

‘Some degree of hope’

A queer reading of two young adult novels in
post-agreement Northern Ireland

ØYVOR FOSSLI LODDENGAARD

SUPERVISOR

Professor Charles Ivan Armstrong

University of Agder, May 2020

Faculty of Humanities and Education

Department of Foreign Languages and Translation

Master

Abstract

In 2018, a report published by Stonewall UK revealed that 52 per cent of LGBT individuals struggled with depression in the past year. The same year, an article claimed that Northern Ireland had the highest prevalence of mental illness and the highest rate of suicides in the UK. This thesis will explore how LGBTQ youths are portrayed in two literary fictions set in contemporary Northern Ireland. *The Unknowns* (2017) and *Every Sparrow Falling* (2019), both written by Shirley-Anne McMillan, are young adult novels that depict and comment on how LGBTQ youths are perceived in contemporary Northern Ireland. By reading these two novels through the theoretical framework of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Michel Foucault and Judith Butler, this thesis will elucidate a perhaps less prominent legacy of the Troubles than the politics of segregation. Because the novels are written for young adults, this thesis will also provide extensive discussion of historical and contemporary context in order to make sense of the novels in relation to the physical and psychological landscape of Northern Ireland.

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Chapter 1: Introduction and Context

While I slept, a man went to a gay club
with two guns and killed forty-nine people.
Today in an interview, his father said he had been disturbed
recently by the sight of two men kissing.¹

“A Poem for Pulse”, by Jameson Fitzpatrick, was published to commemorate a brutal 2016 massacre in the gay club Pulse, located in Orlando, Florida, where 49 people lost their lives. In the aftermath of this tragedy, speculations on the shooter’s motives circulated, and some claimed that the shooter himself, who died, engaged in homoerotic relationships. However, because the shooter died, he was not able to provide an explanation of his actions or sexual orientation. Nonetheless, as the poem states, his father claimed that watching two men kiss had initially provoked the action. Fitzpatrick places the persona of the poem as a man who kisses another man openly on the streets: “As I kissed this man I was aware of them watching / and of myself wondering whether or not they were just.”² By establishing himself as the initial provoker, Fitzpatrick suggests that the speaker triggered the shooter’s hatred prior to committing the massacre. This establishes his agenda for kissing this man as nothing but love, while additionally introducing a feeling of guilt, or paranoia, for provoking someone to commit such carnage. Thus, Fitzpatrick’s suggestion implies that when the persona’s action is named as the trigger for this tragedy it can, in turn, reflect the stress caused by the prejudice still prevailing the LGBTQ minority (i.e. the community of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer individuals).

To characterise a community which has suffered and endured many of the same battles, but still consist of various inequalities, might offer several challenges. Today’s LGBTQ community has many struggles in common, and it is useful to briefly address the way this community has been treated in the past decades, in order to provide a thorough baseline for this thesis’s addressing of queer literature and the perception of LGBTQ individuals. Fitzpatrick stresses the fact that when the shooting took place: “There must have been two men kissing / for the first time last night, and for the last, / and two women, too, and two people who were neither.”³ This passage can offer two possible meanings. First, it can be read

¹Jameson Fitzpatrick, "A Poem for Pulse", from *Bullets into Bells: Poets and Citizens Respond to Gun Violence* (2017), lines 30 – 34.

² *Ibid.*, lines 22 – 23.

³ *Ibid.*, lines 51 – 53.

as a reference to the people who died during the shooting, portraying a commemoration of the love they shared for the last time. Second, and perhaps more significantly, it can be interpreted as a reference to the remaining LGBTQ community which might have experienced this through second-hand trauma and interpreted this action as a statement which undermines their performance of identity. Hateful actions and utterances impose constraints on people who challenge conventional gender and sexuality norms, as is frequently demonstrated by history. The culture of sharing, which has become more convenient through media and the world wide web, has additionally simplified retrieval of information and exposure of actions. As a result, one can safely assume that the effects of a massacre like the one in Orlando was exposed to the rest of the world, including the whole LGBTQ community, within minutes. Hence, the effect brought by physical and psychological violence may inflict widespread fear and stress. This, in turn, could potentially trigger second-hand trauma for the remaining minority and consolidate further oppression. The struggle for equality within the LGBTQ community these last few decades has established the community as an unyielding advocate for change. However, as this thesis will show, when traumatic events transpire, they might also lead to a person relinquishing their identity.

The most urgent reason as to why LGBTQ persons are particularly susceptible to discrimination might derive from homosexuality long being listed as an illness. In the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, the American Psychiatric Association listed homosexuality as a mental disorder until 1973.⁴ However, despite discussion concerning whether or not to remove it, homosexuality was not completely discarded as a diagnosis until 1987; it was merely replaced with the ‘mental disorder’ “sexual orientation disturbance”.⁵ Furthermore, listing homosexuality as a mental disorder in the first place may also be regarded as testimony to how this community was discriminated in previous decades. Treatment, such as conversion therapy, has thus been provided to “cure” this illness, and such treatment was, and still is, heavily criticised for inflicting harm. Moreover, it is expedient to remark that while homosexuality disappeared as a diagnosis in 1987, “Gender Identity Disorder” remained a diagnosis until 2013.⁶

⁴ Neel Burton, “When Homosexuality Stopped Being a Mental Disorder” from *Psychology Today*, 2015, <https://psychologytoday.com/us/blog/hide-and-peek/201509/when-homosexuality-stopped-being-mental-disorder>.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: Dsm-5*. Arlington, VA: American Psychiatric Association, 2013, <https://psychiatry.org/psychiatrists/practice/dsm>.

Arguably, the struggle to gain acknowledgement of homosexuality as a sexual orientation, rather than a mental illness, has marked the perception of those who identify within the LGBTQ category. While prejudice against LGBTQ individuals has decreased drastically recently, “A Poem for Pulse” depicts how homophobia still exists and how it can yield a potentially lethal threat to LGBTQ individuals. The LGBTQ community challenges the status quo and seeks recognition on the same terms as those conforming to conventional gender and sexual norms.

This thesis will explore how LGBTQ youths are portrayed in two literary fictions set in contemporary Northern Ireland. *The Unknowns* (2017) and *Every Sparrow Falling* (2019), both written by Shirley-Anne McMillan, are young adult novels that depict and comment on how LGBTQ youths are perceived in contemporary Northern Ireland. Additionally, the novels present a critique of contemporary religion and society, which is interesting to explore when analysing how contemporary LGBTQ rights are represented in an, arguably, conservative society. When I interviewed McMillan in October 2019, she shared her thoughts on adolescents in Northern Ireland today and how “even young people are reticent to being themselves and talking about themselves too much, and I think that all has to do with being told constantly to keep quiet, ‘cause it could have been dangerous in the past.”⁷ Thus, McMillan introduces hesitation and people being secretive as a prominent issue for contemporary adolescents in Northern Ireland, and she further connects this issue to the legacy of the Troubles. Therefore, in this thesis, I will show how McMillan’s young adult novels present a critical debate of how Northern Irish LGBTQ youth perform their identity, and discuss potential threats imposed to such performances which may not conform to conventional gender and sexuality norms.

Purpose and Objective

The focus of this thesis is affected by it being part of a vocational programme for future English teachers in Norway. The student teacher programme is structured to embrace multiple aspects of preparing aspiring teachers for their future work as educators. The social mandate of educators in Norway includes the ability to approach and adhere to the pupils’ wholeness as humans. One of the main purposes for teachers in Norway is hence to provide the pupils

⁷ Appendix A, p. 61. This thesis’ title is a quote retrieved from the interview which is reproduced in its entirety in appendix A. Other headings in this thesis, marked with single quotation, are also retrieved from the appendix.

with “historical and cultural insight that will give them a good foundation in their lives and help each pupil to preserve and develop her or his identity in an inclusive and diverse environment”.⁸ Educators are thus granted a high level of responsibility that will involve interdisciplinary knowledge and methodology when teaching according to the curriculum. Additionally, the new core curriculum which is scheduled to take effect from August 2020 introduces “Health and life skills” as one of the new overarching principles to be integrated in all subjects taught in school. Norway’s Directory of Education (UDIR) emphasises that some relevant topics within “Health and life skills” are “mental health” and “sexuality and gender”.⁹ Hence, UDIR presents these themes as especially important to teach, and they are thus useful to gain knowledge of prior to teaching in a classroom.

The core curriculum additionally maintains that “[a] good society is founded on the ideals of inclusiveness and diversity”.¹⁰ This might sound like an idealistic and unrealistic goal for a teacher to be able to actively facilitate. However, if the teacher is utterly aware of this purpose, and is given tools to achieve this, it might be one of the most important aims of the school as an institution. For what is the aim of the education if not the duty of assisting to the development of pupils’ *Bildung* or formation of personal identity? If the school is then, by and large, the primary institution of character formation, it is essential that the underlying element of all teaching situations carries the message of cultural diversity and equal value of all humans. Literature, and perhaps especially young adult literature (YAL) intended for pupils in lower and upper secondary school, can then be considered a useful resource to increase cultural awareness. Moreover, cultural awareness may further contribute to a greater understanding of how our society is constructed and hence elucidate why it is crucial to allow for diversity in an inclusive society.

The purpose of this thesis is to examine how different characters and events in YAL reflect the development and performance of identity. Recognising the value of literature in the classroom presupposes a thorough presentation of cultural, social and historical elements that may increase the profit of utilising literature in a teaching situation. I hypothesise that YAL, especially when it can be regarded as somewhat controversial, can make a significant contribution to the process of identity development. Because this thesis has a focus on the

⁸ Utdanningsdirektoratet. “Identity and Cultural Diversity Core Curriculum.” 2017, <https://udir.no/lk20/overordnet-del/opplaringens-verdigrunnlag/1.2-identitet-og-kulturelt-mangfold/?lang=eng>.

⁹ Utdanningsdirektoratet. “Health and Life Skills Core Curriculum.” 2017, <https://udir.no/lk20/overordnet-del/prinsipper-for-laring-utvikling-og-danning/tverrfaglige-temaer/folkehelse-og-livsmestring/?lang=eng>.

¹⁰ Utdanningsdirektoratet. “Identity and Cultural Diversity Core Curriculum.” 2017.

LGBTQ community, this analysis will make use of queer theory, with emphasis on theories developed by Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. A queer reading of *The Unknowns* and *Every Sparrow Falling* may offer a significant interpretation of the characters in the novels and how their identity performances are portrayed.

One strategy within queer reading is to focus on texts which are not canonised. In situations of teaching, it is common to utilise canonised literature to increase pupils' understanding of the world's cultural heritage. However, it is arguably essential to additionally utilise modern and contemporary literature to understand contemporary culture, and subject curriculums in Norway increasingly allow for modern texts to be used in teaching situations. This makes it interesting for this thesis to present and discuss how contemporary literature conveys the reality of LGBTQ individuals today, as the two novels by McMillan, although fictional, present what can be regarded as a realistic portrayal of youth culture in Northern Ireland. Moreover, it is important for an aspiring teacher to prepare, be aware, and be committed to the idea that teaching is about more than gaining knowledge of a subject. The aspect of personal identity formation is particularly interesting when exploring how literature can express features to elucidate how gender and sexuality, and those who deviate from heteronormative conventions, are challenged when facing society. The challenges referenced here will of course vary greatly from society to society, and country to country. Nevertheless, the specific historical and contemporary social features of Northern Ireland are intriguing when discussing LGBTQ.

In order to interpret the selected novels, it is useful to understand the situation in Northern Ireland. Moreover, the conflict in Northern Ireland in the latter half of the 20th century, apart having ongoing consequences for the politics of the United Kingdom and the Republic, is a crucial basis for understanding the social structure today. The following subchapter will therefore first offer a brief introduction to recent history of Northern Ireland and subsequently portray how the legacy of the Northern Irish conflict, and its peace process, has contributed negatively to the contemporary social situation. After a historical introduction on Northern Ireland, I will offer a discussion of identity development and how YAL can facilitate this process. Finally, the theoretical framework will be presented. It will be useful to address all these elements to fully frame the analysis of Shirley-Anne McMillan's novels.

“Post-Conflict” Northern Ireland: A Legacy of the Troubles

The year of 2018 marked fifty years since the beginning of the conflict in Northern Ireland. The violence, trauma and political unease that endured for three decades is commonly referred to as ‘The Troubles’. Initially the conflict appeared to be a social struggle to overcome oppression due to severe political dissonance. However, Olga Skarlato et al. postulate in “Grassroots Peacebuilding in Northern Ireland and the Border Counties” that the conflict essentially emerged from not only “divided political ideologies” but also “ethno-religious identities, and systemic poverty”.¹¹ When the Troubles flared up in the late 1960s, it had thus been building up for centuries.

The oppression of Catholic-Nationalists encouraged activist movements, heavily influenced by the concurrent Civil Rights Movement in the United States of America. Nationalists in Northern Ireland initiated protests in the streets where “One man, one vote” was an effectively used slogan to promote their peaceful message. The Northern Ireland Civil Rights Movement did not promote a violent approach to reach their goal of political equality. However, as the conflict advanced, paramilitary forces such as the Provisional Irish Republican Army and the Ulster Volunteer Force increased the tension in the relatively small country (population of 1.8 million), and during the 1970s the conflict intensified. The Troubles led to 3,500 deaths and caused severe injury to 47,000 people; these three decades engendered, arguably, the traumatising of an entire country.¹²

In 1998, the Good Friday Agreement (Belfast Agreement) settled the country as one in peace. However, the obscurity prominent in the peace process led to further unsettlement for the contemporary political structure as well as contributed to a latent traumatic legacy. When introducing *The Legacy of the Good Friday Agreement*, Charles I. Armstrong, David Herbert and Jan Erik Mustad emphasise the gruelling process of reaching an agreement to end violence.¹³ The negotiations of this process were compromising for both opposing communities, and the several political parties that were involved, and it can be argued whether peace was truly reached in post-agreement Northern Ireland. Furthermore, even though much of the violence has ended, the country is arguably not entirely post-conflict, but

¹¹ Olga Skarlato, et al., "Grassroots Peacebuilding in Northern Ireland and the Border Counties: Elements of An Effective Model," 2013, p. 5.

¹² Siobhan O’Neill, Nichola Rooney, “Mental health in Northern Ireland: an urgent situation”, *The Lancet Psychiatry*, 8 Nov. 2018, [https://thelancet.com/journals/lanpsy/article/PIIS2215-0366\(18\)30392-4/fulltext](https://thelancet.com/journals/lanpsy/article/PIIS2215-0366(18)30392-4/fulltext).

¹³ Charles I. Armstrong, David Herbert, Jan Erik Mustad, (eds.). *The Legacy of the Good Friday Agreement: Northern Irish Politics, Culture and Art after 1998*. 2018. p. 2.

rather in a state of tension. In “The Northern Irish Peace Process: Political Issues and Controversies”, Eamonn O’Kane and Paul Dixon establish the fundamental issue circling the peace process as the matter of how the events taking place during the Troubles, and the ensuing negotiations, were perceived. In other words, the opposing parties of the conflict share the memory of the events. However, the perception of such memories are not similar. O’Kane and Dixon problematise this when presenting the dispute that existed over “who *should* make concessions and who *can* make concessions”.¹⁴ O’Kane and Dixon’s account points to what sacrifices, or concessions, were made and how this would mark the communities in the aftermath of the conflict. However, after excessive negotiation, the Good Friday Agreement was eventually signed 10 April 1998, and the Troubles was meant to become a matter of the past.

Even though the conflict was officially resolved, and peace was reached, there still exists an ambiguity as to whether Northern Ireland is in fact “post-conflict”. Skarlato et al. elaborate on the equivocalness of “peace-building” and how the commitment to keep working on this is crucial to achieve true peace, and not just ceasefire. Because, with a legacy of segregation, sectarianism, and still deeply divided ethno-religious identities, the process of peace-building was, and still is, aimed to address “both the trauma and devastation caused by overt violence and the deeper historical divisions that form the conflict’s core.”¹⁵ Moreover, the perhaps extended issue is whether the core of the cause is transferred to the next generation or left in the past. Thus, the debate about whether Northern Ireland is a country at peace or not, introduces the aspect of second-hand trauma.

The concept of second-hand, or transgenerational, trauma draws on the hypothesis that trauma can be transmissible. In her article “The Generation of Postmemory”, Marianne Hirsch elucidates how trauma is transferred from one generation or person to another. This transfer of traumatic experience is, according to Hirsch, primarily based on photographic evidence in which the traumatic event that transpired is preserved and shown to the following generation, and thus instigate postmemory.¹⁶ Postmemory, Hirsch explains, is “not actually mediated by recall, but imaginative investment, projection and creation”.¹⁷ Hence, even though the traumatic event preceded the postmemory generations’ birth, their parents’ narrative carries

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 19.

¹⁵ Skarlato, et al., "Grassroots Peacebuilding in Northern Ireland and the Border Counties: Elements of An Effective Model," 2013. *Peace and Conflict Studies*. p. 5.

¹⁶ Marianne Hirsch, “The Generation of Postmemory.” *Poetics Today*, 2008, p. 107.

¹⁷ Ibid.

weight, which further contributes to the traumatic memories being consolidated instead of worked through.

The complexity of the Troubles and the core of this conflict calls for a presentation of why it is fertile to elucidate the occurrence of postmemory in Northern Ireland today. Because, as Hirsch postulates, when growing up with “such overwhelming inherited memories, to be dominated by narratives that preceded one’s birth or one’s consciousness, is to risk having one’s own stories and experiences displaced, even evacuated, by those of a previous generation.”¹⁸ What Hirsch then argues is that the postmemory of a conflict can in fact expropriate personal experience and perhaps even identity development. In Northern Ireland, this issue is crucial to elucidate when examining strategies for peacebuilding. The historical frame of Northern Ireland has already established the country as a segregated one, and for this segregation to turn into integration, it is crucial for the generation who experienced the Troubles to end the fostering of us versus them attitudes. Furthermore, it is generally posited that a conflict is divided between victims and perpetrators. However, it is not always a clear division between the two. Hirsch problematises this notion in the state of postmemory, as she questions whether it is ancestors of the victims only who are receptive to postmemory of traumatic events. In the history of Holocaust, which Hirsch utilises as the basis for her argument, these positions may “have come to be taken for granted”.¹⁹ However, when examining the Troubles, there is no consensus as to which of the opposing parties of the conflict is the victim and who is the perpetrator. Perhaps that is why resolving this conflict has become so complicated and the country still experiences political instability and remaining sectarianism.

Seeing postmemory as a big part of the Northern Irish landscape today introduces another critical aspect which is useful for the following discussion. According to the United Kingdom charity organisation Samaritans’ “Suicide statistics report” from December 2019, suicide is the primary death cause of those aged 16-24 years.²⁰ In 2018, 6,507 people committed suicide in the UK, and the highest suicide rate was in Northern Ireland.²¹ Does the high rate of suicide in Northern Ireland reflect transferred trauma from the Troubles, or postmemory? A possible strategy to help answer this question would be to examine statistics in Northern Ireland alone

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Charlotte Simms, et al., “Suicide Statistics Report: Latest Statistics for the UK and Republic of Ireland.” Samaritans, Dec 2019, p. 7, https://media.samaritans.org/documents/SamaritansSuicideStatsReport_2019_Full_report.pdf.

²¹ Ibid., p. 5.

in the past decades. Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency published a register of suicide statistics as an addendum to the “Annual Report of the Registrar General”, accounting for the number of deaths by suicide in the region in 2018.²² This overview demonstrates that the number of deaths by suicide has drastically increased from 73 committed in 1970 to 307 in 2018.²³ It is additionally revealed in the Samaritans’ report that men aged between 25 and 29 had the highest suicide rate in Northern Ireland in 2018. Based on these numbers, it can be assumed that those contributing to the highest rate in Northern Ireland, are in fact not those who experienced trauma first hand during the Troubles, but rather those who grew up and inherited trauma from their parents or grandparents.

Although such statistics do not suffice to establish the Troubles as the cause of the high suicide rate in Northern Ireland, it is arguably one of the contributing factors. This can be evidenced by examining research published on mental illness, which uncovers that the prevalence of mental health issues in Northern Ireland can largely be traced to trauma from the aftermath of the Troubles. In “Mental health in Northern Ireland: an urgent situation”, Siobhan O’Neill and Nichola Rooney state that not only does Northern Ireland have the highest rate of suicide in the United Kingdom, but additionally “the highest prevalence of mental illness in the UK”.²⁴ Moreover, a 2008 analysis revealed that 39% of the Northern Irish population had experienced a traumatic episode that they linked to the Troubles.²⁵ Hence, the Troubles is decidedly a cause when discussing the contemporary psychological landscape of Northern Irish inhabitants. The context of this legacy of the Troubles is important when conducting an analysis of Northern Irish literature by local authors, as it will contribute to a greater understanding of that literature’s purpose. However, considering that this thesis has a focus on the LGBTQ community and young adults, it is equally important to examine the state of mental health amongst those specifically identifying within that category in Northern Ireland.

LGBTQ mental health is a heavily debated subject in countries all over the world. Public and volunteer organisations have multiple campaigns and strategies to highlight contemporary struggles in LGBTQ communities. In the United Kingdom, the charity organisation Stonewall was formed in 1989 as a response to the Local Government Act, and has since become the

²² “Suicide Statistics.” *Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency*, 5 Feb. 2020, [nisra.gov.uk/publications/suicide-statistics](https://www.nisra.gov.uk/publications/suicide-statistics).

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Siobhan and Rooney, “Mental Health in Northern Ireland: an Urgent Situation.”

²⁵ Ibid.

largest organisation of its kind in Europe.²⁶ Their slogan “acceptance without exception”, establishes their mission as lobbyists attempting to change both discriminative laws, discriminative perceptions, and discriminative institutions. Stonewall additionally publishes reports on mental health amongst LGBTQ individuals to raise awareness of why their mission is an important one. A report published in 2018, in cooperation with YouGov, showed such key findings as: 52 per cent of LGBT people have experienced depression in the last year; 13 per cent of LGBT people aged between 18 and 24 attempted suicide in the last year; 46 per cent of trans people and 31 per cent of LGB people had in the last year thought about taking their own life; self-harm and a disturbed relationship to drugs and alcohol were reported as frequent amongst those questioned.²⁷ These statistics refer to the UK in general, and it is, unfortunately, difficult to find research on this issue exclusive to Northern Ireland. What is, however, distinct to Northern Ireland, is that they have recently become the last country in the United Kingdom to pass legislation to legalise same sex marriage.²⁸ The legislation was passed in 2019, by Westminster, after having faced a lot of opposition from local politicians. The legalisation of same-sex marriage has, however, arguably made Northern Ireland a more promising place to live in for LGBTQ couples.

Young Adult Literature: Carrying Out One’s Identity

To read fiction is to experience, and take part in, a culture or society which often exist far from, but sometimes close to, the reality of the reader’s surroundings. To use literature as a tool for broadening and challenging an individual’s mindset is arguably of great value in the process of identity development. For not only will the reader learn new perspectives on others’ culture and lives, but additionally it may nurture the reader’s own cognitive development and arguably generate an increased respect and comprehension for the way society is structured, or equally important a critique of such. This will, perhaps, be most apparent when reading literature about controversial topics, which in turn can cause emotional reactions. Moreover, for the reader to find literature intriguing, it must, arguably, deal with topics designed to captivate him or her. It is, therefore, crucial to acknowledge different categories of literature, as they are adjusted to fit the targeted reader. The category of

²⁶ *Local Government Act*, 1988, c.28. <http://legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1988/9/section/28>.

²⁷ Chaka L. Bachmann and Becca Gooch. “LGBT in Britain: Health Report.” Stonewall, 2018. p. 5, https://stonewall.org.uk/system/files/lgbt_in_britain_health.pdf.

²⁸ *Northern Ireland (Executive Formation etc) Act 2019*, c.8. <http://legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2019/22/enacted>.

literature crucial to this thesis is young adult literature, and this subchapter will focus on the relationship between identity development and this category of fiction.

YAL can be contrasted with the category of children's literature. Perry Nodelman explores the genre of children's literature in *The Hidden Adult: Defining Children's Literature*, where he stipulates that "children's literature tends to see things from the viewpoint of innocence – as children theoretically see them".²⁹ Establishing children's literature as a representation of innocence might then place YAL as representing the process of losing innocence. The years of adolescence involve many changes, both corporeal and cognitive, and these years are arguably critically different to that of being an independent adult. To write literature for young adults, then, means to complement the processes of identity development particular to that age and to write about topics and issues relevant to the targeted reader.

The same way that children's literature served to the formation of children and appealed to the innocence of a child by explaining daily routines, such as the importance of nutritious food and hygiene, and discouraging inappropriate behaviour, YAL appeared contemporaneous with the emergence of a young adult group, in the 1930s and 40s in America, to contribute to the personal identity formation of adolescents. The category of YAL is composed to provide stories that teenagers can relate to. Protagonists of this literature might often be, but are not as a general rule, the same age as the target reader. It can then be assumed that literature offer a gateway into various cognitive perspectives and social surroundings that broaden the experience and further the development of one's identity.

To see what distinguishes teenagers from children on one side, and adults on the other, it is fruitful to address Erik Erikson's stages of psychosocial development, as this theory provides suggestive answers as to why it is crucial to have YAL as a designated category for adolescents. Erikson launched the theory of eight lifespan stages to articulate the psychological development that a person experiences from infancy to late adulthood. The fifth stage, which deals with adolescence (the period spanning from 13 to 19 years) is particularly relevant in this context. Alan S. Waterman published an extended theory on this stage in 1982. In his extension of Erikson's theory, Waterman elaborates on how the "progressive strengthening of identity" and "the development of an ideological world view" are largely

²⁹ Perry Nodelman, *The Hidden Adult: Defining Children's Literature*, 2008, p. 135.

connected to the theory of identity development during adolescence.³⁰ He also emphasises the room for other questions in this development process that deal with “sex role appropriate behaviour and sexual orientation”.³¹ These concepts outline the rough elements that characterise this period in life, but to further comprehend how this theory can explain development of identity for young adults, it is desirable to address the possible psychosocial crises that might occur during this stage. Waterman utilises the term crisis to cover a “period of struggle or active questioning in arriving at such aspects of personal identity as vocational choice and ideological beliefs”.³² Such crises are of utmost importance during the process of developing an identity. The psychosocial crises that might impose a threat to identity development involve role confusion and attempting to visualise one’s future as an adult. Hence, it can be argued that for a young individual in the process of seeking a stable identity, the crises can in turn pose a threat to the development itself. Depending on how one tackle such a crisis will then determine the basis of one’s next step towards arriving at a stable identity.

Furthermore, Waterman distinguishes between an identity achiever “who has gone through a period of crises and has developed relatively firm commitments” and identity diffusion which “includes individuals who do not have firm commitments and who are not actively trying to form them”.³³ It is thus implied that in order to achieve a satisfactory development of identity, one must work through such crises concerning who you are and who you wish to become. However, as Waterman points to in his extension of Erikson’s theory, the period after stage five, referring to the years of early adulthood (between 20 and 39 years), might be equally important in the sense of developing an identity, because many of these years will work as an extension of the teenage years. Thus, it is inadequate to assume that after having completed the years of adolescence, your religious, ideological and sexual identity is fully developed. In other words, the argument of this discussion is not that an individual’s identity is fully developed after the age of 19. However, the period leading up to that age is crucial for identity development in the sense that it establishes the fundamentals to encourage experimenting with who you are, which are crucial to who you become later. In this process of developing an identity, literature may provide external aspects which are fertile

³⁰ Alan S. Waterman, “Identity Development From Adolescence to Adulthood: An Extension of Theory and a Review of Research.” 1982. p. 341, <https://psycnet.apa.org/fulltext/1982-23438-001.pdf>.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid., p. 342.

³³ Ibid.

for the adolescent to interact and experience, as it can contribute to the shaping of who one becomes as an adult.

Another influential theorist strengthening the claim that literature aimed distinctly at young adults is crucial to the development of identity, is Michel Foucault. Foucault elaborated on the importance of the relationship between written work and young adults, and their search for (sexual) identity in “Friendship as a Way of Life”, through claiming that “[t]he more it [literature] is written about young people the more it concerns young people”, pointing to a magazine where he was one of the contributors.³⁴ In other words, for YAL to be compelling for young adults, it must present issues and topics that concern them. Foucault additionally claims that the pursuit for finding one’s identity is not obstructed by trying to discover the truth about one’s orientation. Instead, Foucault suggests that the person in process of developing their identity should “use one’s sexuality henceforth to arrive at a multiplicity of relationships”.³⁵ He thus proposes another aim for the process of developing a (sexual) identity, with emphasis on branching out to encounter people in a newfound manner. This is particularly important when discussing identity development, because while it might be crucial to debate inner questions, or crises, to arrive at the identity of yourself, it is additionally important to fashion your identity not in solitude but in companionship.

Having thus provided and discussed the purpose, historical background and contemporary relevance to fully frame the context of McMillan’s *The Unknowns* and *Every Sparrow Falling*, it is useful to now present and discuss the theoretical framework which the analyses are based on. The theories, which I will elaborate on in chapter two, represent different strategies of how LGBTQ individuals perform their identity and perceptions of such performances. First, I will present and discuss Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s concepts of having either a ‘universalizing’ or ‘minoritizing’ view of homosexuality and her theories of paranoid reading and reparative reading. Second, Michel Foucault’s display of how homosexuality was condemned and what this means for a contemporary perception of LGBTQ individuals is useful to understand how the manifestation of a heteronormative society is still evident today. Last, I will present Judith Butler and her theory of performativity to be further utilised when analysing how some characters in the two novels perform their gender.

³⁴ Michel Foucault. *Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984*, ed. Paul Rabinow, 1997, p. 135.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick: Repairing Paranoia

As a new field of study in the early 1990s, ‘Queer Theory’ introduced several new aspects of understanding literature.³⁶ For one, new readings of the literary canon contributed to shedding light on previously ignored matters, revealing perceptions of sexual orientation that contradict the heteronormative attitude which dominated previous interpretations of classical literature. Secondly, previously ignored openly LGBTQ writers became recognised for their effort to convey their stories through literature. Thus, this introduction of queer theory to become a new theoretical field of not only academia, but additionally of new attitudes and perceptions of society in general, increased the awareness of the discrimination and misconceptions still characterising the LGBTQ community. Recognising this field of studies additionally highlighted how authors identifying within the LGBTQ category had previously experienced restraint and coercion, and how they now exhorted acceptance and equal rights through their literary works. One of the major contributors to the field, which is today referred to as queer theory, is Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick.

Being one of the most influential theorists in the field, Sedgwick debated, in *Epistemology of the Closet*, the concepts ‘minoritizing’ and ‘universalizing’ views of the LGBTQ experience. Sedgwick characterised the ‘minoritizing’ view as “an issue of active importance primarily for a small, distinct relatively fixed homosexual minority”.³⁷ According to this view, being homosexual is a biological facticity which a minority of the community are born as. Thus, there are no environmental factors to contribute or eliminate the preconditions of being gay. Moving on, Sedgwick discusses the ‘universalizing’ view of LGBTQ experience, claiming that it can be seen “as an issue of continuing, determinative importance in the lives of people across the spectrum of sexualities ... seeing same-sex object choice ... as a matter of liminality or transitivity between genders”.³⁸ This implies that homosexuality is something transmitted from one person to another, a controversial claim that might potentially cause increased homophobic perceptions. Sedgwick underscores the idea that the ‘universalizing’ view allows for an individual’s urge to additionally shape their sexual orientation in order to reflect “an impulse of separatism”.³⁹ This can again be understood to

³⁶ Lois Tyson, *Critical Theory Today: a User-Friendly Guide*. 2015. p. 303.

³⁷ Eve K. Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*. 1990. p. 1.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 1-2.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

neglect the idea of a biologically fixed perception of sexuality, making it instead into a strategy of conforming to social conventions surrounding such individuals.

When discussing these views, Sedgwick embraces the different perceptions that still prevail in the LGBTQ community. However, an important note must be clarified before further discussing Sedgwick's approach to reading queer texts. Because, the choice of embracing either a 'minoritizing' view or a 'universalizing' view when discussing and reading queer theories or literature will potentially lead to critically different readings. This thesis will, however, not attempt to settle the question whether the LGBTQ experience is determined by biological facilities or social influence, as I consider this to be an affair for the sociobiological research field. What I do believe, however, is that Sedgwick's distinction between 'minoritizing' and 'universalizing' views can be interpreted as an instructive reminder of how the issue of homosexuality exceeds the mere biological identity of being gay.

Also crucial to Sedgwick's deployment in this thesis, is her reading strategies of queer literature. In "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading; or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Introduction Is about You", Sedgwick elaborates on a distinction between paranoid and reparative approaches to literature. To understand how these reading strategies are valuable as framework for the analysis of the two novels chosen for this thesis, it is first useful to discuss their relation to each other. Sedgwick refers to Sigmund Freud when demonstrating the connection between queer and paranoia. Because, according to Sedgwick, Freud "traced every instance of paranoia to the repression of specifically same-sex desire" and, historically, homophobic psychoanalytic readings associated with Freud "pathologize[d] homosexuals as paranoid".⁴⁰ It even went so far that, from a psychoanalytic perspective, paranoia was regarded as "a distinctively homosexual disease".⁴¹ Paranoia is generally defined as a "mental illness characterized by systematized delusions of persecution or grandeur usually without hallucinations", or "a tendency on the part of an individual or group toward excessive or irrational suspiciousness and distrustfulness of others".⁴² While the first definition accounts for the mental illness and its effects on the sufferer, and is thus perhaps what Freud's psychoanalysis initially aimed to address, the second definition is much more relevant to Sedgwick's theory of paranoid reading. That is to say, the paranoia

⁴⁰ Eve K. Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading; or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Introduction Is about You." 2003. p. 6, <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822384786>.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² "Paranoia." *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, Merriam-Webster, <https://merriam-webster.com/dictionary/paranoia>.

characterising the LGBTQ community may be justified due to the suffering of homophobia they have endured for centuries. Furthermore, it might be a paradox that the theory which Sedgwick proposes is aimed at literature which might attempt to conceal what has been the struggle for LGBTQ individuals in the past. Or, on the other hand, certain LGBTQ stories may instead attempt to accentuate positive trends, which could lead to increased awareness of traditions in the past and introduce discussions of controversial topics.

To comprehend how a paranoid reading might be applied, I will first offer a brief discussion of the main features for this strategy. Sedgwick outlines five approaches that are distinctive to paranoid reading as a textual practice: ‘Paranoia is *anticipatory*’, ‘Paranoia is *reflexive* and *mimetic*’, ‘Paranoia is *a strong theory*’, ‘Paranoia is a theory of *negative affects*’, and ‘Paranoia places its faith in *exposure*’.⁴³ Two of these I find particularly interesting and will be further utilised when commencing my analysis. Let us first address the suggestion that ‘Paranoia is *anticipatory*’: Sedgwick claims that when dealing with paranoia, the first requirement of anticipation is “‘*There must be no bad surprises*’”.⁴⁴ In this context, ‘no bad surprises’ points to the reader being fully aware of, and expecting, that unpleasant findings will be revealed in the text he or she reads. Such unpleasant findings may include, but are not limited to, negative reactions and homophobic incidents related to performing an identity which contradicts the normative way of assigning one’s gender or sexual orientation. Thus, the underlying foundation for performing a paranoid reading must be to always expect the bad, and instead be surprised by the good. This introduces a paradox generated by the very essence of paranoia. Sedgwick stipulates that “the complex relation to temporality” that springs from this prerequisite of needing prior knowledge to be prepared for not evoking ‘bad surprises’ was probably an unpleasant finding for the reader at first.⁴⁵ The temporality thus becomes a circle, and the performer of the paranoid reading needs to be utterly aware of this relation between the basis of an unpleasant finding and of having the extensive background knowledge in order to avoid the ‘bad surprise’.

Also relevant for my literary analyses, is the fifth approach: ‘Paranoia places its faith in *exposure*’. This strategy raises the question of the varying motivations behind the exposing of paranoia in a specific situation. Because paranoia is a very intricate concept, the motivation among paranoid readers might differ due to the subjective element of the reading. However,

⁴³ Sedgwick, “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading; or, You’re So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Introduction Is about You.” 2003, p. 9.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

according to Sedgwick, faith of exposure is ultimately what constitutes the reader's motivation for pursuing the extensive knowledge which may moderate the unpleasant findings in a text. Sedgwick additionally problematises the exposure that occurs when the mind-set of reading is a paranoid one. She asks, "what does a hermeneutic of suspicion and exposure have to say to social formations in which visibility itself constitutes much of the violence", and there is no clear-cut answer.⁴⁶ However, what can be further anticipated from Sedgwick's question is whether the visibility highlighted through a paranoid reading will offer a thorough explanation for how exposure might contribute to further violence, even though its intention might be to make amends. For in some cases it is perhaps not paranoia as an isolated trait that constitutes or provokes violence, it is rather the exposure of suspicious paranoia that authorises perceptibility which may lead to further violence dispensed by the hegemonic heteronormative community. If the reader intends to expose all evidence of mistreatment, there exists a preconditioned suspicion which might, in turn, result in the provoking of homophobic violence. This vicious circle is of course suspect, and perhaps paranoid itself.

The suspicions of paranoia present what is perhaps most crucial when discussing this theory. Because the reader must be paranoid to achieve a successful paranoid reading, there will always exist a connection to that of prior knowledge. And it is this prior knowledge that is fertile to access in order to elucidate the pleasant findings and stay clear of the 'bad surprises'. To take part in a paranoid reading might then be crucial for the purpose of a queer reading. Sedgwick states that a paranoid reading will "offer [a] unique access to true knowledge", however, this true knowledge additionally must admit the weaknesses of not knowing everything.⁴⁷ The emphasis of the paranoid strategy then boils down to representing ways "of seeking, finding, and organizing knowledge" that will be used "as a tool for better seeing differentials of practice".⁴⁸ To access the true meaning of a text, the reader must therefore account for the historical ambience both in reality and in the works of fiction.

Moving on, paranoia becomes essential in order to perform a reparative reading of literature, seeing paranoia as a description of not only the misconceptions concerning the LGBTQ community, but also downright discriminative behaviour. According to Sedgwick's account for a reparative positioned reader "it can seem realistic and necessary to experience surprise" and that such surprises can be terrible, but "there can also be good ones."⁴⁹ In other

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 18.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 18

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 24

words, the reparative reader must overcome the suspicions of paranoia because that is where one might find hope. Sedgwick also emphasises that the reparative reader also has the “room to realize that the future may be different from the present”.⁵⁰ Thus, the reparative reader must be able to identify or situate hope in literature, for the literature to be reparative.

Henceforth, a paranoid reading resulting in a reparative reading, or conclusion, can elucidate significant issues threatening LGBTQ individuals while also suggesting that circumstances will improve. Such a reading will first validate the, sometimes grim, reality of being LGBTQ, and then urge the positivity to change the misconceptions prevailing the community and how it is portrayed. In this context, the reparative reading of the two novels at hand will be to elucidate how the stories convey hope and identify pleasant findings, if there are any. Bearing this in mind, I argue that for the reparative reading to be successful, it must possess a paranoid reading as a foundation.

Sedgwick, however, states that the motives made explicit through reparative readings can in fact not be “inadmissible within paranoid theory” because they are “frankly ameliorative” and “about pleasure”.⁵¹ This may be interpreted to denounce my effort of combining the two reading strategies in a literary analysis. I argue, however, that the two strategies combined may instead nourish an effective and thorough reading of queer literature, seeing the paranoid reading as a foundation for establishing a reparative motivation within contemporary queer literature. The paranoid reader will, arguably, highlight the theme of the novels in a way that reveals how *The Unknowns* and *Every Sparrow Falling* are in fact cutting-edge in the context of their environment, and the reparative reader will accentuate the hope for a better future being an LGBTQ individual in Northern Ireland.

The Condemnation of Unnatural Relationships

Having stated that extensive knowledge of the context is useful prior to commencing a paranoid reading and reparative reading of queer literature, is it fruitful to briefly discuss how sexuality has been perceived and reframed throughout history. To reframe a discourse of sexuality involves radical change in social perceptions of the matter. Not only does it require an awareness of the general society, but it also requires in-depth knowledge of powerful affiliations, i.e. various political, medical and religious institutions. The sexual revolutionaries

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 22.

of the 1960s aimed to prove that the contemporary generation of youths had “more and better sex than their parents and that this would change the world,” because they countered vigorously the conservatism and prudishness of the war-generation that was their parents.⁵² In *Gender, Sex and the Shaping of Modern Europe: A History from the French Revolution to the Present Day*, Anette F. Timm and Joshua A. Sanborn postulate that while the revolutionaries argued that this was the case, it was rather the “scientific, medical and political discourses and policies on sexual behaviour and gender” that changed the view on sexuality. One of the revolutionaries, the French philosopher Michel Foucault, contributed to this change, in particular by publishing *Histoire de la sexualité (History of Sexuality)*. Timm and Sanborn claim that Foucault’s work “reframed the relationship between sex and society”.⁵³ In addition, Foucault’s presentation of how homosexuality was condemned, following the conventions introduced by Christianity in the seventeenth century, is very useful for examining how same-sex relationships are perceived today.

In *History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, Michel Foucault proposes that it was in fact “our epoch of time” which “initiated sexual heterogeneities”.⁵⁴ He outlines how ancient culture was committed “to make us love sex”, and that the ruses employed to achieve this vanished when Christian churches began establishing what normative sexual behaviour should be.⁵⁵ Foucault stipulates that this interventionism with regard to the laws of sex resulted in people detesting their bodies, and a new precedent was set as to how people perceived sexuality.⁵⁶ Because the term ‘epoch’ is such a vague one, it can be assumed that Foucault traces the condemnation of unconventional sexual behaviour, or sodomy, to Christianity itself, in addition to events contemporary with his writing, such as the outbreak of HIV/AIDS. For this reason, it is crucial to consider whether the epoch, as referenced by Foucault, can still be regarded as ‘our epoch’ in 2020. This critique of how sexuality is perceived in Christianity is relevant to my analysis, and I will elaborate further on how this has framed the modern perception of LGBTQ individuals. However, I will first proceed with a discussion of how the discourse of sex, according to Foucault, recognises homosexuality.

As previously stated, Foucault postulates that the glorification of bodies and sexuality was a hallmark of ancient western culture. To frame this claim, Foucault briefly mentions the

⁵² Anette F. Timm and Joshua A. Sanborn. *Gender, Sex, and the Shaping of Modern Europe: a History from the French Revolution to the Present Day*, 2007, p. 170.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 171.

⁵⁴ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, 1980, p. 37.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 159.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

culture of ancient Greece, where sex was viewed as a pedagogical process, a way of learning or transmitting knowledge from one body to another.⁵⁷ In “Friday essay: the myth of the ancient Greek ‘gay utopia’”, Alastair Blanshard offers a depiction of the status of homosexuality in ancient Greece. It was, as the title reveals, not a utopian community in terms of consensual homosexual behaviour.⁵⁸ However, as Blanshard emphasises, the ancient Greeks encouraged a liberated approach to sexual conduct, and to be gay was not yet condemned in the way Foucault describes following the inauguration of Christian values in the seventeenth century. Foucault additionally subverts the claim that many historians have presented before him; that Greek histories are full of depictions where men loved boys or engaged in otherwise homosexual relationships because it was normal. However, Foucault claims, we cannot perceive these stories as evidence of normalcy. Rather, the fact that these stories exist suggests that there was a deviation: “Because if there were no problem, they would speak of this kind of love in the same terms as love between men and women”.⁵⁹

With the history of the ‘utopian society of homosexuality’ in ancient Greece in mind, Foucault proclaims that what changed the discourse of sex drastically was when Christianity started caring about it following the seventeenth century.⁶⁰ Because the Church had established sex as a marital act between a man and a woman, other endeavours, such as sodomy (non-procreative sexual activity) and general homosexual behaviour were condemned.⁶¹ Thus, the condemnation of homosexuality contributed to a change of how contemporary society perceives rightful and wrongful behaviour in terms of sexuality. The significance of this aspect is that this fixed perception of what is correct and incorrect behaviour has affected so many people, and is largely attributed, arguably, to values following Christian tradition. Additionally, it might explain why it has been, and perhaps still is, regarded as controversial to take part in what Foucault sometimes refers to as ‘unnatural relationships’. The legacy of these beliefs is crucial to the perception of LGBTQ individuals today, and will be useful to discuss when commencing my analysis of the two novels. Hence, this statement of how ‘unnatural relationships’ were condemned contributes largely to the perception of LGBTQ relationships today, and is thus a crucial part of the background story as to why the LGBTQ community is an oppressed one. Additionally, the rebellion against the

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 61.

⁵⁸ Alastair Blanshard, “Friday Essay: the Myth of the Ancient Greek ‘Gay Utopia’.” *The Conversation*, 2018, <https://theconversation.com/friday-essay-the-myth-of-the-ancient-greek-gay-utopia-88397>.

⁵⁹ Foucault, *Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984*, ed. Rabinow, p. 257.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 253.

⁶¹ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: an Introduction*, 1980, p. 38.

norms established by Christianity is, as will be discussed later, a crucial part of particularly *Every Sparrow Falling*, but also *The Unknowns*.

Judith Butler: The Performance of Gender

When presenting Michel Foucault's account of how sexual discourse has evolved in 'our epoch of time', it becomes evident that the condemnation of unnatural relationships in the seventeenth century effectively established a negative perception of the LGBTQ community in the following centuries.⁶² Foucault identified the Christian church as a powerful institution that actively condemned all other erotic relationships than that of the sacred marriage between man and woman. While religion is indeed a fundamental element apparent in most societies, it is crucial to account for other hegemonies that further reinforce misconceptions that oppress LGBTQ individuals. Insofar as my discussion of LGBTQ has largely concerned nonconformists opposing normative sexual orientations, it is important to now address non-binary gender identity. One of the key theorists to denounce the current perception of conventional gender is Judith Butler.

Approaching Butler's perception of and theories about gender, it is first vital to define and contrast two frequently used concepts in this discussion: sex and gender. In "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory", Butler sheds light on the distinction between these two terms. She builds on the theory of Simone de Beauvoir where the woman or, according to Butler, any gender "is an historical situation rather than a natural fact".⁶³ Furthermore, gender, according to Butler in *Gender Trouble*, is "the cooked", processed by culture, whereas sex is "the raw" and natural.⁶⁴ This places gender in a dynamic position, something which is never naturally fixed. Moreover, this can be understood as Butler stating that the naturalness of sex, being the biology of genitalia, is the unprocessed and untouched trait of a person. Gender, on the other hand, is touched by culture and thus predisposes a process beyond that of biology. Thus, gender becomes the unnatural nature, the culture. In this thesis, as a consequence, the term sex will be used to reference the fixed biological genus which a person is born with as determined by their genitalia, while the term gender will be considered the cultural expression of such sex. Furthermore, the cultural

⁶² Ibid., p. 37.

⁶³ Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." Dec. 1988, p. 520, DOI: 10.2307/3207893.

⁶⁴ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, 2006, p. 50.

expression of sex may additionally include those conforming to what may be regarded as non-binary gender identifications.

Butler also presents, in *Gender Trouble*, an argument for why gender is culturally constructed, and thus calls for broader acceptance to how society perceives gender. Butler claims that gender identity is generally interpreted through “acts, gestures, and desire” and are therefore “*performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means”.⁶⁵ What Butler states here is that even though the individual will compound these “acts, gestures and desire”, they will concurrently be moulded as an attempt to aspire to the general discourse prevailing the society (heterosexuality) and the biological sex of their body. We can then understand gender, perhaps, as more of a social performance than an expression of personal identity. Hence, the people who are characterised as non-binary are typically those identifying contrary to the biology of their sex. It is this social performance that substantiates Butler’s acclaimed theory of performativity. Moreover, this supposition of how a person’s gender identity can exceed the biological traits of its sex (genitalia) might then represent a connection to Sedgwick’s concepts of the ‘universalizing’ and ‘minoritizing’ views on homosexuality. The common ground between Butler and Sedgwick can further be recognised as advocating for gender, and sexuality according to the ‘universalizing’ view, as social products that predisposes certain mechanisms and structures in culture to become visible.

The theory of performativity introduces the issue of bodily signs that, according to Butler, manufactures the conventionality of gender. Everyone is born with a body and, most often, the body you are born with will express traits to categorise you as either female or male. However, in the process of determining one’s identity, the relationship between the individual’s perception of their biological corporeal traits and the cultural gender assigned to those traits, might cause a conflict. This inner conflict may be extensively aggravated when met with intolerance, and further cause emotional instability. Earlier, it was briefly mentioned that the American Psychological Association categorised “Gender Identity Disorder” as a mental health issue until 2013. To establish an internal struggle for identity as a disorder may lead to further misconceptions in terms of how the general society perceives this conflict. For when governmental institutions, such as the APA and NHS, have been reluctant to recognise nonconformists, it signals that the individual’s identity is at fault. However, when discussing

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 185.

powerful institutions, it is important to clarify that these may vary. For some, the most powerful institutions might be those who are shaped or manifested through an individual who appears in the inner circle of an LGBTQ individual, whether that be family, friends, peers, and so forth.

Certainly, even if institutions are reluctant to recognise non-binary gender identity, Butler clarifies how gender is fluid and merely an effect of identity development:

If the inner truth of gender is a fabrication and if a true gender is a fantasy instituted and inscribed on the surface of bodies, then it seems that genders can be neither true nor false, but are only produced as the truth effects of a discourse of primary and stable identity.⁶⁶

Hence, Butler posits that gender does not have a fixed definition and that the term should instead advocate for a liberated perception as to how an individual chooses to perform their gender. To socially construct, or fabricate, gender through inscribing on the surface of their bodies, offers a significant entry to this discussion. It is first desirable to determine what ‘inscribed on’ is a reference to in this context. Since modern western society has favoured heterosexuality for centuries, stereotypical characterisations of how male and female should fulfil their assigned gender have reinforced how we perceive men and women today. Stereotypes include that men tend to have short hair and women tend to have long, typically women wear dresses and men wear suits. Moreover, a person who challenges these stereotypes and breaches normative ways of assigning one’s gender can thus be regarded as rebellious. An inscribing on the surface of the body might, therefore, be a reference to what a person wears or how they look. Furthermore, Butler specifies that gender can only truly be manifested if the individual possesses a stable identity. Nevertheless, a stable identity is generally difficult to define and, as Erikson’s theory of psychosocial stages makes clear, identity is fluid and in constant development.

Butler maintains the opinion that gender is not an isolated trait conducted to mirror the reality, but rather a social performance dependent on the social surroundings. In “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory”, Butler compares the performance of gender to the theatrical performance of actors. To characterise gender as a performance recalls the distinction between sex and gender. For if it can be assumed that sex is biologically fixed and gender is culturally performed, it presupposes a connection between sex as the decided and gender as the interpreted. Butler

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 186.

clarifies that gender will then work as “the cultural interpretation or signification of that [biological] facticity”, and thus underscores an important connection between the two.⁶⁷ The fact that gender, then, is the subsequent step, the interpretation of the biologically assigned role, further highlights this idea of acting out one’s gender in a social theatrical situation. However, to categorise gender as a theatrical performance might impose critical judgement on how nonconformists of conventional gender are perceived. To address the challengers of conventional gender as merely actors can possibly contribute to undermine their possibility of acceptance and recognition. On the other hand, it may imply that everybody carries out a role in this theatre we call society, although some characters have extended their act beyond the assigned manuscript.

Evidently, all humans take part in the theatrical performance. However, Butler articulates that the performance encompasses a “strategic aim of maintaining gender within its binary frame”, which is perhaps why conventional gender usually adheres to the sex assigned to a baby after birth.⁶⁸ The performances of those categorising as non-binary might then seek to undermine the stereotypes settled for binary perceptions of gender. There are, of course, several strategies to protest conventional gender appropriate behaviour. However, for the purpose of this argument, I believe it is crucial to address the perhaps most prominent approach, cross-dressing. Cross-dressers, or transvestites, are characterised by wearing clothes, hairstyles, or make-up that are generally perceived as non-conventional to the stereotypical way of dressing. Butler, however, posits that when presented with a transvestite this may contradict an innate expectation and compel one to claim that “but oh, this is *really* a girl or a woman, or this is *really* a boy or a man”.⁶⁹ The transvestite will thus challenge the reality of sex versus the performance of gender. However, underscoring the idea of a non-fixed determination of gender, Butler concludes that “the transvestite’s gender is as fully real as anyone whose performance complies with social expectations.”⁷⁰ The responsibility of determining what can then be regarded as a ‘true’ gender is assigned to the society and it is thus implied that one’s performance of gender should always be accepted, and never second-guessed.

Butler’s theory of performativity is particularly interesting for the analysis of how the characters in *The Unknowns* and *Every Sparrow Falling* choose to perform their gender.

⁶⁷ Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory.” p. 522.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 526.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 527.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

Because the novels largely deal with the confrontation of conventional gender roles and normative sexual behaviour, it will be especially fertile to examine how the characters themselves, and their surroundings, perceive the performance of their gender. It is thus crucial to additionally account for the social context in which the novels are placed. Some characters, as the analysis will show, tend to extend and challenge the normative way of assigning one's gender and challenge stereotypical assumptions related to one's biological sex.

Chapter 3: Literary Analysis

‘I didn’t know that anyone was going through anything different’

Shirley-Anne McMillan’s novels are distinguished works of Northern Irish young adult fiction. Prior to analysing *The Unknowns* and *Every Sparrow Falling*, it is particularly interesting to remark how the performance of identity varies between the two protagonists, Tilly and Cariad. This introduction to the literary analyses will therefore briefly elucidate some general features of the two novels, in addition to presenting some of McMillan’s thoughts for writing them.

Both novels are written as first-person narratives, making the stories presented to the reader coloured by either Tilly or Cariad’s perception of the transpired events. Tilly, who comes from a loving and stable, albeit slightly strict, home, portrays her childhood as tranquil, and even boring at times. Cariad, on the other hand, was left by her biological parents when born, and has experienced more instability and rejection than most people most her age. Thus, the two protagonists in the novels have different background stories, and their perception of other characters and the society may affect the way the stories are told. To tell a story through first-person narration is very fruitful when writing YAL, as it provides a connection between the reader and the narrator. Furthermore, this connection can make the reader feel closer to the storyline and the characters, especially those focalised. This is beneficial when adolescents are the targeted readers, because, as my presentation of this thesis’ purpose showed, reading fiction can increase cultural awareness and allow for pupils to discover thoughts and lives different from their own. Moreover, utilising literature in this manner can contribute to the development of personal identity formation.

Given that McMillan is writing for a younger audience, her own life experience would certainly impact the stories she has chosen to convey. As mentioned in the introduction, I interviewed McMillan about her authorship prior to analysing the novels discussed in this thesis:

When I was growing up there were no books about LGBT-kids, at all, there just weren’t any. Or not that I knew of anyway. And when I started writing these books there were none from Northern Ireland, at all. And still very few from teenage literature from Northern Ireland.⁷¹

⁷¹ Appendix A, p. 61.

The motivation for writing these books was, it seems, to write a story in which the targeted reader, being a Northern Irish teenager, could relate to. This is also why, she explains, she wanted to write about place clearly, indicating that Northern Ireland is very different to the rest of the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland. Even though *The Unknowns* is situated in Belfast and *Every Sparrow Falling* in a fictional town, many historical and contemporary elements that are distinctly Northern Irish are clearly present in both books. Thus, both novels convey very interesting descriptions of space, whereby some sites are associated with hope for liberation and others are associated with coercion. To account for these sites would have been very useful. However, to limit the scope of this thesis, this analysis has prioritised to highlight how the characters themselves represent and perform identity when in relation to other characters.

The Unknowns

He looked at me with a grin; his eyes, ringed with eyeliner, were bright under the street lamp.

‘Hey, seen enough?’ he said, but he was still clearly amused.

Maybe he’s not a he, I thought. He sounded like a he. But he had a beautiful face that could be a girl’s face. It was hard to tell with the make-up.⁷²

The Unknowns by Shirley-Anne McMillan is a story of a teenage girl, Tilly, growing up in post-agreement Belfast. McMillan communicates a familiar story of friendship, love, and the struggle of figuring out who you are as a person. Tilly struggles to identify herself with the people she is surrounded by, and her outlet is to climb the highest of monuments in Belfast after dark. No one knows about her climbs; they are her most protected secrets. That is, until one day when she is approached by a mysterious boy in the dark, wearing eyeliner and high-heeled boots, who takes an interest in Tilly and her secret climbs. This boy, Brew, is a challenger of the status quo. His relationship with Tilly challenges Tilly’s mindset and opens her up to a whole new world of beliefs, making her question social structures which she was brought up to believe in. Brew is additionally part of a gang of anarchists, the unknowns, who oppose the self-imposed segregation and sectarian behaviour still visible in Belfast society as a legacy of the Troubles. The gang members relate to each other by being ‘misfits’ or ‘outsiders’ with regards to what the community might deem fitting. The gang embarks upon multiple missions and serves to make Belfast a little less sectarian and a little more open-minded. Thus, the novel is also deeply concerned with social criticism, rebellion and coping with the aftermath of a conflict. Additionally, considering the story is about post-agreement Belfast, the legacy of the Troubles act as a muted backdrop to the contemporary story, sometimes being notably debated, other times being barely mentioned.

When Tilly walks the streets of Belfast in 2017, it has been about twenty years since the three-decade long conflict in Northern Ireland inflicted pain and crucial segregation between the Unionists and the Nationalists. *The Unknowns* demonstrates how this troubled past still affects the lives of people who did not live through the violent times. As I presented in the introductory subchapter discussing the legacy of the Troubles, Hirsch’s concept of postmemory can help shed light on the tension still remaining in post-agreement Northern Ireland. For even though the Troubles officially ended with the Belfast Agreement in 1998,

⁷² Shirley-Anne McMillan, *The Unknowns*, 2017, p. 4.

McMillan's novel portrays a very vivid image of a still segregated and tense Belfast in 2017. Additionally, as I pointed out in the introduction, the conflict is still deeply entrenched in Northern Irish society, established as one of the main causes when examining the gloomy mental health statistics affecting the society today. Considering that this novel mainly portrays young adult characters in Northern Ireland and is written for a young adult audience, the overarching theme of struggling to find your identity is emphasised through rebellion and creating new relations. Because the characters are growing up in post-agreement Belfast, the reader might expect that the reluctance to share too much information about oneself is another evident and difficult aspect when attempting to develop a stable identity. Moreover, while there are very few direct references to the actual conflict, there are crucial references to the remaining sectarianism, such as the graffiti sprayed on a brick wall at a children's playground:

NO TAIGS HERE. (White paint, large letters on the back wall of the park near the swings.)

KAT. (Which means 'Kill All Taigs' – also on the back wall.)

FUCK OFF TAIGS. (Red, white and blue paint, massive letters, on the wall near the sand pit.)⁷³

The '*TAIGS*' referred to in the graffiti is modernised slang for the Irish ancient name Tadhg. The graffiti has presumably been written by Unionists to offend Irish Nationalists. Other evidence that leads to the presumption that this is sectarian graffiti carried out by Unionists is the use of colours on '*FUCK OFF TAIGS*'. The red, white and blue paint can be retraced to the colours of the Union Jack. This incident illustrates the still tense relationship between Unionists and Nationalists in Northern Ireland, bearing the simple message that there is still a deeply rooted conflict, even though peace has been achieved on paper. The gang members take upon themselves to erase sectarian graffiti in a playground, and their devotion reveals their self-appointed mission as civil agents. They do not want anyone to know who did it, and removing the graffiti is not an act of revenge, but rather an attempt to change the mindset of the next generation – the children who spend their time there: "No. Not a message for the sectarian bozos. A message for the kids in the park".⁷⁴

The perhaps most obvious indication, for children and youth, of a continued segregated community in Northern Ireland is the separation of schools. In Northern Ireland, all schools are administered by the Department of Education. There are differences between the schools, however, depending on whether they are integrated schools or independent

⁷³ Ibid., p. 41.

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 48.

schools. Tilly claims that what school a child attends acts as a vital signifier of what system of beliefs, and perhaps politics, their family belongs to:

If you know someone's name or school or where they live, you can have a pretty good guess at their religion. Catholics go to Catholic schools, Protestants go to state schools. The only tricky ones are the integrated schools – you don't know who you are talking to then. But you could still guess by the area they live in. And if you know their religion you can guess at other things too. You might be wrong, but it's still a start.⁷⁵

What Tilly proclaims here might represent how young adults in Northern Ireland think when attempting to categorise people they are surrounded by. In the article “Self-imposed apartheid”, Mary O'Hara problematises the issue of segregation in Northern Ireland, and especially Belfast. O'Hara debates the issue of segregated schools, and claims segregation will persist because “it is still only a very small number of parents who are willing to send their children to non-segregated schools”.⁷⁶ This can be regarded as further reinforcing Northern Ireland's status as a segregated community because there are still many who do not befriend and socialise with members of the other community.⁷⁷ Moreover, it is useful to review the statistics of integrated schools in Northern Ireland, which reveal that only about seven percent (2014/15) of the total number of pupils go to mixed schools.⁷⁸ In the passage above, Tilly also expresses the innate desire for people to be able to categorise other people as a strategy to comprehend how the society that surrounds us is structured. Moreover, this categorisation might be even more crucial in a country such as Northern Ireland, where social norms are still contributing to a need to know what ethno-religious derivation a person has.

Many of those directly affected by the Troubles are the parents or grandparents of this generation of youths. It is therefore no wonder that the communities still remember and commemorate the losses of the Troubles. Again, Hirsch's concept of postmemory supports the hypothesis that trauma still affects much of the population in Northern Ireland, including those who have not directly experienced the conflict. This aspect was also highlighted when examining the causes for and frequency of serious mental health issues in Northern Ireland. In *The Unknowns*, Tilly comments, however briefly, powerfully on this issue: “No murders any

⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 80.

⁷⁶ Mary O'Hara, “Self-Imposed Apartheid.” *The Guardian*, 14 Apr. 2004, <https://theguardian.com/society/2004/apr/14/northernireland.societyhousing>.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ “Integrated Schools.” *Education*, Department of Education, 2016, <https://education-ni.gov.uk/articles/integrated-schools>.

more. Now we murder ourselves”.⁷⁹ So, instead of killing each other, as they did during the Troubles, they now commit suicide.

Recalling the previously mentioned statistics on committed and attempted suicides in Northern Ireland, it becomes evident that the high prevalence of serious mental health issues is of utmost relevance when accounting for the environment of young people growing up in Northern Ireland today, especially if the characters in *The Unknowns* are to be regarded as trustworthy representations of actual teenagers living in Belfast. One example of an incident where the novel describes an event raising the issue of attempted suicide is the first encounter between Tilly and Brew, where Brew assumes that Tilly is about to commit suicide. Tilly has just climbed down from one of the Harland and Wolff cranes, and finds Brew waiting for her on the ground. He explains to Tilly why she caught his attention: “‘Maybe I’m just some guy out for a walk who saw someone at the top of a fuckin’ massive crane and thought they were about to top themselves . . . ’”⁸⁰ To assume an attempted suicide here is not a drastic inference. However, Brew’s comment can also strengthen the indication that suicide attempts are so frequent, it would be realistic to come across one. Additionally, Tilly’s response to Brew’s comment confirms that what he said is indeed justifiable, however, she clarifies that her climbs are intended for escaping reality only for a moment, not forever.

The gang of unknowns are also in many ways rebelling against the social structure of Northern Ireland. As already accounted for, the gang’s self-appointed quest to contribute to make a better society is a counter-reaction to how the Troubles and segregation are still prominent aspects of the everyday lives of people living in Northern Ireland. Their rebellion boils down to opposing, and rejecting, any inherited sectarianism and politics of conflict while simultaneously embracing the notion of being an outsider. Brew summarises the gist of who the gang members are, and where they can be placed in the social structure, in a conversation with Tilly:

‘Everyone here’s like us.’

‘What do you mean, “like us”?’ I said. And was he including me in the ‘us’ too, or did he just mean his gang?

‘Outsiders,’ he said, leaning in towards me and raising both eyebrows. ‘Freaks.’ He stuck out his tongue, revealing a metal bar studded through it.⁸¹

⁷⁹ McMillan, *The Unknowns*, p. 5.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

The gang is thus an emerging subculture in opposition to the two main, existing groups in Belfast.⁸² Their struggle of being outsiders is complemented by their political identification, being that of anarchism.⁸³ Moreover, subcultures tend to emerge as a protest or reaction to the primary cultures' norms and values. When the unknowns create their own norms and ways of living, they accomplish a counter-reaction to how their society is structured. Additionally, referencing themselves as 'freaks' and 'outsiders' demonstrates their embrace of being different to whatever can be regarded as 'normal'.

The gang of unknowns in McMillan's novel additionally portrays the challenging of status quo in relation to gender and sexual identity. This theme can be regarded as somewhat controversial in Northern Ireland, recalling that the country passed legislation to legalise same-sex marriage in 2019 after a lot of local opposition. Considering that *The Unknowns* was published in 2017, it is important to note that equal marriage rights had not been granted prior to the publishing of this novel. To examine how gender and sexuality norms are challenged in *The Unknowns*, it is useful to first address the conflicting thoughts Tilly experiences when she is at school and they are learning about feminism. The teacher asks if there are any feminists in the classroom:

A few girls raised their hands. Beth put her hand up high. She nudged me. 'Come on!' she whispered.
I half raised mine. I wasn't really sure what it meant any more.
'Huh. Typical,' grunted Kyle McClelland. 'The fat lezzer and her best mate.'
There were a couple of giggles. Beth raised an eyebrow at me. I guess more people knew about me and Shauneen than I'd realised. The funny thing was that I really didn't care any more. I smiled at Shauneen to let her know that it didn't bother me if that's what people thought. The idea of being worried about getting caught doing something so innocent seemed childish now.
'You're such a 'phobe, Kyle,' said Jules Morgan. It got a bigger laugh than Kyle's comment. Shauneen smiled back at me.⁸⁴

Studies of feminist movements and theories in 2015 revealed a trend of people being reticent to define oneself as a feminist. One theorist who have explored reasons for this trend is Ellyn Kaschak. She refers to a 'False Fear of Feminism'. Kaschak's comments on possible reasons for this behaviour might help frame Tilly's reaction in this situation. First, Kaschak outlines how the stereotypical feminist is portrayed to "hate men and heterosexuality".⁸⁵ Second, there

⁸² The term subculture in this thesis is based on the late work of the Birmingham school following the tradition of former CCCS director Stuart Hall, as theorised by Angela McRobbie in *Feminism and youth culture*, 2000.

⁸³ McMillan, *The Unknowns*, p. 96.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 135-136.

⁸⁵ Ellyn Kaschak, "False Fear Of Feminism(FFF Syndrome)." *Psychology Today*, 2015, <https://psychologytoday.com/us/blog/she-comes-long-way-baby/201509/false-fear-feminismfff-syndrome>.

exists a belief, however mistaken, that “all feminists are lesbians”.⁸⁶ Tilly’s insecurity about taking a stand is, in this matter, exemplified through questioning what really matters to her. When Kyle utters homophobic and sexist comments, he is countered by another student, Jules. Tilly has, in this case, regained confidence in what she believes is important, and this is portrayed through her non-verbal communication with Shauneen. Tilly knows she is not a “fat lezzer”, and thus, however silently, demonstrates this growth of character to the reader. She will not let such comments or conflicting thoughts bother her anymore, they seem so childish after having been introduced to the gang of unknowns. Furthermore, it is implied that Tilly is aware of the existence of opinions and thoughts about her actions which attempt to label her and her sexual identity. However, she breaks with these thoughts as she remembers that there are things much more important, for instance what she thinks of herself.

A crucial element in *The Unknowns* is how Tilly is exposed to non-binary ways of performing one’s identity of gender or sexuality which seem unfamiliar to her. In a conversation where Brew reveals to Tilly who he really is, and how his past has been, it becomes clear that Brew has taken an active stand regarding his identity:

We were halfway down the line of pictures. In the next one Brew was kissing someone. I hoped he couldn’t see my face getting hotter as we looked at it.
 ‘A girlfriend?’ I asked. ‘Nope,’ he said. ‘First boyfriend.’
 ‘Oh!’ I hadn’t expected it. ‘Are you . . . ?’
 ‘Bi,’ he said. He turned to me. ‘Does it bother you?’
 I thought about it.
 ‘No. And actually, I think that maybe I’m . . . bisexual too.’
 He smiled.
 ‘Cool.’
 ‘Is it?’
 He shrugged.
 ‘Why not?’
 ‘I dunno. I’ve never said that out loud before. I’ve actually never really thought about it before.’
 ‘Well, there are no rules. You don’t have to think about it. You just like who you like, don’t you?’⁸⁷

Brew simplifies the question of sexual orientation by introducing the idea of there being no rules, and how sexuality and relationships could be as simple as a person just liking another person without needing to justify their identity through gender or sexuality. Ironically, while Brew opposes social categorisation by saying that there are no rules, he simultaneously labels himself as bisexual. Thus, he first breaks with the idea that humans need to identify

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ McMillan, *The Unknowns*, pp. 99-100.

themselves as being one thing or another, while also labelling himself and thus giving readers, and perhaps also Tilly, the satisfaction of having categorised him. This is interesting because while Brew's utterances represent anarchy and disaffection with the norms of sexuality, they also amount to sexual orientation confirmation.

Several characters in *The Unknowns* challenge conventional ways of performing one's gender, and Judith Butler's theory of performativity is useful to apply when discussing how some characters choose to perform their gender identity. As my earlier presentation of Butler's theory of performativity, in chapter two, highlighted, there exist multiple strategies for a person to perform gender, where one of them is the inscribing on the surface of bodies. To inscribe on the surface of bodies is then a reference to external traits or looks which may point to what gender someone has. This is useful to recall when discussing how Tilly reacts when introduced to one of Brew's friends – Scar:

'Scar,' he said, pointing to a guy, definitely a guy, maybe about twenty-five years old, with a beard, and a broad chest, wearing a dress. I raised an eyebrow. I didn't mean to be rude – it just kind of happened. I'd never seen a big bearded man wearing a flowery dress before. I looked at him, hopeful that I hadn't offended him and he smiled a broad grin showing the whitest and most straight teeth I'd ever seen.⁸⁸

Here, Tilly is challenged by her own interpretation and image of male clothing. Scar is described as masculine, with his broad chest and beard, but he breaches with the masculine normative behaviour by wearing a "flowery dress". The novel, however, never reveals how Scar identifies his own gender, only that he, on several occasions, wears dresses and make-up. He can, perhaps, be regarded a cross-dresser. This might indicate that Scar's most important purpose in this novel, is to portray a symbol for breaching the normative behaviour of your assigned gender.

Butler's theory of performativity additionally claims that gender is socially constructed. Moreover, she compared the performance of gender to a theatrical performance where gender was ultimately interpreted by the audience, being society. When such performances extend the conventional, or binary, expectation of gender identification, people tend to reveal the "true" gender, according to their sex. On several occasions, Tilly attempt to categorise Scar as a man, and the main issue might then be why someone would have the need to categorise such a personal marker of identity:

⁸⁸ Ibid., pp. 37-38.

... someone who looked like a woman – high cheekbones, blusher, flowered blouse – and a long plaited beard, and they were talking to another person with a beard, who was wearing a long purple evening dress – but I knew him – it was Scar.
 ... Scar, in heels which exactly matched his dress, was adjusting the microphone stand to the right of the dock and a guy wearing an Iron Maiden T-shirt in a wheelchair next to him was tuning an acoustic guitar.⁸⁹

This too, reveals how Scar is challenging the status quo and gender normative behaviour.

Tilly describes an event where Scar is talking to someone who ‘looks like a woman’.

Although it might be a woman, Tilly addresses the person with the gender-neutral pronoun ‘they’, revealing a change where the need to label or categorise someone is no longer a motivation of hers.

Yet the portrayal of norm breaching behaviour in the novel is not always received in a harmonious way. In most cases, Scar is admired for his courageous behaviour, while in other cases he experiences hateful sexual insults. As mentioned in the introduction, Stonewall UK has published significant numbers revealing that the well-being of LGBTQ+ youths is at a lower level than that of heterosexual youths. Based on the statistics, it would seem unrealistic for Scar to only be met by positivity and encouragement for the way he wishes to perform his own identity. It would portray an almost utopian Belfast as described in the novel. However, it is important to clarify that what might be regarded as utopia for one person might seem dystopic for someone else.

In any case, Scar is confronted by an angry man during a riot outside a party held by the gang:

‘You feel like a fight do ye, queer boy?’ he said to Scar. ‘You want some of this?’ He cocked his head towards Brew.

Scar was silent but I could see his fists were clenched.
 Standing there in a red mini dress, I’d never seen him look so angry. But this guy was even bigger than he was. And he was drunk and who knows what else he was on. He kept on yelling.

‘Fuck off! Youse better fuck off. See all them cops over there? They’re busy. And that leaves youse all by yourselves.’ He nodded to Scar. ‘Take your granny home, sunshine, and put some fucking clothes on, you faggot.’⁹⁰

This interaction reveals how Scar receives hateful comments for just dressing the way he likes. The person who verbally attacks him does this through commenting on his appearance and calling him a “queer boy” and a “faggot”. Interestingly, it is never revealed in the novel whether Scar is homosexual, or if he identifies as a man or a woman. The perpetrator here

⁸⁹ Ibid., pp. 90-91.

⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 249.

assumes that, because Scar dresses in feminine clothes, he is in fact gay. However, as theorised by Butler, being a cross-dresser might imply that the gender identification is non-binary. Furthermore, it might be a cultural expression of how Scar perceives and wishes to perform his gender. Scar has, then, supposedly, chosen not to follow the binary dress code of his biological sex, but rather to challenge the heteronormative conventions of gender expression. And this incident might then represent a grim, however realistic, response to a person who breaks with the conventional normative behaviour.

The objective of the gang in *The Unknowns* is, as previously stated, to rebel against the politics of segregation in Northern Ireland. They appear to be a group of people struggling to fit in with the expectations and norms prevailing in the society surrounding them. This group has therefore chosen to live a little differently than expected in a modern society. The members of the unknowns have common traits, one being their reluctance to conform to the established expectations in Northern Ireland. In other words, the deeply segregated communities in Northern Ireland do not appeal to any of the group's members. They are anarchists and are actively attempting to discard and remove sectarian slander to resist further segregation in Belfast. What draws Tilly to this group is then, perhaps, the intriguing composition of individuals who all, in different ways, represent something unfamiliar to her.

It becomes evident, however, that it is in fact one of the similarities between them that becomes decisive for Tilly's development of sexual identity. When Tilly first meets Brew and his gang, she is overwhelmed by their tolerance and acceptance of sexuality and gender performance. When examining how Tilly performs her identity, and experiences a growth in character, Eve K. Sedgwick's theory of a 'universalizing' view on homosexuality can provide a relevant perspective. Even though my previous presentation of 'minoritizing' versus 'universalizing' views rejected a possible decision as to which view was preferable when attempting to understand how the LGBTQ experience could be determined by biological facilities or social influence. There are some perspectives related to Sedgwick's concepts that prove fertile in the understanding of how Tilly's encounter with the gang is decisive for her definition of her own personal sexual orientation. One perspective related to the 'universalizing' view on LGBTQ spectrums might be that while homosexuality, or any sexual orientation, is not directly transmitted from one person to another, like something infectious, a transmission of courage might certainly be prominent. In other words, interacting with another individual identifying within the LGBTQ spectrum might lead to accepting, or even discovering, something about oneself that might have been difficult to see prior to this

interaction. Furthermore, even though Tilly might have always been bisexual, she does not admit this in the novel until she learns that Brew was bisexual, suggesting that he may have transmitted his openness to her. The members in the gang represent a variety of sexual orientations and gender behaviours, which might reflect that their motivation for forming this group was to be in relation with someone “similar” to them – that is different to the heterogenous hegemony. Understanding the ‘universalizing’ view as not being infectious, but rather as having the ability to attract others who identify or conform to the same gender and sexuality conventions as oneself, further supports the hypothesis that a stable identity is developed through social interactions.

Summing up the analysis of *The Unknowns*, it has become evident that McMillan’s young adult novel explores several aspects of an adolescent’s life. The protagonist, Tilly, is faced with several realistic challenges which enable critical thinking regarding possible identity crossroads which may be familiar to the experience of the targeted reader. The main concern of this analysis has been to examine the ways in which these crossroads have portrayed the reality of being a youth in Northern Ireland today, while additionally emphasising the struggles inherent in identifying outside of conventional gender and sexuality norms. While *The Unknowns* can be read as an attempt to reconcile the situation of those choosing to protest the normative way of living, this analysis has attempted to elucidate the struggles that come with this choice. The paranoid strategy in this analysis, as theorised by Sedgwick, might be visible when I argued how the, sometimes utopian, portrayal of choosing to live as the gang does, is in fact unrealistic in contemporary Northern Ireland. To denounce the utopian portrayal of an unconventional way of living might then be regarded paranoid, because a paranoid reader would see that it is too unrealistic in its account.

The debate on whether contemporary modern society strengthens heteronormative standards further calls for the need of a reparative motivation in today’s literature. Reading about what may be considered controversial topics, is perhaps exactly what may contribute to make issues non-controversial, because they become topical. The reparative motif of McMillan’s novel may then be that it contributes to the normalcy of challenging established norms, in this case related to gender and sexuality. While the paranoid reader would argue that the events and perceptions of the novel would be unrealistically optimistic, the reparative reader would argue that it is such portrayals of the LGBTQ community that may eliminate homophobia and hatred towards those challenging conventional gender and sexuality norms.

Every Sparrow Falling

‘Bloody hell. So they think they’re curing his depression by making him become a Christian?’

‘Right. He told me as much.’

‘Why doesn’t he tell them? That the depression isn’t because he’s gay?’

Brains shrugged and looked at me with a flat mouth. ‘Because he believes it. He thinks that’s why he’s depressed, too. On some level he thinks it’s his own fault.’⁹¹

Shirley-Anne McMillan’s fourth published novel, *Every Sparrow Falling*, is also set in contemporary Northern Ireland, however in a fictional town. All young adult characters in the novel are born after the signing of the Good Friday Agreement, and direct references to Troubles are not prominent in this story. *Every Sparrow Falling* deals, however, largely with religious norms, and critique of conservative perceptions of LGBTQ spectrums, which are deeply integrated in McMillan’s portrayal of this Northern Irish town. The key features of this analysis will therefore be religion, perceptions of LGBTQ individuals and self-doubt.

In *Every Sparrow Falling*, the protagonist, Cariad, is a sixteen-year-old girl who has moved from foster home to foster home her whole life. Cariad keeps a list of rules to prevent herself from getting too attached to the people she meets, as she knows it will not take long until she is moved to another home. McMillan’s novel begins with Cariad arriving at a new foster home. Her new foster parents, Dawn and Jacky, live in the fictional town Ballybaile on the north coast in Northern Ireland. In the first chapters of the book, Cariad accounts for her turbulent past as a child in foster care, and how this is unceasingly affecting her present life. After moving to Ballybaile, Cariad is encouraged by her foster parents to attend church and make friends with a girl at school named Jessica and her Christian group, the Youth Fellowship. Cariad’s relationship to the Youth Fellowship and Jessica is very unstable, because she feels she is unable to be herself around them. Not fitting in with the Youth Fellowship is difficult for Cariad as she attempts to stay loyal to Dawn and Jacky, but at the same time she is highly provoked and annoyed by the values established by the church. Moreover, Cariad has one close friend at school who she trusts, Brains. Brains represents everything the Youth Fellowship does not, and he is highly devoted to his secret boyfriend Muff. Throughout the novel, Muff, or James as he is really called, is torn between his faith in

⁹¹ Shirley-Anne McMillan, *Every Sparrow Falling*, 2019, p. 141.

God and the feeling that his being gay is problematic for this faith. As a tragedy takes place, it becomes too late for Muff and Brains to reconnect again. However, the final pages of the novel portray the very essentials of a reparative performance of identity, especially for Muff.

Every Sparrow Falling's first two chapters are a presentation by Cariad where she establishes the context and setting of the story she is about to tell. She speaks directly to the reader and introduces herself, while additionally presenting her past "as a serial foster-reject".⁹² When Cariad establishes herself and her past as unstable and rough, she simultaneously invites the reader to partake in her history, through a first person narrative. The reader is then, during the first few pages, quickly made familiar with her difficult past and thus has a greater capability to understand her mindset later in the novel. It additionally becomes evident that Cariad is rebellious, critical to religion, and sceptical of meeting (especially bonding) with new people. This can, of course, be justified by her experiencing rejection from caregivers in the past. However, as Cariad tells her story, she also shows sides of herself that reflect high levels of loyalty, commitment, and a desire to do good. While these traits become clearer throughout the book, it is also important to mention that Cariad seems to express low self-esteem. For example, she seems to be caught up in the idea that people are either good or bad, and that she belongs to the latter category. After being grounded by Dawn and Jacky, she questions the point of being punished, as she expresses unwillingness to change – or perhaps rather a lack of ability to change: "But what if badness is in you, like part of your DNA? And what if you actually enjoy it?"⁹³ This declaration underscores the presumption that Cariad is very much committed to the idea that the reason she has no family is because she is a person incapable of doing good, and is thus incapable of being loved.

Through Cariad's thoughts, it becomes evident that she opposes and rebels against fixed norms and assumptions made about her. An example of such an opposition is when Brains asks Cariad for her advice, because he wants a woman's perspective. While Brains justifies his reasons for asking Cariad for advice in that she is a woman, Cariad reacts to how he just assumes her gender identification: "Nobody had ever called me a woman before, though. Come to think of it I didn't think of myself as a 'woman' either. Or as anything really."⁹⁴ Her reaction to being referenced to as a woman is not negative in itself. However, she emphasises that this is not an identity marker which she has chosen herself. This can mean

⁹² Ibid., p. 6.

⁹³ Ibid., p. 52.

⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 102.

that she rather thinks of herself as a girl. However, when she proclaims that she does not really think of herself as anything, it emphasises the previous suggestion, presented in chapter two, that gender identity is fluid. Moreover, as Judith Butler's theory of performativity claims, if gender is a social performance or cultural product, it might matter more what other people's perception of what her gender is. For the performance of gender may vary according to who the audience is. Furthermore, when Cariad perceives herself as not being anything, neither a girl nor a woman, it highlights the possibly hurtful aspect of someone assuming a person to be one thing or another.

Cariad's new foster parents, Dawn and Jacky, are described by her as "seasoned God-botherers" and "a couple of naïve old dears".⁹⁵ Settling in with them means that Cariad must comply by their rules and go to church with them – "not as a punishment (so they said) but it also wasn't optional".⁹⁶ Cariad agrees to go to church but spends her time there largely daydreaming "about the future I'd never have".⁹⁷ Thus, a major theme in *Every Sparrow Falling* is religion, or rather, the reasons for some of the main characters to reject religion. The beginning chapters of the novel reveal important details about Cariad's way of perceiving the people surrounding her (who she does not trust) and goals for her future (which she reckons will never come). It is, however, initially acceptable for Cariad to pretend to be a Christian, and even though she makes fun of Jessica and "her Holy Roller friends," she is determined to make things work out with her new foster parents by attending church.⁹⁸ That is, until she reaches her limit of patience when it comes to religion, and ends up discarding the attempt to obey the expectations and rules established by Dawn and Jacky. Cariad subsequently experiences a liberation after deciding to break with Christianity, and, due to her history, she is prepared that this break will also lead to her having to move on to a new foster family. Dawn, however, responds in an understanding and welcoming way: "That's OK. This is your home now. And we accept you, whether you're a Christian or not."⁹⁹

The liberation she then experiences arguably changes Cariad's perception of those surrounding her, and this further offers a dynamic feature to her character, accentuating the belief that doing your "own thing" is welcomed. I believe this is significant because, at first, Cariad expresses insecurity and is prepared to leave after deciding not to follow the values

⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 6.

⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 7.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 8.

⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 137.

expected by Dawn and Jacky. Their reaction, however, stabilises the situation and Cariad's perception of herself. This may further support that important aspects of identity development are to trust and explore who one wishes to be as a person, while at the same time emphasising that tough choices have to be made. And it is these choices that contribute to the moulding of one's identity.

Having established Cariad's break from the church, I will discuss some of the events causing her to come to this decision. It is important, then, to first account for Cariad's opinions about the Youth Fellowship. She expresses her annoyance about their superficiality and shallowness after having listened to their prayers: "Never mind babies getting bombed in Syria or people getting chucked in jail for protesting against the government. It was always, 'Please just let our exams go well,' or, 'Please just let the weather be good for the Scripture Union ramble next weekend.'"¹⁰⁰ The fact that Cariad signals annoyance, or at least dissatisfaction, with the shallowness conveyed by the Youth Fellowship, further highlights a development of her identity. More than once, Cariad presents herself as someone who does not really have anything to offer, she only exists, and she views herself as merely a burden to those surrounding her. However, this passage has a dual substance where 1) Cariad seeks a deeper meaning if she is to take part in the prayer group and 2) she feels there are greater issues in the world than what seems to preoccupy her fellow classmates. Thus, Cariad demonstrates a critique of what she regards as these Christians' narrow-minded prayers to ask for God's support in matters that, according to her, do not really matter at all.

While the passage above accentuates one of Cariad's issues with Christianity, and especially the Youth Fellowship, there are several other passages in the novel which further emphasise how crucial it is for Cariad not to be identified as a member of the Youth Fellowship. She states that:

The only thing worse than someone getting you all wrong is when they get you all wrong and think that you're the type of person who goes to prayer meetings during break time. And the only thing worse than that is *being* the type of person who goes to prayer meetings during break time. Urgh.¹⁰¹

This statement can also be read as Cariad being frustrated because people she meets tends to misunderstand her. And it becomes evident that she is frightened of being identified with the Youth Fellowship, because if there is one thing she knows, it is that she is not like them. This

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 19.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., p. 23.

is arguably a big part of her attempt to fashion her identity. Recalling the presentation of Alan S. Waterman's extended theory on Eriksson's identity development and the psychosocial crises which an adolescent goes through is fruitful for addressing what Cariad wishes to resist here. For Cariad strives to be recognised as herself, and it is perhaps at this moment she understands that the "herself" she attempts to reach does not involve the Cariad who is part of the Youth Fellowship or belongs to the Christian community.

In a conversation with her foster mother Dawn, Cariad has to defend her behaviour from the night before, when she went to a nightclub in Belfast with her friends Brains, Big Gay Dave and Suzanne:

'That *social club* you were in.' She was looking directly at me.
 'Was it . . . a homosexual club?' It wasn't funny but the way she said 'homosexual' made me want to laugh. *Homo-seck-shual*. I bit the inside of my cheek and dropped my eyes to the empty plate. Eventually I was able to speak without smirking.
 'Yes. But it's not what you think.'
 'Oh? And what do I think?'
 'I dunno. Maybe you think it was like some seedy place, or something. The way that some people talk about gay clubs, or even gay people, like they're weird or wrong or something. But it was just a club with people dancing and . . .'¹⁰²

When Cariad here sketches out what she believes is Dawn's perception of the gay culture, she assumes that Dawn's perception of LGBTQ is a non-affirmative one. Cariad assumes that because Dawn does not really have any first-hand experience with gay culture, and is additionally a member of the church, she is also homophobic. However, the homophobic utterances here are not articulated by Dawn, but by Cariad's assumptions. Moreover, Dawn's reaction is related to Cariad being underaged, rather than the fact that she went to a gay club. The passage can then be read as Cariad establishing how the Christian community is expected to see homosexuality.

It is not, however, until the Church and the Youth Fellowship take part in attempting to heal Muff (or James) of being gay that Cariad fully understands the negative perceptions of LGBTQ individuals expressed by the church. The secret relationship between Muff and Brains is over, and Brains is worried about Muff. Muff has suddenly joined the Youth Fellowship, and Brains is frustrated because he too knows that being gay and being Christian are not always considered to be compatible in Northern Ireland. Brains explains Muff's struggle to Cariad:

¹⁰² Ibid., p. 186.

‘I mean, that if you hate yourself and think you’re wrong because you’re gay, and then a bunch of people turn up and tell you that the reason you feel like that is because you *are* wrong, according to religion, and then they tell you that God can help you, you might be more likely to believe them.’

‘Shit.’

‘I know. Shit.’

‘But why does he hate himself? I mean, you don’t feel like that, do you?’

‘No, but I didn’t get bullied for being queer when I was in primary school, either.’¹⁰³

This conversation reveals that Muff was bullied during primary school, and that it is for this reason, amongst others, that he consults the church to cure him of his “illness”. Cariad seems, in this excerpt, shocked and surprised that this has affected Muff to the extent it has. It can thus be understood that Cariad’s character for a moment represents innocence, but not ignorance. Even though she reacts in a perplex manner, previous knowledge of Cariad’s thoughts and utterances reveals that she is aware of the cruelty imposed on much of the LGBTQ community. The excerpt can thus be read as showing how misconceptions still prevail, and how they may lead to bullying when someone does not fit into the heteronormative society. Brains elaborates on why he believes Muff is struggling with accepting who he is:

‘So,’ he continued, ‘you take some little primary-school dicks calling him poof year after year, mix in a soupçon of his granny going on about God and AIDS, stir it up a little bit with the fact that he hates my online queer friends . . .’

‘And you have a recipe for self-hatred?’

‘Bingo. Primed for Jesus.’¹⁰⁴

According to Brains, then, when growing up, Muff experienced such hatred and bullying that it has made him perfectly prepared for Jesus, and this can all be blamed on the unsupportive environment surrounding him whilst growing up. The way Brains describes Muff’s upbringing, reveals that it is not similar to how he grew up himself. For Brains appears to be very understanding of Muff’s troubles, even though it is evident that he is simultaneously tired of the fact that Muff lets his guilt or faith affect the person he is.

Brains is devoted to help Muff, but at the same time he understands why Muff has chosen to pursue his Christian beliefs. To Cariad, however, Brains reveals his negative stance regarding the Youth Fellowship which she is still slightly involved with. Moreover, what Brains shares about the Youth Fellowship from the past, may serve as a foreshadowing of an

¹⁰³ Ibid., p. 107.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

unpleasant event to come. Brains outlines what, according to him, might be interpreted as the church's stance and agenda:

‘They’re not *openly* homophobic, no,’ said Brains. ‘But they’re against it. That Youth Fellowship group you go to? They had a special event last year where they had a guy who came in from another church to talk about gay marriage and how they should all pray against it because it was a slippery slope and next thing you know people would be wanting to marry their horse and stuff.’¹⁰⁵

In other words, the Youth Fellowship, which Muff is now part of, condemns, however discreetly, same-sex relationships. Recalling Michel Foucault's claim of how the church contributed to the condemnation of non-procreative relationships (same-sex relationships or sodomy) in the seventeenth century, it becomes evident that much of this legacy still persists today. In addition, Brains is clearly worn out by this assumption that homoerotic relationships are as unnatural as romantic relationships with animals or objects. And it is not only that Christianity condemns this behaviour within the locked doors of the church that provokes him, but also that their prayers and events urge their member to proclaim why it is unnatural to engage in sinful behaviour such as in same-sex relationships.

When Brains has expressed his concerns for Muff, Cariad is again introduced to a grim side of the Youth Fellowship and the Church. A few days later, when Cariad is approached by Jessica and the Youth Fellowship. Jessica reveals in a note to Cariad that confirms Brains' worries about what the Youth Fellowship was about to do to help Muff, was about to become reality: “*Help him with what?* I wrote, knowing full well what she was talking about. I wanted her to say it, though. *You know*, she wrote. *With his same-sex addiction.*”¹⁰⁶ Cariad expresses annoyance over referencing Muff's sexual orientation as an addiction, but she agrees to attend the gathering at the church so that she can see how the pastor is going to help him. The Youth Fellowship are excited to host this special gathering and convinced this is what it takes to finally relieve Muff of his “confusion”.

This is potentially the most controversial event of *Every Sparrow Falling*. Although never stated in the book, it can be traced to real events around the world commonly referenced as acts of conversion therapy; sexual reorientation therapy; or reparative therapy. This pseudoscientific therapy varies in different practices and aims to change a person's sexual orientation or gender identity. The Human Rights Campaign (HRC) have elucidated the harm such therapy can cause, emphasising the vulnerability of minors and possible consequences,

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., p. 108.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., p. 193.

such as “depression, anxiety, drug use, homelessness, and suicide”, for those exposed to such therapy.¹⁰⁷ The HRC additionally proclaims that while this practice is now, and has been for some time, rejected by “every mainstream medical and mental health organization”, there are still occasions where it is conducted.¹⁰⁸ Some institutions are singled out by the HRC to still partake in this form of therapy: “right-wing religious groups”.¹⁰⁹ To declare whether the Youth Fellowship can be categorised as a right-wing religious group is not germane to discussion here, but what is important to note, is that this religious get-together is not a mainstream event taking place regularly in churches. However, writing about it in *Every Sparrow Falling* might emphasise the extent of damage conversion therapy might cause, as the novel’s description of the event in no way proposes that the therapy has a healing effect.

When Muff then begins his therapeutic treatment as performed by Pastor Jeff, Cariad has joined the rest of the Youth Fellowship in the church after school. After waiting a while, they are all called in by Pastor Jeff to come and participate in the rescuing of Muff:

We filed into the dark room. Gemma gasped, giving voice to what I felt when I saw him. He was lying on a table in the middle of the room, his arms crossed over his chest, eyes closed, surrounded by candles, the only light in the room.

‘Don’t be alarmed,’ the pastor said. ‘James is fine. This is simply a spiritual illustration of what might be, should he continue on this path of unholiness.’¹¹⁰

Walking into the room, they find Muff’s body arranged by the pastor to simulate his dead body. This is, of course, a morbid image to be exposed to for the people who care about Muff, and perhaps especially for his younger sister Gemma. The spiritual illustration of Muff being dead, if he does not get over his same-sex addiction, is meant to motivate the people surrounding him to help him achieve this goal:

The pastor continued. ‘It’s upsetting, but this is the reality of the homosexual lifestyle, which so often leads people into drugs and disease. Let’s take it in turns to let James hear what we might regret about this moment, if it were not simply an illustration of what might come. Let us speak out loud. Jessica?’¹¹¹

In this excerpt, the pastor establishes homosexuality as the main cause for other sins that will ultimately lead to a person’s death. This expresses similarities to what Brains proclaimed in his conversation with Cariad earlier, namely that homosexuality is a slippery slope to people

¹⁰⁷ Human Rights Campaign. “The Lies and Dangers of ‘Conversion Therapy.’” <https://hrc.org/resources/the-lies-and-dangers-of-reparative-therapy>

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ McMillan, *Every Sparrow Falling*, p. 196.

¹¹¹ Ibid., p. 197.

wanting to engage in other non-procreative relationships. The pastor seems to express that same-sex relationships are as bad as human-animal romantic relationships. Gemma is on the verge of breaking down during this session of therapy, and finally she is able to speak: ““Please don’t be gay any more, Jamie. I don’t want you to get AIDS and die!””¹¹² The fact that Gemma assumes that everyone who is homosexual will be infected by HIV/AIDS and eventually die, elucidates another crucial misconception about homosexuality that contributes to the fear prevailing in the LGBTQ community. Therefore, I argue, that two of the key issues leading to homophobia are fear and ignorance. For knowledge of how unusual it is to actually get infected by HIV if you are gay today, even though history has established HIV as a disease frequently infecting those who are gay, can contribute to normalise same-sex relationships. Moreover, Cariad expresses exhaustion and anger after being part of this therapeutic prayer to heal Muff, and decides to stand up for Muff and interrupt the séance: ““How can you all fucking *do this*? It’s warped! You all need a fucking head doctor – everyone except Muff who’s just confused because you’ve all messed him up.””¹¹³

It is the event of the special prayer that eventually leads Cariad to denounce Christianity. However fed up she is with the Youth Fellowship and the church, Cariad is still committed to helping Brains bring Muff back to himself. She decides to ask Big Gay Dave, a friend that Brains introduced her to, to help them come up with a plan that may bring Muff back. Big Gay Dave suggests that Muff should meet his friend Danny. Danny is a priest, and he is gay. The plan is for him to talk to Muff about his church and his perception of Christianity, so that Muff might find comfort in knowing that there is a possibility to unite the two. When introduced to Muff, Danny shares from his past of wanting to be a heterosexual man rather than being gay:

‘It just got too difficult. I tried really hard to be straight. I saw therapists. I got prayer. I even tried to like playing football at school because one of my best friends thought it might help me be *more of a man*. I prayed and prayed. And nothing worked. In the end I thought that one of two things had to be true: either there was no God, and everything I believed was a total load of crap, or there *was* a God and he wasn’t making me straight because actually there isn’t anything wrong with being gay.’¹¹⁴

The story Danny tells Muff shares several similarities with what Brains and Cariad is worried that Muff is going through. What he conveys is that belonging to a church does not necessarily mean to repress a sexual identity which contradicts the heteronormative

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Ibid., p. 198.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., p. 239.

expectations coming from selected branches of Christianity. This way, Danny offers a light in the otherwise grim perception of Christianity in *Every Sparrow Falling*.

Danny's reasoning for coming to terms with being gay additionally introduces two ways of understanding homosexuality which recall Eve K. Sedgwick's concepts of 'universalizing' and 'minoritizing' views of homosexuality. Danny discards the claim of a 'universalizing' view on homosexuality, as he attempted to take part in activities he thought would help him become heterosexual. This contradicts the 'universalizing' view because it rejects that same-sex relationships and desires can be chosen. Seeing this as an attempt to change his sexual identity that failed, it can instead underscore the claim that being homosexual is a biological trait, as understood in the 'minoritizing' view. Thus, Sedgwick's concept of the 'minoritizing' view complements Danny's perception of why he is gay. For even though he did attempt to interact with what he regarded as typically masculine, heteronormative, activities in order to eliminate his homosexual preference, this had no success with changing his sexual orientation.

In addition to Danny's story being significant in relation to the question of 'universalizing' versus 'minoritizing' views of homosexuality, his strategy for becoming 'more of a man' can be discussed in light of Judith Butler's theory of performativity. One of the claims in Butler's theory of performativity is that gender is a social performance, or product, implemented through e.g. gestures and acts. The acts that Danny thought would make him heterosexual, i.e. playing football, suggests that if he were to behave a certain way, or commit to certain acts, it would eventually result in him becoming heterosexual. Danny may have been attempting to perform his sexuality in a social context, through football. However, as Danny states, even though he tried to perform as a heterosexual, he did not feel heterosexual.

Being introduced to all this does not have such a positive effect on Muff as Brains and Cariad had hoped, and Muff continues to pursue his faith in Christianity. That is, until a tragedy one day affects him – an incident where a boat tips over with members of the Youth Fellowship in it. Brains die in the attempt to rescue those who fell out of the boat, Muff being one of whom he rescues. It is at the funeral of Brains that Muff fully acknowledges who he really is, after listening to the pastor commemorate Brains' short life and predicting how his future would have been prosperous: ““What a tragedy that this young man was cut down in his prime. He would undoubtedly have gone on to have a successful career. He would

certainly have had a wife and a family of his own . . .”¹¹⁵ Quietly watching the memorial, Cariad reacts to how the pastor dares to predict Brains’ future, and she struggles to keep still as she knows Brains would have never wanted to marry a woman. However, as she tries to stay calm, Muff walks up to the front of the room declaring: “‘He was my boyfriend. He wasn’t going to get a wife. He’d never have done that. He was gay. Really, really gay. And I’m gay too. And now he’s gone . . . and I think . . . I think we should tell the truth about him.’”¹¹⁶ This is a liberation for Muff, as he finally acknowledges who he is, and this becomes his moment of leaving his shame and repression of identity behind.

When seeing Muff proclaim his love for Brains and accepting himself as a gay person, Cariad expresses relief, justice, and pride. Going through the experience of losing her best friend, Brains, and for a moment losing her hope of Muff’s recovering leaves Cariad in a state of numbness. However, the liberation she experiences when seeing Muff admit to his identity leads to what can be regarded as the novel fulfilling a reparative purpose of eliminating LGBTQ oppression. Recalling that my previous discussion of reading queer literature in a paranoid manner would be useful for it would provide justice and acknowledgment of the suffering experienced by LGBTQ individuals. While Sedgwick did state that the two strategies of paranoid and reparative reading would be inadmissible when analysing queer literature, because of their conflicting aims, this reading of *Every Sparrow Falling* proves that the strategies she accounted for may exist in the text itself. In other words, the suffering and injustice committed towards LGBTQ individuals in this novel have been accounted for in such a way that they elucidate the grim reality of the characters while not coming across as ‘bad surprises’. However, the ending of the book offers the possibility of a more promising future. The hope for a better future is emphasised in the final chapter of the novel, where Cariad, Dawn and Jacky, Big Gay Dave and his boyfriend, and Muff orchestrate the first Pride parade of Ballybaile. Thus, the ending of the novel reveals the reparative motive, the degree of hope, to the targeted reader.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., p. 269.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., p. 270.

‘We are a bit unique in ourselves’

In summary, it seems that what Shirley-Anne McMillan has attempted to convey in these novels is largely connected to who she attempts to reach, her target reader. A big part of life for many youths in Northern Ireland, and elsewhere, is to overcome mental health issues and to create relationships with other people. Even though most people experience insecurity when forming new relationships, it might feel more frightening to a Northern Irish young adult to interact with people outside their immediate circle of neighbours or peers. The reluctance to engage in new friendships and other relationships is, perhaps, deeper rooted in Northern Ireland due to the carefulness of sharing information about one’s family, beliefs, and other identity markers labelling someone to be either Protestant or Catholic. This, McMillan explains, is much because of the history which still marks the contemporary social dynamics in Northern Ireland.

When I addressed, in the introduction, how postmemory or transgenerational trauma could be considered a cause for contemporary restraints in Northern Ireland, social conventions were not thoroughly debated. However, as mentioned in the introduction, McMillan expresses that social restrictions can be regarded as a possible cause for why mental health issues seem to be a major concern among adolescents and young adults in Northern Ireland, since they are getting so used to keeping secrets and reluctant to being themselves. This aspect of transferring trauma, or social conventions, from one generation to another is a big part of the pattern that the gang in *The Unknowns* is trying to break. However, in *Every Sparrow Falling*, the Troubles, or its legacy, is not such an emphasised theme. What is applicable to both novels, however, is the struggle that McMillan indicates to be the reluctance or fear of performing one’s identity. Naming this reluctance as another legacy of the Troubles may be more prominent when discussing the characteristics of Tilly, rather than Cariad. Drawing on what Tilly shares of her upbringing and life as a child, it becomes remarkable how reticent she is to share of her personal experience, possibly because she has grown up being told to keep to herself. Cariad, for her part, has experienced a turbulent upbringing, with experiences different from most children, and it is thus not desirable to identify her reluctance as a legacy of the Troubles.

Considering the fact that *The Unknowns* and *Every Sparrow Falling* are two independent novels, it is important to treat them as two different stories. However, the shared features of the stories are distinguished in their abilities to portray the contemporary struggles in Northern Ireland, while also elucidating the controversy surrounding LGBTQ individuals.

It is additionally significant that McMillan establishes the reluctance of sharing personal stories and being used to keeping secrets as a legacy of the Troubles. Because the history of the Troubles is distinct to Northern Ireland, it is worth noting that the secrets being kept in McMillan's novels are often related to gender and sexuality identity. This issue further supports the hypothesis that Northern Ireland is in fact different from the rest of the UK, and, according to McMillan, the country "can be quite homophobic and transphobic at times".¹¹⁷

Concluding, then, that both novels are crucial contributors to elucidate the reality of an adolescent's life in Northern Ireland, further supports the argument of why these novels were significant to read utilising Eve K. Sedgwick's strategies of paranoid and reparative reading. Both stories present a clear argument to why the reparative motif is crucial for contemporary literature – it can contribute to a change in the perception of an oppressed community. Moreover, having young adults read literature which attempts to elucidate the reality of homophobia and courage, is arguably reparative in itself.

¹¹⁷ Appendix A, p. 62.

Conclusion

Having explored *The Unknowns* and *Every Sparrow Falling* in light of theoretical frameworks related to queer theory, and having discussed how these novels contribute to the understanding of a (perhaps) less prominent legacy of the Troubles, I will now present some final reflections on why the novels are significant in a Northern Irish context. Shirley-Anne McMillan's young adult novels are indeed fictional, but nevertheless convey a realistic portrayal of what it is like to grow up in Northern Ireland today. By providing an extensive context to the novels, the plot offers a greater understanding of the struggles that adolescents experience. In McMillan's final author's note in *Every Sparrow Falling*, she includes information about LGBTQ matters in Northern Ireland. She also presents supportive advice and contact information to reach volunteer organisations so that the readers may better understand, offer support, or even seek support if they themselves or someone they know experience injustice or oppression for performing their identity. McMillan writes that Northern Ireland still needs some work in order to celebrate diversity, and she notes that it is everyone's "responsibility to turn a light onto the dark corners of this place."¹¹⁸ Thus, having included such an extensive note at the end of her novel, it becomes evident that part of the reason she wrote these narratives was to advocate a more tolerant society, where being an LGBTQ individual should be less of a struggle.

McMillan's effort to write realistically about the struggles facing LGBTQ individuals in Northern Ireland also confirms my earlier claim that it is useful for a teacher to provide extensive background knowledge of contemporary social and historical features related to the setting of a novel. Moreover, according to Eve K. Sedgwick an extensive presentation of features that may affect the result of a paranoid reading must be provided to fully comprehend the context of the fictional literature as well as possible links to the real life world. Therefore, to avoid the 'bad surprises', which are named as a prerequisite for performing a paranoid reading, the legacy of the Troubles and the current mental health issues had to be accounted for in order to offer a thorough paranoid reading debating some ostensibly realistic issues facing young adults in Northern Ireland. The paranoid reader should, according to Sedgwick, never be surprised when injustice and homophobia occurs, but rather add them to the list of forms of oppression and unfairness, which are imposed on LGBTQ individuals. Both novels

¹¹⁸ Shirley-Anne McMillan, *Every Sparrow Falling*, 2019, p. 278.

comment on current as well as past cultural issues. However, *The Unknowns* is persistently more concerned than *Every Sparrow Falling* with how these issues represent a legacy of the Troubles. Thus, sectarian violence is more frequently debated amongst the gang members in *The Unknowns* than by the characters in *Every Sparrow Falling*.

The manner in which I read the novels with the assumption that LGBTQ characters were going to be treated badly, in this thesis, thus fulfilled the requirement demanded of a paranoid reader. However, to only emphasize the mistreatment of LGBTQ individuals would result in an unjustifiably unbalanced reading of the two novels. For when remembering that the novels are written to offer some degree of hope, it makes them even more useful when identifying how they serve a reparative purpose as well. That is a purpose of offering hope to those who read the novels. Moreover, the pessimistic approach of a paranoid reading highlights the optimistic result of a reparative reading. Thus, a reparative reading, or conclusion, is stronger if it first includes the establishing and acknowledging of the injustice committed towards LGBTQ individuals. Accepting that contemporary LGBTQ individuals are still being treated badly, as also evidenced by statistics and reports published by Stonewall, Samaritans and YouGov, further makes it possible to fully comprehend how the fictional characters may be acknowledged as realistic portrayals of real Northern Irish adolescents.

In several respects, the characters from *The Unknowns* and *Every Sparrow Falling* discussed in the analysis represent various approaches found in the different theories utilised in this thesis. Initially, in the former novel, Tilly represents a normative approach to gender and sexuality, but as she makes new relationships and develops her identity further, she gradually realises that it is no longer important for her to obey the heteronormative standards imposed by society. It is particularly through her connection with Brew that she finally surmounts the expectations surrounding her and decides to embrace her performance of sexual identity. Brew embraces the autonomy of performing his identity by representing the opinion that whatever he does with whoever he wants should not affect anyone but him, because it is his performance of identity. Arguably, Scar mirrors exactly what Judith Butler's theory of performativity proposes regarding gender performance. The feminine inscriptions on his body, which is biologically male, signal that his cultural gender is that of a woman, or he can be regarded a cross-dresser. Either way, the manner in which Scar performs his gender correlates with how Butler claims that gender should be a fluid cultural performance. In *Every Sparrow Falling*, Cariat demonstrates considerable growth when admitting to need someone

in order to be consistent in her performance of identity, and she represents a voice which advocates against the unfairness of trying to heal Muff. Although not clearly expressed in the context of any of this thesis' theories, Muff's experience with conversion therapy and Brains attempting to save him from becoming a Christian are significant portrayals of a lethal struggle still threatening LGBTQ individuals. However, through the voice of Danny the gay priest, a mature solution is suggested, which may further be regarded as camouflaged advice from McMillan to the targeted reader.

It is important to note, however, that the theories utilised in this thesis have not been used in an uncritical way. By applying the available theoretical framework in interpreting *The Unknowns* and *Every Sparrow Falling*, significant associations and important topics were elucidated in a critical way. Moreover, seeing the theories as tools for better understanding and analysing the novels has led to an increased awareness of a, perhaps, less apparent legacy of the Troubles. Thus, the dynamic features of the characters discussed in this thesis are highlighted through their resistance and development. Their growth and change throughout the novel make it difficult to define them through the lenses of each theory. But it is perhaps this resistance that stresses how the novels and their characters are essentialistic about gender and sexuality identity in itself, seeing many of the characters seeking relationships with individuals sharing similar traits inherent to the community they aim to belong to. This may further suggest that McMillan's characters in her novels were purposely portrayed as not conforming with heteronormative and binary gender and sexuality appropriate behaviour, and further attempting to avoid stereotypical descriptions of homosexual individuals by portraying them as feminine. By making the characters more diverse and giving them the ability to embrace different strategies for resisting being labelled, she also challenges the reader's assumptions prior to reading the novels and gives room for different responses which unties the novels from belonging to merely didactic literature.

This leads me to a key, and complementary, aspect of this thesis. It is useful to recall my introductory claim that many LGBTQ individuals are still vulnerable to physical and psychological violence in 2020, because recent incidents such as the massacre at Pulse Club in Orlando reflect contemporary threats and increased vulnerability for those belonging to the LGBTQ community. Even though many things have changed since the Christian church condemned homosexuality in the seventeenth century, the legacy of this condemnation is still crucial, especially in right-wing religious institutions. However, as Michel Foucault stated, we belong to an 'epoch of time' that has reinforced the heterogeneous standard. And while

homosexuality and non-binary gender identity are no longer categorised as mental disorders, and it is now legal to marry your partner of the same sex in Northern Ireland, there are still many aspects pointing to the struggles inherent in identifying outside of conventional gender and sexuality. Especially the conservative backlash of recent years, where many countries, both in Europe and beyond, have been led by conservative right-wing politicians, has an adverse effect on optimism on behalf of LGBTQ individuals and communities. Seeing that this conservative backlash is a threat to all minorities makes it difficult to be unequivocally optimistic about the future of an inclusive and diverse society.

Therefore, this thesis has emphasised how McMillan's novels can contribute to raise awareness and encourage discussion, in order to better understand and improve the lives of those affected by homophobic utterances and discriminative behaviour. Thus, what Olga Skarlato et al. postulated with regards to grassroots peace-building, is a strategy transferable to improve quality of life for LGBTQ individuals. For perceptions and misconceptions may change if undergone a grassroots campaign with the aim to increase acceptance and respect for others. And it is, perhaps, small gestures with a reparative motivation which may suggest that the 'epoch of our time' no longer favours heterosexuality, but rather embraces diversity and advocates an all-embracing society. Moreover, by acknowledging, but not dwelling on, the difficult past of what many LGBTQ individuals has suffered, this account becomes reparative in itself.

Despite our hopes, to conclude that the world has entered a new phase when it comes to gender and sexuality performance would require a much more encompassing analysis of not only literature but also other factors in society. Certainly, the limited scope of this thesis makes it difficult to place the discussion presented as representative of larger developments in its claim to announce a new phase where performance of identity no longer leads to insecurity and fear of abuse. However, what this thesis has attempted to portray are the possible challenges posed from a Northern Irish perspective, and here it can be argued that making same-sex marriage legal in 2019 may lead to greater changes in perception of the LGBTQ community. Furthermore, even though there may still be some way to go, it is important to convey that when discussing controversial topics, that having such these discussions will in itself offer the basis for a modest optimism for tomorrow's young adults. Thus, the degree of hope emphasised in this thesis belongs to a greater process of challenging conventional perceptions of gender and sexuality, and encourages a more liberated approach to performing one's identity.

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Appendix A

On 7 October 2019, I travelled to Newcastle County Down on the east coast of Northern Ireland to meet with author Shirley-Anne McMillan. We met at Railway St. Cafe for some lunch and a cup of coffee. McMillan was born in Lisburn, Northern Ireland, in 1975. She studied at Queens University Belfast, before moving to Newcastle, where she now lives with her family. I contacted McMillan a few weeks earlier, to see if she was interested in having a conversation with me about her four published young adult novels – *Widows Row*, *Good Hiding*, *The Unknowns*, and *Every Sparrow Falling*.

Before we met, I sent McMillan some questions which were to be the base of a semi-structured interview which I recorded, and later transcribed with her permission to use as part of this master's thesis. She has read the interview and approved the quotes.

Interview

Loddengaard: My first question is a rather technical one. In your books, I've seen that there's a list of acknowledgements to people who contributed in various ways and who has given you information on different matter. So, I was wondering, how do you do your research, and how long does it take you to research a book?

McMillan: Yeah, I guess because my books are set in Northern Ireland, and they're contemporary, so it's not really difficult to find out information, you know. I use the Internet, sometimes I ask on Facebook if people know a certain thing that I need to know, and I normally find that somebody will know the answer. The most research I've done so far has been for the first book actually, *Widows Row*, because it was a historical element to it, so I went to the local library and I went to the museum in Belfast, but for *A Good Hiding* and *The Unknowns* it was mostly questions about pregnancy, and things that maybe were outside my own experience, but things that I could just ask someone else. So, I didn't find it really difficult to do research. The book I'm writing at the minute has a scene set in Granada, in Spain, so I went to Granada earlier this year. I've been there before, but I wanted to go as a writer and try to observe everything and record things. But apart from that most things have been set locally.

Loddengaard: So, it's been more about writing what you know, sort of?

McMillan: Yeah, so it's been really easy to sort of write the place that you know and the time that you know.

Loddengaard: Yes, but I mean there's lots to write about here...

McMillan: Yeah, there is.

Loddengaard: So, that sort of leads me to my next question. What was it like growing up here in Northern Ireland, I mean, related to the Troubles?

McMillan: I know, yeah... So, I was born in 1975, so the Troubles had already started, and my dad was a soldier, so he was posted here. He was English and he was posted here during the Troubles, which was just like really dangerous, obviously, so I was always a bit worried about that. He left the army soon after, but then he had other jobs as well that were related to guns and things like that. So, it was scary growing up. A lot of my friend's fathers were also in the police. And because our society was so divided, I didn't know any Catholics until I was an adult, so you know it was University before I met a Catholic. So, all schools and churches, youth clubs, everything was completely divided which meant that all my friends had fathers who were in the police or the army and I didn't know that anyone was going through anything different to that... So, it was scary, but thankfully my family escaped being hurt. But I did have friends who lost parents, and I had a friend who was shot as well. He is OK, like he survived, but he was shot in the leg. The gunman had come for his dad, and his dad wasn't in, so they just shot him instead. He was only a teenager. So, there were things like that that were not normal, you know... But apart from that we had normal lives with our friends and youth clubs, and we got through the time. But sometimes it was a bomb scare and you had to go home again. And sometimes there were bombs, like that did happen. So, it was sort of a mixture of just a normal teenage life and sort of a frightening time as well.

Loddengaard: And in the school that you went to, did you learn or talk about the Troubles?

McMillan: Yeah, people did talk about things. But there's a sort of weird thing in Northern Ireland, which is still the case now, that people don't like to talk too much about themselves cause you're afraid of offending somebody, but also about revealing stuff about yourself. And I really feel like in my books, my books are set now, so there's that in like this time and the Troubles are over. So, it's like post-Troubles, and teenagers now haven't experienced that, but they still have this sort of legacy of that. So, still people won't talk about their families too much or what jobs their

families might do or Protestant Catholic things because most people are good people. They don't want to offend anyone or get into trouble. So, I do feel like there is a legacy there that has kind of come from the Troubles. Even though kids now aren't getting... their families killed and things just quite so often.

Loddengaard: Yes, that's much of what I'm interested in as well with your books. That they are set now, but there are still a lot of elements from the Troubles.

McMillan: Yes, it is still like quite a divided society. I mean, Newcastle's very nice because it's much more mixed than a lot of places, but I mean, Belfast is very divided. Lisburn where I grew up is quite divided still as well.

Loddengaard: And that's a protestant area then?

McMillan: Yes, Lisburn is mainly Protestant, and there are Catholic areas there. And Belfast would be sort of divided 50/50, there's like West-Belfast is mainly Catholic and East-Belfast mainly Protestant. But there's a bit more mixing now than it would have been, but some areas are still completely divided, and there's still a big wall down the middle of Belfast.

Loddengaard: Yes, so the division in society is still quite visible.

McMillan: Yeah, there is still a lot of division. Definitely. And people are still very careful about talking about themselves. So, and in a lot of my books there are characters who have big secrets and I sort of feel that even young people are reticent to being themselves and talking about themselves too much, and I think that all has to do with being told constantly to keep quiet, 'cause it could have been dangerous in the past.

Loddengaard: Yes, and that is also something which is very noticeable about your books, that those big secrets that the characters often keep are related to LGBTQ...

McMillan: Oh, yeah..

Loddengaard: I mean, my impression is that the characters sometimes struggle with saying out loud that they identify within the LGBTQ categories. Is there any particular reason for why you've chosen to focus so much on this issue?

McMillan: Yes, I think there are a few reasons. When I was growing up there were no books about LGBT-kids, at all, there just weren't any. Or not that I knew of anyway. And when I started writing these books there were none from Northern Ireland, at all. And still very few from teenage literature from Northern Ireland. So, I work with

LGBT-kids, and I kind of feel like they deserve to have their stories as well. But also, Northern Ireland is... or can be quite homophobic and transphobic at times as well. Like we still don't have marriage here for gay people. So, we've always been a wee bit behind the rest of the UK that of LGBT issues. And I suppose I feel that if I didn't have any LGBT characters then that would be really weird, because, lots of my friends are LGBT, and my family, and it's strange to leave them out. And then if you have them in, I feel like I have to talk about homophobia as well, because that's a reality here, you know.

Loddengaard: Yes, and I've read some research on mental health issues and how they are related to LGBTQ and that there are a lot more people here [Northern Ireland] that say they are unhappy because they can't be who they are.

McMillan: Yes, the research about young LGBT people here is terrible, it's just so awful. Recent research has shown that around about 50% of LGBT-kids feel that their school isn't welcoming to them, so it's just awful. And statistics around like self-harm and attempting suicide are like way, way higher than they would be for straight kids.

Loddengaard: It's heart breaking. But that's also why I've found your novels so intriguing, because they deal with these themes in a very important way.

McMillan: Yes.

Loddengaard: We talked a bit about Belfast. Especially in *The Unknowns* and *A Good Hiding* Belfast is very important, is my interpretation anyway. It sort of acts like its own character in the backdrop of the other characters. Is there any specific reason why you chose to do this?

McMillan: Yes, well, I grew up in Lisburn, which is very close to Belfast. So, as teenagers we spent a lot of time in Belfast. A lot of my friends were from there and I went to university in Belfast, and I met my husband there, he is from Belfast, and all my family lives there as well. So, I have lot of connection with Belfast and I just know it really well. I did think it was important to write about place really clearly. I really wanted that to come through. Because there are so few young adult books from Northern Ireland, I wanted to kind of write about how we're different from the UK, because we are. And we're different to the Republic [of Ireland] as well, a little bit too. We are a bit unique in ourselves. So, I wanted that to come through really strongly, and Belfast is just somewhere that I knew really well. *Every Sparrow Falling* is set in the North Coast, so it's set in a more rural location.

Loddengaard: So, what's the most surprising thing you discovered while writing your books? Is there anything that you remember in particular?

McMillan: I did a little bit of research into the prison, the Maze Prison, because, again, it's something that is close to Lisburn, so I knew of it. But it's a very controversial place, because they had thought about making it into a museum of the Troubles, but no one could agree on how to do that, so they just didn't. So, it's just going to ruins. So, I did a little bit of research on it. That was very interesting, but I don't know if I found anything that I really didn't expect to find...

Loddengaard: I see... Has there come any, sort of, feedback to your books that was sort of surprising to you?

McMillan: I suppose I'm surprised that there hasn't been any pushback on it... Although, Northern Ireland can be very homophobic, I haven't had any complaints about that at all. When the first book came out I had some newspaper interviews, and I was a bit worried about them because all they wanted to ask about was the gay storyline, and it's a dual narrative, so Nollaig has like half the story about her pregnancy. And they didn't want to know about it at all, and then I thought, oh my goodness they're going to make some big sensational thing out of this. But it was actually fine, and no one commented on it or anything. Everything has been fairly well received so far.

Loddengaard: Yeah, because that's also a controversial subject that you deal with, when Nollaig researches abortion...

McMillan: Yeah that's right, so it's still illegal here. But in the next few weeks, it's possible that we will have equal rights to those in England because of the collapse of our assembly. And the British Government have said that if our assembly doesn't start again, then they will give us abortion rights and also marriage, equal marriage. So, within the next few weeks that could all change. But, I felt like if you had a pregnant teenager story then it's obvious that they're going to think about what will I do and, I mean she chooses to carry on her pregnancy. But it did make me think like for teenagers here, they don't really have very much of a choice, especially if they're afraid to tell people in their early stages. But when I was at school, two of my friends in my class had babies, before they left school, so I guess I was thinking of them as well.

Loddengaard: Yes, I mean it's definitely controversial topic to deal with when the rules are as strict as they are. Well, what were some key challenges, or did you face any key challenges, when you were writing your books?

McMillan: I think like, in myself, my main challenge was that I wanted to be really authentic, like I wanted my characters to sound real. Like I'm not LGBT myself, and I was like, it's a bit of controversy at the minute around YA-books in the UK of people saying that you shouldn't write LGBT-characters if you're not LGBT yourself. I was sort of aware that if I was going to do that, then I really need to get it right and not use stereotypes and things. So, I was a bit concerned about that. And I made sure that I had LGBT friends who very kindly read my work and gave me some advice about that. I was really keen to get that right, and I think that was my main worry.

Loddengaard: I understand. And because the themes in your books are quite similar, but also different, are you trying to build sort of a relationship between the books, like a framework?

McMillan: Yeah, I hadn't really thought about that. I guess I had wanted them to stand alone, like on their own. And, I guess I feel that there were just some things I had to get out of my system. But the first book didn't really completely do that, so I needed to do a bit more. With *The Unknowns* I wanted it to be more about politics, I suppose, how our government has sort of abandoned young people I think, in my opinion of course... And how young people are starting to take upon themselves to do things. At the time that I wrote it there was nothing to do with the climate change or anything, but that has happened since then, and young people have really taken on this issue and they've decided that you're not going to do something about it so we will take that on. And that, to me, that's just what young people here do. They want to campaign, they want to be activists, and they want to change things and make things better. So, I guess what runs through most of my books is that you have young people who maybe have difficult circumstances but have some degree of hope, and that they want to do things, and want to act to change their own life, and other peoples'. But it wasn't really intentional to link them all together or anything.

Loddengaard: That's how I read *The Unknowns* as well, that I feel like the characters, or the gang, sort of attempt to oppose everything that has happened to cause division in

Northern Ireland, that they want nothing to do with the issue of being either Protestant or Catholic.

McMillan: I think that's very typical of teenagers now, I think. They don't really understand why adults are the way they are and why our politics are so corrupt. And why we don't have a government at the minute. They can't understand that what's not happening.

Loddengaard: Yes, that's very interesting, and it leads me to my next question. What do you hope your readers take away from these books?

McMillan: Oh, what do I hope the readers will take away?

Loddengaard: Yes, like do you have main message...

McMillan: Hm, yeah, well I suppose... I do get some like adult readers, and then some readers that are not from Northern Ireland as well. And I hope that they can see that our young people are really tenacious and hopeful, cause I really feel that they are. They are amazing. So, I suppose I wanted to put that across, that some of the storylines are quite dark and difficult, but I hope that, elements of hope come through for them.

Loddengaard: Moving towards the end, I do have one more question. Your novels are set in post-agreement Northern Ireland with main characters who was not alive during the Troubles, but you've lived and experienced the conflict. Do you ever find yourself thinking about this relationship?

McMillan: I very often find myself thinking of the relationship between my teenage years and the teenagers I'm writing about, which are obviously post-agreement. Because they obviously have different lives to the life that I had, but we're from the same place and lots of things haven't changed. So, it's interesting to talk to young people now as well. Because even though they haven't lived through the Troubles, they will have had family that have, so they may have grandparents who were killed or what the stories are about what have come down through their family. Or they may live in areas which are very very divided and still quite sectarian. So, I do think about that quite a lot. That relationship.