

# Critiquing Heteronormativity in Queer Young Adult Fiction of Casey McQuiston's *Red White & Royal Blue*

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## Abstract

Fictional works are a great way to raise awareness in society. They allow people to connect with different aspects of life, such as LGBTQIA+ individuals, family members, and friends. American author Casey McQuiston's young adult romance novel *Red, White & Royal Blue* (2019) is well known for representing same sex love in elite society. The story of the novel *Red, White & Royal Blue* revolves around Alex Claremont Diaz, the son of the first Female President of the United States who is in a same-sex relationship with Prince Henry of Wales. The plot is about the so-called enemies turning into lovers, the blooming romance between these two famous and powerful public figures, and the difficulties of the same-sex relationship they faced and overcame along with Political and Royal matters. Homosexuality is a matter of convenience to addresses issues such as coming out, complexities of acceptance, hiding sexual orientation, and family, and encouraging queer individuals to be brave, proud and accept themselves. The references mentioned above explore the issues of identity, sexual orientation, self-discovery, coming to terms with them, family, friends and homophobia. They also challenge traditional gender roles and address heterosexual normativity, which legitimizes itself by subjugating and othering peoples of non-heteronormative sexuality.

**Keywords:** Identity, heteronormativity, sexuality exploration, self-discovery, acceptance, young adult, fictional.

## Introduction

The novel is described as being created “for the weirdos & the dreamers”, and the heartfelt message that Casey dedicated to readers in the acknowledgement is truly motivational. Heteronormativity is the belief that reinforces the notion that heterosexual relationships and traditional gender categories (male/female) are the only natural and acceptable forms of human expression. The term “heteronormativity” was first introduced by scholar Michael Warner in 1991, building on the earlier work of scholars like Adrienne Rich and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. Warner argued that heteronormativity is a powerful and pervasive influence that shapes our culture, institutions, and everyday lives.

Heteronormativity has extensive societal effects, such as:

- Reinforcement of gender stereotypes and binaries

Published: 07 March 2026

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.70558/SPIJSH.2026.v3.i3.45581>

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- Marginalization and erasure of LGBTQ+ people
- Perpetuation of violence, discrimination, and oppression

Casey McQuiston is an American, queer, non-binary, bisexual author of romance novels in the new adult fiction genre. They are best known for their New York Times best-selling debut novel *Red, White & Royal Blue*, which has been translated into 31 languages worldwide. She herself grew up in a conservative evangelical Christian society and wanted to express their feelings about being a queer teenage herself. She identifies herself as ‘They’ to attach herself with the LGBTQ ideal. In an interview with “Out”, an American LGBTQ news, fashion, entertainment, and lifestyle magazine, they mentioned that queer fiction was a “formative experience” for them, allowing them to engage with queerness safely as a young person and that much of their work as an author is “about taking care of that conduit and preserving it” for young queer people “who need it the way I did” (“Casey McQuiston”)

### **Scope and Objectives:**

The current society still revolves around heteronormative values, leading people to adhere to gender stereotypes and norms, whether knowingly or unknowingly. Unfortunately, queer individuals continue to face discrimination even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. While some progress has been made, discrimination against the queer community remains widespread. Somehow society is slowly understanding and accepting the queer community and breaking free from gender stereotypes and norms. To illustrate this, I have referenced *Red White & Royal Blue* (2019) by Casey McQuiston which explore the struggles of coming out and embracing one's authentic self. The novel addresses the pressure to conform to traditional gender roles by challenging heteronormative standards.

### **Methodology:**

I conducted a close literary analysis of Casey McQuiston’s novel *Red, White & Royal Blue* (2019) as the primary sources that have informed my work. I also watched the 2023 film adaptation of McQuiston’s novel *Red White & Royal Blue* directed by Matthew Lopez, to gain insight into the concept of heteronormativity, I studied Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* (1999). For a deeper understanding of queerness, sexuality exploration, and coming out.

### **Literature Review:**

To solidify the article, I’ve gone through multiple papers, articles, films and journals like-

“Representing Queer in Popular Literature: Reader Analysis on Casey McQuiston’s *Red, White & Royal Blue*” by Denitha Nafalitha, Kastam Syamsi, Talitha Djulia Claresta, Mita Saputri. This paper discusses the representation of Queer in popular literature and the reader’s response. Still, it does not focus on Prince Henry of Wales’s struggle in a heteronormative society and his fear of embracing his authentic self.

“Do you ever stop talking?”: A comparative analysis of idiolects in Casey McQuiston’s *Red, White & Royal Blue* and its Finnish translation *Punaista, valkoista ja kuninkaansinistä* by Noora Nurminen. This paper examines the idiolects of the characters through their dialogues

in the novel and the translation of the dialogue. However, it does not discuss the themes of heteronormativity and queerness, which is the focus of my paper.

### **Analysis**

“He [Prince Henry of Wales] didn't know how to be himself, not when being himself meant being something his family and the public wouldn't understand.” (Red, White and Royal Blue, ch.10)

The paper delves into the topic of sexual orientation, homophobia, exploring the impact of heteronormativity in society and its negative effects on queer individuals. Drawing references from the novel, it highlights how this marginalization affects the lives of queer people. The focus is on self-discovery, identity, self-acceptance, and the journey of coming out. It emphasizes breaking free from gender stereotypes and societal norms and finding pride in one's own identity, with references from the novel and the movie of same name.

“I'm the First Son of the United States, and all I can see when I look in the mirror is how everyone is going to see me once they know.” (Alex, ch.10)

This passage proves the pride of being queer in a heteronormative society and the courage it takes to live authentically, especially for public figures. Queer individuals are just like everyone else, and their personal preferences and sexual orientation should not matter to anyone, because love is love. Not being heterosexual is seen as a taboo in society, and because of this, people who are not heterosexual start to question themselves if they are wrong for being who they are. Despite their social status, this feeling of being left out, abandoned, and frustrated is universal for queer people, and they start to question their own existence. However, societal pressures often force them to hide their true selves, as society does not view queer individuals as “normal.” This leads them to lead a life that is not authentic. The society also mistakenly believes that sexual orientation affects gender. For example, if a man is gay, society may view him as “weak and unmanly.” The idea that a masculine-looking man can be gay is difficult for some to comprehend because society assumes that if a man is masculine enough then he's straight.

Prince Henry from the novel is concerned that if people were to discover his homosexuality, he would lose the respect and reputation he currently holds as a member of the Royal family.

“He couldn't bear the thought of being ridiculed, of being called weak or unmanly” (Prince Henry, ch.6)

The lack of understanding about LGBTQIA+ and sexuality among individuals fuels homophobia in a heteronormative society. Homophobic individuals often struggle to understand the basic concept of sexual orientation, its normalcy, and its naturalness. They are unable to differentiate between “gender” and “sexuality.” This leads them to perceive queer individuals as perverted, resulting in feelings of wariness and ultimately, contributing to homophobia. Homophobia often manifests as intense hatred and disgust towards queer communities, sometimes leading to violent behavior. Unfortunately, many people worldwide still consider homosexuality and queerness as diseases or mental issues, regardless of developing countries or developed countries. This perception causes queer individuals to be

seen as outsiders in so-called “normal” society, prompting rejection due to a lack of understanding.

It's not always a matter of lack of knowledge. Some people support LGBTQIA+ individuals secretly but are afraid to voice their support due to the fear of being judged and rejected by society, similar to how queer individuals are treated despite their sexual orientation. They are either afraid of societal judgment or have narrow mindsets and act homophobic to stay as part of society. This isn't just the story of a conservative society in a specific place, but the story of every society worldwide. Prince Harry of Wales faces the same dilemma within his family and society, indicating the universal negative effects of a heteronormative society on queer individuals. Just as traditions exist because we exist, and therefore, traditions can only influence the way we live, not the life of the individual. The same applies to sexual orientation; the choices based on it are a part of life and do not define the entirety of an individual's life. Queer people have been marginalized in society for so long that it has become difficult for them to come out, even though homosexuality has been legalized in many countries now.

“I am the First Son of the United States, and I'm bisexual. History will remember us.” (Alex, ch.14)

The declaration carries a sense of pride and relief that any queer individual would feel once they can truly be themselves after pretending to be someone else for a long time. It is essential to be true to ourselves to find our identity and practice self-love. Ultimately, we don't need permission from anyone else or society to be ourselves and love who we are.

This passage illustrates the pain and disappointment experienced by queer individuals when they come out to their families and loved ones in the hope of being accepted and understood. However, family members who lack knowledge about these matters and are influenced by the “What will people say?” mindset, often prevent themselves from even trying to understand. The lack of understanding and support from their family and friends sometimes drives queer individuals towards darkness. They feel isolated and lonely because they are not heterosexual.

“He'd (Prince Henry) been living in the closet for so long, he'd almost forgotten what it felt like to be out in the open.” (Red, White & Royal Blue. ch.14)

Society's stereotypes have always tried to make us conform to their expectations. Power dynamics and politics play a crucial role in many aspects that we may not even be aware of. Just like everyone else, queer individuals sometimes feel the need to hide behind a mask, feeling ashamed of who they are. It can be incredibly challenging for them to embrace themselves, especially in the face of constant discrimination. Self-love is often more difficult to achieve than loving someone else. However, they come to realize that their own scars can create beautiful personal constellations, just as beautiful as those in the sky. Only when they find the answers to questions like “Is it my fault? Is it my wrong?” can they truly breathe and find happiness, allowing them to be their authentic selves. In the novel, Alex's journey beautifully portrays this, from his initial self-doubt about being discovered with Prince Henry to publicly embracing their relationship.

“At least now I can stop acting as if it's something to be ashamed of.” (Alex, ch.13)

Though in Western context people are way more acceptable and open about LGBTQIA+ community than in Third world countries like India. Films like *Badhaai Do* (2022), and web series like *Mujhe Rang Do*, clearly brings out the hardship and struggle of queer people. In society, queer people may still feel the need to enter into a “lavender marriage” to avoid stigma and discrimination. This is portrayed in the plot of the film *Badhaai Do*, where the main characters, one gay and the other lesbian, enter into a lavender marriage to live life on their own terms, free from family and societal pressures. Society still doesn’t accept queer individuals in schools, workplaces, and social gatherings due to prejudice in many countries. Homophobic people view queer individuals as sinners, dismissing their existence and avoiding them. If straight people can draw from their own experience and write straight fiction, then why writing about queer people’s experience becomes a taboo in society?

### **Conclusion**

“To every person in search of somewhere to belong who happened to pick up this book, I hope you found a place in here, even if just a few pages. You are loved. I wrote this for. Keep fighting, keep making history, keep looking after one another.” (Casey McQuiston)

Why is being different considered a sin? Regardless of age, gender, or borders, it seems like a challenge for everyone. We need to be open to new knowledge and understand that differences should not lead to discrimination. It's not wrong to like different things than others, but it's wrong to lie to ourselves. Though the world is vast but some people's narrow mind will never accept something out of the norm. Everyone doesn't need to be the same. We must recognize that the victims of prejudice are no different from ourselves; they are simply seeking love in a different light, which should not be cause for concern. Nobody else has the right to say and judge whether a certain type of love is right or wrong. Everyone deserves equal respect, regardless of race, class, religion, gender, or sexuality. These principles will become clear once society comes together to realize that equality is not just necessary for women in patriarchal societies, but also for queer people who have long suffered but have been overlooked. Change depends on various factors, and sometimes a significant revolution is needed to bring about societal change. The novel also showcased the strong support from Alex's parents and friends, as well as some of Prince Henry's family members, such as his mother and sister. Towards the end, the story also illustrates the significant support from many individuals in the traditionally heteronormative society for Alex and Prince Henry's relationship. These efforts from the fictional works can provide the mental support that queer individuals need to come out. We have the freedom to express our own preferences, and no one else has the right to dictate what we should like. This assures them that just as spring follows winter, the rainbow will soon appear with its vibrant colors to make the world more colorful.

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