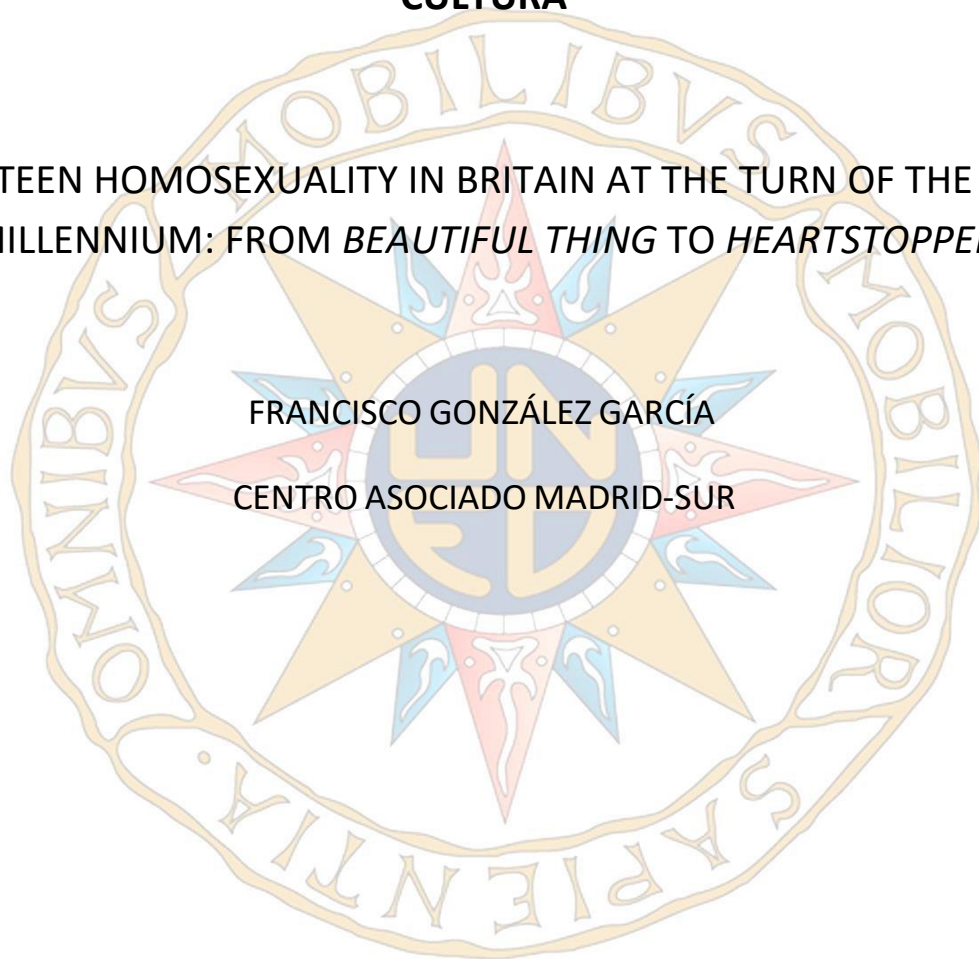UNED | Facultad de Filología

TRABAJO FIN DE GRADO

GRADO EN ESTUDIOS INGLESES: LENGUA, LITERATURA Y CULTURA

TEEN HOMOSEXUALITY IN BRITAIN AT THE TURN OF THE MILLENNIUM: FROM *BEAUTIFUL THING* TO *HEARTSTOPPER*

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CURSO ACADÉMICO: 2022-2023- Convocatoria: junio

Abstract:

Throughout history, the gay population has suffered discrimination and harassment. Teen homosexuals constructed their sexual identities without a legislative umbrella that could offer them protection, understanding, and acceptance. However, in the United Kingdom, from the 1960s, and especially with the turn of the new millennium, legislation started to build a long road toward gay equality. This paper is aimed to establish a comparison between the situation of teen homosexuals in the decades of the 1990s and the 2010s, describing all the changes in the sociopolitical contexts of both periods. The project also includes a description of how gay identity is built and what factors affect how homosexuals disclose their sexual identities. Finally, we analyze some aspects of the literary works *Beautiful Thing* and *Heartstopper*, as representatives of the two decades under study.

Keywords:

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1- INTRODUCTION

Being a teenager has never been easy. A male adolescent starts to experience physical changes in his body: acne, body hair, voice change… but it is not only about the physical transformation, it is also about mental and cognitive development: abstract thinking, the establishment of moral values and norms, intense emotions, self-consciousness… Gay adolescents face a difficult process, living in a heteronormative world. And, despite society has evolved in gay rights, there is still equality to be achieved.

The idea for this work came while watching the Netflix series *Heartstopper*, based on the first two volumes of the graphic novels of the same title by Alice Oseman, both published in 2019. This coming-of-age story describes the lives of two teenagers who go to the same private school and fall in love with each other. Bullying, self-acceptance, and coming out to friends and family are key issues in these first two volumes of *Heartstopper*. Later on, in the following volumes, mental issues, and eating disorders become main concerns too. In a way, watching these two teenagers dealing with their personal struggles recalls the 1994 play *Beautiful Thing*, by Jonathan Harvey, another love story of two gay adolescents who face the process of assuming who they are, whom they love, and how their sexual identity is finally disclosed in a difficult social environment. A film based on the play was released in 1996, directed by Hettie Macdonald. Since both stories shared the issue of a couple of confused teenagers beginning to deal with their homosexuality – or bisexuality – and both took place in England, this brought the question "Has the situation of British teen homosexuals changed within the last twenty-five years? Starting from this question, which is the basis of this project, the following general **objectives** are established:

- To describe the situation of gay teen individuals in the decade of the 1990s and nowadays, focusing on these particular aspects: the legal framework regarding homosexuality, the perception of homosexuality by society, the process of identity construction, the process of coming out, and the relationships with the people around them (peers, friends, and family members).
- To analyze the existing differences, if any, and the aspects that have changed.

- To illustrate the content of the project with examples from the play *Beautiful Thing*, by Jonathan Harvey, and from the four volumes of the graphic novels *Heartstopper*, by Alice Oseman, published between 2019 and 2021 (with an upcoming final volume yet to be released), since they are representative of the decades under study and share quite a few similarities in order to make a comparison.

This work must touch on several disciplines. Firstly, it is obvious that we must describe the evolution of the laws regarding homosexuality throughout history up to the present day and how gay rights have been achieved, to have an overview of the different legal frames that surround the lives of homosexual individuals in both decades under study. It is also important to know the public opinion and general attitudes about homosexuality, since not only politics affect the lives of the people in the collective. Since the turn of the millennium, many achievements and improvements have been made. Therefore, politics, history, and sociology must be the first fields to consider in writing this work.

It is also important to understand the process of personal and sexual identity that gay teenagers undergo, so psychiatric, psychological, and social studies must be analyzed as well. As we said, sociological surveys help us understand what society thought in the past and nowadays about homosexuality and how these results influence or have influenced political decisions. Linked to the process of constructing their personal and sexual identity, gay individuals face that of coming out. Again, psychology and sociology are crucial at this point. The influence of opinion and degree of acceptance by those people who are next to gay adolescents (school peers, family members, and teachers mainly) are critical in the subsequent development of their identity and how they interact with the world.

In the **state of the art**, we can find some works which are centred on the representation of political laws or social movements. Some others describe the different steps in the process of construction of a homosexual identity, as well as the psychological consequences derived from the process of coming out or from the influence of friends and family members. This process has gained much attention in the last decades. Works by Talburt (2004), Robertson & Monsen

(2008), and Breakwell & Jaspal (2022), among others, reflect upon the importance of this complex development, since it has been found that a good resolution of it is crucial for homosexual individuals and their normal integration into society. Accordingly, articles regarding the fields mentioned (psychiatry, psychology, sociology, and politics) have been taken into consideration when planning this work. King et al. (2003), Warner et al. (2004), and Semlyen et al. (2016) provide some interesting data and conclusions in the fields mentioned. The different laws enacted during the period under study and the social movements claiming for equal rights have been also of great help when detecting the differences between the two decades. It has certainly been an interesting and challenging task to analyse these published papers and put all the threads together in order to establish a comparison between the situation of gay adolescents in the 1990s and nowadays, which is the main objective of this work.

Regarding this central aim, it is easy to understand its complexity if we think of the word "situation." What does "situation" mean? It certainly involves all the fields that have been mentioned above, so it requires time and expertise to write a full multidisciplinary description of *that* situation. This work cannot make a deep description of it either, since space and time are limited, but it does intend to briefly expose an overall perspective of gay adolescents' circumstances in two different decades, illustrating and supporting some of the ideas with examples from the works mentioned in the beginning.

Consequently, the **methodology** used for the elaboration of the project starts from the reading of the legislation regarding homosexuality historically in order to see the evolution from the first acts which strongly punished it to the egalitarian laws passed in recent decades, where a great improvement has been made, considering the difficulties that the LGBT+ community has historically borne.

Connected with the advancement of the legislation it is the evolution of society's view of homosexuality. It has definitely changed in the last decades and it has led to a series of plans and programmes carried through several governmental offices and institutions, such as the *LGBT Action Plan*, published in 2018 by the Government Equality Office, aimed at improving the lives of LGBT+

individuals and covering several aspects: health, education, safety, or rights, to name just a few. These plans are addressed not only to the LGBT+ community, but also to the people in their close environment: school peers, staff, and family members. In this sense, LGBT+ associations have unquestionably played an important role in improving the lives of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people.

The reading and analysis of all these articles and publications has resulted in a challenge when deciding how to organize and present the information and conclusions. Although the first part of the work was decided from the beginning (the historical and sociopolitical context), the complexity of the issues regarding the development of construction of both personal and sexual identity, linked to the process of coming out and the implications on mental health, has required a careful responsibility and thorough attention.

Academically, this dissertation is directly related to the subject *Mundos Anglófonos en Perspectiva Histórica y Cultural*, because it deals with a historical perspective of the research made for the elaboration of this work. We have gone into a deep study of the legal framework regarding homosexuality, especially during the last three decades. Also, the course *Comentario de Textos Literarios en Lengua Inglesa* has provided tools to examine critically and carefully the relevant documents connected to the topics this work is about. Finally, *Literatura Inglesa* was also helpful thanks to the useful, general, and specific competencies to analyze the texts, such as the ability to collect data, organize the information and summarize it, among others.

To finish this introduction, we must talk about the hypothesis this work presents. The idea of positive evolution in the situation of gay adolescents in Britain may be obvious, due to the acquisition of equal rights during the last couple of decades mainly, but we will see if there are issues that are not resolved yet, like the process these individuals get through when wondering about their sexuality, their personal identity, and the difficulties they endure when they think of coming out to the people around them, mainly their family and peers.

2- A BRIEF HISTORY OF BRITISH LEGISLATION ON HOMOSEXUALITY

Although nowadays we may have the illusion that gay individuals have obtained total equality in their rights with respect to the heterosexual population, the truth is that this is far from true. Much progress has been achieved, like the recognition of same-sex marriage or the laws against harassment and discrimination, but more is still to be accomplished. Despite the aforementioned laws that have been passed in recent years, gay students still face bullying in schools and, although the government has carried out some institutional programmes, like the LGBT Action Plan of 2018, "to improve the lives of LGBT people", a 2022 report by the House of Commons Library stated that 40% of this community experienced a negative incident in the preceding twelve months in England and Wales, verbal abuse being the most frequent type of incident. This situation can lead to important mental health issues for young gay individuals.

The path of LGBT+ people throughout history has been marked by many difficulties, prosecution, and stigmatization. This section wants to serve as a brief reminder of all the laws regarding male homosexuality. All of them punished homosexuality, until the second half of the twentieth century, when certain prerogatives were gained.

The first act regarding male homosexuality did not mention this term specifically – it was actually coined in the nineteenth century – but against the abominable vice of buggery. In fact, the law was named that way (The Buggery Act) and it was passed in 1533 under the reign of Henry VIII. This law considered sodomy (not only between two men, but also between men and women, or a person with an animal) to be illegal in Britain and those convicted were punished by death. Before that law, homosexual activity had only been covered ecclesiastically. However, it was not until the nineteenth century that "emerged for the first time a real awareness of, and concern with, the homosexual *as a person*, and, accompanying it, a mounting social hostility towards both homosexuality and its practitioners" (Dockray & Sutton, 2017, p.17). In the words of Weeks (2012, p.125), "the sodomite […] remained a 'figure of equivocation', shadowed by secrecy, concealment, disguise and impersonation". Men were considered to engage in homosexual acts, that is sodomy mainly, rather than

being homosexuals. As Weeks (2012, p.122) states, "sodomy was for long generally regarded not as a particular attribute of a certain type of person but as a potential in all sensual creatures". The thing is that, during the nineteenth century, 'unnatural offences' became increasingly subject to legal scrutiny.

In 1861 the Offences Against the Person Act abolished the death penalty for buggery in England and Wales (followed by Scotland in 1889) and downgraded the penalty to life imprisonment. However, only two decades later, the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885, although conceived to protect girls from sexual exploitation by raising the age of consent to 16, in its section 11 considered any homosexual act committed by men illegal. This law was used to send Oscar Wilde to prison in 1895.

After World War II prosecutions and arrests of gay men increased significantly, including some very well-known men of the time. For instance, Alan Turing was sentenced to chemical castration as an alternative to imprisonment. This brought into question the legislation in place in order to deal with homosexual acts. An enormous step was taken in 1957 with the publication of the Report of the Departmental Committee on Homosexual Offences and Prostitution, known as the Wolfenden Report. The committee's main objective was to make some recommendations to the government, such as protecting the public instead of scrutinising people's private lives. The majority of the committee's members agreed to recommend that all homosexual acts between consenting adults (21 at the time) should not be considered crimes. Also, for the first time, the committee declared homosexuality not to be legitimately regarded as a disease. It was not until 1967 that the Government carried out the Wolfenden Report's recommendations in the Sexual Offences Act. This law decriminalised sex between men over the age of 21 in England and Wales (Scotland followed in 1980 and Northern Ireland in 1982), but only partially, since sex between men remained illegal unless it took place privately.

The goal of sexual equality in Britain was far from achieved. In fact, it became worse in the turbulent 1980s, under the government of the conservative prime minister Margaret Thatcher. Section 28 of the Local Government Act was introduced in 1988. This piece of legislation stated that local authorities, which oversaw government schools, should not "promote homosexuality or publish

material with the intention of promoting homosexuality." It also banned the teaching of homosexuality as an acceptable family relationship. It all had started five years before, when a copy of the children's book *Jenny Lives with Eric and Martin* was found in a public library. Right-wing printed media, left-wing local authorities, and the conservative national government were involved in a moral panic – widespread protest demonstrations included –, about the alleged indoctrinating homosexual propaganda and teaching of sexualities at schools that eventually led to the passing of the act, which included the mentioned Section 28. Nonetheless, the law was rather ambiguous in its wording. As Greenland and Nunney (2008) point out, "the lack of government guidelines defining what was or was not covered by the act generated a great deal of confusion and uncertainty among teachers" (p. 244), which ultimately led to troubles with addressing sex education issues or dealing with homophobic bullying, as we will see later.

It was not until 2000 that Section 28 was repealed in Scotland, followed by England and Wales in 2003. With the turn of the millennium, and a public debate on LGBT+ rights caused by the discussion over legislation in force and the power of social movements, a series of legal changes aimed at removing inequality for LGBT+ individuals were enacted in the UK. In 1992 homosexuality was removed from the World Health Organization's classification of mental disorders and two years later the age of consent for gay men was reduced to 18. Age of consent equality did not come until 2001 in England, Scotland, and Wales, and 2009 in Northern Ireland. Also in 2001, the British Government lifted the ban on gay, lesbians, and bisexuals serving in the armed forces.

In 2002, the Adoption and Children Act authorized gay and lesbian single people to adopt a child in the UK, as well as same-sex couples. Two years later, the labour government of Tony Blair introduced the Civil Partnership Act, which granted equal rights and responsibilities to same-sex couples as to married heterosexual ones in all four nations of the United Kingdom. Same-sex marriage, however, did not become legal in England and Wales until the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act of 2013, followed by Scotland one year later and Northern Ireland in 2020, making the UK the sixteenth country in Europe to officially certify same-sex marriage.

Another landmark for the LGBT+ collective was the passing of the Gender Recognition Act in 2004, which allows trans people over 18 years of age to have full legal recognition of their gender, although limited to 'male' or 'female'. The act also permits trans people to obtain a new birth certificate.

The Equality Act of 2010, which replaced previous anti-discrimination legislation with a single act, legally protects people from discrimination, harassment, and victimization in the workplace and in wider society. There are nine protected characteristics in this law: age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex, and sexual orientation.

Finally, we would like to comment on the Policing and Crime Act (2017), a law conceived to reform policing and enable changes to the governance of fire and rescue services. However, this act also included a miscellaneous chapter for "pardons for certain abolished offences." Regarding LGBT+ crimes, this piece of legislation served to retroactively pardon all historic instances of criminal convictions of gross indecency against men in England and Wales. The law became known as the 'Alan Turing Law.' Turing helped to break the Enigma code in the Second World War, but as we mentioned above, was convicted of 'gross indecency' and was chemically castrated. In 2009 prime minister Gordon Brown made a public apology for the appalling way Turing was treated and in 2013 he was granted a posthumous royal pardon.

All these laws had great significance in gay people's lives, but those lives would be incomplete unless we considered other different aspects around them. In the next sections, we will try to describe the whole picture of the sociopolitical situation in Britain in the two decades under study: the 1990s and the 2010s.

3- BRITISH SOCIOPOLITICAL CONTEXT IN THE 1990s

In order to understand the situation of homosexuals in Britain in the 1990s, we must bear in mind the context of the previous decade. As we mentioned before, the 1980s was a decade of turbulence in Britain. The conservative

government of Margaret Thatcher, the prime minister who ruled the country from 1979 to 1990, had to face numerous protests, not only regarding gay rights, but also social matters, like immigration, taxes, health services, or war funding. This state of turmoil became the breeding ground for the conflicts and demonstrations that advocated for LGBT+ equality in the following years. In this sense, British film and TV creatives have always provided us with many audiovisual products where they reflect the social situation of their country. The film *Pride* (2014) and the TV series *It's a Sin* (2021) are just a couple of recently released examples that portray a part of the protests of British society in the 1980s.

Concerning the homosexual population, the 1980s were years when it was not illegal to be gay, but it was not easy either. Although the World Health Organization removed homosexuality from the list of mental disorders in 1992 and twenty-five years previously the Sexual Offences Act had decriminalised homosexual acts between two consenting men over 21 years of age only if those acts took place privately, thousands of men continued to be convicted of sexual crimes. Smiling and winking at other men in the street resulted in arrests. Nevertheless, something had started to change, or awake. The foundation of the first gay organizations (the Homosexual Law Reform Society, The Albany Trust – both in the 1950s –, the Beaumont Society (1966) or the Gay Liberation Front (1970)) had helped maintain the search for equality in public opinion and led to a proliferation of new social or political institutions in the late 1980s and early 1990s, like Stonewall or Outrage!.

It is impossible to talk about the gay community in the 1990s without mentioning the outbreak of HIV/AIDS in the previous decade. With its first recorded case in the UK in 1981, little was known about this disease during those first years, and many people blamed gay individuals for transmitting it. It was even identified as a 'gay disease', because it affected this collective, but not only, since other discriminated groups were its first victims, such as intravenous drug users, immigrants, or racial minorities. Consequently, the gay collective was soon stigmatized.

General attitudes towards homosexuality became rapidly negative. In an article by Clement and Field (2014), the authors compiled many surveys from different sources. One of the most interesting ones was made by the American

analytics and advisory company Gallup. Asked if they considered homosexuality a serious social problem, the results show that the percentage of people who answered affirmatively increased from a typical 20-25% from the mid-1960s to the mid-1980s to 48% of the population by 1988. The late 1980s were, in fact, the years that showed more anxiety and disapproval of gay relations. The National Centre for Social Research (NATCEN), through its reports on British Social Attitudes (BSA) also published a historical overview of the question "What about sexual relations between two adults of the same sex?". The impact of AIDS is also shown in these results, since an alarming 74% considered in 1987 that it was always or mostly wrong, with greater figures if we consider other levels of "wrongness". Nevertheless, this percentage decreased by the end of the 1990s to 46% and nowadays the percentages of "always/mostly wrong" and "not wrong at all" have almost completely flipped around.

Unweighted base: 3,004 respondents (2017)
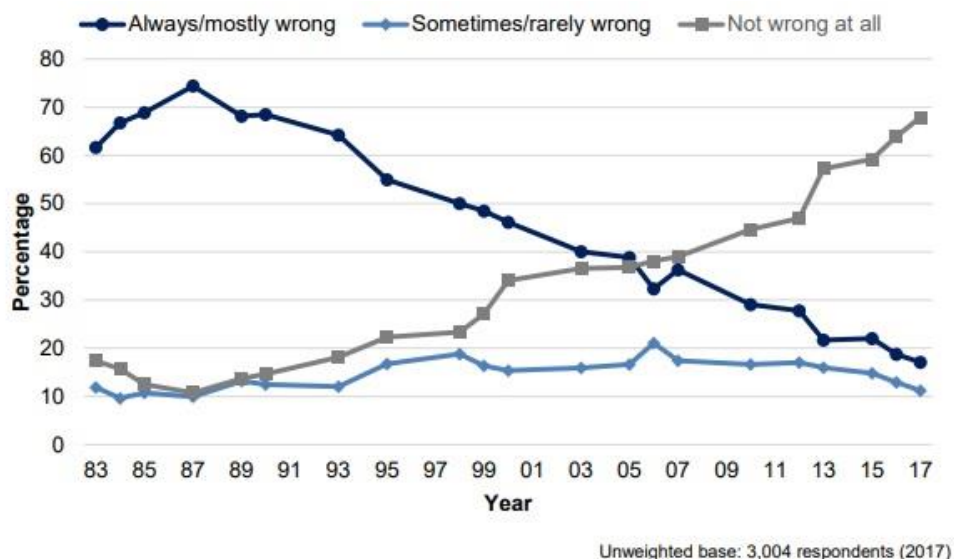
Source: Huchet-Bodet et al. (2019). *Attitudes to equalities: The British Social Attitudes Survey 2017*.

Along with the HIV/AIDS breakout, the aftermath of the controversial Section 28 of the Local Government Act of 1988 may also have had some influence on general opinion when people were asked about homosexuality as an acceptable lifestyle. We must not forget that the law itself mentioned the prohibition of the promotion of "the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship." Therefore, due to the public debate created around this piece of

legislation, it is no surprise that the support for homosexuality as an accepted/acceptable alternative lifestyle decreased in two years from 44% in 1986 to 34% in 1988, recovering quickly to 54% by 1993.

In an interesting article regarding the "largely negative" effects that Section 28 had on teachers and schools in the years after it was enacted, Greenland and Nunney talk about the "uncertainty and fear among teachers" (2008, p.243). As we mentioned before, the words used to write the bill entailed a big problem. Teachers were frightened about what 'promoting homosexuality' meant and, consequently, were unsure whether they could provide information and support to their students. This led to the cautious avoidance of LGBT+ issues in their sex and relationship education (SRE). Besides, as suggested by Warwick and Douglas (2001), important matters like homophobic bullying persisted and grew because teachers felt intimidated and were reluctant to refer to these issues the same way they already did to racism and sexism. Being a homosexual student in Britain in the 1990s was not easy. In the next section, we will see how the repeal of Section 28 in England and Wales in 2003 did not necessarily remove those uncertainties.

The positive part of Section 28 was that it served to put gay vindications in the spotlight and to unite the then disparate British gay rights movements. Protests, demonstrations, marches, interviews, articles, etc. all were useful tools to show the power of homosexual rights movements from the late 1980s. An example was the outcry during the debate on the issues raised by the Local Government Act. Sir Ian McKellen, a very well-known and admired actor, publicly came out on BBC Radio and one year later he co-founded the aforementioned Stonewall, a group renowned for its campaigning and lobbying for LGBT+ rights that is nowadays the biggest organization in Europe supporting the rights of the collective. In 1990, following the death of gay actor Michael Boothe, the first-ever Pride event was held in Manchester.

In 1994, another critical point in the gay rights defense was the protests planned in front of the Parliament by Stonewall and other civil liberties organizations to lower the legal age of consent between homosexuals. By that time, the age of consent for heterosexual and lesbian individuals was 16, while 21 was the age for homosexuals. In fact, Britain was the only country in the

European Economic Community to have the age of consent for sex between men as high as 21. After two rounds of voting, a compromise was made to set the age at 18, which was clearly insufficient for LGBT+ demonstrators. In an article published by *The New York Times*, penned by Richard W. Stevenson, Euan Sutherland, one of the protesters, a 16-year-old gay from south London, declared: "The Government, Parliament are supporting homophobia, supporting prejudice and supporting victimization of a minority group." These words serve to illustrate what many gay teenagers in Britain felt at that time.

Despite legal discrimination, the level of acceptance of gay individuals as public servers, such as teachers or political office, was high in the 1990s and it has continued to grow over the years. In 1993, following a BSA/NATCEN survey, 55% of respondents considered it acceptable for a gay man to be a school teacher. That percentage climbed up to 61% in the case of college or university teachers. The presence of other gay examples is a key issue in the process of construction of an LGBT+ identity and in that of coming out. For that reason, access to gay or lesbian magazines (*Gay Times*, *Attitude*, *Diva*) became an open window into a world many gay teenagers could only imagine. They had access to some information about other gay people, gay bars, and gay referents. This also entailed a great amount of anxiety, though, as "they picked up the magazine and carried it to the till", wrote Georgina Turner (2019) for the twenty-fifth anniversary of *Diva* magazine, reflecting on how it felt like to be a lesbian in the 1990s.

Some other cultural and pop references appeared during the decade. The first ever gay kiss was broadcasted by BBC in 1989 in the well-known soap opera *Eastenders.* Cultural models multiplied in the years to come. Singers like Marc Almond of Soft Cell, Andy Bell of Erasure, Boy George of Culture Club, Morrisey of The Smiths, Neil Tennant of Pet Shop Boys, or Stephen Gately from boyband Boyzone; a particular case is that of Jimmy Sommerville of Bronski Beat and The Communards, who came out as gay and has always campaigned for gay rights; his partner in The Communards, Richard Coles, became a Church of England vicar and is a pioneer in the fight for the Church's acceptance of gay men as priests; writers like David Leavitt or Tony Kushner published books where the main characters were gay; TV series like *Ellen*, *Queer as Folk*, and *Will & Grace*

portrayed different views about homosexuality through their protagonists; and, most importantly, films like *Philadelphia*, *Go Fish*, *In & Out*, *Peter's Friends*, *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*, *Priest*, *Happy Together*, or *Get Real* were released, providing a wide range of LGBT+ roles, from different perspectives and age ranges. All these models were of incalculable importance and truly inspirational for gay adolescents in the 1990s.

We can say that the 1990s developed as a bridge between the agitated and tempestuous 1980s and the unstoppable acquisition of rights that started with the turn of the millennium.

4- BRITISH SOCIOPOLITICAL CONTEXT IN THE 2010s

Although twenty-five years may seem a short lapse of time in the long road of history, the 1990s can be seen now as far and gloomy for a gay adolescent of today. This is thanks to all the achievements that gay individuals have conquered during the last decades, especially from the turn of the millennium. We have already seen that many advances in gay rights were achieved in the 2000s (lowering of the age of consent to 16 years of age, adoption by gay couples or individuals, repeal of Section 28, or the recognition of gender, to name a few).

In the 2010s, some other achievements, like the Marriage Act (2013), allowed gay individuals to get married and have the same rights as heterosexual couples. Likewise, the passing of the Equality Act (2010) was also essential. This piece of legislation established the following protected characteristics: age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, race, religion or belief, sex, and sexual orientation. It also prohibited other conducts like harassment or victimization. Another landmark decision was the possibility of donating blood, which was previously banned for gay people. Since 2021, any person who has had anal sex with the same or different partners in the last three months can be a blood donor, regardless of their gender or their partner's gender, but must wait three months before donating.

As we mentioned above, an interesting article by Clements and Field (2014) gathered a wide range of surveys regarding what public opinion thought about three main indicators about homosexuality: "general attitudes toward homosexuality; acceptability of homosexuals in particular roles; and attitudes toward homosexual rights" (p. 523). As a whole picture, these polls show the increasing openness and tolerance in British society toward homosexuality, particularly since its decriminalization in 1967.

Homosexuality seemed not to be a problem already in the 1990s, after the difficult times of HIV/AIDS in the previous decade. By 2011 84% of the interviewed people thought gay men and lesbians should be free to live their own life as they wish, according to the results of a MORI (Market and Opinion Research International) poll. High rates of acceptability of homosexuals in various professions are shown in different surveys during the 2010s. Particularly teachers are very well accepted (83%), especially in a college or university (86%). Lower rates for teachers in schools may be a reflection of the effects of Section 28 of the Local Government Act of 1988. The bill was repealed in 2000 in Scotland and three years later in England and Wales. In the previous section, we examined the consequences that that bill had on teaching at schools. Five years after its revocation, Greenland and Nunney published the results of a study that showed that almost half of the participants (49%) were not aware of the repeal of Section 28. 21% agreed that it still affected their teaching practice, even in teachers being aware of the repeal and new teachers, revealing that "representations and discourses around Section 28 are being reproduced" (Greenland & Nunney, p. 249). These mentioned representations and discourses refer to the uncertainty teachers felt when addressing sex education issues, leading to a cautious avoidance of those issues and others related, such as homophobic bullying. Despite this experience, the government updated the Sex and Relationships Education guidance for schools in England in order to comply with the relevant provisions of the Equality Act 2010, which include content about different types of families, including LGBT families. The Statutory guidance for governing bodies, proprietors, head teachers, principals, senior leadership teams, and teachers establishes that "schools should ensure that the needs of all pupils are

appropriately met, and that all pupils understand the importance of equality and respect" (p. 15).

Regarding gay rights, a POPULUS poll of 2012 showed that 59% of the population thought homosexuals should be allowed to adopt children, surpassing the 49% the year the Adoption and Children Act was passed (2002). Different 2012 polls show around 60% of acceptance of the right for homosexual couples to get married. The Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act was passed one year later.

From all these data we can state that British public attitudes toward homosexuality liberalized after the decriminalization in 1967, accelerated with the new millennium, and especially during the second half of the 2000s, with more popular support for equality and diversity. Following Weeks (2007), we can say that more liberal attitudes toward gay rights could be seen as part of the progressive diversification of sexual behaviour in British society.

The remarkable modernization of the law was made mainly by the New Labour government under Tony Blair, but it is important to note the change of opinion of the conservative party, which had traditionally opposed equal rights for LGBT people. As Greenland (2008) highlights, the language used by the opponents of the new legislative advances included images of militant and predatory homosexuals, discourses of childhood corruption, or the protection of children and the privacy of the family, with tabloid newspapers pushing against rights equality. However, the laws passed from 2001 onwards were under the conservative coalition that entered office that year. In 2017, fifty years after the enactment of the Sexual Offences Act, the five living British prime ministers wrote for the LGBT news website *PinkNews*, representing the act as the starting point of a journey to achieve equality. All of them praised the achievements of their own political parties and omitted how equal rights had been advanced by their opponents.

The achievement of legal equality and the increase in popular support contributed to greater visibility and, although a 2020 report on sexual orientation by the Office for National Statistics, using data from the Annual Population Survey (APS), showed that only 2.5% of the British male population identified themselves as gay, we must understand that the rate was an exiguous 1.5% in 2014. The

rate was slightly higher if we consider the 16-24 range of age, where 2.7% described themselves as gay.

However, gay models, which started to become usual in the 1980s and 1990s, especially in the field of culture, multiplied explosively in the 2010s, with a vast diversity in films, TV shows, and music. Not only gay, but many more of the LGBT+ community members appeared now on screen or in music. Some examples are: in film, Weekend, The Favourite, A Fantastic Woman; in TV, Glee, Pose, RuPaul's Drag Race; in music, Kim Petras, Lil Nas X, Scissor Sisters. This LGBT+ diversity did not stay limited to the world of the arts and television, but it also reached other aspects of social life, like politics, trade unions, business, journalism, and the police – in 2006 a policeman won the Mr. Gay UK title.

The visibility of LGBT was noticeable. Besides, as Weeks (2012) notes, in some British cities (Brighton, Manchester, Bournemouth) or London boroughs (Lambeth, City, Islington) "tourist strategies were stressing the gay-friendly ambience. LGBT people were moving from the margins to the hearts of some of the most dynamic cities in Britain" (p. 406).

After reaching legal equality, the new step in LGBT policy made by the British government was the publication of institutional programmes "to improve the lives of LGBT people", focusing on reducing health inequalities, extending the anti-bullying programme in schools, ending the practice of conversion therapy, and taking further action on LGBT crime. These are the key actions included in the LGBT Action Plan of 2018, a challenging report funded with £4.5 million.

Related to such important concerns, a study published by the charity Just Like Us in 2021 showed that mental health issues and LGBT concerns at schools are crucial elements of today's situation regarding this community. Concerning the present situation in schools, harassment and bullying, and the consequences they result in, are key matters. We will go into detail in the next section but, as the Just Like Us report points out, only just over half (58%) of LGBT+ young people feel safe at school on a daily basis, with a disturbing 43% recognizing having been bullied over the last twelve months. Personal safety problems and the fear of coming out to their peers conduce to mental health problems, with 51% of LGBT+ young people saying they have experienced or are experiencing

an anxiety disorder, such as depression, panic attacks, self-harm, eating disorders, or alcohol and drug dependence. Furthermore, suicide has been considered by 68% of LGBT+ young individuals. These, among others, are the challenges that authorities, schools, and society, in general, must face in the years to come. The commitments proposed by the LGBT Action Plan are aimed to end these questions, putting LGBT people's needs at the heart of the National Health Service, taking action to support every LGBT child, and acting so that LGBT people feel safe in their homes and their communities.

However, some critical voices have stood up against it. Lawrence and Taylor (2020) consider that "the LGBT Action Plan represents a missed opportunity to cohesively address (in)equalities across key lifecourse spheres across and beyond the UK" (p. 597). These authors defend the idea that there are still manifestations of "enduring stasis", where particular issues remain stagnant because they are considered "too tough to address", such as the experiences of LGBT+ people seeking asylum. Besides, issues regarding devolution to the UK nations result in an uneven and limited applicability of the plan.

Recent decades have seen legislative great progress regarding gay rights, as well as more open attitudes toward the LGBT community. However, new challenges need now to be faced: homophobia, health inequalities and mental health issues, constant bullying at schools and communities, with lack of reliable contexts to report homophobic harassment, and considerations about gender identity seem to be key concerns for twenty-first-century society.

5- CONSTRUCTION OF GAY IDENTITY, COMING-OUT, AND MENTAL HEALTH

The process of gay identity formation is complex. For gay youths, sexual identity development is a central task and can be especially challenging for them. However, there is no uniformity across studies about what gay identity means and how this identity is constructed. Where all authors coincide is in its conceptualization as a developmental process that every individual passes in his

lifetime. This process eventually should lead to personal acceptance and a positive self-image.

Early models formulated by therapists in the 1970s and 1980s (Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1982) analyzed the development of gay identity from childhood to adulthood. Stage-based models focus on a series of steps that the individual goes through. Different authors (McCarn & Fassinger, 1996; Brady & Busse, 1994; Levine, 1997; Fassinger & Miller, 1996) name the stages in different ways, but they all go from initial confusion to a final synthesis where the individual integrates his sexual identity in all spheres of his life. The intermediate stages would include awareness, comparison, acknowledgment, internalization, exploration, acceptance, assimilation, tolerance, disclosure, and pride. According to Mohr and Fassinger (2000), "identity stages are generally conceptualized as multidimensional constructs that involve individuals' feelings and beliefs about their sexual orientation, other LG people, and people of different sexual orientations" (p. 67).

Recent research has moved from a stage model to a non-linear, multidimensional process, where not all adolescents experience the same aspects in the same way, at the same time, and even some of these steps may not be experienced at all.

Several intertwined factors intervene in the formation of a gay identity. Following D'Augelli and Patterson (2001), there are three sets of variables involved in identity formation:

- Personal subjectivities and actions, which include individual's perceptions and feelings about their sexual identities, as well as actual sexual behaviours. Internalized homonegativity, confusion about one's sexual orientation identity, and comfort with sexual orientation may be included in this group.

- Interactive intimacies. Here we find the influences of significant people, like family members, peers, and intimate partnerships. Disclosure of one's sexual orientation, age of coming out, daily hassles, and participation in LGB community activities are dimensions to be included in this category as well.

- Sociohistorical connections, which are the social norms, policies, and laws, as well as the values existing during particular historical periods. We must not forget that, historically, same-sex attractions have been considered within the context of pathology or a question of immaturity. Societal intolerance may cause stress and conflict, and for gay individuals, it can make the process of acknowledging their homosexual orientation a turbulent life event that can increase the risk for mental health problems.

In previous sections we have gone deeper into these sociohistorical connections, explaining how laws have affected homosexuals throughout history and how general social attitudes and opinions have changed over centuries, so we would like to centre now on the act of revealing one's gay sexual orientation. The process of coming out, which can be defined as the disclosure of one's gay identity to others, is directly related to the first two variables we mentioned above and to the two literary works we will reflect on in the last section of this work.

Studies about the process of coming out are closely linked to those of gay identity construction and have been typically written from a psychological perspective. Some of these studies (Cass, 1979) emphasized the cognitive aspects of the process, while others concentrated on behavioural features (Sullivan & Schneider, 1987). They generally establish a series of stages with a unidirectional movement aimed at eventual outward disclosure. Recent research, however, considers the process of coming out as a "multidimensional concept that includes point-in-time events as well as a gradual process" (Guittar & Rayburn (2016, p. 337). These authors talk about the process of coming out not as something to be completed, but as a career to be managed, an ongoing process impacted by life circumstances and events that go beyond any initial disclosure.

According to Carrión and Lock (1997), the following factors can influence the coming out process:

- the individual's social experience

- the individual's family experience

- the support that the individual receives from either group

These aspects can be described in terms of protective factors (or facilitators), and stressors or barriers that may cause distress and, eventually, affect mental health. Both categories are constantly interacting. Following Dumont and Provost (1999), we can identify high self-esteem, social support, coping strategies, participation in social activities, and resilience within the first group (protective factors).

High self-esteem is associated with self-confidence, mental well-being, persistence when facing adversities, and active coping strategies, whereas lower self-esteem, which can be the result of internalized social stigma, can lead to depression and anxiety disorders. This explains why it is so important for gay adolescents to have a positive response when disclosing their sexual orientation to someone significant. A 2017 study by Jones et al. showed that self-esteem is lower in sexual minority-identified people when compared to heterosexual peers.

Social support includes the support received by friends, family, and strangers. Adequate social support will alleviate the impact of stress on health. On the other hand, as pointed out by Burke and Weir (1978), low satisfaction with social support is associated with depressive or psychosomatic symptoms, anxiety, and interpersonal sensitivity. Self-esteem and social support are interconnected, since young people with little social support are likely to suffer from low self-esteem and are less likely to cope effectively with difficult changes.

We can describe coping as the thoughts and behaviours mobilized to manage stressful situations. Gay adolescents can try to solve the problem of rejection in their process of coming out or, on the other hand, can face the situation through avoidance, withdrawal, or pessimistic attitudes. Again, depending on their response, mental health issues can arise.

Another important protective factor is participation in social activities. This can help adolescents "to foster personality development and socialization" (Dumont & Provost, 1999, p. 347), and provide a channel to express their energy. Involvement in social or community activities provides a sense of belonging and protection.

Resilience in the gay population can be defined as the dynamic multidimensional process of positive adaptation and coping in the face of

adversity. There are some risk factors that gay people may face, like external and internal homophobia (homonegativity), victimization (verbal or physical abuse), concealment of sexual orientation, or family rejection. Their protective mechanisms to respond to all or some of those risks include self-esteem, engagement in community activities, social support from family, school, and peers, involvement in social activities, and resilience. The main indicators of positive adaptation and resilience are the presence/absence of mental illness and risk behaviours, such as self-harm and suicide attempts, depression, anxiety, psychosomatic disorders, posttraumatic stress, compulsive sexual behaviours, and eating disorders.

As we have seen, adolescents' self-perceptions are highly influenced by how other individuals perceive them. In this sense, the role of the family is crucial in the process of coming out in gay youths. As mentioned when talking about the facilitators in the process of disclosure, family support or the lack of it may influence the adolescents' well-being and mental health. Bregman et al. (2013) affirm that family support is "associated with personal comfort, increased self-esteem, and fewer self-critical behaviors" (p. 419), while parental rejection "increases the likelihood of youth experiencing identity struggles" (p. 427). Other studies (Floyd and Stein, 2002; Willoughby et al., 2008) also show a correspondence between family acceptance toward their child's same-sex attractions and a greater consolidation of a sexual orientation identity, more openness and comfort, while family rejection is related to negative LGB identity, confusion and need for acceptance.

Another extremely important aspect for gay adolescents in their process of coming out is the influence that peers may have. During adolescence, the peer group becomes increasingly important, and, for gay adolescents, it is vital the opinion and acceptance of their friends, with whom they can establish friendly relationships. For that reason, stereotyping and homophobic preoccupations of peers, as well as of teachers and parents, as we have just seen, can be important challenges if you belong to a sexual minority and can be the cause of additional stress and difficulty. In addition to that, daily hassles and role strains have been proven to affect and erode peer relationships, as suggested by Bobo et al. (1986).

On the other hand, a strong social support structure may buffer the impact of crises, challenges, and life transitions.

Not only does the closest group of friends influence a gay adolescent in his process of coming out or disclosing his sexual identity, but also the whole group of adolescents in the same classroom, school, or neighbourhood. Research has demonstrated the potential impact that homophobic bullying can have on young LGB people's mental health and well-being. We alluded above to the situation of bullying at schools and, despite the shift in attitudes, inclusiveness is not yet completely achieved in school environments. As reported by a 2021 study about the situation in UK schools, the charity Diversity Role Models published that only 27% of secondary school students said their school would be safe for LGBT+ individuals to come out, 54% of students reported bullying as well as homophobic, biphobic or transphobic language. Lower figures are shown in the 2018 National LGBT Survey, which states that a third of respondents experienced a negative reaction to being LGBT. Disclosure of their LGBT status without permission, verbal harassment, exclusion from events and activities, and sexual and physical harassment were reported to be the most common reactions. Furthermore, students do not feel their needs are addressed, particularly in sex and relationships education. That can be one of the reasons why young students suffering from bullying do not feel comfortable talking about their situation. According to Just Like Us, 18% of LGBT+ young people have not told anyone and only 21% have told a teacher.

One of the negative outcomes that rejection may lead to is suicide. Suicide or suicidal attempts occur in those with little social support and an absence of integration into society. This may conduce to isolation, a personal sense of failure, and extreme vulnerability. A well-known case was that of football player Justin Fashanu, the first professional footballer to come out publicly. As published by the BBC in 1998, Fashanu was charged in the USA of sexually assaulting a teenage boy. Later on, he committed suicide. In his suicide note, he wrote "I felt I wouldn't get a fair trial because of my homosexuality". The Just Like Us report asseverate that 68% of LGBT+ young people have experienced suicidal thoughts and feelings. On a positive note, constructive messaging drastically improves

student mental health and well-being, and pupils who have had 'strong' positive messaging about being LGBT+ at school are less likely to contemplate suicide.

Considering all these facts, figures, realities, and experiences, it is highly important to work with educational institutions, psychological services, individual young people, their families, and teachers. Diversity Role Models include some other recommendations addressed to schools, authorities and parents, such as prioritising staff training on LGBT+ identities and inclusion, explicitly including anti-bullying policies, celebrating diversity in the school, using inclusive language, embedding LGBT+ inclusion into all aspects of teaching, funding LGBT+ inclusion education programmes and research, taking an active role in having conversations with children about diversity, taking part in school LGBT+ History Month, Pride celebrations, or other events.

6- *BEAUTIFUL THING*: AN URBAN FAIRYTALE

Beautiful Thing, the play by Jonathan Harvey first published in 1994, tells the story of Jamie and Ste, two 15-year-old adolescents who live in a low-rise block of flats in Thamesmead, south-east London. Jamie lives with his single mother Sandra, who has a boyfriend, Tony. Ste lives with his father and brothers, who abuse him physically. They both have a neighbour, Leah, a young black girl who has been expelled from school. In such a negative environment where, in Leah's words (act two, scene five, p. 81), "[…] Nothing ever happens. Nothing ever changes", Jamie and Ste fall in love, construct their sexual identity and overcome society's prejudice and their own fears.

In a 2013 interview for the online magazine *The Double Negative*, celebrating the twentieth anniversary of the play, Harvey stated that he wanted to "write a story in which being gay was about falling in love and about emotions and having a laugh and finding your soul mate". However, he admitted being "quietly angry" about the situation in Britain in 1992, when he wrote the play, when lowering the age of consent for homosexuals was being discussed in parliament, and Section 28 was into effect, since he was a teacher in London at that time. We can see his 'quiet anger' reflected in the character of Tony (act one, scene two), who spits on

the floor when he mentions Thatcher while talking with Jamie about famous people who cry, maybe criticising her cold demeanor, with a lack of empathy, her 'Iron Lady' attitude.

However, the positive halo and the feeling of a feel-good play results are obvious, for instance, with the use of optimistic and bright songs, and from the title itself. The author of the aforementioned interview, David L. Rattigan, affirmed that the title of the play "speaks for itself. It's a play about all things beautiful – people discovering the beauty in themselves and each other, unexpected moments in an often-depressing and oppressive world". Besides, Harvey added a subtitle – *An urban fairytale* – because he thought "there's a bit of a fairytale ending". And this is precisely the uncommonness and innovativeness of the play: the topic of two gay adolescents falling in love, representing them as two completely normal people, touching the reader or the audience by making them reflect upon the acceptance of homosexuality. This is achieved thanks to the portrayal of five characters full of sensitivity and nuance.

Beautiful Thing is also a coming-of-age play. Its two protagonists, Jamie and Ste, are immersed in their process of identity construction. Both discover their sexual identity, which includes the fear inside them, and the often-painful process of coming out. In this sense, the use of language is important. As an example, we can find the word 'weird'. In act one, scene four (pp. 40-41), Jamie and Sandra have an argument where Sandra says:

SANDRA. […] You're fuckin' weird.

After the fighting, Jamie asks:

JAMIE. How am I weird?

Both characters know Jamie is not like what a heteronormative world expects from a boy of his age. Jamie does not like sports, but he adores old black-and-white films and musicals (*The Sound of Music* appears later in the play). Maybe these are just stereotypes, but they help to describe Jamie's character. But, by the end of the play, the same word 'weird' is used in a different way (act two, scene four, p. 67).

JAMIE. (*Crying now*) I'm not weird, if that's what you're thinking!

SANDRA. I know you're not, love.

In this scene, Sandra has found out his son has gone to a gay pub with Ste. We find Jamie defending his identity as a homosexual and Sandra accepting it. There is nothing to be ashamed of.

Another example is the term 'queer', which can be used as an insult. In the play, every time Ste has been abused by his family, he stays at Sandra's, sharing Jamie's bed. The first time this happens (act one, scene five, p. 45), Jamie and Ste use the word 'queer' with fear, as something bad, just after Jamie kisses Ste.

STE. D'you think I´m queer?

JAMIE. Don't matter what I think.

Later in the play (act two, scene one, p. 49) the protagonists are talking about Ste's fear of his family, when they have this conversation:

JAMIE. Scared o'being called queer?

STE. (*Pause*) Are you?

JAMIE. (*Pause*) Dunno. Maybe. Maybe not.

STE. And are you?

JAMIE. Queer?

STE. Gay.

JAMIE. I'm very happy. (*Pause*) I'm happy when I'm with you […].

We see how both adolescents, and particularly Jamie, are starting to not fear what people might think about them. We can find a pun, using 'gay' with the sense of homosexual, but also with the old meaning of 'cheerful'. However, because of their difficult environment (working-class families who might have anti-gay prejudices or who might react violently to learning about their sexuality), they still show reluctance to openly accept their sexual orientation. They both are living an identity crisis, but this crisis is necessary for their evolution.

The word 'queer' pops up again in the same scene (p. 56), when Leah calls Ste "stupid queer", because he threatens to hit her if she spreads where he slept

the week before. Here, we do not have only an insult, but also a power relation, where Leah would be "at the bottom of the slag-heap", and that is why she rebels against it.

Nonetheless, once they have gained self-confidence, assumed who they are – only between then though – and perceived comfort in each other, Jamie uses 'queer' with the sense of 'sick' in a fake absence note to their teacher, which makes them collapse laughing (act two, scene three, p. 64).

JAMIE. Dear Miss Ellis. Sorry Steven wasn't in school today, only he was feeling a little queer […].

This last scene happens when Jamie shows Ste a copy of *Gay Times*, the famous gay magazine. This is representative of the gay adolescents of the 1990s, who saw in magazines a way to be in contact with other homosexuals. Besides, agony columns served the gay population as a way of putting into words their personal issues, sometimes as serious as those related to HIV. In *Beautiful Thing,* we can also find an example of this (act two, scene three, p. 63).

STE. (*Flicks through then reads a bit*) Dear Brian, can you transmit the HIV virus via frottage? What's that?

JAMIE. (*Tuts*) Yoghurt. It's French.

STE. Cor, thick git! (*Reads some more.*) Dear Brian, I am twenty-three, black and gay. The problem is that although I'm happy being with a man and have a strong desire to live with a lover, I get that horrible feeling that people are going to talk about me behind my back, and that they won't accept me as I am. Also, my family don't know. Unhappy, North London.

JAMIE. Get over that river mate, I'll make you happy! (**STE** *whacks him on the head with the magazine.*) See Ste, you're not the only one in the world.

STE. I know, there's whatsisname out of Erasure.

Here we can read that the fears Jamie and Ste had were just the same as any other teen homosexual at that time: fear to get sick, fear to be alone, fear of what people might think. Magazines provided not only a way to be in contact with the outer world – the real world, actually – and express personal problems

anonymously, but also a wide range of models for gay youths, with covers dedicated during that decade to personalities such as singer Freddie Mercury, fashion designer Jean-Paul Gaultier, or actor Rupert Everett, among others.

Just after that dialogue above, Jamie and Ste decide to go to a gay pub, a place where Ste can 'squeeze' Jamie. It is important to note the historical significance of gay bars as safe places where people could escape from harassment and feel they belong to the same community. At the same time, however, Ste has some kind of fear of being identified as gay, because someone might see them. Definitely, Ste is the character who is more hesitant about his sexual orientation. He does not fit the gay stereotype, since he enjoys sports. Besides, he lives in a family where his father and brothers abuse him, and that makes him fear their reaction if they eventually might find out he is gay ("He'd killed me! […] They all would, all of'em." (Act two, scene four, pp. 78-79).

The critical moment in the play happens in the next scene, when Sandra and Jamie have 'that' conversation. Strictly speaking, it is not a coming-out scene because there is no such thing as a confession. Sandra had received a phone call from Jamie's tutor the night before, saying she is worried about him because he is being bullied. It is then that Jamie must face his fears and manage that stressful situation, trying to cope with it. His courage and resolution, which we can associate with his high sense of self-esteem, make him face the situation with tears but with determination too. Nevertheless, we must not forget he is the first one to question that it is not such a bad thing to be gay, he has a gay magazine, and he suggests going to a gay pub. At the same time, he expresses his hesitations and anxieties when he 'bunks off' school to escape from physical bullying, or when he talks like this to Sandra, taking her as an archetype of what his closest environment might think of his homosexuality (act two, scene four, p. 67).

JAMIE. You think I'm too young. You think it's just a phase. You think I'm… I'm gonna catch AIDS and… and everything!

We still have a final and explosive disclosure of Jamie's sexual identity. After Sandra runs out of the room in tears, Tony enters and asks Jamie why his mother

is so upset (he thinks she is upset), and Jamie answers (act two, scene four, p. 69):

JAMIE. I'm a queer! A bender! A pufter! A knobshiner! Brownhatter! Shirtflaplifter!

Finally, Jamie releases his fears and anxiety. That cathartic moment makes him feel relieved. His prejudice about what his mother might think of him disappears. That liberation leads to a richer and more communicative relationship between mother and son by the end of the play. In act two, scene five, p. 84, Jamie invites Sandra to go to the gay bar because "There's a male stripper on tonight as well". That final scene ends with Jamie and Ste innocently dancing, full of confidence in who they are; the perfect ending to an urban fairytale.

7- *HEARTSTOPPER*: MEET, CRUSH, KISS, OUT, LOVE, AND JOURNEY

Heartstopper is a series of graphic novels by Alice Oseman. Along four volumes (the first one published in 2019, with a final fifth yet to be released), it tells the love story of Charlie and Nick, two teenagers who go to the same all-boys school. The four volumes are divided into six chapters: "Meet", "Crush", "Kiss", "Out", "Love", and "Journey", and in each one of them we get to know about their relationship evolves.

Initially, Charlie and Nick were just minor roles in Oseman's debut novel *Solitaire*, published in 2014. Many aspects of Heartstopper mirror the previously analyzed literary work, *Beautiful Thing*. The most obvious is that the protagonists are going through the process of constructing their sexual identities, but the way they disclose them is very different. Firstly, Charlie did not choose to come out publicly; instead, he was outed by some bullies at school. Throughout the four volumes, we will discover the consequences of this harassment. We will see that Charlie's uncertainties will make him injure himself and will cause him to suffer from eating disorders that eventually will drive him to a mental hospital to treat anorexia. When we first meet Charlie, he has a kind of relationship with another student, Ben, who is not sure about his sexual identity and only uses Charlie for

making out with him whenever he wants to, but he is scared of being caught. This reflects the fear that even today some gay adolescents have when they think about their friends' reactions to their homosexuality.

Charlie is also quite an anxious and insecure young man. At the beginning of volume 1, Charlie and Nick are seated together in new-form groups. Nick greets Charlie every day, showing his pleasant and friendly personality, but Charlie is suspicious that Nick behaves like the bullies who outed him the previous year and only wants to make fun of him. This mistrust is the consequence of suffering from bullying. Actually, Charlie has a small group of friends, which includes Tao, Aled, and Elle, a trans girl who has moved from the boys' school to a new girls' school.

Nick's coming out experience marks the end of volume 2 and differs greatly from that of Jamie and Ste in *Beautiful Thing*. In fact, it is the only confession in both literary works. Nick lives with his mother, and he usually shares with her his concerns and daily hassles, although they do not talk about sex. They usually talk in the car to or from school and, in this climate of confidence, Nick finally comes out as bisexual to his mum. Despite his fears, his mother's positive acceptance is essential for him and his later development within the story. Nick's mother even says she is sorry she ever "made you feel like you couldn't tell me that" (volume 2, p. 556). This approval and support provide Nick with self-confidence and represent a crucial turning point in the process of construction of his sexual identity. Besides, what is important about Nick's confession is that he has control over it, and he decides when and to whom to tell about his being bisexual. Aled, in volume 3, p. 665, makes this reflection about coming out.

Charlie and Nick's characters are quite similar to Jamie and Ste's, respectively. While Charlie is an introverted boy, like Jamie, Nick is very popular, since he plays in the school's rugby team (Charlie will later join the team because he runs fast), whilst Ste is very athletic and plays well at football. In volume 2 Charlie confesses that he always knew he was gay and, although we do not really know if Jamie also knew, we can see that both characters are very sensitive and have some interests in common, since they both share cultural hobbies, like movies or music (Jamie loves classic cinema and Charlie plays the drums). On the other hand, we can say that both Nick and Ste fit in a heteronormative society and play a comfortable role, until they start to have doubts about their sexual identity. However, while Ste discovers his homosexuality, Nick finds out he is bisexual. In his journey of self-discovery, he is very confused in the beginning and, after considering he may be gay, he does some research on the internet about what bisexuality means and, after watching some online videos (volume 2, p. 347), he finally accepts he likes both boys and girls and tells Charlie he is 'definitely bisexual' (volume 2, p. 532). Here we can see the relevance of online media for twenty-first-century adolescents. They belong to a world where everything is connected and everyone can have access to it, and where they share their experiences through social media. For instance, Charlie and Nick are

constantly sharing their pictures on Instagram, and they usually contact each other using this social network, which plays an important role in building their relationship.

Heartstopper reflects today's society with the inclusion of diverse sexualities. There is a wide range of characters that show different sexual identities. Apart from Elle, there is a couple of lesbians, and Aled comes out to Charlie in volume 3. Every one of them lives his/her sexuality in different ways, but they all seem to be quite content with who they are. However, Oseman warns the readers about the risks of being trans, and when Nick asks Elle if she often visits her family back in Egypt, she replies saying that "it's really dangerous to be a trans in Egypt. You can get arrested or attacked or… worse. Just for being who you are. I mean, that stuff happens everywhere, but it's more common there […]" (volume 4, p. 966). This is an example of all the work that still needs to be done in education regarding sexual diversity and human rights.

One redundant aspect in *Heartstopper* is how prejudices shape the personality of Charlie and Nick's heterosexual peers. We can read many prejudgments like "Does he even like sports? Everyone knows he's gay" (volume 1, p. 46), and "Do you like musicals?" (volume 2, p. 481), which show how stereotypes still survive today. The role of the teachers is crucial to ending stereotypes and prejudice. In *Beautiful Thing*, we could see how a phone call from Jamie's teacher, telling his mother, Sandra, that he was being bullied, was the trigger to the eventual coming out of both protagonists. In *Heartstopper* we have Miss Singh, the P.E. teacher, and coach of the rugby team, who is married to another woman. She plays an important role as a model, and as a person to be trusted. In volume 3 she confesses to Nick that she was bullied in the 2000s when she met her wife and recognizes that "things are a little better now, but… you never know" (p. 599). Yet from volume 1 we can see the importance of her function to finish with stereotypes that adolescents still have today when she confronts some of the players on the rugby team while they are speculating about Nick's sexual identity (volume 1, p. 204).

Those comments by Nick and Charlie's teammates make them feel worried about their relationship. Nick needs time to figure it out, feeling deeply confused in the beginning. In his process of coming out, he finally tells Tara that he and Charlie are "sort of going out" (volume 2, p. 425). Later on, they tell their closest friends about their relationship and start acting normally on a school trip to Paris, so finally, everyone knows. Along with Nick's process, we can also notice the positive evolution in his group of teammates, from prejudging and making homophobic comments to fully understanding and accepting the situation, since their friendship with Nick is much more important than anyone's sexual orientation.

However, two characters show their homophobia at different stages in the story, as a demonstration that gay people must face homophobic attitudes still

today. One of them is Harry, one of Nick's classmates, a rich boy who is used to having everything he wants, and who makes contemptuous comments to Nick about Charlie. Nick finally faces him and, after Harry calls Charlie "a pathetic little fag" (volume 2, pp. 494-495), punches him in the face. The other antagonist character is Nick's elder brother, David, who does not accept Nick's sexual identity and is constantly questioning his brother's bisexuality, with comments such as "[…] He's saying he's "bi"! What a load of absolute bullshit. […] He can't even admit he's gay!!" (volume 3, p. 647). At the very end of volume 4, Nick's father, who lives in France, comes to England and invites Charlie's family for dinner. In such a setting, David is about to out his brother, but then Nick explodes and confesses to his father that he and Charlie are boyfriends. Right after that, Nick reproaches David that he has always tried to bully him into hating himself, but that he likes who he is (volume 4, p. 1238). That scene reminds us of that at the end of *Beautiful Thing*.

Heartstopper's final strip shows Nick driving Charlie to an unknown place, just letting themselves go while listening to their favourite music, strengthening their relationship after all the problems they have overcome.

8- CONCLUSION

When we proposed a hypothesis in the introduction of this project, we were aware that many achievements in equal rights for the gay population had been already acquired in the last few decades. For that reason, we can affirm that the situation of gay adolescents nowadays is better than in the 1990s if we consider the legislative framework. We have also noticed that the acceptance levels of homosexuality have increased among the British population and now a very little percentage of society think homosexuality is something wrong.

We have described the sociopolitical contexts in the decades of the 1990s and the 2010s and, although much progress has been made, we have also found some aspects that need special attention, particularly those related to respect for diversity which can later influence teenagers' mental health. We have portrayed the reality of gay adolescents through the analysis of some studies and articles.

Much effort has been made but, despite the implementation of some governmental educative programmes directed towards the LGBT+ population and those around them (school and family), people belonging to that collective still report harassment, bullying, and hate crimes.

In addition to that, gay adolescents still go through a hard process when they wonder about their sexuality and their personal identity. As we noted, this may have some kind of influence on adolescents' mental health, such as anxiety and low self-esteem, especially if they do not have a positive response from those people in their closest environment (family members, friends, and peers).

Finally, we have analyzed two literary works, *Beautiful Thing* and *Heartstopper* and, although they both are works of fiction, they present characters that interact with people around them and show feelings and concerns about their sexual identities. Jamie and Ste, and Nick and Charlie are representatives of two different generations of gay adolescents, but all of them share psychological features that prove that some aspects of being a homosexual youth have not changed in recent years and need some attention.

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