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Seeing Ourselves: The Impact of Queer Representation in Children's Media

Introduction

When I was a child, think third grade, I was very proud of myself for not being “boy crazy” like the rest of my friends. We would talk in the typical elementary school girl fashion about what boys were cute and what boys weren't, who had a crush on who, who was totally getting married someday. What we did not talk about was queer people. We did not discuss if we thought any *girls* were cute. Being gay was not something that anyone talked about. If I was asked who I had a crush on, I'd say no one. And when I was inevitably pressed because “Come on, you've got to have a crush on *someone*”, I'd pick some random popular guy I'd never be expected to actually talk to, because I didn't realize that I could have a crush on a girl. But my question is, why did I have to wait until I was 14 to have this self-discovery? Why, in my childhood, had queerness never been presented to me as an option? I had no idea how my parents felt about the LGBTQ+ community. I was afraid, because being queer was something that had been presented to me as something to be afraid of. No child should have to feel that kind of fear. That's why it's so important for children to have not only queer representation, but positive queer representation. Queerness is not something to be feared, and should never be presented as such. Queer representation in children's media is integral to children's understanding of the LGBTQ+

community and provides countless other benefits, such as creating safer spaces for queer kids and helping them be more confident in their identity.

Disney and Queer-coding

Like many people, I grew up on Disney. Me and my sisters were always watching Disney princess movies. But what none of those princess movies has, and indeed no Disney movie at all has, is explicit queer representation. Notice my use of the word “explicit”. Characters like Captain Hook from *Peter Pan*, Hades from *Hercules*, and Ursula from *The Little Mermaid* are portrayed as queer people without ever being explicitly stated to be queer. This is a phenomenon called queer coding, which is intentionally giving characters stereotypically queer traits to give the impression that the character is queer. However, one thing all of those characters have in common is the fact that they’re villains. Furthermore, these characters' villainy is often tied directly to their queer traits and behaviors. Take Captain Hook for example. Throughout the film Hook is portrayed very femininely in contrast to the other pirates with his long hair and more effeminate mannerisms, creating an obvious level of separation.

While the other members of Hook’s crew wear torn, casual clothing, Hook’s clean and dapper cloak creates the illusion not only of masculinity, but of propriety. His performative masculinity hides his femininity and his villainous acts at the same time, implying a connection between the two (Brown 5).

By tying Hook’s femininity, a trait in men that the media typically uses to characterize a gay man, with his villainy Disney creates a negative connotation around queerness. This sends kids the message that there is something wrong or evil with having these traits. In contrast, the hero of the movie, Peter Pan, is portrayed as your typical masculine man despite the fact that “Peter Pan

has historically been portrayed as a feminine character, with many adaptations even going so far as to cast a woman in the role” (Brown 6). Disney takes lengths to avoid portraying their protagonist as anytype of queer, further reinforcing the idea that there is something evil or wrong with the femininity, and hence queerness, that Captain Hook portrays.

Another example of Disney’s use of queer coding is Ursula from *The Little Mermaid*. Ursula, as you may know, was based on the drag queen Divine (Brown 8). This was not only intentional, but highly recognizable to adults watching the film as “Divine was a famous drag queen during this time period, and his campy, diva traits, far from incidental, were inherent to his drag identity” (Brown 7). In the case of Ursula, Disney was looking to explicitly code her as a drag queen. And once again, the villain of the movie is the one portrayed as queer. In a similar way to Captain Hook, Ursula’s queerness is tied to her villainy, with “[h]er desire to become a queen serv[ing] as her primary motivation, which connects drag queens to villainous behavior” (Brown 8). With *The Little Mermaid* Disney once again sends the message that queerness is something evil and wrong. However, these campy queer coded villains that Disney creates, like Ursula or Hades, are beloved by audiences. These characters are interesting and fun to watch. The issue with these characters is that a queer coded villain should not be the only character a child can see themselves in. If the only form of representation you have is the bad guy, it doesn’t matter how fun the bad guy is. By queer coding villains Disney sends the message that being queer is being the bad guy.

Disney has certainly come a long way from their consistently queer coded villains, even going so far as to include a “first gay character” in their movies... seventeen times (Rude). That’s right, Disney has claimed a “first gay character” in one of their films seventeen different

times. While all of these characters are “firsts” in their own right, they aren’t advertised as something different from each other (Rude). They’re all just “Disney’s first gay character”. Almost all of these characters are background characters, and almost all of the moments Disney called groundbreaking didn’t last for more than about five seconds of screen time. If you don’t know to look for these moments, you’re likely not going to notice them. I remember a huge deal being made over Disney’s first gay character in *Onward*, and I remember being excited to watch the movie because of it. The character is a female police officer who is on screen for less than a minute, who briefly mentions having a wife. If you didn’t know to listen for it, you would easily miss it. Disney shunts queerness to the sidelines and pretends like they’re doing much more than they actually do. This perpetuates the lack of representation. If you’re a queer kid growing up and the only explicitly queer characters you see are on screen for under a minute, the message you’re sending is that queerness is something to be shoved to the side. Over the years Disney has created the narrative that queerness is something villainous and something to hide, leaving these kids that grew up on Disney lacking in positive queer representation.

Obstacles to Queer Representation

Queer representation is incredibly important in children’s media, but it doesn’t often make its way in. In recent years we’ve had an increased amount of representation in kid’s shows, but it’s still nowhere near the amount that it should be. There’s many reasons for this, one of which being the companies producing this media have long held conservative beliefs left over from the days of the Hays Code. “The Hays Code specified what content was acceptable and unacceptable for films for public audiences in the US. One of its founding principles is that ‘No picture should lower the moral standards of those who see it’” (Tew). The code was strictly

against queer people, as being queer was considered “sex perversion”, which was banned. The code was in effect from the 1930’s to the 1960’s, and promoted a rigid set of conservative morals that governed the type of films made (Tew). While the Hays code is long gone, clearly some of its rigid morality has stuck around, evidenced by Disney’s lack of queer characters. The reason we get this sense of morality around showing queer people on screen is from a misguided perspective on what it means to be “family friendly”. Due to the perceived sexual nature of queer relationships, they aren’t considered appropriate for children. This is wrong for a number of reasons, the first and most obvious of which being that a queer relationship is no more sexual in nature than a straight relationship. If it’s child appropriate to show a heterosexual relationship, go ahead and assume it’s ok to show a homosexual relationship because the only difference is the genders of the people involved. Furthermore, children’s “understanding of LGBTQ identity is "couple-centric," with little recognition of visual or verbal innuendos” (Chik). The kids watching these shows aren’t assuming anything less than innocent while watching queer couples on screen. The issue does not lie with the children, it lies with the people distributing this media.

Companies like Disney have long been preventing queer rep from hitting the screens. A good example is Alex Hirsch’s *Gravity Falls*, a Disney Channel show. An article from *Entertainment Weekly* cites an interview with Alex Hirsch where he discusses his attempted queer representation in the *Gravity Falls* episode “The Love God” where he tried to have one of the couples that falls in love be a lesbian couple:

Hirsch notes it was already an “atypical” situation because, where previous notes from the standards and practices department came through email, this was done over the phone. Speaking frankly, he says, “The truth is they’re scared of getting emails from

bigots and they're cowards. So they're letting the bigots control the conversation. My response was basically, 'Let 'em complain,' 'they're wrong,' and 'they're just gonna have to live with it.' Unfortunately, it got so contentious that [the network] essentially told me that if I didn't cut the scene they would cut the episode and they strong-armed me out of it" (Chik).

Hirsch fought to include queer representation in the show, but in the case of "The Love God", was ultimately overruled. This isn't to say that the show had no queer representation at all. Two recurring characters on the show, Sheriff Blubs and Deputy Durland, were confirmed in the final episode to be gay with the line "We're mad with power! And love" and the two gazed into each other's eyes (Hirsch). The scene aired just two years before *Steven Universe* would break down boundaries with their gay wedding episode, "Reunited". Yet *Gravity Falls* had only been allowed explicit queer representation in its finale because of Disney's fear of backlash (Romano).

Opposition to queer representation led to it being incredibly limited throughout the 2010's, but as public opinion changed and the demand for inclusion and diversity in media grew, queer representation also saw a rise. This increase in representation despite opposition has helped to normalize queer representation to kids and opened doors for the shows that would come after.

The Progression of Queer Representation

Overtime queer representation has crept further and further into the mainstream, becoming more prevalent in shows put out by big media companies, like Disney. However it certainly did not start out this way. Creators of shows had to push boundaries and fight for the inclusion of this important representation. I'd like to discuss two of the shows that had a big impact on the inclusion of queer representation in children's media, starting with *Steven Universe*

in 2013. The show follows its young protagonist Steven and the crystal gems, rocks with human forms from space, as they fight to save the world (Sugar). *Steven Universe* absolutely shattered boundaries with one of its main characters, Garnet. Garnet is a fusion, two gems fused together into one person. The significance of Garnet comes from who she's created from. Garnet is a combination of Ruby and Sapphire, two female characters. Fusion is shown throughout the show to be an intimate connection and in the case of Ruby and Sapphire, is a representation of love; "Garnet herself is a relationship, and a queer relationship at that, and is a representation of the love Ruby and Sapphire share for each other" (Storz 25). Garnet is a main character, and she's never shunted to the side. There's a whole arc with Ruby and Sapphire's relationship culminating in their wedding in the episode "Reunited". A wedding between two female characters was shown in a children's cartoon, a massive step forward for queer representation in children's media, and it would make room for shows that would later go even further.

In 2018, the next big step for queer representation in children's media happened with Netflix's *She-Ra* remake, *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power*. The show follows its protagonist, the Horde soldier Adora, as she learns that she is destined to become the ancient warrior She-Ra. Adora leaves the Horde, and she and her magical princess pals work together to fight the evil Horde and save the world (Stevenson). *She-Ra* is so important due to the sheer volume and presence of queer representation. Early in the show, we have Spinnerella and Netossa, a married lesbian couple. The two are clearly shown to be in a relationship, often shown holding hands and calling each other "darling" (Stevenson). These characters start off with a minor role in the show, they become more present as the show goes on. *She-Ra's* queer representation certainly doesn't stop here. A main facet of the show's plot is the relationship between Adora and her childhood

best friend Catra. When Adora leaves the Horde, she and Catra become enemies on the opposite side of the war. Catra attempts to get Adora to return to the Horde, and Adora tries to convince Catra to leave it. As the show progresses, their relationship becomes more complex and starts to have a romantic undertone, culminating in Catra and Adora sharing a kiss that saves the world in the show's finale (Stevenson). Similar things happen in any number of children's shows and movies, with "true love's kiss" saving the day, but none of those shows had queer characters sharing that important kiss. Not only did *She-Ra* have queer characters, it had queer protagonists. What's more, *She-Ra* took a classic trope, true love's kiss, and applied it to queer characters, demonstrating for kids that there's more than one type of "true" love. *She-Ra* was an incredibly important step in the inclusion of queer representation in children's media, as it truly opened doors for the inclusion of queer protagonists in children's animation.

The Owl House

One of the best children's shows for queer representation is *The Owl House*. The show follows its protagonist, Luz Noceda, as she gets up to wacky antics in the demon realm and learns how to be a witch (Terrace). It starts as a fun, wacky show, but as it continues the plot gets darker and the show spends more time with its many complex character arcs. The show is a treasure trove of queer rep, with its protagonist Luz not only being bisexual but actively shown dating another member of the main cast, antagonist-turned-friend Amity Blight. In the episode "Knock, Knock, Knockin' on Hooty's Door", Luz attempts (and succeeds) to ask out Amity (Terrace) This was monumental, because this moment did not occur in the show's finale, a common theme among shows featuring queer characters. No, this moment happened about halfway through season two, allowing the show to explore their relationship and providing a

positive example of queer representation. The show has more types of queer representation than just Luz and Amity's relationship, a good example being the character Raine Whispers. Raine is nonbinary, and it's represented very casually. Specific terms are never put to their identity, but they are exclusively referred to with they/them pronouns in the show, giving kids an example of a different type of gender identity. Most kids probably don't know what being nonbinary is, or that they could use different pronouns, and giving them an example like Raine Whispers helps normalize nonbinary people to children.

The Owl House does more than just be gay. It also works to dismantle some common stereotypes and basic character archetypes, a wonderful example of this is the character Gus. Gus is the guy in the hexside trio of Luz, Gus, and their friend Willow (Terrace). Yet Gus is not portrayed in either of the ways the male character in a group of girls is portrayed. This typically happens one of two ways. The male character can be presented very femininely and flamboyantly, like in *The Proud Family: Louder and Prouder* where the main character, Penny Proud's male friend Micheal Collins is openly and flamboyantly gay (Smith). You could also get a love triangle, like in *The Legend of Korra*, where the protagonist Korra, her male friend Mako, and their friend Asami end up in a complex love triangle, eventually taking the ultimate plot twist when it's implied (and later confirmed in the comics) that Korra and Asami end up together (DiMartino). Throughout this all, Mako is portrayed as your typical masculine man. While there are certainly some exceptions to this rule, the standard has certainly been set to be either a love triangle or a gay best friend. Gus from *The Owl House* breaks this standard. Gus is presented as a sensitive character in touch with his emotions, typically feminine traits. Yet Gus still displays some stereotypical masculine traits, making sure his friend Willow calls a doll a "figurine" and

visually presenting as more masculine (Terrace). What's more, Gus is never shown to be gay. I've spent this entire essay talking about how important queer representation is and how we need more, but the fact that Gus *isn't* gay is just as important. Gus breaks stereotypical masculine molds without being labeled as queer for it, providing kids with a different example of masculinity. It's important for kids to see themselves reflected in the characters they watch, and very few kids fit into the typical mold of these archetype characters. Providing kids with diverse, non-archetypal characters allows them a better chance of feeling seen by the media they watch, and queer media tends to contain more of these characters.

The Impact of Queer Representation for Kids

Queer representation is incredibly important for children, but why? Here's an analogy: imagine you're born with green hair, but everyone else has purple hair. Your parents, your siblings, your friends, all of them have purple hair except for you. Almost every character you watch on tv has purple hair, and the only people who do have green hair like yours are either made fun of for having green hair, or are the evil villains, and all of those villains are using their hair to attack people. Having green hair must be something bad. So you try to dye your hair purple, but it doesn't take. So you start to hide your hair under a hat and wish you could have purple hair like everyone else. That's what it feels like to grow up queer when the only things you see in the media that feel like *you* are the bad guys or are ridiculed for being themselves. But imagine one of those shows you watched had a main character with green hair, and when you watched that show you felt seen. Maybe you take off that hat, because you feel more confident in yourself. And maybe when you take that hat off, some of your friends will take off their hats and reveal that they had green hair too because they aren't as scared knowing they aren't alone. It's

so important for kids to feel represented in the media because it helps them feel confident in themselves. An article from *Action For Children* put it very well, “For children who are exposed to television and other media from a young age, positive representation matters. Seeing themselves authentically represented in the media, helps LGBTQ+ children and young people validate their experiences” (Cruz). For kids to feel confident in their identities, they need to feel like those identities are valid, and positive queer representation provides that reassurance.

How kids see queer media is nearly as important as the representation the media contains. When you were a little kid, I’m sure your parents and teachers made an attempt to teach you right from wrong, and I’m sure some of those principles still sit with you today. If a parent is showing a child tv shows with queer representation and expressing positive opinions on the queer representation, it’s going to affirm for that child that being queer is ok. If parents are actively avoiding showing queer representation to children, those children aren’t going to know if their home is a safe space if they identify as queer. They might be forced to find those spaces elsewhere, likely at school, where they might have queer friends. Representation in tv shows that parents actively choose to play for their children plays a big role in a child’s understanding of their parent’s perspective on queerness. Parents are in charge of what they teach their children, and “[l]ike animated cartoons, schools and parents have the power to teach counter-narratives that challenge dominant structures, though more often than not they end up socializing children to subscribe to heteronormativity” (Storz 10). By intentionally showing their children queer media, parents teach their kids that it's ok to be gay, allowing kids to feel safe in exploring their identity.

Survey Results

I surveyed members of Lavender House, Virginia Tech's LGBTQ+ Living Learning Community, about their experiences with queer representation in media. I received twenty responses and asked them questions about when they first saw a gay character in the media, and when they personally felt represented by the media. I found that most people first saw a queer character from the ages of ten to fifteen, and only half of those people first saw a queer character in a children's show. Only two respondents first saw a queer character in a Disney show. Responses about feeling truly represented by a character in media were much more varied, and 65% of respondents had not felt represented by a character until after the age of sixteen. One fifth of the respondents named a character from *The Owl House* as the first character they felt represented by, with four of the five people naming Luz Noceda, and one naming Raine Whispers. The only Disney characters people felt represented by were from *The Owl House*. Three of my respondents have still never felt represented by a character in the media. I asked how having (or not having) queer representation before the age of twelve affected them. Those who had queer representation felt they had been positively impacted, they realized they were queer sooner and felt more normal. No one said they were upset or negatively impacted by queer representation. Those who didn't have queer representation expressed that they wish they had had it. It took them longer to realize they were queer and made it more difficult for them to feel comfortable in their own skin. It's so important for children to feel represented in the media because it helps them to feel more confident in themselves and their identities, as evidenced by my survey responses. Those who oppose queer media for children often make the claim that it's "turning the kids gay", which a quick scroll through X (formerly twitter) makes evident with any number of people either making this claim or mocking those who make it. This claim is blatantly

untrue. As evidenced by the survey results, queer media does not “make” kids queer, it just helps them recognize their queerness by providing a positive representation of their identity that kids can see themselves in. Queer people who don’t see themselves represented in the media as children are still queer, it just becomes more difficult for these people to recognize and come to terms with their queerness.

Conclusion

When I was growing up, I didn’t get to watch any shows that had queer representation. I struggled to come to terms with my identity because it had never been presented to me as an acceptable option. It’s so incredibly important for kids to have positive queer representation in the media because it teaches kids that their identities are valid. Parents that show their kids queer media help to construct safe spaces for their children where they can explore their identity. By showing kids that queerness is ok through representation in the media you let a whole generation grow up feeling confident in themselves and their queerness. Even kids that aren’t queer still benefit, as queer media tends to contain diverse, non-archetypal characters showing different expressions of traditional gender. It’s so important for kids to be able to see themselves in the media, and queer kids deserve to see themselves just as much.

Appendix

Survey questions

- Are you a member of the LGBTQ+ community?
- How do you identify?
- Do you identify as trans and/or nonbinary?

- What was the first time you saw queer character in a book, movie, or tv show?
(please name the character and the book/movie/tv show they are from)
- Approximately what age were you when you saw this character?
- When was the first time you felt represented by a character in a book, movie, or tv show? (please name the character and the book/movie/tv show they are from)
- Approximately what age were you when you saw this character?
- If you saw queer representation in media when you were 12 and under, how did that impact you growing up?
- If you didn't see queer representation in the media when you were growing up, how did that impact you?

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