film, as the Gay–Straight Alliance is founded, Ike accepts and celebrates being gay.⁹

9. Additionally, Ike is played by the actor Alex Newell, who identifies as gender nonconforming in the real world. In the series *Glee*, they also portray a transsexual character – though they need to dress in masculine clothes when at school, they dress in feminine clothes when rehearsing and performing at the Glee Club (Dawson 2021). Though this article does not include transsexual or transgender individuals,

As Goodkind High School is unaware of Ike's gender identity, he also forms part of the novel's Borderlands of Respectability. He is single and does not partake in any sports (like Russel). Ike also has a higher level of maturity (when compared to Terese and Kevin). Together with Min, he does not find the stunt that was pulled on Brian comical in any way. Still, he too is afraid to allow Brian to join their support group, but after the abusive cafeteria scene, he changes his vote to allow Brian to join the Geography Club. He never once disrespects Brian, but Brian acts as an example of what could possibly happen to him should he be deported from the Borderlands of Respectability to Outcast Island.

Additionally, Hartinger's (2014) portrayal of Ike coincides with the effeminate nelly stereotype. Goodkind High School considers him to be another unpopular but respected straight individual who does not have a girlfriend and does not play any sports (unlike Russel, who became popular, played baseball and did go on double dates with girls). Hartinger (2014) and Entin (2013) also portray Ike as a character who is queer-born, who knows that he is queer, and a character who grows in maturity as he is another pioneer of the Gay-Straight-Bisexual Alliance at Goodkind High School.

Samantha

As mentioned before, Samantha is only a secondary character introduced in the film by Ike; the viewer never sees her. Ike narrates to Min, Terese and Russel in the Geography Club how he met her:

Ike: Listen to this. So, after weeks of talking to this boy online, we finally met up. Hmm. So then I think: let's see how far I can take this. Then I'm all, I'm gonna put my hands down his pants and see what happens. And he's all, 'Surprise!' [...] Try no package. He was totally a 'she'. You see, this girl. Her name's Samantha. She's a les. When she told her parents, they kicked her out. She came back a day later and told them that she was just confused and to prove it to them, she'd go out and promised to find a boyfriend. I know. Tragic, right? She said she didn't want a straight dude ... said she felt safer with a gay guy instead. [...] We went and got coffee. Talked for hours. Bitch is fierce. So I'm gonna be her fake boyfriend until she figures the situation out. (Entin 2013)

Accordingly, Samantha needs to act straight in her heteronormative society to avoid being rejected by her parents for being a lesbian. Furthermore, the viewer becomes aware that she is willing to lie and have a fake boyfriend until she is more certain about how to deal with her situation: it is implied that she is still a student; thus, she does not necessarily have any place or resources to go and live until she is old enough or educated to make a living. Samantha also fears having a heterosexual boyfriend, as the individual in question

(footnote 9 continue...)

a connection can still be made to Ike's flamboyant character. When one compares Russel, Kevin and Ike as gay characters with one another, it becomes clear that Russel and Kevin are not flamboyant but more masculine. Ike's flamboyancy can result from connections to be made regarding transsexual or transgender individuals. The assumption can be made that Entin (2013) portrays Ike as a character who is still confused about his gender identity, and that Ike, because he is flamboyant, is actually transgender.

might want to be sexually active with her. In contrast, she does not want to be intimate with the opposite sex.

Glenn and Eddie

Glenn, Kevin's gay uncle, and his boyfriend, Eddie, are also introduced by Kevin's smiling father, Scott, as secondary gay characters who the viewer does not meet; they also do not exist in Hartinger's (2004) novel:

Scott: Hey, maybe you [Russel] should come to church with us this weekend. Meet the whole family.

Kevin: Uh, what do you mean 'the whole family'?

Scott: Your uncle Glenn's comin' to town. [...] He's introducing us to his new boyfriend, Eddie. Your uncle says ... he may be the one. Says he's pretty sure of it, actually. (Entin 2013)

The viewer becomes aware of Scott's openness towards gender identities, considering that either his own brother or his brother-in-law is openly gay. It is further implied that Glenn has had other relationships before and that Eddie is most probably the final one with whom he wants to live his life. Moreover, Entin (2013) creates the allusion that Kevin's parents might be aware, to some extent, that Kevin's gender identity is not straight and that – subconsciously – they want to inform him that they will not reject his gender identity but celebrate him as an openly gay individual.

Brian

Brian Bund, who is actually straight, is assumed to be a gay character – in a heteronormative setting – in Hartinger's (2004) *Geography Club*. Regarding the film (Entin 2013), the school does not believe Brian to be gay but still abuses him for being an outsider.

In the novel, the students of Goodkind High School mistakenly believe Brian to be the 'gay' student who went to Ms Toles – the health teacher – to materialise a queer support group at the school. Coincidentally, Brian is not the student, and the unknown student is also not one of the Geography Club members. Hence, the reader becomes aware that there is yet another queer student – or students (besides Russel, Kevin, Min, Terese and Ike) – at Goodkind High School in need of support. It has been mentioned a few times now that all the members of the Geography Club, one time or another, feared being alone and lonely for being queer. Still, Brian actually is alone and lonely for being an outcast, and he has to deal with the prejudice and abuse in his own way as there is no support at the school – 'You can't c-c-care what people think. You'll go c-c-crazy. You've g-got to save your energy for when people really d-d-d-do stuff' (Hartinger 2004:198). Brian is considered to be gay for being and looking different: he stutters and has a skin problem – factors that are irrelevant to his gender identity – "No," he said. "I thought I was for about a w-w-week once. But now I know I'm not [gay]" (Hartinger 2004:197). Brian is even more disrespected – specifically by the jocks – once the students believe him to be

the 'gay kid' who approached Ms Toles to establish a Gay–Straight Alliance support group. In the film, Brian is not abused for wrongly identified as gay, but for being different:

- Brian: Sit down. I'd love the company.
 Russel: Thanks.
 [...]

 Brian: Hey, it gets better. Believe me, after a whilst you just move on.
 Russel: Why are you being nice to me?
 Brian: I guess I know what's it's like to walk around scared. [...] Just because people don't understand me doesn't mean I don't understand them. (Entin 2013)

At the beginning of the novel, Russel makes it clear that Brian is the only inhabitant of Outcast Island at Goodkind High School ('Brian Bund was the unquestioned outcast of the school'; Hartinger 2004:8), making Russel (and most probably Min, Ike, Belinda and Gunner,¹⁰ after the initiation of the Gay–Straight–Bisexual Alliance) additional occupants. He is neglected, abused and disrespected emotionally, physically and verbally in various scenes in the novel (a few cafeteria scenes, a classroom scene and a hallway scene). Hartinger (2004) and Entin (2013) use Brian as a character to depict what it must be like to endure a school environment that is abusive and heteronormative towards queer individuals. However, he acts as a character who has hope and is determined to pass the school year. The reader also learns that Brian is a forgiving, accepting, selfless and brave character when he does not reject Russel but supports him when the school rejects him – "That you're g-g-g-gay?" he said, and when I nodded, he said, "That would make me some k-k-k-kind of hypoc-c-crite, wouldn't it?" (Hartinger 2004:197). Brian clarifies to Russel that he (Brian) would have been considered a hypocrite if he were to reject Russel for being 'different'. He therefore forgives Russel for his single moment of applied abuse (probably knowing that Russel only acted the way he did because of fellow jocks who were part of the audience), together with being willing to take on even more abuse for Russel's sake by 'making' Goodkind High School believe he was the gay individual who approached Ms Toles when, in fact, it was neither him nor Russel. As a result, arguably, Brian has the highest level of maturity compared to the rest of the characters; he also acts as an example of a straight individual (a queer ally) who supports queer individuals.

Finally, Brian (like Ike) is depicted as an effeminate nelly¹¹ stereotype. He is extremely unpopular (for no valid reason), does not have a girlfriend (or other friends for that matter) and does not play any sports. Even though Brian's gender identity is heterosexual, Hartinger depicts him as a wrongly outed character. Consequently, all the abuse Brian had to endure causes him to become a pioneer of Goodkind High

10. In both the novel and the film, Gunner is Russel's best friend.

11. The Oxford English Dictionary (2022d) defines 'nelly' as a derogatory, colloquial term that refers to an effeminate or homosexual man who is a silly, ineffectual, fussy or sissy person.

School's Gay–Straight–Bisexual Alliance. In conclusion, although it may only be guessed whether Goodkind High School institutes to treat Brian with more respect, at least he is not lonely and alone anymore, because he now has friends and is part of a support group. The reader or viewer can only hope that the Gay–Straight–Bisexual Alliance or the Gay–Straight Alliance will allow for a more positive change at Goodkind High School, where queer is not rejected or barely tolerated but accepted and/or celebrated.

Ms Toles and unidentified queer individuals

The viewer of Entin's *Geography Club* (2013) is introduced to a Gay–Straight Alliance that may allow for more positive change to occur at Goodkind High School, where queer individuals are accepted and celebrated. Ms Toles, for example, represents an ally for queer individuals:

- Min: Ms Toles gave a controversial interview. [...] It talked about her feelings on sex education and how she was for condom machines in the school bathrooms. It also talked about that time she put condoms on cucumbers in class. [...] 'Not one student complained to me about my condom exercises,' said Ms Toles. 'In fact, three students came up to thank me.' [...] 'As a health educator, it's my job to teach all the students,' Toles said. According to Toles, that even includes gay students. 'There are gay and lesbian students at every high school in town, including ours. Just last week I talked to one of them about a support group for gay teens. The world is changing every day and I think it's a phenomenal idea,' Toles stated. When the school board found out that she'd given this interview, Ms Toles was... suspended. Now I'm guessing that none of you [Russel, Terese, and Ike] would have gone up to Ms Toles and suggested a gay support group. Guys, there are others like us at this school and they're looking for a place to go.

Briefly, it becomes clear to the viewer that Ms Toles has an open mindset regarding diversity (i.e. gender identities). She is assumed to be a straight character, as Entin (2013) does not explicitly state her gender identity, but she is not limited to traditional norms. Therefore, she becomes the sponsor of Goodkind's Gay–Straight Alliance. Moreover, in her interview, she clarifies that she is aware of more than one queer individual in their town and that support groups are needed for these individuals.

Conclusion

This article gave a brief overview of the problem statement, rationale and research questions. Afterwards, 'young adult fiction', 'queer' and 'queer identities' were defined, queer characters and hermeneutics were explained, a brief synopsis of the novel was provided and the depiction of the fictional queer characters regarding Hartinger's (2004) queer literary text *Geography Club* and its 2013 film adaptation was discussed.

It was explained that young adult fiction exposes teenagers, adolescents and adults to fictional teenagers who deal with

21st-century issues or challenges to which they can relate in the real world. Young adult fiction has an educational impulse (i.e. social activism, critical reflection, questioning power relations, etc.) aimed at emerging readers regarding change, growing up and finding oneself. Literature allows individuals to think about complex ideas and relate these to relevant events in their lives, which ultimately impacts the formulation of their self-identity.

A definition was provided wherein a positive and negative point of view for queer was given. Some individuals regard the term as offensive, disparaging or rejective. In contrast, as was also the case for this article, others see it as an umbrella term inclusive of all gender identities that are different from heterosexual or cisgender identities.

It was also elaborated that gender is not a locus of agency or a stable identity from which various acts proceed. Still, it is rather an identity that is tenuously constituted through a stylised repetition of acts through time. Therefore, queer theory critically examines how power works to legitimate and institutionalise certain expressions and forms of gender and sexuality whilst stigmatising others. Queer theory destabilises gender and sexual identities, encouraging and allowing unfettered and multiple interpretations of cultural phenomena.

Furthermore, it was determined that there are four types of queer characters: a character who is outed or comes out as queer, who is influenced by the environment or is born queer, who experiments to determine their own gender identity and who is included in the heteronormative worlds of nonqueer texts (or vice versa). Accordingly, there are six prominent queer characters in Hartinger's (2004) and Entin's (2013) *Geography Club*: Russel (gay), Kevin (gay), Min (bisexual in the novel; lesbian in the film), Terese (lesbian), Ike (gay in the novel; a confused bisexual who is actually gay but possibly transgender in the film); Samantha (straight-acting, but secretly a lesbian), Glenn and Eddie (gay), Ms Toles (queer ally) and Brian (assumed to be gay in the novel but not in the film; queer ally). Many characters – excluding Brian and Ms Toles – are queer-born. Russel, however, is also outed as queer. Furthermore, the gender identities of Russel, Min and Ike are known at the end of the novel; Kevin and Terese remain secretive. Concerning the film, Terese's gender identity becomes known. Additionally, Brian is believed to be a gay individual whose type of character is both queer-born and outed as queer. At the same time, he is actually a straight character included in a queer context. He, together with Ms Toles, is considered a queer ally.

In conclusion, literature is prominent when addressing social problems experienced by individuals. As was specifically addressed in this article, character is an important literary element that contributes to literature being understood and appreciated. The main findings of the analysis were that the depiction of fictional queer characters may be used as a queer literary element to reveal and inform a queer and

nonqueer target audience of an identified queer social issue (i.e. prejudice and abuse). The underlying aim of this article was to demonstrate that it is important to analyse an author's depiction of their characters that can contribute to an implied message to be delivered and the possible change of ingrained perceptions. A recommendation that stems from this article for future studies is to explore the theme of prejudice and abuse (in the novel in question) in depth whilst also identifying and analysing the social messages that manifest throughout.

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