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**Simon Spier's Process to Sexual Identity Formation: Guilt
in Becky Albertalli's *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda***

Treball de Fi de Grau/ BA dissertation

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ABSTRACT:

Becky Albertalli's novel *Simon vs. The Homo Sapiens Agenda* (2015) has been one of the most acclaimed publications of current LGBTQI+-themed YA, a success shared by its film adaptation *Love, Simon* (Berlanti, 2018). The portrayal of Simon Spier's coming out experience has elicited a very positive response from readers. However, due to the lack of academic analysis of both novel and film, a central aspect that has been disregarded is the element of guilt. Therefore, in this dissertation I aim to shed light into the covert component that shapes not only the main plot, but also Simon's journey of self-discovery. Moreover, by considering academic studies of other YA fiction, I will offer a study of the portrayal of the teenager gay experience, in hopes of asserting the relevance of a work like Albertalli's in the young adult LGBTQI+ audience. I argue that, although Simon's loss of agency leads to the supremacy of heteronormative characters and, thus, proves that guilt is used as the main tension element in the plot, it would not be possible nor realistic to portray a coming of age story that neglected the internalised guilt of the gay character. Furthermore, I also conclude that Albertalli's proposal depicts a rather truthful yet hopeful experience of the teenager's coming out process through Spier's story.

Keywords: *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda*, Becky Albertalli, *Love, Simon*, Greg Berlanti, homosexuality, YA literature, queer literature, guilt, LGBTQI+ visibility

0. Introduction

The rising popularity of young adult (YA) fiction has opened a new window of opportunity for the representation of minority groups, thus giving visibility to those who have been long regarded as *the other*. Thanks to the popularity of these new works, many teenagers have been able to find a referent in characters similar to them, allowing them to feel identified with their struggles and coming to terms with their own identities. One of the groups that has greatly benefitted from this phenomenon is the LGBTQI+ community.

John Donovan's *I'll Get There: It Better Be Worth the Trip* (1969) has been considered the first YA queer novel ever to be published, as it openly dealt with homosexual characters in a portrayal of their struggles with sexual identity. However, queer literature has since seen a tremendous evolution, both in the plot and the depiction of their characters. As Cart and Jenkins point out, the first openly homosexual characters in YA literature did not have a prominent role within the plot and, in the case that they were awarded a protagonist role, they tended to encounter tragic fates. With the evolution of the genre, queer characters started to be presented as protagonists who took active part in complex plots. In order to lay out the advances, Cart and Jenkins provide a classification of some of the main works in queer YA. Firstly, books published between the 1970s and the 1980s are considered "stories of homosexual visibility", as they depict gay and lesbian characters who either decide to, or have to, come out to their close circle of friends and family. Secondly, they propose the existence of "gay assimilation" novels, in which a "melting pot of sexual identities" is presented, portraying characters who "just happen to be gay". Finally, in recent years, the tendency has been to produce texts that contain "queer consciousness", showing LGBTQI+ characters in their family context. (2006: xx).

Based on these distinctions, Clark and Blackburn suggest a further differentiation of works under the queer YA category. Attending to the study conducted, they concluded that a distinction should be made between “LGBT-inclusive” and “queer” narratives, as the discourses used in either category are rather dissimilar, not only in their representation of the LGBTQI+ community, but also in their objectives and outcome. Therefore, the authors regard as ‘queer’ those works that use polyphony as the basis of a speech that challenges sexual identity beyond the binary system. On the contrary, they argue that ‘LGBT-themed’ projects fail at conveying a multivoiced message and, therefore, contribute to the perpetuation of heteronormativity (2011: 12).

Published in 2015, Becki Albertalli’s *Simon vs. The Homo Sapiens Agenda* falls into Cart and Jenkins’ queer consciousness category, as it depicts the day-to-day life of seventeen-year-old Simon Spier, a closeted teenager who is forced to deal with the experience of coming out to his friends and family while trying to pursue his own love story. In this romantic comedy, Simon Spier presents what appears to be a rather satisfactory life surrounded by open-minded friends and family. He attends Creekwood High in Atlanta, Georgia, where he shares a group of close friends, Leah and Nick, whom he has known since childhood, and Abby, a new student. In this context, the protagonist (under the nickname Jacques) navigates his own sexuality through the emails he shares with Blue, a mysterious student whom he met through a Tumblr post. However, the tension does not reside only in the mystery of Blue’s real identity, but rather on a classmate’s threat. Martin Addison learns about his correspondence with Blue by accident and decides to hold those against him in order to become closer with Abby, Simon’s friend. Eventually, after the protagonist decides to follow Martin’s requests in fear of being discovered and deceiving Blue, who is also afraid of revealing his sexual identity (even to Simon himself), Simon’s friends discover the truth and confront him about

having consciously withheld Abby from Nick for his own interest. Nevertheless, peace is restored once he discovers Blue's identity, who finally overcomes his anxiety and publicly declares his feelings for Simon.

Ever since its publishing date, the novel has seen great acceptance from the young public, especially among the LGBTQI+ community. It is due to the positive response of the teenage public that Albertalli (1982, Atlanta) has received awards such as the Best Read's award for Young Adult fiction, which she was given after being recognised by the American Library Association. Moreover, because of the demands of readers, Twentieth Century Fox relied on Greg Berlanti to adapt Simon's story into a cinematic piece, which made its debut in July 2018, starring Nick Robinson.

Although no academic studies have been published specifically regarding Albertalli's work, her novel has been used by critics as a positive example of current LGBTQI+-themed YA. Nevertheless, through my personal analysis of the work, I aim to focus on a central element that critics have failed to acknowledge. The author uses a manifest sense of guilt as a mark of Simon's self-discovery process, which is defined by the supremacy of heteronormativity and lack of agency. In order to bring light into the question, I have asserted two main sources of guilt. The first one stems from the heteronormative expectations instilled into the gay characters during their formative years, which leads to the mild internalised homophobia held by both Simon and Blue, the main love interest. On the other hand, external guilt results from the central plot, which narrates how classmate Martin Addison blackmails the protagonist by applying his heterosexual supremacy. Moreover, so as to understand the consequences of this element, Albertalli's portrayal of the gay experience has also been studied. Thereby, instances in which the characters express their most profound fears and feelings in regards to their identity construction and exploration have been taken into account, as well as other

factors such as the settings, in order to bring the relevance of the story forward. In this regard, it has been proven that Simon Spier's story constitutes a rather positive model for young teenagers, who can see in the narrator a teenager with struggles that come close to their own.

In short, this dissertation aims to expose the covert element of guilt, while asserting that, even though Albertalli's proposal emphasises the component through a tense plot, it is not possible, in the present time, to construct a realistic queer story that does not explore guilt, as it is part of the experience of most gay teenagers. Furthermore, even though agency of the queer protagonist is lost, the author provides a fair and truthful representation of the gay experience of an American teenager, while shedding hope for future generations.

1. Guilt: External and Internal Influences on Simon

1.1 Internalised Guilt

Simon vs. The Homo Sapiens Agenda follows the journey of young Simon Spier in the discovery and acceptance of his homosexuality. For that, Albertalli places the lead character in a loving and accepting environment. This way, as I understand, the author frames her work in what Cart and Jenkins described as “queer consciousness” in hopes of portraying a normalised vision of the gay experience. In this regard, both critics and readers have shown fairly positive responses to Albertalli’s work.

Referring to the representation of the gay experience, Carman’s review highlights some of the innovative and influential aspects of the film adaptation, while being critical of the blandness of the plot itself. One of the innovations he emphasises is the ability of both Albertalli and Berlanti to “asks what it means to be in the closet in the 2010s, when America’s late adolescents practically live online, posting away” (Carman, 2018: 45). In a more critical spirit, Couch points towards a counterproductive aspect of the story, asserting that “what’s problematic about *Love, Simon*, however, is that for a movie that is supposed to be the definition of inclusive, its criticism of certain identities as well as its careless typification is unnerving.” (Couch, 2018: online) Moreover, she also believes that “although the movie doesn’t strive to be extraordinary, it risks too little. Not only is Simon one of the most boring protagonists to exist (through no fault of Nick Robinson, who plays him very well), but the queerness in the plot is eroded and the result is a heteronormative love story featuring a gay protagonist.” (Couch: online) With such criticism, the scholar suggests the need for commitment with the exploitation of the queer experience, which would add positive value in a story with a young LGBT target audience. Oppositely, Knowles opts for a rather optimistic review of the novel, in which he praises the author for the prominence of the queer characters in a story that he believes

faithfully depicts the process of identity formation. “For young readers unsure of their sexuality and identity, having access to a book like this will be a groundbreaking experience.” (2018: online), Knowles claims. Furthermore, he highlights the importance of the increasing representation of queer character in fiction, an issue that has subsided for decades.

Notwithstanding, despite the acclaimed representation of Simon’s experience as a gay teenager, one aspect that I believe readers and critics have failed to notice is the implied internalised guilt that the queer characters present. Hence, a question arises. Is it possible to elicit a faithful depiction of the experience in which guilt does not play a role? So as to provide a thorough answer, I believe such component should first be understood in Simon’s context.

Firstly, as Norbury suggests, it is interesting to note that the foundation of this internalised guilt is the need to fulfil social expectations, a feeling accentuated in young adults, who need approval from their group of equals in order to feel accomplished (2012: 183). This branch of emotional guilt may lead to a portrayal of internalised homophobia by the queer characters, as “characters are shown to be particularly vulnerable to homophobia during their formative years when their sexuality is in the process of emerging. The characters’ perception that they will not be accepted and will not belong if they disclose their sexual orientation is often shown to be rational and justified” (Norbury, 2012: 187). Although it is true that Simon acknowledges that he lives in a positive environment in which acceptance should not be a concern, some covert elements prove the presence of internalised guilt in the form of self-concealment and his interactions with friends and family.

In first instance, it is relevant to study the correspondence between Simon and Blue, a prolific account of the most private instances of the two young gay men. The use

of said emails becomes, I believe, a therapeutic means of coming to terms with their sexuality and understanding, as Norbury claims, the homophobia that they have been exposed to during their formative years. In one of the first mails, Simon confesses that he had had a girlfriend when he was in middle school. However, he already knew that there was something different with him, yet he was aware of what was expected of him. In turn, this reflects how a young child has received the message of a heteronormative society, instilling in him that it is the appropriate thing to do to have a female partner, even if that leads to him having to hide in the toilet during one of the school parties, a metaphor for what awaited his true identity. Moreover, he then adds that “the real reason I had girlfriends was because I didn’t one hundred percent believe I was gay. Or maybe I didn’t think it was permanent.” (Albertalli:16) With this quote, Albertalli showcases the acceptance of the heteronormative message instilled in him during his formative years.

Another source of internalised guilt is found, paradoxically, in Simon’s coming out process. It is once he has gathered the strength to be open about his sexuality to his friends and family that he starts to worry about the logistics of it. Hence, he feels the need to consider not only their possible response, but also their feelings about the timing and consequences of the event, an experience shared by Blue. In another of the emails, Blue confesses that he feels compelled to have the conversation with his mother before talking to his father, as it might “hurt her feelings” if he did otherwise (Albertalli: 116). A similar thought process takes place in Simon’s story. However, in his case, backlash is added to the emotional guilt. He is aware that Leah and Nick are his best friends, and therefore feels the need to share his perspective with them first. Nevertheless, he eventually decides to talk to Abby before the rest of the group, as he reflects “I don’t have that kind of a history with Abby. But that’s what [makes] it easier” (Albertalli: 284) This causes an immediate negative reaction after he opens up to his two best friends, as Leah’s first

response is to demand an explanation for why she has not been the first person he has talked to. Consequently, this show of insecurity, yet again, turns the attention from Simon, who is taking a step forward and showing bravery, to Leah, the heterosexual character, who unconsciously uses her position to question her friend. Hence, this proves how normativity is instilled not only in the gay characters, but also in the heterosexual ones. Thus, I believe that Albertalli sees this almost comedic scene as an opportunity to denounce such reality.

Finally, one of the clearest indicators of Simon's internalised guilt is the sequence after his father apologises to him for having made potentially offensive comments regarding the LGBTQI+ community. During their open-hearted conversation, Simon feels the need to follow his father's apology, claiming the he "[is] sorry [he] didn't turn out to be much of a boy" (Albertalli: 250) On one hand, Simon's intervention shows an implicit vision of gender as binary, which proves Blackburn and Clark's earlier remark on the depiction of gender in 'LGBT-themed' works. Moreover, this conception of gender is taken to its last consequences when the character constructs his sexual identity. Thereby, the already existing heteronormative expectations the queer character has internalised during the formative process are met with a need to fulfil his assumed social role as a 'man', adding further pressure and emphasising the internalised guilt developed by Simon. Notwithstanding that, it is crucial to understand the response of the family, explored in section 2, as I believe it also creates a positive model for readers.

In sum, it is my stance that Albertalli manages to portray the effects of heteronormativity during the formative process of the gay character. Therefore, emotional guilt appears to shape the experience of both young men during the creation of a sexual identity. Hence, I believe *Simon vs. The Homo Sapiens Agenda* accounts for the inevitability of internalised guilt in a teenager's journey to acceptance of one's sexuality.

Moreover, I must add that, despite being a heterosexual writer, Albertalli manages to identify the call for internalised homophobia in a faithful depiction of a teenager's coming out process.

1.2 External Guilt: Heteronormative Pressure on Simon

Although I have asserted emotional guilt as a quintessential element in homosexual narratives, I believe *Simon vs. The Homo Sapiens Agenda* presents a secondary source of guilt, one that comes from the tension created by Martin and Simon's storyline. It is after the former discovers Simon and Blue's emails that he decides to blackmail Simon in order to get closer to Abby, his best friend. Therefore, the teenager is faced by a moral debate. Eventually, letting his anxiety take control, he decides to follow Martin's demands and create situations for his classmate to approach Abby. His plan, however, results in his friend discovering the truth and, after being rejected, Martin publicly exposing Simon's sexuality on the school's Tumblr page. Hence, I read this as not only a show of homophobia, but also a display of power and agency on the part of the bully. Notwithstanding that, I also point towards a clear influence of emotional guilt, which leads to Simon's fear of being discovered and, by extension, to him following Martin's demands despite being aware that he could harm his friends.

In this regard, Norbury suggests that "the apparent objective of the novels is to create reader empathy for and acceptance of the YA protagonists concerned, and to reinforce the need for social support, particularly from parents and peers, by showing how it makes such a crucial difference in the individual experience of the teen lesbian and gay character" (2012: 185) According to her view, which I support, precisely the centrality of guilt within the plot emphasizes the message conveyed by the author, in hopes of eliciting the sympathy of the reader. Contrarily, Blackburn and Clark claim that "LGBT-inclusive

discourses [as opposed to queer discourses¹] often reinforce heteronormativity and binary constructions of sex and gender” (2015: 12) Therefore, the fact that Addison decides to use his position of privilege to extort Simon proves the former’s perspective of the protagonist as *the other*, who becomes a victim by the sole event of being differentiated from the rest of the characters. However, in order to find middle ground between both perspectives, I propose an exploration of the formal assets of the novel, which can lead to conclusions about the covert component of guilt.

Firstly, a clear indicator of Simon’s loss of agency is the narration style. In *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda*, the diegesis is directed by a narrator in the first person. According to Gerard Genette’s theory – exposed in *Figures II* (1969) and *Figures III* (1989) – Simon would be constructed as an intradiegetic narrator, as he is interpellating the reader in his narration of the first level of diegesis² in first person (1980: 228-229). However, it is due to the agency awarded to the heterosexual characters that the role of the narrator, usually related to the protagonist, is subverted. A clear example of this loss of instrumentality is the episode in which Simon speaks openly about Martin’s blackmail with his best friend Abby for the first time. After discovering that she has been set up with Martin, despite her friend knowing her interest in Nick, her response is to blame Simon for it. Although it is true that Simon’s actions were not correct, I believe Abby does not fully empathise with her friend and lets her own emotions overtake her response, undermining the difficult position Simon was in. Hence, in a sequence that should serve as the moment when *pathos* overpowers the scene and *anagnorisis*³ is achieved, the event leads to a monologue in which Abby only further blames Simon for not considering her

¹ Vid p.2

² Genette defines the different levels of diegesis by claiming that “any event a narrative recounts is at a diegetic level immediately higher than the level at which the narrating act producing this narrative is placed.” (1980: 228)

³ In *The Poetics*, Aristotle defines *pathos* as the emotional load elicited from the reader in a *fibulae*, while *anagnorisis* refers to the moment of recognition of a character with an external element which is revealed.

feelings. “‘It’s just, you know. I get that you were in a difficult position. But you don’t get to make the decisions about my love life. I choose who I date’ She shrugs. ‘I would think you would understand that’” (Albertalli: 253). Moreover, the film adaptation banks on a scene in which Simon’s close group of friends confronts him about the events that have resulted from Addison’s threat:

Nick: Hey, Simon, we need to talk. So, Abby and I hung out on New Year's Eve, and... you see, now we're together.

Abby: Why did you tell Nick that I have a boyfriend in college named Jonathan?

Nick: Why'd you make that up?

Simon: Look, Martin... he was the one who wrote that CreekSecrets post about me. He screenshotted my emails and he's been using them to blackmail me for months.

Nick: What does that have to do with us, Simon?

Simon: He told me that if I didn't help him get with Abby, he'd out me. And I... That's why I had to keep you guys apart.

Nick: So, you made up a bunch of lies. And that's why you convinced me to go on that date with Leah? You know, to keep me away from Abby?

Abby: So, wait. Running lines at Waffle House and beer pong at Bram's, all of that was just to pawn me off on Martin? I'm not a piece of meat, Simon. You know how hard it was for me to start over. I trusted you. (sighs) (Berlanti, 2018)

Similarly to the novel’s episode, instead of allowing the protagonist to elaborate on his experience, the rest of the characters silence him with their argument, ignoring, yet again, what could be an opportunity for *anagnorisis* and connection with the queer viewer. Therefore, it becomes clear that the status of protagonist is passed on to the secondary characters, who take up Simon’s agency and put their own interest before the mental stability of a young gay man in search of acceptance. Hence, what appears to be a diegesis with an *autodiegetic narrator*, results in a case closer to a *witness narrator*⁴, who simply recounts a love story marked by heteronormativity. Furthermore, Simon opens his diegesis by making a rather metaliterary remark, claiming that “‘It’s strange, because in reality, I’m not the leading guy. Maybe I’m the best friend” (Albertalli: 19). What seems to be a show of vulnerability of a narrator who opens up to the readers, ends

⁴ Genette describes an *autodiegetic* narrator as one who tells his own experience in the first person. A clear example of this would be an autobiography. On the other hand, a *witness* narrator is one who uses the first person to narrate a first degree of diegesis in which the action is external to the character. (1980; 245)

up being a foreshadowing of the story, as Simon is inevitably robbed of his agency not only by Martin, but also by his best friends, who take the side of the bully and blame Simon. This way, it is evident that, as he foretells, Simon becomes the best friend rather than the protagonist one would assume him to be. Nevertheless, it is to be noted that Abby, Nick and Leah have also fallen victims of Martin's blackmail and, therefore, I believe their positions are justified to an extent. However, in my view, Albertalli misses an opportunity to show alliance of both heterosexual and homosexual characters earlier in the novel, rather than making shorter mention of it by the end of the narration, when Simon's friends recognise their mistake. On the other end, I believe Berlanti does manage to show said alliance in a more clear manner, in a scene where Abby, Nick, Leah and the rest of his classmates cheer him on while he is waiting for Blue on the Ferris wheel.

Finally, as regards the formal aspects of a narration, there is a key concept in literary theory that accounts for a successful display of the events, Aristotle's *catharsis*. According to the classic, "[tragedy], however, is an imitation not only of a complete action, but also of incidents arousing pity and fear. Such incidents have the very greatest effect on the mind when they occur unexpectedly and at the same time in consequence of one another" (1962: 60) Following the previous example, it is true that a connection is created between Simon and the reader, thus, the character is able to transmit the feelings of pity that Aristotle mentions. However, the position of power acquired by the secondary characters results in a possible undermining of Simon's pity, thus leading to a cathartic effect created not by the protagonist and gay character, but by the heterosexual ones, whom the reader may feel more inclined towards. All in all, it is clear that Martin Addison's play on homonormativity is key in the development of guilt. Through the tension in the plot not only do Abby, Leah and Nick fall victims of the bully's threat, but Simon finds himself in a situation where his agency is eroded.

2. Limits in the Representation of the Gay Experience

One of the main reasons for the popularity of *Simon vs. The Homo Sapiens Agenda* is its honest approach to what it means to be a gay teen in a time when social media and technology are changing the way youngsters communicate. It is precisely the optimistic and hopeful representation of the coming out process that has given Albertalli's novel its success. Moreover, I believe what makes the story relatable to LGBTQ+ teens is the raw and realistic perception that Simon conveys through the vulnerability of his narration. However, I have come to the realisation that an analysis of the representation of the gay experience can account for other issues that shape the reality of many gay teenagers in America.

In the light of this, it is important to note the settings of the story, which takes place, as asserted previously, in a deeply religious community. Even though Simon's family does not identify with the Christian faith, some elements have clearly transcended from American society, one of the most relevant being the covert puritanism that impregnates the story and influences Simon's coming out. This disguised puritanism becomes distinctly noticeable when Simon uses unquestionably moral terms to differentiate two types of people:

Because there's an invisible line, and on one side are people like Garrett and Abby and Nick and every musician ever. People who go to parties and drink and don't get wasted off on one beer. People who have had sex and don't think it's a huge deal. On the other side of the line are people like Leah and me. But one thing that makes it weirdly better is knowing that Blue is one of us. I'm reading a little between the lines here, but I actually don't think Blue has ever kissed anyone. (48)

In this example, the narrator uses concepts of *right* and *wrong* to dissert those who are morally superior and, therefore, have not had any sexual encounters nor abused alcohol from those who have approached sin through sex and soft drugs at the age of seventeen. Moreover, the fact that he feels relieved assuming that Blue, his love interest,

does not fall into the second category, proves his internalised puritanism, as he does not initially conceive a relationship with an *immoral* person.

More insight into this element can be seen in Simon and Blue's correspondence, in which both boys appear to be taken aback by the mere thought of sexual tension. For instance, Simon proves the effect that a negligent sex education can have in his own perception of sex and sexuality. "And I'm guessing they [Reese's⁵] are better than hetero sex, a.k.a. "intercourse" (per my mom). Non-hetero sex, though? I imagine it may be a little better than Reese's. Is it weird that I can't talk about this without blushing?" (Albertalli: 62) Firstly, the fact that he conceives heterosexual and homosexual encounters as separate shows that Simon's interpretation of sex is directly linked to heterosexual penetration, a common misconception deriving from a reductionist idea of sexuality. Furthermore, he points out that he is blushing while mentioning the sole idea of sex, indicating the naivety with which he approaches the matter. Notwithstanding that, it is also interesting to note that, for the first time, there is an implied interest in the exploration of homoerotic sexuality on the part of Simon, which will be followed by Blue in later emails. This event proves a first step towards Simon's acceptance of his own sexuality as he starts to overcome internalised guilt. Moreover, it is from this moment onwards that both characters seem to enjoy exploring sexual desire together. This, based on readers' comments⁶, accounts for a fair representation of the process of self-acceptance in sexual identity creation. The curiosity regarding sex is perfectly exposed in the instance when, after Simon (as Jacques) mentions sex, Blue answers "I also like to imagine you

⁵ Reese's are a popular chocolate snack in America. In this context, Blue and Simon start talking about Halloween candy in earlier emails, which entails Reese's (and Oreos, another popular snack) as a token for their relationship.

⁶ Adam Silvera writes on GoodReads: "If Becky wasn't a gay teenage boy with good grammar and a foul mouth in several past lives, then she's absolutely one of the most observant writers in the YA game" (2013: online. Comment published on Dec 20, 3013; https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/19547856-simon-vs-the-homo-sapiens-agenda?ac=1&from_search=true)

now fantasizing about sex. I can't believe I just wrote that." (Albertalli: 79). Not only is Blue admitting that he has started to fantasize about Simon, but by saying that this is something he would not have expected to write, he is also pointing towards a slow process of acceptance of sexuality⁷. Furthermore, Simon then claims "I'm jittery and awake and completely in knots, all from an email. And I'm hard. So, that's kind of strange." (Albertalli: 80). Once again, although he does not feel completely comfortable with his body's response to sexual arousal, Simon has taken a step forward in acknowledging "I'm hard", a response he does not blame himself for. Thereby, it is my stance that Albertalli, as a heterosexual writer, has been able to acknowledge the implicit puritanism of Georgia's society and translated it into the experience of two young gay men who make slow, steady progress in the acceptance of their sexual identities. To do so, the characters explore sexual desire and come to terms with those in the intimacy that their emails entail. This way, as they are able to share their experience with another gay man who is in their same position, both Blue and Simon manage to navigate their covert internalised guilt towards a more accepting relationship with their identity and sexual conducts.

The feeling of comfort between the romantic pair, however, is nothing but the result of a stronger connection that is not built solely upon flirtation. On the contrary, it is the mere experience of self-questioning that comes with dealing with one's sexuality that brings the characters together, portraying a sense of comradeship between the two main gay characters. This idea of fellowship is first brought up when Simon reads Blue's post⁸ on the school's Tumblr page. "I guess it was about the loneliness. And it's funny, because I don't really think of myself as lonely. But there was something so familiar about the

⁷ Sexuality here understood as sexual behavior in regards to desire.

⁸ The content of Blue's post is never delivered in Albertalli's novel. However, Berlanti does present an approximation to the original message in *Love, Simon*: "Sometimes I feel like I'm stuck on a Ferris wheel. One minute I'm on top of the world and the next I'm at rock bottom. Over and over, all day long. Because a lot about life is great. But nobody knows I'm gay. – Blue" (Berlanti; 2018)

way Blue described the feeling. It was like he had pulled the ideas from my head.” (Albertalli: 18), claims Simon after coming across the message. After this initial connection, Simon eventually identifies that it is because Blue makes him feel safe that he feels so inclined towards him and opening up to him. On his side, Blue confirms he feels the same way towards Simon, adding “I don’t know, Jacques – there’s something about you that makes me want to open up.” (Albertalli: 61) Moreover, I believe it is only once they admit to being comfortable enough with one another that their conversations acquire a deeper tone, showing an exchange of experiences that reproduce the gay experience. Thereby, it is generalisation that provokes an identification of the queer reader with the gay characters. Similarly, more fellowship is shown once Simon comes back to school after having publicly come out. It is this day that other gay and lesbian characters approach Simon to show endorsement, creating a positive model of a support network.

Notwithstanding that, this same safe space created among Blue and Simon leads to a question of identity. As they express, the emails become a metaphorical room where prejudices are forgotten, and their true identities can flourish. Thus, the conversations acquire a more raw and deeper tone when sharing their personal journeys. By extension, this entails the existence of a false identity that the characters have carried ever since they first questioned their sexualities, which is represented in the faux names they both use when referring to the other. Therefore, it is obvious that only when they are Blue and Jacques can they truly and shamelessly express their deepest feelings, fears and desires. This idea of secrecy is reinforced by some of the events of the plot. For instance, Halloween is regarded by both Simon and Blue as “the perfect opportunity to be someone else for an evening” (Albertalli: 36), to what Blue adds that he “[imagines himself] having this complicated secret identity. Maybe I still do. Maybe that’s the whole point of these

emails” (Albertalli: 36). This way, both characters express the need to, as Spier puts it, “transform” into a different character, one that will, paradoxically, convey the side of their true identity that they cannot share under other circumstances. Following this, Simon reveals his cross-dressing, a habit he felt forced to stop due to the pressure of social norms:

What no one knows, even Blue, is that dressing up used to mean something to me. I don’t know how to explain it or reconcile it, but I haven’t forgotten the feeling of silk against my legs. I always knew I was a boy, and I’ve never wanted to be anything but a boy. But when I was younger, I used to wake up at night in April dreaming of Halloween. I would try my costume on a dozen of times each October, and all through November, I obsessively fantasized about pulling it out of my closet one more time. But I never crossed the line. I don’t know. There’s just something kind of mortifying to me about the intensity of those feelings. [...] I can’t even stomach the idea of cross-dressing now. I don’t even like to think about it too much. A lot of the time, I can’t believe that was me. (Albertalli: 66)

In this quote, Simon exposes himself in a profound and vulnerable manner, in a statement that only further proves the influence of social norms in the process of identity formation of a queer young adult. Moreover, the fact that he directly related cross-dressing with the LGBTQI+ community shows, again, the restricted vision of identity that results from heteronormativity and binary conceptions of gender. On the other hand, it is strictly when he makes the decision to stop using what he considers costumes that his double identity is created. This way, Simon, as many LGBTQI+ people, feels the need to conceal his true identity in favour of a public one that mimics the stereotypes of a heteronormative society. In lieu of this, Simon makes a direct allusion to this confinement of the real identity, wondering “do you ever feel locked into yourself? I’m not sure if I’m making sense here. I guess what I mean is that sometimes it seems like everyone knows who I am except me” (Albertalli: 59). Not only is he speaking directly to the reader, using a universal queer experience in order to elicit an identification of the reader with the

character, but he is also addressing the control of a heteronormative society over those who do not identify with their axioms.

Finally, I couldn't close the section on representation without making special mention to Simon's coming out scene. Particularly, I believe the moment he shares with his parents is especially important, as Albertalli is able to present an example that will serve as a positive role model. Not only this, but I also believe that the scene can work as a conversation-opener for many closeted teenagers, who may use Simon's story as a pretext to share their own stories with their families. In the novel, Simon initially appears to feel faced by his father's homophobic comments during their family tv sessions ("The gay one?"/ 'Daniel's not gay', Nora objects/ 'Kid, he's a one-man Pride Parade. An eternal flame.' [...] 'Dad, stop', says Alice./ And so Dad start singing that song 'Eternal Flame'" (Albertalli; 24)). These slurs, despite his sister's attempt to correct the older man, seem to have an influence in Simon's nerves before coming out: "My whole body tenses. [...] Nothing is worse than the secret humiliation of being insulted by proxy." (Albertalli: 24). Nevertheless, the author uses the situation to present a different side of the story, portraying an evolution on the father's character, who is able to accept his mistake and learn from his children.

'I owe you an apology, kid.'
I look up at him.
'What you said on Friday. About the gay jokes.'
'I was kidding' I say. 'It's fine.'
'No,' my dad says. 'It's not really fine' [...]
'I know I didn't make it easy for you to come out. We're very proud of you. You're pretty brave, kid. (Albertalli: 247)

In this scene, a few days after Simon has openly declared himself gay to his parents, his father approaches him before he leaves for a party and uses the pretence of setting the conditions for his night out to establish a heart-to-heart conversation about his sexuality. In this context, the father assumes his wrongness and apologises to his son. This scene, as I understand, conveys such a powerful message of acceptance and

recognition of one's mistake which could have a rather positive impact on other parents. Thereby, through the eyes of a parent who acknowledges their own fault and is able to show himself vulnerable to his child, others in a similar position may feel inspired to approach their LGBTQI+ children and show support while acknowledging their will to learn about the community.

On the side of Simon's mother, as well as his sisters, support is shown from the opening of the narration, which creates a positive environment for the gay character. In this light, I think her position is to be acknowledged, as she represents another role model for parents reading. In the scene where Simon comes out to his parents, a moment of awkward silence is created, broken by his mother's kind words of encouragement. "Honey. That's... God, that's... thank you for telling us." (Albertalli: 163). The reason her intervention is so powerful, as I understand it, is precisely the lack of the adjective she seems to be looking for. It is because she retracts from qualifying his coming out as *good*, like one would expect, that she is allowing Simon to be the judge and protagonist of his own moment. Hence, rather than showing acceptance through moral terms, she decides to show understanding and thank him for his bravery. This way, she is creating a positive model for heterosexual alliance through non-judgemental language and understanding of the experience. In this regard, she builds her role as an ally by showing interest in Simon's perception, "So, talk me through this.", to which she adds "We're proud of you." (Albertalli: 164). With these lines she is not only praising and comforting Simon for his bravery, but she is also showing interest while acknowledging a possibility for learning from her son. Thereby, once again, she becomes a positive influence for parents who might not know how to approach their own children's coming out.

In sum, I can conclude that *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda* does portray a fair account of the gay experience. It is through their personal experience that the

LGBTQI+ characters convey a universal struggle most queer young adults share and can feel identified with. Moreover, by creating a safe space with Blue, Simon is able to explore the issue of identity. Hence, a sense of comradeship among both gay men is portrayed, which allows for the overcoming of their repressed sexual desires. In regards to the event of coming out, Simon's parents play a crucial role, as they become role models for other parents. Thereby, the encouragement and praise the narrator receives for his bravery, as well as the interest in learning from his experience, could start conversations among parents and their LGBTQI+ children and work towards stronger alliances.

3. Conclusions and Further Research

This dissertation has provided an analysis of Becky Albertalli's *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda* (2015). I have argued that guilt is a core component of the story. Often overlooked by critics, the centrality of Simon's culpability works as reinforcement of heteronormativity in what, on first instance, appears to be an innovative and inclusive narration. The identification of two sources of guilt in Simon Spier's story has propelled a new question into the analysis, in hopes of understanding whether guilt is a natural part of the experience of a young gay man. On one hand, I have identified the relevance and influence of emotional guilt, which leads to a possible case of internalized homophobia and an accentuation of the teenager's need for social acceptance. On the other hand, Martin Addison's blackmail creates the main source of tension in the plot. This way, the heterosexual character imposes his inexperienced view of homosexuality in favour of the fulfilment of his personal desires, at the expense of minimising the struggles of the homosexual narrator. Thus, the character who is assumed to be the protagonist of the story falls into the background, becoming, as he claims, "the best friend".

Another line of study in this dissertation has been the representation of the gay experience. In this light, although infused with an underlying puritanism characteristic of the settings, Simon finds in his love interest — and vice versa — a safe space in which true identity can flourish. Furthermore, this proves the existence of a faux identity, one the queer characters have had to create in order to comply with the heteronormative axioms imposed by society. Notwithstanding that, the outstanding comradery amongst the LGBTQI+ characters provides a positive role model for a support network, in which companionship stems from an understanding and identification of the individuals. Similarly, I highlight the response of Simon's parents during the protagonist's coming

out as another positive model of support and alliance. This way, the father's acknowledgment of his problematic behaviour and interest in learning from Simon's experience displays a relationship built upon mutual influence and support. The mother's behaviour in her encouragement and praise for her son's bravery also constitutes a positive influence of healthy communication and understanding of the gay character. These models can provide opportunities for readers to start conversations with families and for parents to understand the importance of their actions when interacting with their LGBTQI+ children.

Due to the requirements of the format, I have not been able to provide an analysis of other issues displayed in the book, which could present bright opportunities for further research in the field of queer studies. For instance, an analysis of the male characters and the implied view of masculinity, along with a standpoint of gender as binary, could provide a new perspective on the study of guilt in relation to a process of sexual awakening, as it deeply influences the character and his internalised homophobia. Moreover, by studying the relationship between Leah and Abby, new conclusions on the representation in fiction of the influence of patriarchy in female friendship could be drawn. Finally, I believe that the analysis of the centrality of new media and virtual communication could become a rather prolific line of study in a postmodern society that has been deeply influenced by the millennial postulates. It is, besides, interesting to remark the impact of technology in the creation of a virtual identity, especially that of a queer teenager. Moving forward, *Simon vs. The Homo Sapiens Agenda* could present a new tendency in YA to introduce such elements, which present both an opportunity to build stronger bonds among people of the community but also to create situations in which external guilt, in the form of bullying, may be more easily widespread.

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