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Queer Magicians

An Analysis of The Magicians Through Queer and Fantasy
Literature Theory

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Through Queer and Fantasy Literature Theory*

**Thesis for B.A.
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Abstract

This thesis examines *The Magicians* by Lev Grossman and analyzes how it queers both its fantasy elements and queer representation. It looks at how in Grossman's novel the readers expectations are thwarted and real-world problems crossover to the magical world. It further questions how even within queer friendly spaces biphobia persists and is analyzed through the subtext of this novel.

The first chapter of this thesis establishes that *The Magicians* is a novel that falls under the fantasy literature genre by using works of scholars studying fantasy literary theory, most prominently Farah Mendlesohn's *Rhetorics of Fantasy* and Tolkien's essay "On Fairy-stories".

Having established that *The Magicians* is a fantasy novel, queer theory is then applied to the novel as a whole, divided into twofold analysis. First, queer theory is applied to the chosen one element of the novel, examining how queering the conventions of fantasy literature obscures who the chosen one is throughout the narrative. Next, queer theory is then applied to the two named queer characters in the novel. Significantly, there is character analysis of Quentin, hypothesizing that he suffers from internalized biphobia through subtext as well as of Eliot's flamboyant dandy act, which is exposed and queered.

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Introduction

When people hear the words magic and fantasy, the general expectation is for a happy adventure story, potentially a fairy tale or a chosen one saving the day. What is generally not expected is a depressed protagonist and magic not being a miraculous solution to everything. However, such is the premise of the series discussed in this thesis. *The Magicians* (2009) is the first book in a trilogy of the same name by Lev Grossman. The series is a cross between a portal quest fantasy and an intrusion fantasy, as defined by Farah Mendlesohn in *Rhetorics of Fantasy* (xix, xxii). Portal quest fantasy is so named because in portal quest fantasy books the characters are transported from a familiar world into the unfamiliar where the fantastic happens. Intrusion fantasy, as the name implies, intrudes on the real world, or the familiar world, and moreover, this is most commonly found in urban fantasy books. A sub-strand of literary theory, fantasy literature theory is still a relatively new field compared to other fields of literary research. In spite of that, there are already many well established tropes in the field that are commonly found in books that fall under the fantasy genre umbrella. In *The Magicians* Lev Grossman purposefully plays around with established tropes, referencing older works and spinning them into the storyline, wanting to talk back to his favourite authors growing up such as C.S. Lewis, even creating Fillory as a response to Narnia (Christopher). Contrary to the works Grossman references, *The Magicians* is aimed at an adult audience and unsuited for the youngest fantasy readers. The series does not shy away from showing gritty situations, that is sex, partying, and drugs all feature heavily in the books. *The Magicians* can be considered a queer novel because it subverts conventional fantasy tropes and plays on queer stereotypes and experiences.

Due to the fact that academics are still working on establishing a way of categorising fantasy fiction, there is no established canon. Therefore, for the purpose of this thesis, Farah Mendlesohn's theory and terminology will be used as a guide to define and analyse the work along with queer theory. As mentioned above, *The Magicians* is a mix of portal quest fantasy and an intrusion fantasy. The simplest explanation of portal quest fantasy is, as Mendlesohn writes, "a portal fantasy is simply a fantastic world entered through a portal"(xix). When the characters go to the magical area they enter into another realm and the magical is separate from the reader's world. Intrusion fantasy, however, brings the chaos to the ordinary setting, intruding on the order of that world. In the case of *The Magicians*, magic starts out in a portal quest like manner as

Breakbills University is set apart from the ordinary world, as the story progresses in the novel, the fantastic gradually intrudes into the ordinary world. In *The Magicians*, the setting for the ordinary world is New York, which serves as the basis for the primary world in which the story beings. Within the primary world, there exists the ordinary world of the mundane in New York. A second aspect is the Breakbills campus which is a place of magical alteration on the primary world (Tolkien 64). The first part of the story is largely set on the Breakbills campus in upstate New York, with short mundane holidays and travel to other magical locations for the duration of their time at school. After graduation the characters return to the mundane New York to live there, they use magic in the mundane setting to evade mundane responsibilities such as rent and leases, using illusionary and deception magic. They leave the mundane upon discovering a way of accessing the secondary world within the series, Fillory. Enchantment, as Tolkien calls it, can produce a secondary world, within *The Magicians* the creation of Fillory was done by two gods, Ember and Umber, who wield a different magic than our magician characters (Tolkien 64). Much like C.S. Lewis's Narnia was created by Aslan, a god wielding creation magic of the universe.

Fillory is Lev Grossman's answer to Narnia, in that it is an out-of-realm secondary world and to get there, they need an enchanted item, the specialized skills of a traveller, or a fixed portal (Grossman 248-49, 59-60). Fillory exists in parallel space, separate from Earth and the ordinary world existing simultaneously with Earth but time passes differently, seemingly arbitrary between the worlds. In the world of Fillory magic is a common thing, although utilized differently than on Earth and most of the animals can talk. Unlike in Narnia, there is seemingly not a clearly defined evil to defeat and Fillory itself turns out to be more dangerous than they thought. Having only read about it in the children's book series famous in their world about the Chatwin's. The dream adventure quickly turns into a nightmare, as they find themselves totally unprepared for their quest involving fighting for their lives in a new world.

Fantasy as a genre relies heavily on tropes and contemporary fantasy narratives play around with arranging those tropes in new ways to make up new realities. Arguably the best-known known trope is the chosen one, where the protagonist is chosen in some manner to achieve a goal. They then set out on a quest for improvement and towards achieving the goal and have an adventure with ups and downs on the way there. Fantasy tropes are many even older than fantasy as a genre, they often come from folk and fairy tales that have been passed down through the oral tradition. The best

example of the chosen one is King Arthur and the Arthurian legends (Pool). Because fantasy as a genre relies on rules and structure it is often seen as childish, conservative and retrospective (Balay 923) Although it can be argued that all genre literature has a set of conventions as Chabon notes that “A Genre implies a set of conventions-a formula and conventions imply limitations, and therefore no genre work can ever rise to the masterful heights of true literature, free of all formulas and templates” (qtd. in Balay 924). Therefore, Balay further argues that fantasy instead of being bound by these restrictions set by genre, it is liberated by them, since awareness of rigid formulae gives room for adapting, subversion and pleasure (924).

Queer theory is a combination of theories working together to form a cohesive analytical tool for contemporary close readings and critiques. Acadia describes queer theory as a mode of critique that decentres normative frameworks and deconstructs assumptions, challenging the hermeneutic background that other theories might use to make sense of the work (1). Queer theory examines works that include queer characters and narratives but does not exclusively recognize only those as works that fall under queer theory. Kenneally argues that a text can be read queerly but that does not necessarily make it queer (40-41). Similarly, quoting Pearson, the inclusion of gay and lesbian characters or issue does not make a work queer (qtd. in Kenneally 40-41). To be considered queer a text must question unspoken societal assumption or break down commonly accepted dualisms. An example of such is heteronormativity, which is the expectation that everyone is heterosexual and living a conventional heterosexual lifestyle ("Heteronormativity"). Queer theory also looks at anything that defies accepted societal conventions, such as traditional gender roles, and breaks genre boundaries. As such, queer theory's critical interpretive lens offers a good analytic for challenging assumptions taken for granted in texts as well as the world (Acadia 1).

Queer theory has its roots in post-structuralist thought and feminist critical theory, as a theory it works hard to resist closure and final definition (Kenneally 31). From its background in feminist critiques, queer theory recognizes the abstract theory of universality which feminist critique refers to. However, queer theory recognizes a plurality of conceptions of universalities and eventually seeks to undermine the idea (Acadia 3-4). The critique of universality is closely intertwined with the critique of objectivity. Objectivity poses that a single objective perspective can define the universal, or a universal truth, leading to objectivity being described as a “God’s Eye View”. Queer theory challenges this view by questioning that there might not be an

objective perspective to define this, or that if there is one how is it objective. Using queer theory we can then understand for example that a violent homophobic action from a single being might arise from a larger network of power structures and concepts rather than a single being producing hate (Acadia 4). What is particularly important to queer theory is a sense of identity: how the work identifies itself, and moreover, how its characters identify. Further, it asks how this identity works with the expectations set for the work by its genre and audience. Because queer theory is so hard to define and accepts no boundaries, it is convenient to use to deconstruct books that subvert the expectations of their genre such as *The Magicians*.

Those familiar with the idea of fantasy but have not extensively read fantasy literature themselves might expect that since fantasy deals with a lot of ‘what if?’ questions it would be an ideal medium for queer expressions, a perfect space to explore a queer reality. Although, just as Battis says “fantasy provides a realm where same-sex relations can be presented uniquely and provocatively...But those same realms... can also merely recapitulate homophobic and patriarchal tenets.”(260-61). Marchesani points out that fantasy often seems even more constrained than nongenre literature because of the conventions of characterization expected in fantasy and the effects of these conventions on the depictions of sexuality and gender (597). However, looking at Kenneally who says that fantasy has a predilection for presenting the strange and unusual or giving normal a new look (41) and Battis who argues that the fantasy genre is manifestly queer (260), they both agree that fantasy for all its queer potential is reliant on its authors for LGBTQ character inclusivity. As much as fantasy provides realms of faraway kingdoms and distant planets it can also merely recapitulate homophobic and patriarchal tenets (Battis 260-1). An example of this is in Jim Butcher’s *Codex Alera* series, in *Furies of Calderon* in which characters of both sexes are shown to have the potential for magical powers. Even so some women from the dominant culture, utilizing these magical powers, seem to lack independence or are not expected to, or trained to use their powers in combat, but rather keep up traditional binary roles. Readers familiar with fantasy literature might have their own idea of the universality of what constitutes a fantasy story, subverting those expectations while keeping with the style and conventional tropes of fantasy is partly what makes *The Magicians* queer.

Queering The Chosen One

The chosen one can be chosen by another person or entity, their lineage, a prophecy or were chosen for a specific trait that they possess or even an action that they took (Pool). There are many ways of choosing or finding the chosen one, and their journeys may vastly differ but their end goal of defeating the evil they were chosen to fight is a common denominator. The chosen one is not always the one that seems best prepared or motivated to take on the fight with whichever evil needs vanquishing. However, they are the chosen one and therefore they must be the one to take on the challenge and are expected to win simply due to being the chosen one. Some examples of well-known Young-Adult chosen one heroes include: Harry Potter, Sailor Moon, Tris Prior, and Katniss Everdeen. Harry Potter is the chosen one because he was marked by his enemy, as the result of a prophecy, his battle is also personal in nature as his enemies are behind the deaths of his friends and family. Sailor Moon was chosen because of her birth right, as the reborn moon princess she is the chosen one, regardless of her lack of talents. In *Divergent*, Tris Prior is the chosen one because of her personality traits, she is divergent and does not fit into the organized society. Katniss Everdeen took the action to choose herself at first but was then chosen by others as their figurehead motivated by a personal vendetta against her enemy she fought hard and willingly. The writer utilises tropes to subtly convey to readers without outright stating who the chosen one is so that readers can use deductive reasonings to figure it out. This is especially important in novels where there is no Harry Potter-esque prophecy to expressly state who the chosen one is.

The Magicians queers the chosen one by obfuscating the readers perception of who the novel's chosen one is. Multiple characters are distinguished as potential chosen ones, they each have some connection to a trope leading the reader to believe in their potential as the one who will either prevail or fail. Only Jane Chatwin, who herself is a special case, is aware that they are taking part in a bigger plot to rid the world of an evil, while the potential heroes are worrying about everyday mundane things, such as their futures after school and social life. Although many of the others desire to be a hero and have to have a quest, they mostly aspire to distinguish themselves from the other magicians in a world where most forms of magic are an everyday career choice. The magical world is a small and an intimately connected subgroup of the world's population, but the competition for recognition is fierce, those that succeed become the academic elite. While a portion of the graduates just lives off of using magic to acquire

accommodations and funds provided by the magical community, a sort of universal income for magical university graduates (Grossman 227-8).

There are three main characters that the reader is pointed towards as potential candidates for success. The first hint is that Quentin, Alice, and Penny are set apart from the other students by being given the chance to skip a year, after their first semester, provided they pass the final exams. They study together independent of their peers, making up a group of three, a number that frequently reoccurs through fantasy and folklore as the ideal number of people for a quest. In the case of Alice, Quentin, and Penny, they are being highlighted in the text as potential chosen ones, rivals, and compatriots for a quest all at once.

Quentin

Quentin is the first character that *The Magicians* leads the reader to believe is the chosen one. Quentin is the protagonist and therefore the general assumption the reader makes is that they are about to read about Quentin's adventures and his journey to becoming a hero. He leads the reader into the liminal space that is the Breakbills campus as together Quentin and the reader learn about the existence of magic. Liminal space in this context is a transition point to another place or state of being, in this case the Breakbills campus is the place of transition from mundane to magical, transforming the students into magicians and providing the reader with a crutch to support the transformation ("Thresholds"). The first chapter of the novel dives right into starting the action by having an outgoing paramedic hand Quentin a mysterious envelope addressed to him (Grossman 11-12). Within the envelope is an unbound copy of; *The Magicians: Book Six of Fillory and Further*, a novel that as far as Quentin knows should not exist (Grossman 14). While examining the package a page flies away and leads Quentin on a chase through a portal to Breakbills University where he is spontaneously invited to sit the entrance examination to the university (Grossman 15-20). Quentin's receipt of the manuscript hints at him being chosen for the journey to come, both in Breakbills and in Fillory. As according to TV tropes, an online wiki collecting examples of tropes in all sorts of media, a common fantasy trope is that receiving a mysterious object, that is rare or should not exist is often the first step to becoming the chosen one ("The Chosen One"). Although Quentin loses the manuscript before having the chance to read it or further examine it, which results in halting his heroic journey. Quentin is successfully able to

skip a year, after his first semester, marking him as an exemplary student and setting him apart from his peers.

During his third year, Quentin is further distinguished from his peers when they are tested for their discipline, a branch of magic with which they have a special affinity. Students then specialize their studies in relation to their discipline and are assigned clubhouses linked to their discipline. However, Quentin's results are inconclusive and as a result he is placed with the smallest group, the 'Physical Kids', whose branch of magic focuses on altering the physical stage and augmenting energy (Grossman 80). Quentin is therefore seemingly lacking in all special abilities, though it sets him apart for having no speciality at all, potentially his discipline is just so rare or insignificant they cannot test for it (Grossman 93-4) By joining the 'Physical Kids' Quentin gains a sense of belonging at Breakbills, renews his friendship with Eliot and meets Janet and Josh properly for the first time. The first sign of something going really wrong in the novel happens at the end of Quentin's third year is when Quentin plays a prank in class on Professor March, the prank while seemingly harmless causes a mispronunciation error in spellcasting which invites a monster called The Beast into the classroom. The Beast paralyzed the entire class and killed one student before disappearing after hours of keeping them trapped while the teachers worked to free them (Grossman 111-16). Quentin, jarred by this incident, sets his focus on being just a normal student and keeping his head down and studying. As fourth year rolls around the students get sent to Breakbills South where he along with Alice are the only two who even attempt complete the optional final exam, meant to test resolve and their ambition to be better magicians (Grossman 157-8, 65). The following semester Quentin loses much of his focus as graduation draws nearer, suffering from indecisiveness of having too many options, wondering what he will do for the rest of his life when he can do anything. He botches his final project of flying to the moon and has a mental breakdown over life and living. This mood continues on after graduation and well into their trip to Fillory, nothing is as Quentin expected it to be.

Quentin is not satisfied with Fillory, though his dreams are coming true they feel childish and alien to him now. Therefore, at the end, it is not Quentin who manages to fight the great evil off, while he has his moments of bravery and fighting, he freezes when the true moment comes along. He is not the hero of this adventure. After everything is said and done, Quentin find the motivation to overcome his previous fears of magic, mastering magic beyond anything he thought himself capable of, how easy

everything got when nothing really mattered (Grossman 382-83). He completes his previously failed goals, he finishes Alice's project and reverse engineers Penny's Spell and when all that was over The Questing Beast appeared to him (Grossman 384). Quentin successfully hunts The Questing Beast, which grants him three wishes, he cannot bring Alice back or fix Penny's hands so he rewards those that helped him on his quest and returns to Earth (Grossman 389). The novel ends on a new adventure for Quentin, Janet and Eliot brought Julia with them to persuade him to return with them to Fillory and take up the mantle of Kings and Queens (Grossman 401-02).

Alice

Coming from a family of Magicians, Alice is already aware of the existence of Breakbills. She is, unlike most legacies and contrary to her skill and potential, not invited to sit the entrance examination. She is being purposefully kept away from magic due to the death of her brother at the school some years earlier (Grossman 192). Alice makes the choice of going to Breakbills regardless of her lack of invitation set on figuring out for herself what happened to her brother. She walks through the wards and forest surrounding the property arriving unannounced and gets to sit the entrance examinations due to the unprecedented nature of her arrival. By doing so it can be interpreted as Alice making her own quest. She is the self-made hero setting out on an adventure with a specific goal in mind, only to be swept along on a grand adventure with an unknown goal. Alice sets herself apart from majority of the students by already being familiar with magic upon arrival to the school, she is further distanced from the others when she skips a grade with Quentin. The two of them were the only two who finished the final examination at the South Pole, an exam meant only for the most ambitious and magically gifted of students and Alice beat Quentin in the race by two days (Grossman 164). Alice finally learns the truth about the tragic death of her brother through Janet's gossiping, that he had died in a magic overload accident and not in a car crash like she had originally been told. (Grossman 184-92). Alice and Quentin motivate each other to continue, they support and comfort each other, preparing for a life after school neither of them ever planned for. While Quentin loses motivation to keep studying magic after graduation Alice kicks it up a notch, this is what truly marks her as the other hero rather than a sidekick to Quentin. She goes along to Fillory for Quentin, but her ambition and drive make her the true hero, the true chosen one, the one who beat The Beast. She, like her brother before her, overcharges her magic and goes too far to

save the one she loves. Alice defeats The Beast by overpowering a spell, the consequence of which is transforming into a niffin, a magical entity. She disappears after finishing off the battle, gone but not truly dead, stripped of her humanity she was the hero of the quest, the one who dealt the final blow, sacrificing everything she hoped to gain in the process. (Grossman 363-5).

Jane Chatwin

In the antepenultimate chapter Quentin finally gets to read the manuscript of 'Fillory and Further - The Magicians', which he had been handed at the start of the novel. The manuscript reveals that Jane Chatwin had returned to Fillory and became a chosen one, chosen by the gods, when Umber hands her a quest after the death of Ember. The dwarfs, asked by Umber to give her a tool, give her a time controlling watch piece, which she then has to figure out and learn how to use it and its magic all by herself (Grossman 377). This becomes the origins of the watcher woman, a presumed villain in the original Fillory and Further novels as Jane has multiple magical mishaps while trying to learn how to use her item of power (Grossman 377-9). Jane Chatwin has throughout the novel been orchestrating and influencing events, her quest to win simultaneously makes her a chosen one as well as a mentor. In order to complete her quest, she restarts the timeline multiple times rearranging her chessboard of people. She only stops when the desired result has been achieved, destroying her magical item upon completion in order to prevent further changes (Grossman 381). She is not the one to finally cause the death of her brother, Martin Chatwin who had become perverted by magic becoming the Beast that was the ultimate enemy of this novel. However, she is the one that orchestrated the events that ultimately lead to his defeat. She reveals to Quentin that he has already fought The Beast before in another timeline, that she has made multiple attempts, but every other time has failed. Therefore, to prevent Quentin from resetting the timeline again in order to save Alice, Jane breaks the watch piece, making further time travel impossible for both of them (Grossman 378-82).

What makes Jane Chatwin's role queer is her background role as a chosen one as well as a mysterious manipulative mentor. Well-read readers of heroic fiction are well aware of the purpose of a mentor figure. They are someone that guides the hero along their journey, such as Gandalf, or someone that just prepares the hero and then sends them off on their journey, such as Chiron ("Mentor"). While reading the Magicians, the headmaster, Henry Fogg comes off as the mentor figure, preparing young magicians for

the world, a reasonable assumption, and in a way, he is the mentor for majority of the Breakbills students. However, Jane Chatwin influences the group that eventually goes to Fillory, she changes the circumstances in their lives without their knowledge in order to start the journey. She in her role as Ember's chosen one becomes a sort of mentor to her human chess pieces, which the Fillory group essentially is to her. Jane's plan to finish her chosen one goal is to use the young magicians to destroy her brother, to complete her quest. For Jane's plan to work, she has to think of all the variables that could bring the desired events to fruition. She influences Quentin's entrance to Breakbills, she has influence at the school, it is implied that her connection is to Henry Fogg (Grossman 38-9). She made sure that Quentin made it to the examination and admits to lurking on campus grounds unseen to monitor students, and that she needs Quentin in fighting shape (Grossman 82-3). Further it is implied that, she uses those connections to influence who Quentin gets to know and who he becomes close to. She is also an unusual mentor figure in the way of rarely interacting with Quentin, making her a mysterious figure and is herself also a chosen one, albeit with a slightly different quest. In *The Magicians* she secures her plan by having multiple potential chosen ones, while Quentin is the protagonist. Alice and Penny are also set up as potential chosen ones while simultaneously acting out the roles of a sidekick and other hero tropes.

Penny

While Quentin, Alice and Penny start off as a trio, their paths quickly diverge. Although different from many of the characters who are just there in the background Penny sets himself apart from the first mention of him. He is a punker who is the first to finish the entrance examination, a loner; he does not fit in with the group and has seemingly no friends. The closest he gets is while studying with Quentin and Alice to skip a year ahead. However, while they pass their exams and move on to the next year, he gets left behind. Regardless of his failure to skip a year, Penny is shown to be a brilliant magician. He is very driven to learn more and gets private lessons from a professor upon his discipline being revealed to be a rare branch of magic. Penny is a traveller, someone who is able to navigate between the worlds and can transport himself and small supplies with him places (Grossman 249) . Penny chooses not to graduate Breakbills, seeking instead to complete his own independent research. True to his punk attitude he longs to be a free spirit, not bound to the curriculum of an organized institution and classroom learning. Penny is the one that discovers the way to Fillory,

coming across the button through Jane Chatwin's influence. He then seeks out the others to accompany him on this adventure. Due to his frankness and excitability at the quest and eagerness to be the chosen one The Beast sees him as the biggest threat once the final battle starts, immediately taking away his ability to do magic by biting off his hands (Grossman 355).

It all Ties together

While everything seems to lead to Quentin being the chosen one and defeating The Beast, he panics and fails. While he aspired to be the hero, he more often than not created the danger. He accidentally summons The Beast in class (Grossman 111), upon arriving in Fillory they are given a gift by a nymph and told to use it when all hope is lost (Grossman 292). However, when Quentin uses it in Embers Tomb at the encouragement of the others, instead of help, he summons The Beast (Grossman 351) bringing about even more danger. When Quentin wants to help, he causes more danger, panics, or screws up. Penny, having been the one to acquire the button and gather the others assumed that this would be his chance of living up to his childhood dreams. Having prepared himself for the trip by learning battle magic and researching what he could and acquiring supplies. Upon arrival to Fillory he completely immersing himself in speaking with the locals in a formal manner and actively seeking out a quest and information. His preparedness and enthusiasm eventually cause his ultimate failure as the Beast sees him as the major threat to his plans. Alice is the reluctant hero, she followed along for Quentin's sake, and sought only to protect herself and others from the Beast. Her preparation was simply her diligence at learning magic, to better herself and her goal of seeking academic recognition within the magical community. Alice's motivation to fight the beast is to save Quentin, she throws the Beast off using non-magical means, shooting him with Janet's gun and then overpowering him with advanced magic. The Beast was a self-learned magician with little belief in academia, he never anticipated that Alice who he perceived as a bookworm would be able to overpower him and his near god like magical abilities. Jane is the one that brought them all together, she affected their experience at Breakbills creating small variables to her previous attempts at defeating the Beast and restoring Fillory to Umber. She chose them as potential hero's and reaped the benefits of Alice living up to her potential and slaying the beast. Queering the chosen one in *The Magicians* by not having the protagonist be the true hero of the main quest within the novel

Queering the Queer

Although *The Magicians* is a fantasy novel with openly gay characters such as Eliot and could therefore be called a queer-inclusive novel, that outright would not make it a queer novel. What, apart from the previously mentioned queer usage of the chosen one and fantasy tropes, makes it interesting to queer theory is the subtext of biphobia the books. Quentin seems to suffer from internalized biphobia while Eliot shows signs of biphobia seemingly linked to his insecurities. Quentin desires Eliot but also refuses to fully admit it to himself, he then over sexualizes women to compensate for his attraction to men. Even though Eliot & Quentin slept together with Margo in *The Magicians* Eliot seems to think that was only Quentin being drunk and wanting to sleep with Margo. Eliot's characterization as a flamboyant city gay is also played around with in the novel, where it is revealed that he is from rural America the youngest son of a homophobic father, presenting as a city born flamboyant upper-class socialite.

Bisexuality falls between in the binary heterosexual vs homosexual discussion and is often erased from the discussion. Even within queer spaces and LGBTQ+ media erasure of bisexuality is a prevalent problem. When bisexuals are in a relationship, they are either in a gay or straight relationship as perceived by the outside world unless they specifically come out flamboyantly and regularly as bisexual. Two men in a relationship, might be one gay and the other bi but you would never know it unless you were to ask (Burlison 19-20). Bisexuals often feel unwelcome in gay communities as people see them as straight passing or using straight privilege and feel that if given the chance will choose to be in a heterosexual relationship, and that their gay leanings are just a phase and not anything permanent or lasting (Burlison 21). The way Eliot treats Quentin throughout *The Magicians* series reflects this view, that Quentin if given the chance will choose to fit in to society by entering a relationship with a woman. Bisexuality is also often seen as a middle ground, testing the waters before coming out as gay, even though many choose to first come out as gay before coming out as bisexual. Those that identify as Bisexual are accused of just having fun while in same sexual relationships and refusing to commit to one sexuality (Erickson-Schroth and Mitchell 300) Bisexual erasure is especially prevalent when people fight for the right to be homosexual as they were born that way, searching for a scientific way to establish that they cannot help being homosexual but if bisexual people exist then they upset the fragile balance of the binary (Burlison 21). The AIDS crisis was a huge factor in

bringing back biphobia as bisexuals were seen as a way of passing the disease onto straight people and lesbians, making it not a gay only disease (Burlison 24)

The way bisexuality is perceived by scholars and the public queers queer theory as queer theory would not exist without the binary opposition between homosexuality and heterosexuality. While bisexuality opposes the monosexual practice and paradigm creating more open-ended categories. Forcing Queer theory to re-evaluate itself frequently and the reconceptualization of categories of sexual differences and perception (Erickson-Schroth and Mitchell 313). Bisexuals like Quentin who are vulnerable due to mental health and lack of support system, have a vested interest in staying in the closet because they are not guaranteed that either gay or straight communities will accept them, therefore they have a harder time accepting themselves.

Quentin's Queerness and Internalized Biphobia

As previously established the book starts in New York where Quentin is heading to a college entrance interview which results in him being led to Breakbills. At the time he is only a seventeen-year-old gifted High School student planning to go to Princeton. We are introduced to his friends Julia and James both of whom are also gifted students and know each other through extracurricular programs for gifted students (Grossman 4). They are all walking together as James and Quentin have the Princeton interview, while Julia is joining for moral support on the way before heading onwards to the library. Quentin internally panics about the interview and his future while James and July joke around as they walk. What calms Quentin's anxiety is doing simple magic tricks in his pocket, the movement of which triggers a sexual joke from James (Grossman 6). Textually, Quentin expresses feelings of jealousy and inferiority, feeling like a third wheel and like he is imposing on James and Julia due to their recent status as a couple. Quentin admits to having an unrequited crush on Julia but feeling like he would never stand a chance compared to James. Looking deeper in the subtext of Quentin envying James and wanting to be more like him, it is possible to read attraction to him as well (Grossman 8). The way Quentin constantly compares himself with James, establishes his low self-esteem and sense of self-worth. James, described as handsome and confident, has the life that Quentin wants, the girl he is attracted too and, in every way, superior to him in Quentin's mind. Despite his reservations and jealousy regarding his friend's relationship he is comfortable with physical touch between them and has no problems with James's wrapping an arm around him in public (Grossman 8). Later on in

the novel he describes how to end his fight with Penny, Josh wrapped his powerful, gentle arms almost tenderly to lift him up off of Penny (Grossman 82). Although Quentin is insecure and has low self-esteem, he is seemingly unaffected by toxic masculinity or fragile masculinity in regard to his ability to show affection with other males. He however time and time again oversexualizes the women he interacts with, taking careful inventory of their physical assets. His toxic ideas of male dominance give him a hard time accepting that Alice can fight for herself and that he does not need to protect her from everything they come across. This mixes with his saviour complex, wishing to become a hero at any cost, influenced by his depression and suicidal tendencies. In *The Magicians* Quentin only has relationships with women and openly admits to liking them. The reader is subjected to his graphical description of their physical attractiveness and often his thoughts of his unworthiness. The only named female character in the novel who Quentin does not describe is Fen who he deems to be a lesbian “to the best of Quentin’s ability to gauge these things” (Grossman 314). Quentin also describes males in this manner, but he does it with more subtlety and an undertone of envy. He seems to be unaware or unwilling to admit his attraction towards men, overcompensating by oversexualising women’s looks.

Early on in the novel the main focus of Quentin’s attention is Eliot who he clearly looks up to. Although he wonders why Eliot would wish to spend time with him in general. Because Eliot, who he describes as having an air of magnificent melancholy sophistication, can have anyone he wishes so why should he settle for Quentin (Grossman 42-43). He then speculates that Eliot pities him for his bad reaction to the cigarette offered to him and that Eliot had simply gotten tired of being alone or that “maybe he just needed a straight man” (Grossman 43). Quentin describing himself as a straight man after having unashamedly wondered at Eliot and his magnificence and been affected by his airs of unapologetic attitude towards the world (Grossman 43) is a good example of Quentin’s lack of self-awareness in regard to his own sexuality, or his subconscious suppression of it. Even though Quentin and Eliot spend a lot of time together alone before the start of Quentin’s First Breakbills term they drift apart once the term starts. Mid semester while looking for a quiet place to read, Quentin stumbles upon the scene of Eliot involved in a domination and submission play giving another student a blowjob. Quentin stays as a voyeur before realising that he should not be watching them and leaves. What is interesting about that scene is both the graphic nature of it, as Balay mentions that fantasy fiction avoids sex in general (924). As well

as how Quentin reacts, instead of being horrified or ashamed of what he witnessed he wonders why Eliot had not come to him. As much as Quentin tries to deny his attraction to Eliot his mind betrays him:

“On some level Quentin was hurt: If this was what Eliot wanted, why hadn’t he come after Quentin? Though as much as he longed for Eliot’s attention, he didn’t know if he could have gone through with it.” (Grossman 66).

Additionally, he is disappointed that Eliot did not notice his presence in the room or notice him enough to show sexual interest. Especially seeing as Eliot was known for having his boy’s only hang around for a short time before moving onto the next, Quentin is disappointed not to have been asked. After Eliot graduates Quentin starts dating Alice, their relationship is built on faulty foundations that started through raw animal instinct after being transformed into foxes at Breakbills South. Quentin and Alice, become very socially isolated from the other students after the older physical kids graduate, they are unable to bond with the much younger physical kids joining the cottage and have few others for company their last year at Breakbills.

Quentin has doubts throughout his relationship with Alice, those doubts only seem to grow stronger once they graduate and reunite with the others in New York. Even though Quentin and Alice live together, Quentin is spending majority of his time with Eliot, when the former physical kids are not all partying together. Alice is unhappy with Quentin’s constant partying with Eliot, she would rather seek to further her magical education and expects Quentin to do the same. After one eventful dinner party at Eliot and Janet’s Soho apartment, Quentin and Janet have to manhandle a very drunk and upset Eliot into bed. Having tucked Eliot into the bed, they are seemingly overcome with lust and undress, getting into the bed as well (Grossman 237). When Quentin wakes up the morning after, Alice is sitting at the edge of the bed staring down at them, he has vague memories of the night before and has an identity crisis, blaming magic for his bad decisions. Relationship wise, *The Magicians* does not shy away from showing the nitty gritty consequences of internal fighting in a relationship, Alice gets revenge on Quentin by sleeping with Penny and Quentin is just angry. Balay talks about how in fantasy fiction avoids sex, it also avoids showing non-functional relationships in quest romances and other such forms of fantasy, which is why the genre is generally seen as appropriate for children (924). From as early the Victorian era fantasy, as Nelson observes, has relied on symbolism and subtext and can therefore permit expressions of sexuality, even deviant sexuality through subtext (Balay). Quentin’s sexuality is always

relayed through subtext, the exception being his attraction to Eliot, but he is in denial of it, and therefore it is never outright stated. After having slept with Janet and Eliot, Quentin remembers very little of the night at first, thinking that Eliot had mostly been passed out. However while planning the trip to Fillory some hazy memories return, and Quentin remembers kissing Eliot, and the feeling of somebody else's stubble on his cheek and upper lip (Grossman 268). While in Fillory, the relationship dynamic is up in the air, nobody wants to focus on the relationship drama while adventure is to be had, but the tension is still there. Quentin feels oddly about Eliot hooking up with a Fillorian native but is also having trouble with the situation with Alice and Penny. The next interaction that gives Quentin away is after the final battle, he wakes up all alone in a strange new place and what makes him swoon is Eliot's handwriting on a note he left him (Grossman 375).

Eliot is Fine and Dandy

The reader's first impression of Eliot is that he is someone Quentin wants to impress, he is well dressed and laid back, leaning against a tree smoking a cigarette, as he greets Quentin upon his arrival to the Breakbills campus (Grossman 16-17). Quentin notes that there is just something off about his face, but despite his odd appearance Eliot's effortless self-possession attracted Quentin to him. Eliot gives off the aura of belonging in the world, confident and naturally buoyant in a world where Quentin was struggling to stay afloat (Grossman 19). Although at this point Quentin is interested in getting to know him, Eliot outright states that he does not want to know more about Quentin cause he does not want to get attached (Grossman 18). The reader is meant to notice Eliot as Quentin spots him occasionally in the distance commenting on his airs of sophistication and how he seems to belong somewhere infinitely more distinguished (Grossman 16). The next time they meet Eliot offers Quentin a cigarette, this time unafraid to get attached to Quentin as he had already passed the entrance examination. Due to the act Eliot puts up Quentin thinks he must have been raised amongst the rich of Manhattan but in reality, he is from Eastern Oregon born the youngest son of a homophobic farmer. He puts up airs of entitlement, dresses impeccably to hide his roots and insecurity. The way he comes out to Quentin is by comparing how he is an outcast in his family, lanky where his older brothers are thick necked athletes. How his family feels sorry for him, saying "They think I'm at a special school for computer geeks and homosexuals" (Grossman 46). Eliot is the only character in the book to directly state that he is gay, he

embraces that role with “hard-won ... airs of ludicrously exaggerated insouciance” (Grossman 46). That summer Quentin and Eliot are able to spend time together freely because they are the only two students on campus, and bond quickly. However, until after Quentin joins the physical kids, they only see each other occasionally due to the demanding schoolwork and different classes.

What is interesting about Eliot is that he has made himself up into a modern dandy, using fashion style and attitude to hide the substance of his personality underneath. The way Eliot lounges against a tree with a cigarette in hand when greeting Quentin, creating the aesthetic image of a nonchalant personality. Using his looks and partying, to make himself into a commodity of fetishism. He even goes so far as to wear a dressing robe over his clothes on their boating trip, giving him what Quentin remarked on as a shabby princely look (Grossman 46). The dandy is associated with the feminization of modern culture, the dandy not living up to the ultra-masculine attitude of the modern day (Glick 16). To add to the image of Eliot not being the ideal masculine figure his father wanted him to be. The cigarettes he offers Quentin come with a reputation, as Quentin states, “Merits are for pussies” (Grossman 43). Quentin’s observation of the cigarettes comes from a life in Brooklyn, Eliot admits it is a bad habit but that they are the only cigarette’s he can stand. There is strong subtextual imagery in this passage as Quentin, unfamiliar with cigarettes, fondles and plays with it before being reprimanded by Eliot to actually smoke it (Grossman 43). The imagery of the cigarette as a male sexual organ and the smoker of them being a pussy refers back to a older code of gender performance. Homosexual men as far back as 1890 were able to present in society as normal as long as their gender performance conformed to masculine codes of dress, style, and bodily comportment. They were therefore judged by their gender performance and not their partners, men who took the ‘passive’, penetrative role in sex were called fairies (Thomas 69-70).

Eliot’s characterization queers the idea of the gay character generally seen in Fantasy literature as he is unashamedly sexual. Both fantasy literature and YA fantasy literature generally rely on subtext and symbolism to express sexuality, Christine Jenkins observes that in YA literature any gay characters tend to follow gender norms and are socially isolated from other queer spaces and characters (qtd. in Balay 925). Here although Eliot is the only named out character, he is shown to have hook-ups and Quentin even accidentally stumbles upon him mid sexual act with another male student (Grossman 66). While the market for Queer fiction is expanding the general idea is that

relationships in fantasy exist in the subtext and subversion of ideas, that the innocence of the non-sexual relationship is what makes them inherently sexually-deviant (Balay 924). Eliot has sex with a nameless character and is mentioned to be sexually active with multiple partners. However Balay mentions that in YA fiction if sex happens it is between characters who are seen as soulmates and they are making love and everything revolves around intimacy rather than physical release (Balay 927). Fantasy Fiction in contrast, does not generally graphically depict gay sex it can frame it within rules and then be playful with those rules (Balay 927). Although, Quentin and Eliot sleep together along with Janet the memory of it is hazy and Quentin only remembers kissing Eliot, and the feeling of somebody else's stubble on his cheek and upper lip (Grossman 268). In the antepenultimate chapter Quentin receives a handwritten note from Eliot, where he confesses that Quentin is the one that he needed in his life to become who he was meant to become (Grossman 375). This refers back to a line he said at the beginning of the novel, asking Quentin not to pity him as he did not need his family to become who he was meant to be (Grossman 46), implying a potential for some form of relationship between the two of them, be it a queer-platonic found family relationship or something more.

Conclusion

To conclude, *The Magicians* is a queer novel because it subverts conventional fantasy tropes and plays on queer stereotypes and experiences. It is a fantasy novel because the fantastic is present within the novel, it departs from the contemporary reality of the reader and the fantastic is easily identifiable. *The Magicians* uses fantasy conventions and tropes but subverts them and creates a queer fantasy. As previously stated for a novel to be properly read in a queer theory style, it does not have to have queer characters, but it must defy the binary expectations of society. *The Magicians* has both queer main characters and subverts fantasy conventions.

Although Quentin is not the chosen one for the novel's main quest, his story keeps going in *The Magician King* and *The Magician's Land*. In a way Quentin does complete a quest by mastering magic, it is just not the quest he thought he would finish, or the one the reader anticipated. Eliot embraces the gay stereotype mould of a modern-day dandy to hide his shame at being born a hillbilly. However, although he embraces the style, he cannot erase the physical characteristics that mark him as different, Eliot is attractive because of his charisma and style not his looks. Quentin is a depressed, closeted bisexual who does not miraculously get better when he discovers magic, contrary magic thrives on strong emotions and is fuelled by his depression and anxiety.

All of these elements unite to create an unusual fantasy world where the worries of the mundane do not get left behind in the mundane world but affect the decisions that the characters make in the magical world. Quentin battles his anxiety and depression to keep going and finish school, he may not be the quest's hero, but he keeps fighting on, enduring, determined to survive and find a purpose in life. Often fantasy is escapism, but in this particular case, *The Magicians* reflects on the futility of it.

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