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LITERARY REPRESENTATIONS OF NON-HETERONORMATIVE AND TRANS PEOPLE IN POLISH YOUNG ADULT (YA) LITERATURE: THE EXAMPLE OF NATALIA OSIŃSKA'S TRILOGY AND ANOUK HERMAN'S NOVEL *NIGDY NIE BĘDZIESZ SZŁO SAMO*

Abstract: The author focuses on literary representations of LGBT+ youth in Polish novels classified as Young Adult Literature (YAL). They use a three-part framework created by Michael Cart and Christine A. Jenkins to analyse books viewed as emblematic for Polish queer YAL: Natalia Osińska's trilogy (*Fanfik* 2016, *Slash* 2017, *Fluff* 2019) and Anouk Herman's novel *Nigdy nie będziesz szło samo* [*You'll Never Walk Alone*, 2023]. When describing literary representations of coming out and queer youth subcultures, the author draws attention to the multidimensionality of the identities of the characters in this type of literary work. They are presented not only in the context of their gender identity and sexual orientation, but also through the prism of their economic situation and place of birth. The queerness of the characters is not limited to issues of gender and sexuality, but also involves challenging the norm of neurotypicality. According to the author, the novels analysed represent an interesting cultural representation of the Polish community of young people who identify as gay, lesbian, transgender and non-binary, as well as their allies (parents, friends).

Keywords: Young Adult Literature (YAL), transgender, queer, neurodiversity, coming out

Introduction

The last eight years of the conservative Law and Justice government have been marked by a series of homophobic and transphobic speeches by politicians and clergy who have publicly incited hatred against minorities. In 2020, Archbishop Marek

Jędraszewski called LGBT¹ people the ‘rainbow plague’, and President Andrzej Duda, running for re-election, publicly declared the need to ‘defend children against LGBT ideology’, arguing that non-heteronormative people are ‘not people, it’s an ideology.’²

Meanwhile, research shows that the greater the social stigma, the greater the fear experienced by members of minorities. This is confirmed by a number of studies carried out by non-governmental organizations. The report on the social situation of LGBT+ people in Poland in 2019–2020 shows that 20.6% of LGBT+ people have lost a relationship with a close person in their life due to revealing their sexuality, and the percentage of people who hide their sexual orientation or gender identity has increased. Significantly, 53% of respondents have been the victim of a hate crime because of their sexual orientation or gender identity. The proportion of people with severe symptoms of depression has increased by 16% in comparison to the previous year, whilst almost one in two LGBT+ people (48%) have diagnostic symptoms of the condition. Fifty-five percent of people who took part in the study say they sometimes think about suicide. Correspondingly, seventy-four percent of LGBT+ students (and 59% of all university students) have suicidal thoughts resulting from stress associated with their sexuality or their identity as a minority. In addition, 16.5% of respondents have experienced at least one episode of homelessness.³ I refer to this political and research framework⁴ at the beginning of this article in order to illustrate the profound interrelations between the literary representation of the young LGBT+ community and the socio-political-economic landscape of Poland.

The emergence of a new type of literature for young people in Poland was linked to the democratic breakthrough of 1989. The central theme of most YA fiction is growing up, finding the answer to the question ‘Who am I?’. In books of this new type, the reader could find a reflection of the world around him, with all the positive and negative phenomena that had previously been passed over in silence in the countries of the communist bloc as incompatible with the image of society created in accordance with the officially adopted ideological policy. The catalogue of difficult topics and taboos used by authors of this type of text included: death, including

¹ LGBT+ is an abbreviation and umbrella term for the community of non-heteronormative and transgender people. It is an extension of LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender). The “+” sign symbolises all other sexual and gender minorities, e.g. asexual and aromantic people (K. Skrzydłowska-Kalukin, J. Sokolińska, *Mów o mnie ono [Talk about Me It]*, W.A.B., Warszawa 2022, p. 11). In this article, I use the term LGBT+ to reflect a wide range of non-heteronormative people’s experiences, except where I quote statements from politicians or researchers who use the narrower term LGBT or LGBT+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Asexual).

² K. Skrzydłowska-Kalukin, J. Sokolińska, *Mów o mnie ono*, op. cit., p. 82.

³ M. Winiewski et al. (eds.), *Sytuacja społeczna osób LGBT+ w Polsce. Raport za lata 2019–2020 [The Social Situation of LGBT+ People in Poland: Report for 2019–2020]*.

⁴ In Poland, gender and queer studies have been developing as academic disciplines since the 1990s (B. Chołuj, *Gender Studies* [dictionary entry] [in:] *Encyklopedia gender. Pleć w kulturze*, Czarna Owca, Warszawa 2014, pp. 162–167).

suicide; illness, especially incurable illness; physical or mental and intellectual disability; addiction to narcotic substances; physical and psychological violence in the family and peer group; unplanned pregnancy at a young age.⁵ Changes related to the development of new media have led to the emergence of new issues, such as: gender identity; sexual orientation; addiction to computer games and the Internet; belonging to religious sects, gangs and various forms of enslavement related to this fact; war trauma.⁶ For a long time, however, non-heterosexual and transgender young people were invisible in Polish literature aimed at the younger generation⁷. When they did appear, especially in the novels of the 1990s, they were presented as secondary characters, as in the novel *Kolacja na Titanicu* [*Dinner on the Titanic*] by Krystyna Bolgar (1991) or in *Musisz to komuś powiedzieć* [*You Must Tell Someone*] by Barbara Ciwoniuk (2010).

The issue of non-heteronormativity⁸ and/or transgenderism had previously appeared in some books, both in Polish and in translations from other languages. Polish LGBT+ popular fiction (for adults) appeared after 2005. Young adult (YA) fiction, including non-normative themes, appeared a little later, around 2010.⁹ The first Polish novel for young adults devoted entirely to the discovery of homosexual identity is the acclaimed *Koniec gry* [*End of the Game*] by Anna Onichimowska (2012). The following years saw the publication of novels with LGBT+ themes, such as *Jak ziarnka piasku* [*Like Grains of Sand*] by Joanny Jagiełło (2018) and *Hodowla* [*Breeding*] by Katarzyna Ryrych (2019), as well as those that focus entirely on non-heteronormative male characters: *Rado Boy* by Dorota Jarowska (2019), *W mojej krwi* [*In My Blood*] by Marek Szydłak (2020), *Hurt/Comfort* (2020) and *Angst with a Happy Ending* (2021) by Weronika Łodyga, and two novels by Edyta Prusinowska (*Opowiem o to-*

⁵ K. Tałuc, *Trudne tematy w polskiej współczesnej powieści dla dziewcząt. Strategie narracyjne na przykładzie twórczości Natalii Osińskiej*, „Bibliotekarz Podlaski. Ogólnopolskie Naukowe Pismo Bibliotekoznawcze i Bibliologiczne” 2022, vol. 56, <https://doi.org/10.36770/bp.726>, p. 161.

⁶ Ibidem, p. 162.

⁷ Of course, non-heteronormative literary heroes have appeared in Polish literature, as evidenced by anthologies and academic studies devoted to the topic. In this article, however, I will focus on literary characters who openly explore their non-heteronormative identity during adolescence.

⁸ *Heteronormativity* – the institutions, structures of understanding and practical orientations that make heterosexuality not only coherent – i.e. organised as a sexuality – but also privileged (L. Berlant, M. Warner, *Sex in Public*, “Critical Inquiry” 1988, vol. 24, no. 2, p. 565). These structuring norms organise homosexuality as its binary opposite. Negative attitudes towards homosexuality may result from the fact that it disrupts socially sanctioned gender role patterns and causes them to lose their concreteness and clarity (G. Iniewicz, *Stres mniejszościowy u osób bisekualnych i homoseksualnych. W poszukiwaniu czynników ryzyka i czynników chroniących* [*Minority Stress in Bisexual and Homosexual People: Searching for Risk and Protective Factors*], Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, Krakow 2015, p. 41). *Heteronormative assumptions* – unconscious beliefs and expectations that reinforce heterosexuality and heterosexual relationships as the ideal norm (G. Iniewicz, *Stres mniejszościowy...*, op. cit., p. 47).

⁹ P. Sobolczyk, *Queerowe subwersje. Polska literatura homoseksualna i zmiana społeczna*, IBP PAN, Warszawa 2015, p. 479.

bie gwiazdom [I'll Tell You About You to the Stars] 2022, and *Truskawkowy blond* [Strawberry Blonde] 2022). At the same time, two types of LGBT+ fan fiction began to develop – slash and femslash – which include stories whose characters identify as non-heteronormative. Some of these have been published by the authors themselves. The popularity of LGBT+ themes on fan fiction websites proves the necessity for stories of non-heteronormative and transgender youth in Poland.¹⁰

However, it is only in Natalia Osińska's trilogy (2016, 2017, 2019) that we find a more complex description of the discovery of non-heteronormative and queer identity in a Polish context.¹¹ A similar role on the map of Polish LGBT+ YAL is played by Anouk Herman's novel *Nigdy nie będziesz szło samo* [You'll Never Walk Alone, 2023]. This type of literature can be defined – following Cart and Jenkins' typology – as queer consciousness literature which represents emancipated, self-aware LGBT+ characters in their communities and families of choice.¹²

¹⁰ M. Niewielska, *Zarys historii amerykańskiej i polskiej młodzieżowej literatury LGBT* [An Overview of the History of American and Polish LGBT Youth Literature], "Dzieciństwo. Literatura i Kultura" 2021, vol. 3, no. 1, p. 162.

¹¹ A. Kujawska-Kot, *Od impulsu fotografii do narracji tożsamościowej. Funkcje fotografii bohaterów transpłciowych w ich życiu* [From Photographic Impulse to Identity Narrative: The Functions of Transgender Heroes' Photographs in Their Lives], "Rynek. Społeczeństwo. Kultura" 2018, vol. 27, no. 1, pp. 91–99; B. Malec, *Ludzie są jak „fan fiction”. Na przykładzie „Fanfika” Natalii Osińskiej* [People Are Like "Fanfic": On the Example of "Fanfic" by Natalia Osińska], "Artes Humanae" 2017, vol. 2, pp. 175–187; K. Reszczyńska-Urban, *Inicjacje bohaterów nieheteronormatywnych w Fanfiku i Slashu Natalii Osińskiej* [Initiations of Non-heteronormative Characters in Fanfic and Slash by Natalia Osińska], "Dzieciństwo. Literatura i Kultura" 2019, vol. 1, no. 1, pp. 221–235; Z. Ułańska, *Miłość silniejsza niż płęć? Nowe oblicza polskiej literatury LGBT na przykładzie twórczości Natalii Osińskiej i Marcina Szczygielskiego* [Love, Stronger than Gender? New Faces of Polish LGBT Literature on the Example of the Works of Natalia Osińska and Marcin Szczygielski] [in:] P. Szymczyk, E. Chodźko (eds.), *Motyw miłości w wybranych tekstach literackich i innych dziedzinach kultury* [The Theme of Love in Selected Literary Texts and Other Areas of Culture], Wydawnictwo Naukowe TYGIEL, Lublin 2018, pp. 274–288; eadem, *Od empatii do akceptacji. Rozmowa z Natalią Osińską* [From Empathy to Acceptance: Interview with Natalia Osińska], "Mały Format", <http://malyformat.com/2018/05/od-empatii-do-akceptacji-rozmowa-z-natalia-osinska> (accessed: 21.11.2023); M. Niewielska, *Zarys historii...*, op. cit.

¹² M.V. Blackburn, C.T. Clark, E.A. Nemeth, *Examining Queer Elements and Ideologies in LGBT-Themed Literature: What Queer Literature Can Offer Young Adult Readers*, "Journal of Literacy Research" 2015, vol. 47, no. 1, pp. 11–48. Within American YAL, the three-part framework created by Michael Cart and Christine A. Jenkins had proved useful for analysing texts related to the LGBT+ theme: homosexual visibility, gay assimilation and queer consciousness/community (M. Cart, C.A. Jenkins, *The Heart Has Its Reasons: Young Adult Literature with Gay – Lesbian – Queer Content. 1969–2004*, Scarecrow, Lanham 2006). In homosexual visibility literature, a character comes out or is outed as gay or lesbian, and this outing is the "dramatic substance" of the story. Gay assimilation literature involves the portrayal of people who have just realised they are gay and are trying to adapt to a new situation. Queer consciousness literature represents emancipated, self-aware LGBT+ characters in their communities and families of choice (M.V. Blackburn, C.T. Clark, E.A. Nemeth, *Examining Queer...*, op. cit., p. 14).

Conceptual Framework and Methodology

In this article, I focus on literary representations of LGBT+ youth in Polish novels classified as young adult (YA) literature, realising a Cart and Jenkin's category of *queer consciousness literature*. The aim of this study is to identify complex literary representations of LGBT+ teenagers in Polish novels classified as young adult literature and published in the twenty-first century. The following research questions were formulated: What salient context or theme is conveyed by reading this text? How are the specific problems of LGBT+ adolescents (love, loss, alienation, independence, friendship, truth and self¹³) presented? How is the concept of 'queer' conceptualized in this type of literature? How do normative discourses emerge? And finally: What are the common features in Polish queer literature aimed at young adults?

The term YA literature was first used in the late 1960s to refer to realistic fiction set in the real (as opposed to imagined) contemporary world and dealing with problems, issues and circumstances of interest to young readers aged approximately 12–18.¹⁴ However, YA also appeals to an older demographic: Cart refers to this type of novel, aimed at 19–25 year olds, as New Adult.¹⁵ Over the past decade, YA has become a burgeoning sector, for example in the UK, which continues to thrive while other sectors, such as adult fiction, are in decline.¹⁶ YA has been described as 'the

¹³ P. Letellier, *Headfirst into Queerdom: Julie Anne Peters Goes Where No Teen-Lit Writer Has Gone Before*, "Lesbian News" 2005, vol. 30, no. 7, pp. 24–25.

¹⁴ L. Bachelder et al., *Young Adult Literature: Looking Backward: Trying to Find the Classic Young Adult Novel*, "The English Journal" 1980, vol. 69, no. 60, pp. 86–89; D. Gallo, *Listening to Readers: Attitudes Toward the Young Adult Novel* [in:] V.R. Monseau, G.M. Salvner (eds.), *Reading Their World: The Young Adult Novel in the Classroom*, Heinemann, Portsmouth 1992; C. Hunt, *Theory Rises Maginot Line Endures*, "Children's Literature Association Quarterly" 2017, vol. 42, no. 2, pp. 205–217; idem, *Young Adult Literature Evades the Theorists*, "Children's Literature Association Quarterly" 1996, vol. 21, no. 1, pp. 4–11; P. Campbell, *Campbell's Scoop: Reflections on Young Adult Literature*, Scarecrow Press, Lanham, MD 2010; R.S. Trites, *Disturbing the Universe: Power and Repression in Adolescent Literature*, University of Iowa Press, Iowa City 2000; idem, *Twain, Alcott and the Birth of the Adolescent Reform Novel*, University of Iowa Press, Iowa City 2007; M. Cart, *From Insider to Outsider: The Evolution of Young Adult Literature*, "Voices from the Middle" 2001, vol. 9, no. 2, pp. 95–97; idem, *Young Adult Literature: From Romance to Realism*, American Library Association, Chicago 2010; idem, *Cart's Top 200 Adult Books for Young Adults: Two Decades in Review*, ALA Editions, Chicago 2013; idem, *Young Adult Literature: From Romance to Realism*, 3rd edition, American Library Association, Chicago 2016; W.C. Kasten et al., *Living Literature: Using Children's Literature to Support Reading and Language Arts*, Prentice Hall, Upper Saddle River, NJ 2005; K. Coats, *The Bloomsbury Introduction to Children's and Young Adult Literature*, Bloomsbury, London 2017; eadem, *Young Adult Literature: Growing up, in Theory* [in:] S. Wolf et al. (eds.), *Handbook of Research on Children's and Young Adult Literature*, Routledge, New York–London 2010; C. Hill, *The Critical Merits of Young Adult Literature*, Routledge, London 2014; L. Phillips, *What Is YA? H-Amstdy*, Part 1, <https://networks.h-net.org/node/2602/discussions/897613/part-1-what-ya> (accessed: 23.05.2024).

¹⁵ M. Cart, *Young Adult Literature*, op. cit.

¹⁶ C. Eyre, *Children's Book Market up 7% in First Quarter. The Bookseller*, <http://www.thebookseller.com/news/uk-childrens-book-market-7-327130> (accessed: 23.05.2024).

most important publishing creation of the last decade,' with sales increasing rapidly since 2006.¹⁷

Young adult literature has become one of the most dynamic and creatively exciting areas of publishing, welcoming artistic innovation, experimentation and risk-taking.¹⁸ Today's YA literature, as Alice L. Troupe argues, has more complex plots and motivations and more moral ambiguity than pre-1960s YA literature, and is more likely to experiment with the novel form.¹⁹ This trend currently includes new forms of non-fiction and poetry, as well as graphic novels and comics.

The inclusion of non-heteronormative secondary characters in a novel does not allow us to say that the novel is queer.²⁰ Moreover, LGBT-inclusive literature often reinforces heteronormativity and binary constructions of sex and gender, often providing only a "sentimental education." Alternatively, a queer consciousness literature strives to suspend sexual and gender identities, interrogating heteronormativity by acknowledging a variety of genders, sexes and desires.²¹ The main and secondary characters belong to the LGBTQ+ community, and the process of coming to terms with one's gender and sexuality is an important element of the novel.

The category of representation, a cornerstone of literary theory, emerges as a key concept because of its multiple implications for understanding how texts reflect, construct and challenge social realities. Representation encompasses not only the rep-

¹⁷ A. Flood, *Edinburgh International Book Festival Reveals "Bold, creative" Lineup*, "The Guardian", 9.06.2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/jun/09/edinburgh-international-book-festival-reveals-lineup-gordon-brown-judith-kerr-jonathan-safran-foer> (accessed: 23.03.2024).

¹⁸ M. Cart, *The Value of Young Adult Literature*, <http://www.ala.org/yalsa/guidelines/whitepapers/yalit> (accessed: 21.11.2023).

¹⁹ A.L. Trupe, *Thematic Guide to Young Adult Literature*, Bloomsbury Publishing, London 2006 p. VII.

²⁰ *Queer* – originally a term used by homosexual men to describe themselves (Chauncey 1994), before becoming a pejorative term for deviation from the heterosexual norm. It was reclaimed by the LGBT+ community in the 1990s and now refers to various practices of resistance, including resisting normative assimilation and deconstructing oppressive norms of gender and sexuality. Queerness manifests itself in many different ways and can be performed and/or read differently according to an almost endless combination of feelings, experiences, contexts and contestation (J. Taylor, *Playing it Queer: Popular Music, Identity and Queer World-making*, Peter Lang, Bern 2012, p. 10). Queer theory undermines the binary logic that constructs identities as oppositional and exclusive, and seeks as its primary strategy the denaturalisation of identity categories (ibidem, p. 25). "Queer" implies a self-conscious deconstruction of heteronormativity and a breaking down of arbitrary boundaries based on sex, gender and sexual orientation. By destabilizing categories and focusing on a politics of inclusion rather than exclusion, "queer" helps to build coalitions among disparate groups and break down barriers that demarcate identities such as transgender, lesbian or bisexual. Theoretically, the concept of "queer" can be marshalled to mean anything that challenges heteronormativity (M. Bernstein, R. Reimann (eds.), *Queer Families, Queer Politics: Challenging Culture and the State*, Columbia University Press, New York 2002, J. Kochanowski, *Spektakl i wiedza. Perspektywa społecznej teorii queer*, Wydawnictwo Wschód-Zachód, Warszawa 2009).

²¹ M.V. Blackburn, C.T. Clark, *Analyzing talk in a long-term literature discussion group: Ways of operating within LGBT-inclusive and queer discourses*, „Reading Research Quarterly” 2011, vol. 46, pp. 222–248; M.V. Blackburn, C.T. Clark, E.A. Nemeth, *Examining Queer...*, op. cit.

resentation of characters, settings and narratives within literary works, but also the broader ideological frameworks and cultural discourses with which they engage. It plays a crucial role in shaping readers' perceptions of identity, power dynamics and social norms. As Stuart Hall argues, representation is a process that enters the field only after things have been fully formed and their meaning constituted. But since the 'cultural turn' it is said that meaning is thought to be produced – constructed – rather than simply 'found,' and consequently representation is conceived as entering into the very constitution of things. To represent is to use language to say something meaningful about the world, or to represent it meaningfully to other people. To represent is also to symbolise.²²

Chambers argues that all groups, particularly minority groups, should have their own literature with protagonists they can identify with.²³ Melanie Ramdarshan Bold argues that there are numerous studies that highlight the importance of young adults having access to books in which they can see themselves, e.g. with a character who shares their ethnic or cultural background, religion, sexual or gender identity. Books with minority characters give minority readers the opportunity to see their own faces reflected in the pages of good books.²⁴ Several studies have also highlighted the positive impact on reading and literacy of exposing young adults to representative titles.²⁵ However, it is also important for majority readers to read and learn about marginalised groups, as books can help to reduce prejudice and build community, not by offering role models or explicit lessons, but through compelling stories that allow us to imagine the lives of others.²⁶

In reviewing the literature and developing the selection criteria, I chose those novels that fall into the framework of queer consciousness, present a non-heteronormative and queer hero in the main role and reveal various strategies of social assimilation. I incorporated a qualitative approach (content analysis of literature representation with elements of narrative analysis) and used the methodological framework created by Cart and Jenkins (homosexual visibility, gay assimilation, queer consciousness/community) to choose books viewed as emblematic for Polish queer YAL: Natalia Osińska's trilogy (*Fanfik* 2016, *Slash* 2017, *Fluff* 2019) and Anouk Herman's novel *Nigdy nie będziesz szło samo* [*You'll Never Walk Alone*, 2023].

²² S. Hall (ed.), *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, Sage Publications, Inc, Open University Press, Walton Hall 1997.

²³ A. Chambers, *Tell Me: Children, Reading and Talk*, Stenhouse, Portsmouth, NH 1993.

²⁴ M.R. Bold, *Inclusive Young Adult Fiction: Authors of Colour in the United Kingdom*, Palgrave Macmillan, Springer Nature, New York 2019.

²⁵ M.R. Bold, *Inclusive Young Adult Fiction...*, op. cit., p. 127.

²⁶ H. Rochman, *Against Borders: Promoting Books for a Multicultural World*, American Library Association, Chicago, IL 1993, p. 19; L. Freedman, H. Johnson, *Who's Protecting Whom? I Hadn't Meant to Tell You This, a Case in Point in Confronting Self-Censorship in the Choice of Young Adult Literature*, „Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy” 2001, no. 4, pp. 356–369.

In Osińska's trilogy, the protagonists of the volumes are a transsexual, a gay and a feminist. They act as a catalyst for emancipatory discourses that in recent years have gained a foothold in the wider sphere of Polish public discourse. Similarly, in the Herman's novel, the fates of non-heteronormative, transgender and non-neurotypical people are intertwined. By analysing the plot and ideological level of these texts, I aim to reveal the features of emancipatory discourses present in Polish prose aimed at young adults.

Findings

Discovering non-heteronormative identities

Both Natalia Osińska's trilogy and Anouk Herman's novel give us a glimpse into the lives of teenagers who are discovering their non-heteronormativity. Tosia/Tosiek/Daniel,²⁷ the main character of Osińska's trilogy, is initially withdrawn, avoids the company of his peers and copes with difficult emotions by taking fluoxetine – a drug used in episodes of severe depression and obsessive-compulsive disorder. Every time someone calls him “Miss”, he freezes. Only one day, when he hears the name “Daniel” and puts on men's clothes borrowed from a friend, does she (the character is still identified as a girl at this point in time) begin to feel that this kind of gesture has a deep meaning for her:

Her heart beat faster as she watched the boy in the mirror gracefully imitate her every move. She felt a strange euphoria, as if she had just fallen in love. Suddenly everything was in its place. Suddenly everything was as it should be. The feeling of inner collapse that had always accompanied her disappeared.²⁸

We can describe this state as gender euphoria, when our outward appearance begins to correspond to our felt identity.²⁹ Thanks to her/his father, Tosia/Tosiek/Daniel learns that in the past, as a child, she identified with the opposite gender. The teenager begins the process of discovering his gender identity: she/he searches for information about transition on the Internet, starts exercising, changes his style of dress, tries to conform to normative masculinity. Becoming aware of one's transgender identity is the moment when the process of growing up and taking responsibility for one's own life begins. Tosia becomes Tosiek and later Daniel, he begins to speak in class, asks questions, has discussions with teachers and stops taking her medication. Sometimes he uses the repertoire of sexist stereotypes and treats his female friends with

²⁷ The change of names reflects the character's journey of self-discovery. The heroine first used the name Tosia, then Tosiek, and finally Daniel. So I use the phrase Tosia/Tosiek/Daniel.

²⁸ N. Osińska, *Fanfik*, Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, Warszawa 2016, p. 92. All translations are the works of the author.

²⁹ K. Skrzydłowska-Kalukin, J. Sokolińska, *Mów o mnie ono*, op. cit., p. 9.

contempt. He is a searching character, exploring his identity, freely making new friends and getting involved in climate change activism.

In the hero's behaviour we also see characteristics typical of people with ADHD³⁰: a lack of patience, trying to focus on oneself, engaging in risky behaviour (e.g. taking psychoactive substances). The hero is often irritable, absent-minded, impulsive, vindictive and unable to cope with difficult emotions, leading to communication problems. Daniel's behaviour is perceived by his friends and family as chaotic and uncompromising:

Tosiek was impulsive, resistant to criticism, impregnated with other people's needs and ruthless in enforcing his own. Joyful abnormality gushed from his ears in a rainbow stream [...]. Tosiek's well-being always fluctuated around extreme values.³¹

Tosia/Tosiek/Daniel's story allows us to learn about the realities of the lives of trans people in Poland. In addition to the lack of anti-discrimination education or protection from hate speech, these people also experience inequalities in the health care system (long waiting times for psychological and psychiatric consultations) and the judiciary (a stereotypical approach to the transition process). Poland is the only country in the European Union where the reassignment of sex on documents requires a civil lawsuit against one's parents. It is also necessary to present the court with a psychiatrist's certificate of transgenerism, preferably two opinions, as well as a series of medical tests. Until recently, a person applying for reassignment of sex was expected to act in a social role consistent with his or her identity for a period of two years.³² In this context, the situation of minors who are completely dependent on their parents is particularly difficult. When it comes to hormone therapy, there are guidelines regarding, among other things, the age of the patient and the assumption that only from the age of sixteen are they mentally mature enough to undergo treatment. Before receiving a prescription for hormones, the patient undergoes a diagnostic process.³³

Thanks to the support of his loved ones, Tosiek, the hero of Osińska's novel, begins the transition process, takes testosterone and decides to take the name Daniel. His transition is also social.

Bogna/Riko in Herman's *You'll Never Walk Alone* (2023) takes a similar route:

³⁰ ADHD is part of neurodiversity – which refers to the different ways in which people's brains work, but is often used in the context of autism spectrum disorder (ASD), as well as other neurological or developmental conditions such as ADHD or learning disabilities. Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is associated with differences in communication, learning and behaviour, although it can look different from person to person (N. Baumer, J. Frueh, *What is Neurodiversity?*, <https://www.health.harvard.edu/blog/what-is-neurodiversity-202111232645> [accessed: 28.11.202]).

³¹ N. Osińska, *Slash*, Agora, Warszawa 2017, pp. 65, 73.

³² P. Szewczyk, *Ciała obce. Opowieści o transplciowości* [*Foreign Bodies: Stories about Transgenderism*], Agora, Warszawa 2023, pp. 82–83.

³³ *Ibidem*, pp. 64–65.

She always felt that there was something wrong with the form ‘she,’ ‘her,’ ‘girl’ or, horror of horrors, ‘young woman.’ The words themselves were fine, but they became unpleasantly scratchy, like grandma’s woollen jumper, when someone spoke to her like that [...]. She took off her fleece and went to the mirror in the corner. There she could see herself in full, from her toes to the top of her head. On the one hand this increased her dysphoria, on the other hand she trusted this more accurate reflection more.³⁴

The term ‘dysphoria’ used in the quote describes a state of ongoing distress or discomfort, characterized by intransigence and persistence, resulting from the experience of discrepancies between how a person feels and how he or she is socially recognized. This condition is a common experience for transgender people. It appears or intensifies during puberty due to changes in the body. It can also result from the fact that the trans person has not yet come out to their family or loved ones (social dysphoria); their family therefore treat them in a way that conflicts with the trans person’s own identity.³⁵ Dysphoria can affect the whole body or parts of it, the voice, or the way of dressing.³⁶ Children and adolescents who do not receive psychological support in dealing with dysphoria suffer from depression, eating disorders and mental crises.³⁷

Herman’s novel provides insight into the subsequent stages of the protagonist’s social transition: wearing loose clothes, searching for information on the internet, changing profile photos and nicknames on social media, choosing a new name (Riko instead of Bogna) and using impersonal pronouns. Riko also uses a flattening binder and applies make-up that emphasises masculine features. One day they cuts her own hair, which in Polish YAL is a clear gesture of rejection of her former gender identity. Rico’s next step is to be open about being non-binary at school, which leads to bullying and secondary victimisation by teachers (who blame Rico for allegedly provoking his peers to acts of violence). The boy is actively fighting for recognition of his identity in the school environment. He explains to the teacher: “Being different is not something to hide. You can flaunt it. Many people do, for example, to make others less ashamed of who they are”.³⁸

The teacher’s reaction reveals a mechanism we call institutional heterosexism³⁹ – the actions of institutions that promote a heterosexual lifestyle, exclude or force non-heteronormative people to be invisible, and at the same time grant privileges

³⁴ A. Herman, *Nigdy nie będziesz szło samo* [*You’ll Never Walk Alone*], W.A.B., Warszawa 2023, pp. 79, 85.

³⁵ P. Szewczyk, *Ciała obce...*, op. cit., p. 44.

³⁶ K. Skrzydłowska-Kalukin, J. Sokolińska, *Mów o mnie ono*, op. cit., p. 9.

³⁷ Ibidem, p. 106.

³⁸ A. Herman, *Nigdy nie będziesz szło...*, op. cit., p. 230.

³⁹ *Heterosexism* – an ideological system that denigrates and/or stigmatises non-heterosexual behaviour, relationships or communities, thereby privileging heterosexuality over homosexuality (G.M. Herek, *The Context of Anti-Gay Violence: Notes on Cultural and Psychological Heterosexism*, “Journal of Interpersonal Violence” 1990, vol. 5, no. 3, pp. 316–333).

to heterosexual people.⁴⁰ Here we could speak of institutional transphobia, i.e. the promotion not only of a heterosexual lifestyle but also of a cis-sexual gender norm.

Leon from Osińska's trilogy deals with heterosexism in a different way. The boy lives and supports himself and is also active in the school council, the newspaper editorial office, a cabaret and a history club. Despite his independence, Leon approaches Tosiek/Daniel's coming out process with reservations. His fears stem from his experience of violence and being thrown out of his home after coming out as gay. The lack of acceptance from his loved ones has left a deep mark on the hero's psyche: "He didn't know the words to describe the night [of leaving home] when something inside him solidified into ice and stayed there forever, sharp as a splinter"⁴¹

Shortly after this incident, Leon beats up a classmate who has shown interest in him. His reaction is profoundly homophobic. A change of school and environment does not solve the hero's problems, as he struggles with panic attacks. Leon's fears and anxieties form the discursive axis of the second volume of Osińska's trilogy, entitled *Slash*. The title refers to a genre of fan fiction written almost exclusively by women that focuses on homoerotic relationships between men who are usually perceived by society as heterosexual. *Slash* is an announcement of the romantic relationship that will unite Tosiek/Daniel and Leon.

Meanwhile, Leon lacks assertiveness and has problems with setting boundaries and taking a leadership position in a group (e.g. a drama group). When confronted, he withdraws, which is related to low self-esteem resulting from growing up in a dysfunctional family where emotional needs are not openly discussed and communication ranges from silence to open conflict. Established rules are rigid and never change, and family members succumb to the illusion that they are dealing with their problems. Children growing up in such families may experience constant anxiety and guilt.⁴² The young man strongly internalises the social expectations placed on adolescent males and rejects Tosia/Tosiek/Daniel's strategy of exposing stigmatised aspects of identity, including by participating in marches and parades. At the same time, he is desperate for closeness and acceptance.

Leon's difficulties in dealing with his situation illustrates the phenomenon known in the literature as minority stress, defined by Grzegorz Iniewicz as follows:

An additional burden of stressors, apart from those commonly found in the population, that affects people belonging to stigmatised minority groups. The result is chronic psychological tension due to the experience of discrimination and stigmatisation.⁴³

⁴⁰ G. Iniewicz, *Stres mniejszościowy...*, op. cit., p. 47.

⁴¹ N. Osińska, *Slash*, op. cit., p. 247.

⁴² J. Flis, *Co ze mną nie tak? O życiu w dysfunkcyjnym domu, środowisku, w Polsce i o tym, jak sobie z tym (nie) radzimy* [*What's Wrong with Me? About Living in a Dysfunctional Home, Environment, in Poland and How We (Don't) Deal with It*], Znak, Kraków 2023.

⁴³ G. Iniewicz, *Stres mniejszościowy...*, op. cit., p. 28.

Tosia/Tosiek/Daniel and Leon are therefore conceived as contrasting characters, representing different strategies for coping with the process of discovering non-heteronormative identity and minority stress. Leon internalises homophobia and has difficulty accepting himself. He experiences anxiety, depression and guilt. Tosia/Tosiek/Daniel develops different coping mechanisms: he demands recognition of his identity and finds a support group.

This image is complemented by Matylda, the main character of the novel *Fluff* (2019). The title refers to a sub-genre of fan works, usually of a light-hearted nature, favoured by ‘Victory’ – the celebrity fandom to which both heroines belong. Matylda accepts her newfound identity and does not feel any minority conflicts or stress, which is probably related to the high level of acceptance from her loved ones.

Queer Multicolour

The novels illustrate the lives of queer teenagers experimenting with expressions of gender and discovering the multidimensionality of identity. The first hero of Osińska’s trilogy to openly experiment with his appearance and change his style (from mohawk to steampunk outfit to dandyism) is Tosia/Tosiek/Daniel: “Tosiek fought so hard and persistently for the right to be himself that he would not allow any part of his autonomy to be taken away from him, regardless of the cost.”⁴⁴ In some ways, especially after coming out of the closet, Daniel resembles the hero of Herman’s *You’ll Never Walk Alone*, Sobaka, a young gay man who dresses eccentrically: a blue fur jacket, trainers, a colourful scarf, bleached hair. Sobaka’s expression, however, is feminine:

If she didn’t recognise him, she’d probably think he was a girl’ – wearing a long coat tied at the waist, tall like a catwalk model [...]. In his hand he held a scarf decorated with feathers, straight out of a burlesque or a 1920s party.⁴⁵

Tosia/Tosiek/Daniel, however, despite experimenting with his appearance, tries to prove his masculinity at all costs.

Another dimension of queerness in both novels is related to the category of neurodiversity. The character of Wiktoria from Osińska’s third volume can be considered queer, a non-heteronormative and non-neurotypical person who studies at home and whose relationships mainly take place in the virtual world. During conversations, Wiktoria is often overwhelmed by thoughts, finds it difficult to understand human behaviour such as manipulation or retaliation, and is overwhelmed by the prospect of leaving the house. In stressful situations, the teenager gives in to impulses. She reacts badly to stimuli such as bright lights or noise. Thanks to Matylda’s patience and knowledge, the bond between the girls survives.

⁴⁴ N. Osińska, *Slash*, op. cit., p. 86.

⁴⁵ A. Herman, *Nigdy nie będziesz szło...*, op. cit., p. 27.

Wiktoria resembles fifteen-year-old Katuchna – the heroine of Herman’s *You’ll Never Walk Alone*. She is a secretive, withdrawn person with low self-esteem. The space for free expression is the Internet: “Virtual adventures filled them with the strange feeling that the world had nothing real in it and was as murky as a dream under anaesthesia.”⁴⁶

At school, Katuchna is bullied because she is different. In situations of increased stress, such as when her friend goes missing, she becomes depressed. Despite her difficulties with her peers, she experiences her first infatuation and romantic relationship with Riko.

Herman’s novel also provides us with an image of the queer community founded and animated through the actions of Melody. She is a trans person who lives in a squat because her father kicked her out of the house (after she came out). She has also experienced hate-motivated violence (street beatings) and homophobia at school. She was outed by her girlfriend without her consent and had to confront her conservative parents. She finds his family of choice in the queer community:

Perhaps she needed to read those dozens of pirated books on queerness and gender philosophy in order to heal. Perhaps healing meant learning anger, just as she had once learned shame.⁴⁷

Just like other people belonging to minorities, Melody cares about building an informed queer community:

All of them were more or less involved in social work: every month, together with Ciechocinek and friendly activists, they organised hot meals for people in crisis, and in the summer they ran workshops in the city on self-defence and safety during demonstrations. There were also collections of clothes and food, and they regularly provided shelter for those most in need.⁴⁸

The squat Melody founds is called DeLarverie, after Stormé DeLarverie, an American butch lesbian and drag king who initiated the Stonewall uprising. One day, in an act of desperation, Melody confesses: “That’s what we are, isn’t it? Outcasts. Activists. Losers. Queers.”⁴⁹

Eventually, however, the squat closes down and Melody, facing homelessness, has to find a new place to live. The heroine is representative of that part of the non-heteronormative community that is struggling with the crisis of homelessness as a result of coming out.

⁴⁶ Ibidem, p. 12.

⁴⁷ Ibidem, p. 53.

⁴⁸ Ibidem, p. 54.

⁴⁹ Ibidem, p. 118.

The role of the family

The coming out of a non-heteronormative and transgender child is an important moment in a parent's life. The moment when a parent learns that their child is different from the image that the father or mother has of him or her can bring many emotions. This is because we live in a society that is heteronormative – it recognises heterosexuality and related behaviours as the applicable norm. Osińska's and Herman's novels provide insight into the different emotional reactions and behaviours of adults who learn that their child is different from most of their peers and children are forced to deal with a lack of knowledge, tolerance and even outright violence.

Tosia/Tosiek/Daniel's transition process is most difficult for his aunt Idalia, who has denied for years that her niece is a transgender child. The woman believes that "everything will soon return to normal."⁵⁰ The process of accepting the transition takes a long time, but in the end the woman comes back changed and accepting. She buys a binder for her nephew and supports Leon by teaching both boys consensual communication. Unfortunately, we do not know how the woman went from prejudice to acceptance.

Tosia/Tosiek/Daniel's father's reaction is complex and ambiguous. At first, he treats his daughter/son's behaviour as a form of youthful rebellion:

Marcin was not outraged that the child rebelled, dressed strangely or tried to be someone else – after all, everyone was a teenager once, right? He was too. He was only burdened by the need to deal with it all personally⁵¹

The father meets his child's basic needs, but has problems recognising any emotional needs and being able to empathise. Fear still accompanies him. He feels that he does not know his own child, but performing the role prescribed by the normative masculine gender does not facilitate open communication with the teenager. For example, he has never asked 'What do you need from me right now? How can I support you?' It seems that the problems associated with coming out exacerbate previous problems in the adult-child relationship. A man tries to maintain a relationship with his child, but:

He spent most of his energy hiding from Tosiek how scared he was. About him, about his future, about his own nerves, about that thin line of understanding that any stupidity could strain.⁵²

Only when confronted with the thought that he might lose his child (as a result of a suicide attempt) does the father decide that the most important thing is to respect the child's choice, even if he loses a daughter and gains a son. This process is likened to grieving the loss of the image of the child that you carried inside you. The father feels anxiety, anger and confusion. He is confronted with his heterosexual assumptions. The man

⁵⁰ N. Osińska, *Fanfik*, op. cit., p. 168.

⁵¹ *Ibidem*, p. 173.

⁵² *Ibidem*, p. 193.

is concerned not only about the transition process, but also about the child's future in a world that adults see as unfair and unpredictable.

Functioning in a family full of tensions and misunderstandings, Tosiek/Daniel looks for alternatives. He finds the family of his choice in the LGBT+ community, which meets in a local club and offers real emotional support. The rules of the meetings are discretion, respect and honesty. The literary image of adults reacting to children coming out reveals the wider problem of social exclusion reported in the research. In this sense, the well-known feminist slogan "the private is political" is materialised in the pages of the novel: the reaction and involvement of parents determines whether their children will be safe at home, at school and in their immediate social environment. Both children and adults realise that they cannot protect themselves from structural discrimination. However, some people make an effort to fight for themselves, for authenticity and freedom, and to create safe spaces.

In all four texts analysed, the characters live in large cities: in Osińska's trilogy it is Poznań, in Herman's novel it is Katowice. Osińska creates a more universal and conventional image of the city as a space more conducive to emancipation than the village (where Leon comes from). Herman, on the other hand, gives the place a local flavour by describing an apartment in an old mining block of flats (the so-called "familok") without central heating. His characters come from diverse economic backgrounds, showing an intersectional perspective. Social exclusion has many faces in their novel: it is not only related to sexual orientation and gender identity, but also to the family history, place of birth, skin colour and weight of the characters.

Social assimilation

In revealing their new/true identities at school, the teenage characters experience a range of behaviours typical of societies where there is no formal sex education. Tosiek/Daniel experiences exclusion, cyberbullying and is harassed because of his non-normative gender identity (as are others because of their weight, economic status or disability). He is attacked on his way home from school. Even reporting the case to the police proves difficult because there is no law in Poland that protects non-heteronormative and transgender people from hate crimes. In Poland, people of the same sex cannot marry or enter into a civil partnership. They cannot inherit from each other or adopt children together.

The school as an institution forms a key component of assimilation discourses in the novels analysed. It is a place to make friends, but also to experience social exclusion. Students criticise the overloaded curriculum, the inappropriateness of the content with regard to contemporary global problems, and the intergenerational misunderstandings.

The climax of the trilogy and the fullest expression of social assimilation is the wedding of Leon's sister Sandra, to which Leon and Daniel go together. Their dance

provokes a violent reaction from the bride's father, who throws the teenagers out of the party. The mother's words to her son are also accusatory:

You must have been determined to ruin their wedding today. A big parade of perversions, instead of an orchestra there are Satanists, a couple of girls are sleeping on the grass in front of everyone, and at the table, at OUR table, sits this... this...⁵³

In the heterosexual order, a wedding is a manifestation of heteronormativity, a carefully choreographed spectacle that reproduces gender and sexual norms. It does not contain the image of two men dancing and showing tenderness to each other. Leon's sister is an exemplary ally of the LGBT+ community, but her husband Hubert aptly defines the situation: "I didn't want to tell you this earlier, but your family is textbook dysfunctional."⁵⁴

The problem of social assimilation within heteronormativity also affects heterosexual characters and is linked to the pressure to create a family that functions according to a normative script. Łanieczka⁵⁵ is the heroine who represents these struggles. She had an unplanned pregnancy at the age of seventeen, lives with her father and is raising her daughter, Iza, on her own. The girl struggles with eating disorders in the form of restrictive diets through which she tries to regain control of her life. She has attempted suicide. He is hated at school, but he actively fights for himself. Despite pressure from her relatives, she rejects a relationship with Cezary, a 25-year-old man who is the only one who 'has not experienced trauma at school'⁵⁶ and who represents the heterosexual and cis-gender norm in the world presented in the novel. Łanieczka rejects the possibility of marriage and the social pressures associated with it because she does not love the man and her priority is to solve her current problems.

The new media and the sub-cultures of Generation Z

The novels also provide an insight into the cultural activities in which young, non-heteronormative characters are engaged.

As members of Generation Z⁵⁷, they are active users of new media and popular culture. They write and read fan fiction, browse fan art, are fascinated by fantasy literature, watch bootlegs on YouTube and listen to the soundtracks of famous musicals. It is in the group of fans of his work that Tosiek/Daniel finds support in the form of an organised online affirmation against hateful content, which allows him to believe that

⁵³ N. Osińska, *Fluff*, Agora, Warszawa 2019, p. 269.

⁵⁴ Ibidem, p. 303.

⁵⁵ A. Herman, *Nigdy nie będziesz szło...*, op. cit.

⁵⁶ Ibidem, p. 64.

⁵⁷ *Generation Z or Gen Z* – children and young people born after 1995/1996. This generation is described as self-aware, persistent, realist, innovative and self-reliant. They are the first digital natives: they use social media much more than previous generations to stay up to date on current affairs.

he is not alone. Young Poles living in big cities develop their passions thanks to tutorials on YouTube, listen to K-pop, meet at conventions for fans of fantasy, role-playing games, manga and anime, comics and TV series, and run their own channels on YouTube. Popular culture is a way for young people, especially non-heteronormative young people, to challenge social norms:

In this convent atmosphere, she [Matylda] found it increasingly difficult to judge what was normal and what was an oddity. Three giggling princesses ran down the alley, hugging each other, and a moment later a tall, bearded man dressed as a manga Lolita walked by. Standards. What norms, where are the norms?⁵⁸

Bogna/Riko belongs to the community of people who believe in magic and network on WitchTok. Most young people are impressed by Harry Styles, who chooses gender-neutral styles or combines feminine and masculine clothing elements. Herman also manages to incorporate social media narratives into the book, bringing the prose closer to the dynamics of contemporary communication.

Some heroines take part in ‘black protests’. In this way, we get a glimpse of one of the few literary images of the protests in defence of the right to abortion that swept through Poland in 2016–2020:

An incredible crowd of people dressed in black, with and without umbrellas. They filled the entire Mickiewicza Square and spilled out onto the street, and the policemen, swarming around in their bright vests, tried to direct some of them to the back, closer to the Castle, and to clear at least one lane of traffic. It paralysed the city.⁵⁹

One of the main slogans of the protest was: “You will never walk alone”, paraphrased from the title of Anouk Herman’s novel. The author makes it impersonal by replacing the feminine form with the neuter.⁶⁰ The involvement of Generation Z in social protests is one of the characteristics of the young generation in Poland. It should be added, however, that the street style of protest is concentrated mainly in large and medium-sized cities.

Some characters, such as Sobaka or Melody,⁶¹ choose more sophisticated reading material, such as the writings of Marx and Engels, live in squats (rather than orphanages), and write poems that refer to ‘new trends and alternative traditions’.⁶² A comparison of Osińska’s and Herman’s novels shows two ways of expressing queer subculture: within popular culture and within alternative cultures embedded in the anarchist-squatter tradition.

⁵⁸ N. Osińska, *Fluff*, Agora, Warszawa 2019, p. 64.

⁵⁹ N. Osińska, *Slash*, Agora, Warszawa 2017, p. 292.

⁶⁰ There are three singular genders in Polish: masculine, feminine and neuter.

⁶¹ A. Herman, *Nigdy nie będziesz szło...*, op. cit.

⁶² Ibidem, p. 39.

Conclusions

The novels discussed create a literary image of the young generation of people belonging to Generation Z, with a particular focus on the LGBT+ community. This image is varied and dynamic. An important theme is the economic status of Polish families: the parents of the main characters are corporate employees, health care workers, manual workers, etc. Some of the adults are so-called independent parents, both mothers and fathers, raising adolescent children alone. They live in large, pre-fabricated housing estates, in workers' "family houses" and in modern buildings with security. This reflects the economic and social changes in Polish society after 1989.

An important plot thread is the coming out of the teenage hero. Most parents react to this process with fear of social ostracism. Ultimately, they deal with this challenge in different ways: from denial and aggression towards their own child, to negotiating a space of freedom, to full acceptance. Parents' reactions differentiate the situation of their children, who either have to deal with systemic challenges on their own or can count on growing up in a safe environment that allows them to confront hate-motivated violence.

The image of the Polish school in the novel is clear: it is a place of institutionalised homophobia and transphobia, the result of many years of neglect in education policy. Despite the tolerant attitudes of some teachers, LGBT+ youth experience organised hatred and cyberbullying. The most effective form of resistance is self-organisation and peer support. In this sense, school is a reversal of the expected of the adult-youth relationship, where young people are more responsible and older people seem helpless in the face of diversity and violence.

All the novels analysed also paint a moving emotional picture of the young generation of LGBT+ people in Poland who experience minority stress, violence and harassment. They have attempted suicide and some struggle with eating disorders and anxiety. In addition, young gay, lesbian, transgender and non-binary people experience age-related dilemmas about starting a romantic relationship, feeling rejected by a partner, or fearing an unknown future.

Polish Generation Z youth, both queer and heteronormative, are involved in protests to combat climate change and defend women's rights. Non-heteronormative, transgender and non-binary people are creating their own subcultures in which fan art plays an important role. Some people are also involved in countercultural activities.

All the novels analysed in this article are written in accessible language, appropriate for the age group of potential readers. In addition, they use gender-neutral forms, which makes the novels sometimes resemble guides for families of LGBT+ people who want to understand the role of inclusive language in creating a friendly environment. Interestingly, the theme of the characters' intimate (sexual) relationship is not developed in any of the novels analysed. Katarzyna Tałuc explains this surprising conclusion by saying that *Fanfic*

was supposed to be a book that eleven-year-olds would read and that adults, such as their parents, would recommend to them. That is why Osińska was pleased to receive positive opinions about the book from people over 30, for example. This intended audience is reflected in the structure of the novel, for example in the absence of realistic “spicy fragments” with a clear erotic undertone, or in the omission of niche phrases typical of fan culture.⁶³

Another explanation for the absence of this theme (also in Herman’s novel) is the lack of sex education in Poland, which may give rise to fears that some children to whom this type of literature is addressed may not be ready (according to authors and publishers) for the more mature themes dealt with in many novels marketed for young adults.

Osińska’s trilogy and Herman’s book also differ in terms of the credibility of the representation of the LGBT+ community and the proposed narrative treatments. Although I myself appreciate the literary creation of Tosia/Tosiek/Daniel for its interesting reflection of the process of discovering one’s gender identity and sexual orientation, I partly agree with the opinions of some fans (expressed, for example, on lubimyczytac.pl or www.goodreads.com) who accuse it of being too superficial. Reservations relate mainly to the implementation of threads concerning the transition process of the fanfic’s main character. What is missing (as Tałuć also notes) is an in-depth psychological portrait of a person struggling with doubts about his or her legal identity, a nuanced description of the experience of gender dysphoria, or showing problems with expressing one’s needs in the environment. Perhaps the performativity of representation (following Anna Krajewska) does not lie in acting out references, but shows the act of creating a world (and identity) that is simultaneously real and not, that exists simultaneously as true and untrue.⁶⁴ However, this gap is filled by the narrative proposed by Herman, which is much more nuanced and psychologically credible. *Nigdy nie będziesz szło samo* is part of the coming out literature that is still needed, but may become less relevant in the future as the representation of queer people in literature increases. The author draws inspiration from her own experiences and those of others, which gives her book authenticity.⁶⁵

I suppose that the difference in narrative style is probably due not only to the authors’ literary skills, but also to their life experiences. In one of her interviews, Osińska admitted that the creation of the protagonist was the result of a well-thought-out narrative strategy. The author wanted to write a novel that would reach the widest possible audience, so she wrote for a homogenised audience of popular culture.⁶⁶ Plot solutions, tropes and patterns used in popular literature, understandable to most

⁶³ K. Tałuć, *Trudne tematy...*, op. cit., p. 14.

⁶⁴ A. Krajewska, *Performatywność reprezentacji*, “Przestrzenie Teorii” 2017, no. 28, p. 14.

⁶⁵ A. Koniecznyńska, *Anouk Herman o swojej książce „Nigdy nie będziesz szło samo”*, “Vogue Polska”, <https://www.vogue.pl/a/anouk-herman-o-swojej-ksiazce-nigdy-nie-bedziesz-szlo-samo> (accessed: 24.05.2024).

⁶⁶ K. Tałuć, *Trudne tematy...*, op. cit., p. 50.

recipients, turned out to be the optimal template for the proposed content, but not necessarily satisfying for all LGBT+ people (which seems impossible).

Meanwhile, Anouk Herman defines herself as a non-binary person, a feminist and a non-heteronormative queer person. In one of the interviews, she emphasised that “the choice of topics or issues of representation in what I write is not accidental”. Herman emphasises that narratives focusing solely on the trauma, pain and sadness associated with queerness are one-sided and can lead to stereotyping, perpetuating negative ideas about queer identities and monetizing their suffering in the publishing market. Despite the criticism of an excessive focus on trauma, the author emphasises that difficult aspects of queer people’s experiences cannot be completely ignored and postulates that the problems described in books should be realistic and reflect the real experiences of queer people, as opposed to fictionalised, simplified representations. Herman admits:

I want queerness to be not the only element that holds the plot together, but a component of the hero’s identity, and for coming out not always to be the climax. So that these are not stories about abstract values and moralising fairy tales, where “representation” and the so-called “important issues” are ticked off, but stories that fascinate, that engage, that fulfil the entertaining and cathartic function of literature.⁶⁷

What is particularly interesting about the book is that it describes people in search of themselves. Each hero is different, but they share commonalities such as the search for identity and first loves, which are universal, though often difficult and painful. The authors raise issues of loneliness, rejection and fear, especially in the context of queer people who are not accepted by their parents or have problems with self-acceptance. The book also touches on mental health issues that are particularly relevant in the context of the pandemic, the climate crisis and the political situation. The authors draw attention to the growing awareness of these problems, but also to the difficulties in accessing treatment. The main motivation and goal of the characters’ actions is to discover and reveal their own gender and sexual identity. At the beginning of this journey they experience tension and suffering. Then comes the moment of epiphany – the discovery of something they have always known but had not realised. However, the characters’ transformation does not happen spontaneously. On the road to self-discovery, they encounter obstacles in the form of stereotypes, prejudice and violence against LGBT+ people. They dramatise the plot of the novel and force the characters to confront themselves (with family, peers, teachers). Difficult moments also make it possible to introduce the figure of an ally – a person who supports a representative of a minority in the fight for his or her own rights. The characters go through a process of not only sexual but also emotional transition, which leads to purification.

⁶⁷ A. Koniecznyńska, *Anouk Herman...*, op. cit.

In conclusion, the novels discussed create a literary image of the young generation of people classified as Generation Z, with a special focus on the LGBT+ community. The theme is diverse and dynamic, and an important issue is the economic status of Polish families, which reflects the social and economic changes in Poland after 1989. The main theme is the hero's coming out during adolescence, and the parents' reactions to this process vary from negation and aggression, to negotiating the space of freedom, to full acceptance. The Polish school in the novels is a place of homophobic and transphobic prejudice, but the LGBT+ youth cope with it through self-organisation and peer support. Both novels also paint an emotional portrait of the young generation of LGBT+ people in Poland, experiencing minority stress, violence and harassment. Despite differences in narrative style, both books constitute an important voice in literature, representing the authentic experiences of queer people in Poland.⁶⁸

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⁶⁸ Due to the limited scope of the article, I do not refer to the film adaptation of Osińska's first novel *Fanfik* and the related documentary *Jesteśmy idealni [We Are Ideal]* [Polska, 2023, ed. M. Kozakiewicz].

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