

Queer Representation in Alice Oseman's *Heartstopper* Series

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ABSTRAKT

Obecné téma této teze se točilo kolem reprezentace queer komunity, konkrétně v knižní sérii *Heartstopper* od Alice Oseman. Reprezentace queer lidí se v průběhu let stala relevantnější, jelikož LGBTQ+ komunita získává svůj hlas a stává se populárnější, zejména mezi mladou generací dospělých. Cílem této práce bylo analyzovat typy, rozsah a přístup k reprezentaci queer komunity v knižní sérii *Heartstopper* od Alice Oseman. Queerness je aktuální téma pro mládež a všechny queer osoby. Práce se zaměřuje na queerness reprezentovanou Alice Oseman, jako autorkou literatury pro mladé dospělé, která se také nachází v LGBTQ+ spektru, což sérii v konečném důsledku dělá autentičtější. Pro účely práce jsem shromáždila související materiály k tématu a prostudovala odbornou literaturu, která byla nakonec použita k analýze primárních zdrojů. Teze dospěla k závěru, že Oseman reprezentuje queerness v *Heartstopper* autenticky a pozitivně, a to na základě důkladné analýzy, která ukázala rozmanité zastoupení různých sexuálních a genderových identit.

Klíčová slova: queer reprezentace, LGBTQ+, queerness, bisexualita, bi erasure, intersekcionalita, binarizace, bifobie, homofobie

ABSTRACT

The general topic of this thesis revolved around queer representation, specifically in Alice Oseman's *Heartstopper* book series. Representation of queer individuals has become more relevant over the years as LGBTQ+ community gains its voice and becomes more popular, particularly among the young adult generation. The aim of this thesis was to analyse types, extent and approach of queer representation in Alice Oseman's *Heartstopper* book series. Queerness is an up-to-date topic for youth and all queer people. The thesis concentrates on queerness represented by Alice Oseman as a Young Adult literature author who is also on the LGBTQ+ spectrum, which makes the series ultimately more authentic. For the purpose of the thesis, I collected related materials to the topic and studied professional literature which was eventually used for the analysis of the primary sources. The thesis concluded that Oseman represents queerness in *Heartstopper* authentically and positively, according to thorough analysis which showed a diverse representation of various sexual and gender identities.

Keywords: queer representation, LGBTQ+, queerness, bisexuality, bierasure, intersectionality, binarization, biphobia, homophobia

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INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, queerness is one of the main topics in society and its development. It is addressed extensively, and in some cases, fought for. As LGBTQ+ individuals are getting more rights like heterosexuals, they are also mentioned in media lot more often than in the past century. Regarding media, especially literature, authors of Young Adult literature challenge topics in their work such as sexual identity, coming out or queer acceptance. It is not such a long time ago when these topics were still a taboo, and not only in media. The queer awareness has become more visible than ever and is represented much more today. In recent years, the literature world gained many new and young writers whose goal is to write books with almost only LGBTQ+ characters to spread the queer representation and make queer people feel more included in media, thus represented. It is crucial for youth to acknowledge the existence of queer people as many of them might be going through something similar like the queer characters. Queer representation in Young Adult literature plays a big role in terms of self-acceptance and identity-wise issues. Writing about something that is relatable due to reader's personal experiences is one of the approaches an author can choose to speak to the audience. One of the Young Adult authors, named Alice Oseman, addresses whole spectrum of sexualities in her work. She identifies on the spectrum herself and puts queer characters in many of her books. From asexual representation to transgender one, and she addresses societal issues such as homophobia, bierasure, transphobia, binarization or aromanticism. One of her biggest works is called *Heartstopper* in which she decides to centre the story around LGBTQ+ characters and their obstacles connected to their sexuality. The thesis begins with an overview of theoretical concepts, specifically Queer representation or Young Adult literature. The main aim of this thesis is to analyse the queer representation in Oseman's *Heartstopper* book series.

AUTHOR

The author's name of the *Heartstopper* book series is Alice Oseman. She is a British author, illustrator and best known for her young adult novels which delve into topics such as mental health, identity, sexuality and LGBTQ+ representation. To continue with the general facts, she was born in 1994, in the United Kingdom and her career as a novelist has started since early age, when she was 19 years old and her first novel, called *Solitaire*, was published.

This author's writing style is known for its emotional depth and exploration of identity, mental health and sexuality. She specifically includes depression, anxiety, meeting social expectations, cultural background and other challenges in a sensitive and realistic manner. She is skilled in many YA tropes such as platonic relationships and diverse characters.¹

She stresses terms such as sexuality, gender and contributes inclusivity in the young adult literature which reflect diverse sexual orientations and gender identities. Alice Oseman herself is on the aromantic-asexual spectrum which makes all of her work personal in those terms and therefore, she writes about topics and characters that are familiar to her.²

Overall, Alice Oseman has deserved her voice in contemporary young adult genre with her distinctive and unique approach to realistic portrayals of LGBTQ+ characters, mental health, identity and sexuality.

Author's bibliography

Alice Oseman's most well-known novel series, called *Heartstopper*, is about two teenage boys who meet at school and fall in love. It navigates LGBTQ+ representation, friendship, love, mental health, coming out and self-acceptance. This creation has started as an Oseman's webcomic in 2016, it later turned into a graphic novel series and eventually ended up as a popular adaptation on Netflix in 2022. The graphic novels have five original volumes and in addition, there are special editions, *Heartstopper Yearbook* or a *Colouring Book*.³ Additionally, *This Winter* and *Nick and Charlie* are spin-offs in the *Heartstopper* universe.⁴ Ultimately, *Heartstopper* represents a diverse queer spectrum.

¹ Alice Oseman, "YA author Alice Oseman talks about the writing process and life as a professional author," interview by Lydia Suffield, *Hello Giggles*, April 17, 2016. <https://hellogiggles.com/interview-alice-oseman/>

² Carly Tegen-Dye, "Heartstopper Creator Alice Oseman Says Success as a Writer Was 'A Wonderful Surprise' (Exclusive)," *People*, March 17, 2024, <https://people.com/heartstopper-creator-alice-oseman-talks-writing-and-more-exclusive>.

³ Alice Oseman. 2025. "Graphic Novels." <https://aliceoseman.com/heartstopper/graphic-novels/>

⁴ Alice Oseman. 2025. "YA Fiction." <https://aliceoseman.com/ya-fiction/>

Furthermore, *Loveless*' main character experiences aromanticism and asexuality which are one of the rarest representations in YA literature.^{5 6} Georgia Warr, the main character in *Loveless*, deals with transition to university and tries to understand her place on ace spectrum. Moreover, Alice Oseman identifies as asexual and aromantic⁷, too which supports the authenticity and a rare perspective in YA literature.

Solitaire was Alice Oseman's debut novel. This book is about an introverted teenager who struggles with her own mental health. Main character's life changes when she becomes involved with the mysterious *Solitaire*, a group that starts pranks at her school. The novel is noteworthy for its exploration of teenage depression, identity and the complexity of relationships.

Her bibliography further consists of novels such as *I Was Born for This* and *Radio Silence* that are both not quite part of queer representation.

Author's writing style

Oseman's writing style in *Heartstopper* can be characterized by its simplicity and clarity of diction, as she uses the everyday language of adolescents. Her approach ensures that readers will relate to characters' experiences thanks to their authentic voice and conversational tone. When it comes to writing the dialogue itself, Alice Oseman reaches her audience in order to stay up to date with the current language of teen vernacular. For instance, while she was working on the Third Volume, she changed the phrase "love bite" to "hickey"⁸ after consulting it with her fans, which ultimately demonstrates her commitment to authenticity and her openness to her readership.⁹ Moreover, Oseman adds emojis and expressive illustrations to show emotions as well as words that might not be easy to fully capture.

Alice Oseman chooses a first-person narrative in her book *Loveless* to allow readers delve into her protagonist's world deeply which is supported by a pacing which portrays the

⁵ Alice Oseman, "Q&A With Alice Oseman, *Loveless*," interview by Kaley Kiermayr, *We Need Diverse Books*™, February 1, 2022. <https://diversebooks.org/qa-with-alice-oseman-loveless.com>

⁶ "Asexual Representation in Mainstream Speculative Fiction," The Book Smugglers, posted February 28, <https://www.thebooksmugglers.com/2019/02/asexual-representation-in-mainstream-speculative-fiction.html>.

⁷ Alice Oseman, "Heartstopper author Alice Oseman: 'If you don't have sex and romance, you feel like you haven't achieved,'" interview by Lucy Knight, *The Guardian*, November 19, 2022.

⁸ Alice Oseman, *Heartstopper Volume Three* (Hachette Children's Group, 2020, page 739).

⁹ Alice Oseman, "Heartstopper author Alice Oseman: 'If you don't have sex and romance, you feel like you haven't achieved,'" interview by Lucy Knight, *The Guardian*. November 19, 2022. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2022/nov/19/alice-oseman-author-heartstopper-sex-romance-asexuality>

rhythms of adolescence, not only emotional. The pacing involves changes from dialogue to action and reflects the youth which can be turbulent as well as thrilling. Oseman's use of imagery is profound as she often writes about everyday scenarios which brings relatability. For example, in *Heartstopper*, she depicts the ordinary school life and social interactions which gives the audience the sense of authenticity and ensures that reader will feel as he experiences the events first hand.

Heartstopper book series is written in the third-person narrator as the narrative closely follows the main characters – especially Nick and Charlie – which allows readers to discover their inner thoughts and emotions. Oseman avoids any omniscient comments and rather simply shows the emotional states of protagonists to readers. What is not explicitly said, is shown with the visual aspects such as emojis, heart motifs¹⁰ or facial expressions which support the unspoken emotions and psychological alterations. For instance, in the First Volume of *Heartstopper*, there is a visual portrayal of confusion of one of the protagonists about his sexuality. It is a combination of shattered pieces with questions about being gay and his anxious facial expressions.¹¹ Moreover, Oseman chooses a dual narration type of narrative throughout the book series in order to shift between Nick and Charlie's perspectives and depict their personal growth and struggles.

¹⁰ Alice Oseman, *Heartstopper Volume Two* (Hachette Children's Group, 2019), page 413.

¹¹ Alice Oseman, *Heartstopper Volume One* (Hachette Children's Group, 2019) page 191.

THEORETICAL CONCEPTS

Queer representation

Queer representation means a visible portrayal of LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and other) individuals within characters, themes and media which includes literature, film or television.¹²

Specifically talking about literature, there can be queer protagonists, with queer themes such as coming out, visibility, intersectionality or identity¹³, and addressing issues related to the LGBTQ+ community, such as homophobia, coming out or acceptance of the society. Main goals of this phenomenon are to present queer people as the equal individuals as heterosexual people, break down stereotypes, show the wide range of queer experiences, give LGBTQ+ people more space in media or normalize queer relationships and identities as they are. For instance, reading about queer characters helps to normalize the existence of queerness and respect the whole spectrum of sexualities and gender identities. It is also valuable in terms of queer people seeing themselves being represented in media which validates their struggles and experiences as well as encourages them to not hide their gender identity but embrace it.¹⁴

1.1.1 Types of queer representation

Queer Representation in media has diverse and various forms, thus it can have different impacts on the audience, whether we talk about negative representation, positive one or none.

Negative queer representation appears in a way when queer characters are portrayed as antagonists with negative stereotypes which then can have a harmful impact on how queer people are perceived in real life by society. This portrayal can lead to negative biases and prejudices which can eventually escalate to creating uncomfortable environment for queer people's well-being.

¹² Katelyn Thomson, "An Analysis of LGBTQ+ Representation in Television and Film," *Bridges: An Undergraduate Journal of Contemporary Connections* 7, no. 5 (2021), https://scholars.wlu.ca/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1053&context=bridges_contemporary_connections

¹³ Matt Brim, *James Baldwin and the Queer Imagination* (The University of Michigan Press, 2014), page 2-3.

¹⁴ Katelyn Thomson, "An Analysis of LGBTQ+ Representation in Television and Film," *Bridges: An Undergraduate Journal of Contemporary Connections* 7, no. 5 (2021), https://scholars.wlu.ca/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1053&context=bridges_contemporary_connections

One of the negative queer representations is “queerbaiting”. Queerbaiting is just a marketing technique to draw in queer audience in order to increase profit and views. Simply put, queerbaiting refers to a scene in which the character is portrayed as a possible LGBTQ+ individual, without any past evidence in the story.

“No queer representation” signifies the absence of queer characters and queer storylines altogether, meaning it only portrays heterosexual people. Thus, there is no diversity whatsoever. No representation can have a lot of reasons, such as historical censorship in terms of prohibiting the depicting of ‘sexual perversion’ in the Hays Code in the United States or stigmatizing LGBTQ+ community and making it as a taboo topic.¹⁵

Positive queer representation is breaking down stereotypes about LGBTQ+ people and reduces societal stigma in media which leads to promotion of acceptance of queer individuals. Moreover, it positively increases the impact on mental health of queer people after they are positively portrayed in media, according to the research.¹⁶ Positive representation shows authentic characters with authentic experiences and issues of LGBTQ+ community.¹⁷

Young Adult Literature

Young Adult literature is a type of literature which deeply relates to adolescent experiences and challenges that teenagers face in everyday life. It often includes themes of identity, self-discovery and self-acceptance, which later shifts to young adulthood. YA literature provides audiences with similar protagonists and storylines that readers can relate to in terms of their own life journey during adolescence.¹⁸ YA books are mostly written from the perspective of or in the voice of a teenager, also known as from the perspective of the first person singular in literature.

¹⁵ Kevin Leo Yabut Nadal, Ph.D., “Why Representation Matters and Why It’s Still Not Enough,” *Psychology Today*, December 27, 2021, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/psychology-the-people/202112/why-representation-matters-and-why-it-s-still-not-enough>

¹⁶ Scott Dylan, “The Importance of Positive LGBTQ+ Representation in Media and Advertising,” *Inc & Co*, July, 2024, <https://scottdylan.com/blog/pride-month/the-importance-of-positive-lgbtq-representation-in-media-and-advertising/>

¹⁷ Tessa Kaur, “Queer representation in media: the good, the bad, and the ugly,” *Heckin’ Unicorn*, October 14, 2023, https://heckinunicorn.com/blogs/heckin-unicorn-blog/queer-representation-in-media-comprehensive-list-breakdown-lgbt?srsltid=AfmBOoq6uxudy2BZoD9A5CElT_LhNpp5L3G4FSdoTx8Z6UL_raNYmvPW¤cy=CZK

¹⁸ Harrison, Wayne and Bec Ehlers, “What is Young Adult Literature?,” *Oregon State Guide to English Literary Terms*, February 5, 2024, <https://liberalarts.oregonstate.edu/wlf/what-young-adult-literature-definition-and-examples>

Furthermore, what adolescents read is a big influential aspect in this forming age and it can eventually influence their mental health state or their self-perception.¹⁹ Young Adult literature protagonists deal with relatable issues such as navigating friendships, first loves, expectations within society, discovery of their identities and sexualities, which ultimately raise a connection between readers and characters.

The main reason for its popularity is the relatability. YA literature offers readers relatable storylines and characters of what they experience at this stage of life and describe the roller coaster of emotions they live through.²⁰

Coming back to the history of Young Adult literature, there is a dynamic between the terms “young adult” and “literature” which has been changing over the time as culture and society itself. Furthermore, the term “literature” traditionally meant fiction. “Young Adult Literature” was first used in the late 1960s, explained as the “realistic fiction that was set in the real contemporary world”.²¹ It focused on problems and issues of youngsters, aged approximately 12 – 18. Over the past twenty years, this age group has significantly increased regarding number of people between the age 12 and 19 and ultimately, the definition of “young adult” changed to including people from the age of ten to the age of twenty-five.²² Given the fact of these currently expanded terms, the number of books for this audience has increased as well. YA literature has even broadened into picture books, comics and graphic novels.²³

In the 19th century, the urbanization in the United States led to the development of queer subcultures, anti-sodomy laws and ultimately, the repression of LGBTQ+ individuals.²⁴ This fact shows the importance of contemporary YA works such as *Heartstopper*.

Nowadays, the trend of diversity has also reflected to YA genre and their characters. Authors have been including protagonists with aspects such as young people of colour,

¹⁹ Karen Coats, “Young Adult Literature,” in *Handbook of Research on Children’s and Young Adult Literature*, (Illinois State University, 2010).

²⁰ Harrison, Wayne and Bec Ehlers, “What is Young Adult Literature?,” *Oregon State Guide to English Literary Terms*, February 5, 2024, <https://liberalarts.oregonstate.edu/wlf/what-young-adult-literature-definition-and-examples>.

²¹ Harrison, Wayne and Bec Ehlers, “What is Young Adult Literature?,” *Oregon State Guide to English Literary Terms*, February 5, 2024, <https://liberalarts.oregonstate.edu/wlf/what-young-adult-literature-definition-and-examples>.

²² Harrison, Wayne and Bec Ehlers, “What is Young Adult Literature?,” *Oregon State Guide to English Literary Terms*, February 5, 2024, <https://liberalarts.oregonstate.edu/wlf/what-young-adult-literature-definition-and-examples>.

²³ Leigh Goldstein and René Ostberg, “young adult literature,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, February 13, 2025, <https://www.britannica.com/art/young-adult-literature>.

²⁴ Michael Bronski, *A Queer History of the United States* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2011), pages 29 – 53.

LGBTQ+ teenagers, people with disabilities and addressing topics as gender identity, sexuality, racism and more. Nevertheless, this type of book has been also criticised and banned in YA literature.²⁵

To put Alice Oseman in context with YAL, her work is authentic for her portrayals of LGBTQ+ characters. Especially *Heartstopper* and *Loveless* contribute to the diversity of queer characters in Young Adult Literature. *Heartstopper* book series offers the positive depiction of queer relationships and offers contrast to stereotypes in earlier YA literature. She provides a hopeful narrative for queer youth with her positive themes of love, friendships and self-acceptance.

On the other hand, *Loveless* focuses on the underrepresentation of asexual and aromantic identities in YA literature which highlights the diversity of LGBTQ+ spectrum. Alice Oseman's ace personal experience adds to the authenticity in *Loveless* as well.

She contributes to queer YA literature significantly with how she increased visibility to underrepresented queer identities as well as her approach to diversity and inclusivity within the genre. It also encourages the heteronormative framework within society and broader understanding of queerness.

²⁵ Leigh Goldstein and René Ostberg, "young adult literature," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, February 13, 2025, <https://www.britannica.com/art/young-adult-literature>.

CHOSEN BOOKS

This bachelor thesis is about Alice Oseman's most known book series called *Heartstopper* and its queer representation in it. This series of young adult graphic novels was initially published as a webcomic on Tumblr, and it had over 50 millions of views.²⁶ *Heartstopper* is targeted at a young adult audience²⁷ as the characters are teens themselves, the main theme of this series is sexuality, and the essential focus is on homonormativity. Homonormativity can be explained as a normalization of LGBTQ+ identities who seek to have the same position in society as heterosexuals.²⁸

Although this book series introduces a wide range of characters in terms of diverse sexual orientations and ethnicities, Alice Oseman lacks exploring their intersectionality. Meaning she is hyper-focused on one part of what they experience in life as people, instead of linking other parts of their identities to get closer to real life scenarios. Intersectionality explains how complex an identity is and how various forms of oppression shape individual's experiences such as racism, sexism or classism.²⁹ To give an example, *Heartstopper's* characters are people of different races and ethnicities such as Black, Asian or Spanish which are essential identity aspects that are not taken into consideration in this book series. Elle Argent is one of the main characters in *Heartstopper* and moreover, she is a Black transgender girl. Therefore, the book series only focuses on her gender and sexuality, but her racial identity is not integrated throughout the four volumes which ultimately means that Oseman only portrays one of her aspects that shape her as a person. Tara Jones is another main character and additionally, she is a Black lesbian girl and again, Oseman only focuses on her sexual part rather than merge both sexuality and race in order to achieve the intersectionality among the main characters and the overall *Heartstopper* universe. Every character is mainly defined by their sexuality, with limited or no exploration of their race, ethnicity and others.

²⁶ Anna Kobylowska, "Intersectionality of Queer Female Characters in Alice Oseman's Young Adult Series of Graphic Novels *Heartstopper*," *Dziennikstwo. Literatura i Kultura* 6 (2024), 164 – 177: <https://www.journals.polon.uw.edu.pl/index.php/dlk/article/view/1335>

²⁷ Alice Oseman, "Heartstopper author Alice Oseman: 'If you don't have sex and romance, you feel like you haven't achieved,'" interview by Lucy Knight, *The Guardian*. November 19, 2022.

<https://amp.theguardian.com/books/2022/nov/19/alice-oseman-author-heartstopper-sex-romance-asexuality>

²⁸ Jill Hermann-Wilmarth and Caitilin L. Ryan, *Queering chapter books with LGBT characters for young readers: recognizing and complicating representations of homonormativity* (Discourse Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education, 2014).

²⁹ Sinéad Kelleher and Mike Murphy, "Variations in suicidality across multiple social identities in asexual people: An intersectionality analysis," *Journal of Affective Disorders Reports*, no. 2 (2025): 3-4, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2666915325000514>

On the other hand., Oseman has not fully lacks the absence of intersectionality as she puts people of colour as her characters in the book series. However, in an interview with *The Guardian*, she conveyed the vacancy of diversity in her book *Solitaire*. She claims that her white privilege and limited exposure of these topics is the reason why she did not put the necessary perspective sooner. Eventually, Oseman expressed her regret for her former actions and promised to improve the representation as she introduced bisexual protagonist of colour in her next work called *Radio Silence*.³⁰

When it comes to *Heartstopper*, Alice Oseman has stated in an interview with *The Beat* that she had the desire to create a universe with all kinds of LGBTQ+ characters to ensure as wide diversity as possible.³¹

In summary, Alice Oseman has shown progress over the years of her career regarding her earlier reflection and commitments for improvement.

Characters and storylines

Nick and Charlie

The series is separated into four volumes (and recently a fifth one was published) that has been eventually adapted into a hit Netflix show. It follows two main protagonists, Nick and Charlie, who meet in all-boys grammar school in the UK and develop a genuine friendship into a romantic relationship in the end. Charlie is open about his homosexuality from the beginning of the series and a very empathetic and kind character who also struggles with anxiety, depression, anorexia and obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD). Moreover, he fights with low self-esteem due to his past experiences. He has a talent for music and is an academically driven student.

While Nick's character is an athletic, kind-hearted teenager who is in conflict with understanding and accepting his sexuality as he discovers that he is bisexual throughout the main storyline. He is a generally well-liked classmate and very popular in a large social circle. Each book keeps track of an evolvment of deepening their relationship and challenges or joys that come with it.

As mentioned above, these protagonists meet when Charlie is in his first year of high school and they are assigned to sit together in class. They soon form a close bond and

³⁰ Alice Oseman, "Alice Oseman: Romance is not the centre of my world," interview by Patrick Sproull, *The Guardian*, February 22, 2016. <https://www.theguardian.com/childrens-books-site/2016/feb/22/alice-oseman-radio-silence-solitaire-teen-ya-books>

³¹ Alice Oseman, "Alice Oseman chats about LGBTQ+ rep in HEARTSTOPPER Vol 2," interview by Avery Kaplan, *The Beat*, October 29, 2020. <https://www.comicsbeat.com/interview-alice-oseman/>

continue to spend more time together. During early stages of their friendship, both of them struggle with specific things. For instance, Charlie is dealing with unwanted coming out that happened before he was coming to high school and unrequited love for a boy. While Nick is dating a girl named Tara at that point, starting to question his feelings towards her and Charlie, which eventually makes him wonder about his own sexual identity. One of the central moments of turning their friendship into a romantic one is during a rugby match when Nick comforts Charlie because he feels like an outsider, and this makes Nick realize he cares about Charlie more than just a friend. This transition climax when Nick expresses his romantic feelings to Charlie and in the course of time, they become a couple.

Nevertheless, their relationship does not come without challenges. Thus, they are dealing with homophobia and discrimination, experiencing bullying and feeling the pressure to meet heteronormative expectations. When it comes to becoming more public as a couple, they have to handle their families and friends' opinions. While Nick's mother supports him when he comes out to her; and his father and older brother have quite more difficult response, Charlie's friends initially protect him and don't agree with it in the beginning but ultimately accept his relationship. Finally, at the end of the series, Nick and Charlie built a relationship with a strong foundation of love, acceptance and emotional growth.

Tao Xu and Elle Argent

Heartstopper has more storylines which are as crucial as the one with Nick and Charlie because they show the very broadness of sexuality, LGBTQ+ and mental health subject. Another storyline portrays Tao Xu and Elle Argent, the two key supporting characters in *Heartstopper* book series.

Tao is a straight teenage boy of British Chinese origin who is Charlie's and also Elle's best friend. He is known for being a protective friend and having strong opinions. He tends to have a bit of a hot-headed temperament and overthink situations. Tao is also depicted as a young boy with a lot of emotional depth who is struggling with his own insecurities, especially when it comes to Elle, for whom he has had feelings for a long time, but it is not able to express them to her. Tao as a character is essential in the series because he brings a complex, flawed view on friendship and romantic feelings.

While Elle is a transgender Black young girl who transfers to an all-girls grammar school and the series follow her journey of self-acceptance and finding her place in the society as a transgender girl. She is an artistic character who has a rich personality and while

she navigates the complexity of her gender identity, she is also able to form deeper connections with her friends, and eventually a romantic one with Tao.

Ultimately, Tao and Elle's long-time friendship results in a romantic relationship which just adds another layer of complexity to the whole story. Regarding their process of becoming a couple, it is clear they have a strong emotional connection from the beginning but they both struggle with confronting their feelings to each other. Tao is afraid of rejection, while Elle fears if Tao truly accepts her for who she is as a transgender girl. When it comes to themes in this storyline, it delves into vulnerability, self-discovery, friendship and love. These two characters' development relies upon Tao's learning to express emotions and Elle's progress in embracing her identity.

What is worth mentioning is the fact that Elle and Tao make an interracial couple with questions whether their relationship is considered as heterosexual. If both individuals identify this way, then their relationship is heterosexual. Elle is a woman and Tao is a man, therefore it aligns with heterosexual dynamics based on gender identity, not on assigned sex at birth. However, Oseman's standing point is that she rather avoids labelling and focuses on emotional authenticity and no qualification in terms of sexual orientation.

Tara Jones and Darcy Olsson

Moreover, the book series also includes a lesbian couple, Tara Jones and Darcy Olsson, who goes to the same grammar school as Charlie and Nick. The girls are both very openly affectionate towards each other and deliver a positive representation of LGBTQ+. They are portrayed as supportive friends to Charlie and Nick as well as examples of experiencing coming out and dealing with societal influences in teenage years.

Tara Jones is portrayed in the series as a kind and confident person. Even though she is openly gay, she still faces many challenges that arise from societal expectations and from fear of judgment if she expresses her love for Darcy in public, particularly within the context of high school. Furthermore, she is a Black young girl and Oseman does not focus on any Black lesbian struggles in the books, only on issues regarding her sexuality – being a teen outed lesbian. In simple words, she is a lesbian first and a Black woman second, as Kobylowska said.³² Tara is overall showed as a very supportive friend of Nick who helps guide other characters regarding figuring out their identities and sexuality.

³² Anna Kobylowska, "Intersectionality of Queer Female Characters in Alice Oseman's Young Adult Series of Graphic Novels *Heartstopper*," *Dziennictwo. Literatura i Kultura* 6 (2024), 164 – 177: <https://www.journals.polon.uw.edu.pl/index.php/dlk/article/view/1335>

On the other hand, Darcy, Tara's girlfriend, is more openly expressive and extroverted character in this series. She is also very open about her love for Tara without any external pressure which makes her protective and very supportive of Tara, too.

Unlike the developing relationships of Nick and Charlie, of Tao and Elle, their relationship is already established when the reader meets them in the beginning of the book series and can see a relationship where both people feel truly understood and accepted at a young age. Nevertheless, that does not mean their relationship goes without issues an LGBTQ+ teen might have. Throughout the series, Darcy tries to encourage Tara to be more open and fearless about their relationship, while still show patience and understanding of Tara's struggles. What is essentially different about this relationship compared to others is the ongoing support and growth they give each other, plus already having a strong bond. They show another possible queer experience which is being a young LGBTQ+ couple at high school that includes both positive outcomes and obstacles which is also essential for a relationship to evolve. When it comes to themes, it aims to kindness, long-term relationship and emotional honesty.

Additionally, there is one introverted and quiet character called Isaac who becomes friends with Charlie and joins the whole group. He adds a storyline with themes of friendship, mental health and the pressure of academic life. He is firstly portrayed as an outsider in his friend group and highly intelligent perfectionist who struggles with mental health and figuring out his sexuality as he eventually feels as asexual person.

1.2 Themes

Heartstopper touches on a wide range of themes that resonate with readers and makes it popular for a diverse audience. Through themes such as love, friendship, identity, mental health and personal growth, the book series offers a broaden portrayal of adolescence and a complex journey to self-acceptance, hand in hand with mental health issues or gender identities.

Adolescence

The theme of adolescence is one of the most essential ones as the main characters of *Hearstopper* are teenagers. Thus, they are in the most crucial stage of their lives to shape their identities and discover who they are. The whole book series revolves around challenges

they must face, relationships they must navigate and their own personal issues they must deal with.

For example, Charlie Spring is the main protagonist of *Heartstopper*, and he has to manage love, mental health, self-acceptance and healing his trauma. Throughout the series, it is showed how much progress Charlie has made as a young person. To start with, Charlie struggles with understanding and accepting his identity after he got outed at the previous school he was attending by one of his classmates. That had a critical impact on the perception of his identity and his journey involves coming to terms with it in the end. Nick plays an essential role in this process as he helps Charlie to realize he is worth to be loved and happy.

As mentioned above, Charlie's struggling with mental health is another essential part of the experience, especially his anxiety and dealing with an eating disorder. It is depicted that he faces many challenges marked by aspects of self-doubt, fear and feelings of unworthiness. Charlie gets through many phases as he eventually ends up in hospital for treatment related to his anorexia, while his health is getting severe. That is when he starts seeing a therapist, too. This theme is a great reminder of an importance of dealing with our mental health situation and seeking for help when necessary.

Part of Charlie's experience focuses on bullying and trauma which was particularly caused by his former friend Ben. From the start of the series, Charlie has been experiencing physical and emotional bullying at school, mainly due to his sexuality as he also got involuntarily outed which was mentioned earlier. Thus, he struggles with hiding his true self and dealing with toxic relationships which later in the series lead to profound feelings of isolation, self-doubt and eventually concludes in anorexia. However, while he is dealing with everything mentioned before, there are also depicted positive aspects of his life such as the healing process, supportive friendships and love towards Nick, his boyfriend, which is one of the crucial reasons why he ultimately accepts himself for who he is and comes to terms with his sexuality, moreover embraces that fact.

Representation of Gender Identity and Fluidity

Due to gender identity and fluidity being one of the central themes of the book series, it is thoughtfully explored, describing complexity and diversity of gender experiences. *Heartstopper* includes a wide range of gender explorations within every individual character throughout the series. For instance, Elle Argent's journey of being a transgender girl; Nick's realization of his bisexuality and first same sex romantic relationship; Charlie's coming out as gay; Isaac's gender fluidity and asexuality; Tara and Darcy's lesbian relationship and

Tao's representation of heterosexuality as well as being in a relationship with a transgender girl.

Gender Identity is individual's inner sense of themselves and their gender, which can be man, woman, neither or both. Unlike the sex – female or male – that is designated at birth which refers to a person's biological status.³³ What is important to mention is that gender identity differs from sexual orientation as well as from sex. Sexual orientation tells us who we are attracted to or not, whereas gender identity comes from deeper understanding of self and has nothing to do with attraction.³⁴

Gender Fluidity's essential idea is that a person's gender expression or gender identity, or both, changes frequently and over time. For instance, a girl identifies as a girl in her childhood and continuously until adolescence, then identify as a non-binary and possibly as a woman again, later in life. This is only one of many possible person's scenarios and ultimately, people who identify as gender-fluid are gender-fluid persons.³⁵

Alice Oseman portrays the importance of self-acceptance and the essential role friends play in terms of the journey of gender affirmation. More specifically, through Isaac's character, Oseman emphasizes fluidity of gender by introducing Isaac as a more conventional representation of gender in contemporary literature. Conventional representation in the sense of portraying a character which is flexible and non-conforming, standing out of rigid gender expectations, understanding gender as something individual based on his wardrobe choices and behaviours. Overall, *Heartstopper* highlights experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals and points out the societal recognition of gender as a spectrum which offer readers a sense of recognition and validation.

Romantic and Platonic Love

One of the central themes in *Heartstopper* is love, especially the romantic one between characters. The themes of romantic and platonic love are explored with depth and complexity, demonstrating how both forms of love can shape individual identities and relationships. The romantic love between Nick and Charlie is central to the narrative, showing a journey of self-discovery as Nick deals with his sexuality and falls for Charlie.

³³ Laurel Wamsley, "A Guide To Gender Identity Terms," *NPR*, June 2, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2021/06/02/996319297/gender-identity-pronouns-expression-guide-lgbtq>

³⁴ Laurel Wamsley, "A Guide To Gender Identity Terms," *NPR*, June 2, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2021/06/02/996319297/gender-identity-pronouns-expression-guide-lgbtq>

³⁵ Sabra L. Katz-Wise, "Gender fluidity: What it means and why support matters," *Harvard Health Publishing*, December 3, 2020, <https://www.health.harvard.edu/blog/gender-fluidity-what-it-means-and-why-support-matters-2020120321544>.

For instance, Nick's ultimate understanding of his feelings for Charlie, from confusion to acceptance, showcases the tender and transformative nature of romantic love. Meanwhile, the platonic love between Charlie and his sister, Tori, is equally important. Tori consistently supports Charlie, especially when he struggles with his relationship with Nick and his self-worth, demonstrating the deep emotional bonds that can exist between siblings.

Romantic love also plays a role in the relationship between Tara and Darcy, whose loving, supportive dynamic offers a refreshing portrayal of queer female romance. Tara, who once hid her feelings for Darcy, comes to the realization of the importance to be open and accept her emotions, as shown when she openly kisses Darcy for the first time, marking a climactic moment in their relationship. On the other hand, the platonic love between Tao and Elle provides another layer to the story. While Tao initially struggles with his feelings for Elle, he learns that love does not always need to be romantic to be meaningful, as their friendship remains a vital part of their emotional support system, eventually changing into a romantic one.

Together, the relationships in *Heartstopper*—whether romantic, like Nick and Charlie or Tara and Darcy, or platonic, like Tao and Elle—highlight the importance of love in its many forms. These characters demonstrate that both romantic and platonic connections are essential for personal growth, self-acceptance, and a sense of belonging.

Coming Out and Acceptance

The theme of coming out and acceptance is explored with sensitivity and care, illustrating the emotional complexities and challenges faced by LGBTQ+ individuals. Nick's journey of coming out is one of the most significant aspects of the story, as he navigates his feelings for Charlie while coming to terms with his own sexuality. Initially uncertain about his identity, Nick's eventual decision to come out to his family and friends marks a central moment in his personal growth. For example, when Nick comes out to his mother, her supportive and loving response points out the importance of acceptance in the coming-out process. This contrasts with the more challenging experiences faced by other characters, such as Charlie who has been out for a while but still struggles with his past experiences of bullying and rejection. Charlie's journey demonstrates how acceptance is not just about coming out but also about healing from the pain of past traumas.

Other characters such as Tara and Darcy also experience their own moments of coming out and finding acceptance. Tara's experience of coming out to her friends at school and the emotional support she receives from them, particularly from Darcy, shows how important friendship and understanding are during these times. Similarly, Elle's journey of transitioning and being accepted by her friends, especially Tao, stresses how coming out is not limited to sexual orientation but can also involve gender identity. Tao's eventual acceptance of Elle's transition, and his recognition of her courage, emphasizes the importance of unconditional support and love in the process of self-acceptance.

Ultimately, *Heartstopper* portrays coming out and acceptance as a deeply personal and ongoing process, one that requires both self-acceptance and external support from friends, family, and loved ones.

HEARTSTOPPER VOLUME ONE

First volume of *Heartstopper* starts with showing Charlie and Ben's, his classmate, toxic and unhealthy relationship. From the beginning of the book, it can be understood that Charlie is outed gay boy and Ben is not quite ready to come out as queer, thus Ben and Charlie are only meeting in secret to be affectionate around each other. Additionally, it seems like Ben is the one having all the power over their relationship as they only meet up when it is convenient for him. Ben has also tendencies to accuse Charlie and put all fault on him for things that are not his fault at all.³⁶ Even though it is not said in the beginning of the book, it looks like their relationship has been going on for some while already, with random secret meet ups and Ben's toxic behaviour towards Charlie, such as bullying him or having comments that he is actually the one who does not want to "go public", even though Charlie is the one who is outed as a gay. This is showing a negative queer representation as Ben's alarming behaviour supports negative stereotypes about LGBTQ+ individuals.

Furthermore, Charlie is a witness to Ben kissing a girl³⁷, eventually finding out that he actually has had a girlfriend while he has been meeting with him, too. Given this fact, it portrays queer people who are not ready yet to come out on public and therefore, using other queer people (outed or not) in their favour. Moreover, Ben's girlfriend is not aware of the fact that she is only his fake girlfriend in order to make sure that no one finds out about Ben's true sexuality, and she is not even aware of the fact that he is not heterosexual as she has no reason to think otherwise. Thus, his heterosexual counterpart is being used just the same as his homosexual one.

Eventually, Charlie decides to end things with Ben, which Ben does not agree with and behaves even aggressively towards Charlie.³⁸ Ben is clearly in deep refusal of his true sexual identity, whether it is gay or bisexual, which is ultimately harmful for Charlie as he emotionally manipulates him, pushes his boundaries and ignores the essentiality of consent. Ben's role in this book series is the portrayal of a queer person who has neither come out, nor acknowledged his sexuality in the healthy way. Instead of that, he consciously tries to suppress it and projects his fear and confusion on others – especially Charlie. However, Alice Oseman is being very cautious to not entail that Ben's behaviour is caused by his queerness. It is important to mention, that Ben is not the antagonist in *Heartstopper* book series, but

³⁶ Alice Oseman, *Heartstopper Volume One* (Hachette Children's Group, 2019), page 19.

³⁷ Alice Oseman, *Heartstopper Volume One* (Hachette Children's Group, 2019), page 26.

³⁸ Alice Oseman, *Heartstopper Volume One* (Hachette Children's Group, 2019), pages 74-82.

rather another authentic queer character with flaws and societal fears in order to show the diversity of LGBTQ+ experiences.

As Nick and Charlie start to spend more and more time together, people at their school start to get impression that their relationship is not only platonic. Nick starts to be confused too as he is not sure anymore that he only likes females.³⁹ There is a part in the book where Nick is browsing the Internet, searching questions such as „How do I know I'm gay" and taking a gay quiz.⁴⁰ While Nick is in the process of exploring and understanding his sexuality, he is surrounded by societal stereotypes that associate his behavior, appearance and hobbies with heterosexuality, thereby disguising the possibility that he could be queer. For instance, Tao, Charlie's friend, assumes Nick is heterosexual based on the facts that he plays rugby and calls everybody „mate", according to Tao.⁴¹ He continues with his comments about Nick even later in the first volume when he gets the chance: „Just look at him. He's as straight as they come."⁴² Harry, Nick's classmate from Year 11 is obviously the biggest bully in the school and even though Harry and Nick are friends, plus they play rugby together, Harry is picking at Nick as well as his other rugby friends. It is difficult for them to believe that Nick could be gay as they have known him for years. And that is the moment when their P.E. teacher overhears them and adds to their conversation: „You can't tell whether people are gay by what they look like. And gay or straight aren't the only two options. Anyway, it's very rude to speculate about people's sexuality."⁴³ Which becomes one of the positive dialogues that supports positive queer representation in *Heartstopper*. She is trying to show her pupils a positive attitude towards LGBTQ+ individuals and eventually, they themselves change their view, saying „I can see it. Nick and Charlie."⁴⁴

In terms of Charlie in the first volume apart from the situation with Ben, Nick's classmates on the rugby team, which Charlie eventually joins as Nick is trying to convince him, are bullying him too, especially a boy called Harry. Harry is picking on him for being gay and he comments inappropriately regarding rugby: „Does he even like sports? Everyone knows he's gay."⁴⁵ Which supports stereotypes against queer people that most of them are not fond of liking sports, according to him. Moreover, other rugby teammates are making similar comments about Charlie, that, however, come out of their lack of knowledge of

³⁹ Alice Oseman, *Heartstopper Volume One* (Hachette Children's Group, 2019), pages 187-194.

⁴⁰ Alice Oseman, *Heartstopper Volume One* (Hachette Children's Group, 2019), page 192.

⁴¹ Alice Oseman, *Heartstopper Volume One* (Hachette Children's Group, 2019), page 25.

⁴² Alice Oseman, *Heartstopper Volume One* (Hachette Children's Group, 2019), page 123.

⁴³ Alice Oseman, *Heartstopper Volume One* (Hachette Children's Group, 2019), page 204.

⁴⁴ Alice Oseman, *Heartstopper Volume One* (Hachette Children's Group, 2019), page 205.

⁴⁵ Alice Oseman, *Heartstopper Volume One* (Hachette Children's Group, 2019), page 46.

queerness rather than being homophobic : „Well all I knew about him was that he's gay.“ „Mate, I don't actually think being gay makes you bad at sports.“ „I never said that!“⁴⁶ Although it's been already established that Charlie is openly gay, he decides to confides in Nick about his relationship with Ben and how it has started.⁴⁷ He also mentions it was his classmates last year who told everybody Charlie is gay. Thus, Charlie did not come out by himself as it should be his choice whether he wants to tell anybody or not.

In addition, there has been shown one of the main characters for the first time – Tara Jones and Darcy Olsson, who come out as a lesbian couple to Nick.⁴⁸ At the end of the book, the setting is on Harry's birthday party where Charlie gets picking at again by those school bullies and eventually, Charlie and Nick kiss after some turning points in the story, with more to be continued in the next volume.

As it occurs since the first volume, Nick is involuntarily dealing with biphobia from his surroundings which may negatively result in assumptions about bisexuality itself.⁴⁹ Biphobia is defined as the form of prejudice directed towards bisexual individuals, typically grounded in stereotypes that incorrectly associate bisexuality with infidelity, hypersexuality, and increased risk of transmitting sexually transmitted infections.⁵⁰

To sum up the first volume, Alice Oseman illustrates many prejudices towards LGBTQ+ individuals that are stereotypical for the society such as assuming someone's sexuality based on their hobbies or looks. There are portrayals of the positive queer representation as their P.E. teacher educates her pupils about sexuality spectrum and portrayals of bullying classmates because of their sexuality. Since the first volume, Oseman addresses terms such as biphobia and homophobia.

⁴⁶ Alice Oseman, *Heartstopper Volume One* (Hachette Children's Group, 2019), page 62.

⁴⁷ Alice Oseman, *Heartstopper Volume One* (Hachette Children's Group, 2019), pages 110-111.

⁴⁸ Alice Oseman, *Heartstopper Volume One* (Hachette Children's Group, 2019), page 221.

⁴⁹ Melissa Allen, ““In a Romantic Way, Not Just a Friend Way!”: Exploring the Developmental Implications of Positive Depiction of Bisexuality in Alice Oseman's *Heartstopper*,” *Journal of Bisexuality*, (2022), page 3.

⁵⁰ Melissa Allen, ““In a Romantic Way, Not Just a Friend Way!”: Exploring the Developmental Implications of Positive Depiction of Bisexuality in Alice Oseman's *Heartstopper*,” *Journal of Bisexuality*, (2022), page 3.

2 HEARTSTOPPER VOLUME TWO

The second volume of *Heartstopper* begins where it finished in the first one – at a party where Nick and Charlie kissed. This act of affection between them starts Nick's discovery journey of his sexuality as well as their relationship with Charlie. Nick gives us an internal view into his thoughts as he is confused about his sexuality and is trying to figure out his identity. Nick calls it a „gay crisis" which portrays how young people can get confused about their sexuality and how difficult it can be to find out theirs.⁵¹ As Nick and Charlie keep talking about sexuality, Charlie shares his authentic story about how he found out he is gay⁵² and what's more, he even suggests Nick that he might be bisexual as Nick also likes females. By Charlie explaining that there are more sexualities than only gay and straight people on the spectrum, it portrays a positive queer view, and it includes the whole queer spectrum. Moreover, Charlie's character is representing the positive queer representation as he respects Nick's decision that he is not ready to come out to his family or friends just yet. Charlie has a positive attitude towards that which shows how people should react when someone asks them to respect their decision, this time regarding coming out. The story continues with Nick searching for „What is bisexuality" on the Internet⁵³ where we can clearly see Nick's lack of knowledge about bisexuality being one of the options as well, which ultimately demonstrates the compulsory binarization. This phenomenon is described as the social, cultural or institutional enforcement of binary understanding whether individuals classify their gender as male or female and identify their sexuality as heterosexual or homosexual, causing exclusion of identities that exist outside of these mentioned, such as non-binary or bisexual people.⁵⁴

Connecting Nick's experience and compulsory binarization, Nick's sexuality is no longer in the heterosexual spectrum as he always thought he was and since he has started to feel romantic feelings towards Charlie, he automatically came up with the thought of being gay, not bisexual. His former attraction to girls was no longer in the picture as he has started to be attracted to the same gender, not considering the fact that he could be attracted to multiple

⁵¹ Alice Oseman, *Heartstopper Volume Two* (Hachette Children's Group, 2019), pages 296-301.

⁵² Alice Oseman, *Heartstopper Volume Two* (Hachette Children's Group, 2019), page 311-315.

⁵³ Alice Oseman, *Heartstopper Volume Two* (Hachette Children's Group, 2019), page 347.

⁵⁴ Jennifer Coletta, „The Missing B Word: Compulsory Binarization and Bisexual Representation in Children's Literature," *Jeunesse: Young People, Texts, Cultures* 10, no. 1 (2018): 85-108. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/jeu.2018.0004>

genders. Looking at Oseman's illustrations⁵⁵, Nick only completed his research on whether he is gay or not, which highlights the fact that thinking outside of binary sexuality felt unthinkable.

In this volume, Elle Argent is mentioned as a trans girl for the first time. She has made the transition recently and before, she was going to the Truham Grammar School for boys. Nick recognises her at Charlie's birthday party as she is one of Charlie's friends.⁵⁶ Portrayal of more positive representation continues on the page 431⁵⁷, when Tara Jones is talking to Nick, and she introduces Darcy Olsson as her girlfriend for the first time in the book series. In addition. Nick confides in them that he has been dating Charlie. They all react in a positive way. Tara and Darcy try to support Nick by telling him how Darcy found out she is a lesbian and that he does not have to come out to anybody, unless he wants to.⁵⁸ Meaning that his coming out or sexuality is not his responsibility towards anyone. Furthermore, there is no sign of portraying Nick's (bi)sexuality as less queer than of Charlie or other queer characters in the book series. Meaning that bisexuality is as legitimate and valid sexual identity as being a homosexual, not supporting bi-erasure.

While Nick finds it quite difficult to wrap his head around his sexuality and is still panicking when he imagines his coming out to others⁵⁹, Nick's friend Harry tries to bully Charlie again. This time, Harry gets the opportunity to ask Charlie questions such as: „How it is being gay?” or „You don't really look like gay.”⁶⁰ Which makes Nick angry, and the situation ends up with Nick fighting with Harry in order to stop his homophobic behaviour.

In the end of the second volume, Nick comes to terms with his bisexuality and is ready to share this with his friends and family.⁶¹ The first person that Nick comes out to is his mother. He tells her he is bisexual, and that Charlie is his boyfriend. Nick's mother's reaction is very positive as she gives him the reassurance of the infinite love she has for him, accepting words of affirmation she expresses, regardless his sexuality. This is a portrayal of a positive queer acceptance from families and friends which is often underrepresented in media, and it strongly contrasts the stereotype of family rejection, which offers a refreshing and progressive queer representation.

⁵⁵ Alice Oseman, *Heartstopper Volume Two* (Hachette Children's Group, 2019), page 191.

⁵⁶ Alice Oseman, *Heartstopper Volume Two* (Hachette Children's Group, 2019), page 374.

⁵⁷ Alice Oseman, *Heartstopper Volume Two* (Hachette Children's Group, 2019), page 431.

⁵⁸ Alice Oseman, *Heartstopper Volume Two* (Hachette Children's Group, 2019), page 435.

⁵⁹ Alice Oseman, *Heartstopper Volume Two* (Hachette Children's Group, 2019), page 452.

⁶⁰ Alice Oseman, *Heartstopper Volume Two* (Hachette Children's Group, 2019), pages 480-481.

⁶¹ Alice Oseman, *Heartstopper Volume Two* (Hachette Children's Group, 2019), pages 530-533.

As a bonus in *Heartstopper Volume Two*, Alice Oseman gives the audience a sneak peek into how Tara Jones and Darcy Olsson got together as a lesbian couple. There is a short story which shows that Tara was already established as a lesbian for some time, while Darcy just discovered she might like girls, eventually coming out as a lesbian too.

In summary, Nick and Charlie's relationship starts to transform into more serious relationship and there is a huge stress and improvement in Nick's sexuality discovery as he comes to the terms of being bisexual and tries to accept it. Oseman addresses terms such as bi-erasure or compulsory binarization.

3 HEARTSTOPPER VOLUME THREE

While the second volume was mostly about Nick's discovering journey of his sexuality and coming out to his mum, the third one includes issues with Nick's older brother, school trip to Paris and concerns about his friends and family's opinion. The third volume of *Heartstopper* starts with Nick writing to his journal about how figuring out your sexuality is complicated, and that "bisexual" feels just right at the same time.⁶²

Charlie and Nick have established their relationship status as boyfriends at the end of the second volume, which naturally continues to Charlie telling his parents about him and Nick. However, Charlie's parents seem to be surprised and did not even think he could be gay: "Oh. You're surprised." "Well, I suppose we didn't think he was..." "Well, you know, he's very sporty, laddish sort of boy."⁶³ His parents show how these stereotypes are still extended within the society nowadays. Even though Charlie's parents have been aware of Charlie's sexuality for a long time, they still hold on to these stereotypical perceptions. Thanks to Nick's mum's good reaction, Nick feels more confident about coming out to their friends as well. For instance, Nick and Charlie decide to come out to Charlie's friends Aled and Elle.⁶⁴ They turn out to be really happy for them as they already accepted Charlie as a gay boy. Yet, Charlie admits to Nick that he is also not fully ready to come out as boyfriends to everybody.⁶⁵ This fact shows how being publicly in a relationship with another boy can still be challenging, even for someone who is already openly gay, due to his past traumatic bullying experience. As Charlie shares later in this volume, the time when it came out, he is gay was challenging for him: "People either thought I was a novelty, or I was just gross. It really surprised me how many people are still homophobic."⁶⁶ Charlie also says how it got better over time when people finally started to realize that he is a real person with real feelings. Still, their perception of him got into his head anyway and even got to the point when he hated himself because of what others say.⁶⁷ This is a well-explained example of the consequences which homophobia can have on LGBTQ+ people.

As mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, Nick's older brother comes visit his mum and Nick from university. Nick does not seem delighted his brother is back and he perceives him as a homophobic person. For instance, one time when Charlie is visiting

⁶² Alice Oseman, *Heartstopper Volume Three* (Hachette Children's Group, 2020), pages 3-4.

⁶³ Alice Oseman, *Heartstopper Volume Three* (Hachette Children's Group, 2020), pages 564-566.

⁶⁴ Alice Oseman, *Heartstopper Volume Three* (Hachette Children's Group, 2020), page 620.

⁶⁵ Alice Oseman, *Heartstopper Volume Three* (Hachette Children's Group, 2020), pages 586-588.

⁶⁶ Alice Oseman, *Heartstopper Volume Three* (Hachette Children's Group, 2020), page 631.

⁶⁷ Alice Oseman, *Heartstopper Volume Three* (Hachette Children's Group, 2020), pages 632-633.

Nick's house and Nick's brother comes introduce himself to Charlie, he estimates: "I just wanted to meet the guy who turned my little brother gay." "Should have always known you'd turn out gay."⁶⁸ Meanwhile Nick declares that he is actually bisexual, and his brother does not seem to accept that as a valid fact: "If you're gonna be gay, at least admit you're gay." "What, Im not allowed to be sceptical when you're randomly deciding you're gay?"⁶⁹ Although Nick's brother has a negative mindset towards Nick's sexuality, their mum continues with her positive and supportive approach: "It's up to you if and when you want to tell people, including David and your dad."⁷⁰ Furthermore, *Heartstopper* shows a wide range of positive queer representation as Nick's P.E. teacher confides in him about her youth years when she met her current wife at school. She tells him how it was more difficult to be queer than nowadays.⁷¹ However, Nick's brother's biphobia is a reminder of how delegitimization of bisexuality is still up-to-date topic. What is very positive is Nick's approach towards bi-erasure as he argues multiple times that he is "actually bisexual" and not gay like his peers assume, allowing the character to legitimize bisexuality by himself. Additionally, Alice Oseman gives space to Nick's character to not sexually fit into the binary schema but rather accepting his sexuality as equal to others which upholds the idea of degenerating the binary.

Most of the third volume of *Heartstopper* is set in Paris on the school trip where Year 10 and 11 travel after exams, together with Nick and Charlie's friends – Tao, Elle, Aled, Darcy, Tara as well as Harry and others. There have been many conversations going on on this trip in Paris, regarding coming out and sexual identity which ultimately help the audience to have a clearer understanding of queer community. One of the examples would be when Tara talks about their beginnings with Darcy and describes how tough it is to come out publicly: "Darcy was already out. We'd been dating for a while and most of our friends knew. But other people were starting to guess too." "At our school, 'lesbian' was used as an insult all the time. I probably even used it once or twice when I was younger."⁷² Another positive example would be when Tao talks about Elle transitioning into a female from a male, how of a hard time she experienced with being a trans girl.⁷³ Additionally, it is one of

⁶⁸ Alice Oseman, *Heartstopper Volume Three* (Hachette Children's Group, 2020), page 643.

⁶⁹ Alice Oseman, *Heartstopper Volume Three* (Hachette Children's Group, 2020), pages 644-645.

⁷⁰ Alice Oseman, *Heartstopper Volume Three* (Hachette Children's Group, 2020), page 646.

⁷¹ Alice Oseman, *Heartstopper Volume Three* (Hachette Children's Group, 2020), pages 597-600.

⁷² Alice Oseman, *Heartstopper Volume Three* (Hachette Children's Group, 2020), pages 707-713.

⁷³ Alice Oseman, *Heartstopper Volume Three* (Hachette Children's Group, 2020), page 719.

the first times when transgender individual is mentioned in *Heartstopper* which supports the *Heartstopper's* idea of representing as many different sexualities as possible.

Earlier, in one of the volumes, we have established Nick's classmate Harry to be homophobic and a bully. Nevertheless, Harry tries to apologize for his former actions towards Charlie and Nick: H: "I know I said some homophobic shit. Honestly, my family's pretty homophobic. But I feel like I know better now, and I won't say shit like that anymore." CH: "You said all that homophobic stuff to me, but it's okay because you're sorry?" "People like you made my life hell last year. And I shouldn't have to forgive anyone any of it."⁷⁴ It is a great switch for Charlie to be able to stand up for himself after the bullying he experienced last year as well as a refreshing approach from Harry's side.

In the end of the trip, Nick comes out in a full room of his classmates while playing truth or dare. He reveals Charlie and him are dating⁷⁵ and says: "We're okay with being out."⁷⁶ which essentially changes the trajectory of their relationship from hiding to being publicly established as boyfriends, and that essentially shows the progress of how it can be for someone going in terms with their sexuality.

The very last romantic discovery the audience gets is when Mr. Ayaji and Mr. Farouk, two male teachers who are responsible for the Paris trip, find mutual affection and attractivity towards each other. What precedes this matter is their earlier discussion about Mr. Farouk's "late" coming out: "Well, when you don't come to terms with your sexuality until your mid-twenties, you tend to miss out on all those beautiful gay teenage experiences."⁷⁷ whereas Mr. Ajayi says back that there is no age limit to discover about his sexuality which ultimately ends this volume with them sharing a kiss.

In this volume, there is shown a huge difference between Nick's peers and his brother, in terms of accepting his bisexuality. On the one hand, Nick's classmates do not take bisexuality into their consideration in the beginning when there are obvious signs of Nick and Charlie not being only platonic friends. That is happening only due to their lack of knowledge about sexual identity and there is a big switch in correcting their incorrect assumptions right after Nick explicitly states that he is bisexual, not questioning him and ultimately believing him. On the other hand, even though Nick has demonstrated many times to his brother that he is bisexual and not gay, David keeps eliminating bisexuality as the

⁷⁴ Alice Oseman, *Heartstopper Volume Three* (Hachette Children's Group, 2020), pages 840-841.

⁷⁵ Alice Oseman, *Heartstopper Volume Three* (Hachette Children's Group, 2020), page 858.

⁷⁶ Alice Oseman, *Heartstopper Volume Three* (Hachette Children's Group, 2020), page 860.

⁷⁷ Alice Oseman, *Heartstopper Volume Three* (Hachette Children's Group, 2020), pages 808-809.

legitimate sexual identity in his view. David's intentional mislabeling of Nick's sexuality is an example of bi-erasure phenomenon as he has a negative view on his brother's queerness and is unable to accept it as an equal to gay identity.

To sum up, volume three is set mainly in Paris and mainly shows Nick's coming out to his friends and classmates which eventually bursts out to dealing with Nick's biphobic brother. In this volume, Nick becomes much more confident in his sexual identity than he was before which gives him the strength to confront his brother, and that is a huge development. Volume three still addresses terms such as biphobia, bierasure or homophobia and coming out.

4 HEARTSTOPPER VOLUME FOUR

Heartstopper's volume four is mostly about Charlie's mental health and how he deals with his eating disorder rather than focusing on the main theme of this book series, which is queerness. However, Volume Four still contains a bunch of queer representations within the main characters. For example, Elle opens up about her family relatives in Egypt when they are having a beach day with their friend group: „It's really dangerous to be trans in Egypt. You can get arrested or attacked or...worse. Just for being who you are.“ „I mean, that stuff happens everywhere, but it's more common there, so I haven't since I was like, eleven.“⁷⁸ This fact gives the rest of the volumes a bigger picture in terms of realization of how crucial is to spread normalization of LGBTQ+ people.

One of other important inputs is when Nick writes in his journal and confides that he has been spending more time with his rugby mates as he is out to them now, and that is why he feels like he can be more himself around them, to be able to hang out and chill.⁷⁹ Nevertheless, Nick still does not feel comfortable around his older brother as he keeps having irritating comments about his sexuality: „You've been on your phone to your little boyfriend non-stop. Didn't know you gays were so co-dependent.“⁸⁰ along with the fact that Nick's brother more or less forced Nick to come out to his father during family dinner with Charlie's family at the table, too. This all adds to the rest of the evidence that Nick's older brother is portrayed as a homophobe.

The fourth volume also includes a short bonus story in the end about Mr. Ajayi and Mr. Farouk's relationship which only adds Farouk's relationship which only adds to all the other queer representations and queer relationships.

As it was mentioned before, even though the protagonist, Charlie, is mainly dealing with his mental health in Volume Four, there are still many different queer aspects that are addressed. For instance, Elle's obstacles with her transgender identity as she cannot visit her family in Egypt, or unstoppable biphobic comments from Nick's brother. The fourth volume brings Nick's coming out to his father or development in the teacher's relationship.

⁷⁸ Alice Oseman, *Heartstopper Volume Four* (Hachette Children's Group, 2021), page 966.

⁷⁹ Alice Oseman, *Heartstopper Volume Four* (Hachette Children's Group, 2021), page 1156.

⁸⁰ Alice Oseman, *Heartstopper Volume Four* (Hachette Children's Group, 2021), page 1050.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, queer representation in literature became wider and more popular. That is why Queer representation in Alice Oseman's *Heartstopper* book series is relevant nowadays as it shows a huge progress within the society and its approach. However, queer representation is not always positive because many authors create stereotypical queer characters. In Oseman's *Heartstopper*, the queer representation is extensively used as most of the characters have a different sexuality than heterosexual one. The representation Oseman used includes homosexual people as well as transgender ones or bisexuals, too. There are also lesbian characters and portrayals of asexuality which is ultimately rare in literature. The book series illustrates authentic lives of teenagers who deal with questions of self-acceptance, their sexual identity or how to come out to their family and friends. It portrays homophobic bullying and compulsory binarization as not everybody believes in bisexuality, and it is often erased or ignored. The main character, Nick, develops throughout the volumes from being sure he is heterosexual to eventually accepting that he is bisexual. This obstacle is caused by lack of queer knowledge as the protagonist has no idea that there is something between gay and straight. Nick goes through stages of confusion, acceptance and coming out as well as navigating his first relationship with a boy. While his boyfriend fights with homophobia and bullying.

In *Heartstopper*'s four volumes, there are characters from a different point of the spectrum and/or race. For instance, one of the two protagonists is white cis bisexual boy, while the other one is Spanish homosexual boy. Furthermore, there is a Black lesbian girl, an Asian cis heterosexual or a Black transgender girl, with an aromantic boy. Oseman tries to illustrate a diverse range of queer individuals as well as make it intersectional. As mentioned in the introduction, the queer representation has become more essential for today's generation, thus it is important to include queer characters in YA literature section more than before. Queer characters should be represented in media as much as heterosexual ones due to a bigger awareness which was not up to date earlier in this century.

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