TURUN YLIOPISTO

Queer Be Fantasy Creatures:
A Queer Reading of TJ Klune's Fantasy Novel
The House in the Cerulean Sea

Nelli Helin

Master's Thesis

Degree Programme in Language Learning and Teaching, Department of English
School of Language and Translation Studies
Faculty of Humanities
University of Turku

April 2025

Master's Thesis

Degree Programme in Language Learning and Teaching, Department of English
Nelli Helin
Queer Be Fantasy Creatures: A Queer Reading of TJ Klune's Fantasy Novel *The House in the Cerulean Sea*
Number of pages: 38 pages, 5 pages of appendices

This thesis offers a queer reading of TJ Klune's *The House in the Cerulean Sea* (2020). Since the novel is a work of fantasy literature that includes openly queer characters, queer theory is combined with research into fantasy literature to find out how issues of prejudice and discrimination against queer people can be presented in a fantasy world setting and what purpose this setting serves in the light of these issues.

The chapter for theoretical background defines the novel within the fantasy genre and specifies the scope of queer theory appropriate for the analysis. The order of the analysis goes from queer themes and characters in the novel to themes of acceptance that reflect the acceptance of minority groups in the real world. The importance of representation is also discussed concerning these themes, and lastly, a short analysis of the sequel to the novel, published in 2024, is included to finalize the discussion on the established themes.

I conclude that the fantasy setting of *The House in the Cerulean Sea* is appropriate and even desirable to allude to issues regarding queer people in the real world. The fantasy creatures of the novel serve as the "queer" elements that must face surmise and mistreatment because they deviate from the societal "norm" and, thus, they act as an allegory for queer people and other minority groups. Furthermore, as a queer author, Klune has been able to provide positive yet authentic representations of queer people for which there is a current necessity.

Key words: queer, fantasy, queer theory, magical creatures, acceptance, representation

Table of contents

1 Introduction

Fantasy literature offers its readers an escape from reality to places where the impossible is possible and where our mundane everyday problems do not matter in the face of magical powers and evil forces. In contrast, being openly queer has been impossible and continues to be so in many parts of our world. There are still people who deny the existence of any form of identity that deviates from the cisgender heterosexual "norm" as if these other identities were mythical creations of the imagination. With its various fantastical character types that are often treated as outcasts in stories, fantasy literature can offer a safe haven for anyone who has ever felt like an outsider, queer people often among them.

In this thesis, I examine TJ (Travis John) Klune's *The House in the Cerulean Sea* (2020), a fantasy novel set in an imaginary English-speaking society in modern times. The novel centers around Linus Baker, a human character who deals with orphaned magical children in his everyday job. The main character is also gay, and the story involves a queer love story which, however, is not the central plotline of the story. Instead, the story's focal point is the orphaned magical children who no one wants to adopt but they should, nevertheless, somehow grow into functioning individuals of society. Through the main character's experiences, the reader comes to understand the complicated attitudes toward the allegedly dangerous existence of the magical youth who need to be controlled and taken care of but not many want to take responsibility for.

The aim of this thesis is to explore the purposes served by a queer main character within a fantasy world setting in *The House in the Cerulean Sea*, and whether queer themes and fantasy literature can come together to reveal something more about the controversies of not fitting in society's norms. I argue that the story utilizes magical creatures who are misunderstood and dehumanized by others who see them as, by definition, "queer" to allude to issues of discrimination and prejudice happening in the real world against queer people as well as other minority groups. I aim to show that fantasy literature can serve as a well-suited setting to discuss themes of queerness and otherness.

Although fantasy literature with queer themes can be found nowadays, there seems to be a lack of research into the topic. For instance, Battis (2007, 7–8) claims that despite the abundance of contemporary fantasy literature between 1979–2000, there has been no considerable research on these works. Furthermore, Kenneally (2016, 20) argues, almost ten

years later, that there is, more specifically, a lack of research on fantasy literature with queer themes: "Whether discussing fantasy's queer potential as a genre or the representation of LGBT/queer characters and themes in fantasy, the lack of critical attention given to the topic is evident". In contrast, Mendlesohn (2009, 398) believes that there has not been a substantial volume of queer fantasy and science fiction writing since there might be an inherent contradiction between the fantasy setting and queer themes. According to Mendlesohn, "when you make part of the future strange, you need some kind of anchor to the present through an element of unchangingness" (ibid.). This might have been the case in the 20th century and even in the early 21st century when themes of queerness were still considered radical and groundbreaking. Still, in today's climate where being queer (at least in the modern Western ideology) is becoming more mundane, most would probably not consider it the changing factor in a literary work full of actual fantastical elements.

Since the early 21st century, the representation of queer characters in literature – and in other forms of media – has changed considerably. For instance, Kenneally (2016, 235), who studies LGBT fantasy novels between the years 1987–2000, states that

> [m]argins and marginalised identities are inherently more queer than the normalised and stable centre: as LGBT fantasy characters took centre stage as primary characters, and accumulated a genre of their own, their literature slowly lost its radical queer potential. In fact, the genre of LGBT fantasy was the means by which 'LGBT' and 'queer' became decoupled: it provided a context for the everyday and mimetic representation of LGBT characters.

In other words, fantasy literature that contains central characters that identify as LGBTQ+ makes these characters "not queer", as the queerness of these characters does not define them in these stories. Their sexuality or gender does not make them stand out as it would in the present real world.

These different viewpoints on queer fantasy literature and the possible lack of research on it intrigued me to explore a fantasy novel with explicit queer themes. Having a queer character in a story filled with actual imaginary characters makes the reader wonder about the purpose of this juxtaposition. What is actually *queer* in this setting? Furthermore, I find it refreshing to read and examine a work of literature that centers around a queer character without the struggles of their queerness being the central means for plot and characterization. Virtanen (2022, 10) mentions how most fantasy literary works that include queer characters usually focus either on these characters' oppression for their orientation or their journey of coming

out as the central plotline and adds that "[s]tories like this are of course important, but from my own position as an adult member of the queer community, sometimes reading stories with queer people simply existing, with the focus of the story not being their identity, ought to be written". As *The House in the Cerulean Sea* seems to fit these criteria, I deem it pertinent to study the novel and its potential to bring forth new perspectives for the discussion of queer themes. As Kenneally (2016, 236) argues: "The next challenge for LGBT fantasy researchers will be examining how this genre shifts and works to retain at least some of its power and potential now that it is, at last, no longer hiding in plain sight". In other words, what new can queer fantasy tell us about queerness if the central plot lines do not focus on being queer anymore? This will be one of the main issues explored in this thesis.

To answer these questions I have introduced in this chapter, I organize the thesis in the following manner: Chapter 2 goes through the theoretical background of the thesis which consists of defining *The House in the Cerulean Sea* within the fantasy genre and introducing the basis of queer theory used for the analysis. Chapter 3 is dedicated to the analysis of the explicit queer themes found in the novel: Section 3.1 summarizes briefly the novel's plot, section 3.2 explores the queer themes and section 3.3 examines the novel's two openly queer main characters more closely. Chapter 4 continues the analysis of relevant themes with section 4.1 focusing on the treatment and eventual acceptance of the magical creatures as an allegory for the acceptance of queer people in the real world. Section 4.2 brings the discussion to representation and considers its importance in fiction in general, and, lastly, section 4.3 takes a look at the novel's sequel that was published during the writing of this thesis. Finally, Chapter 5 concludes the findings of the thesis.

2 Fantasy and the Queer

This chapter functions as the theoretical background for the thesis, laying the foundation for the analysis. First, I define fantasy as a literary genre and then demonstrate how *The House in the Cerulean Sea* (referred to as *The House* from this point forward) can be categorized within this genre by referring primarily to Attebery's pioneering *Strategies of Fantasy* (1992). Second, I discuss the application of queer theory and the usage of the term *queer* for the purposes of this thesis.

2.1 Fantasy Literature

There are undoubtedly many ways to define fantasy. *Encyclopedia Britannica* (2024), for instance, describes 'fantasy' as "imaginative fiction dependent for effect on strangeness of setting (such as other worlds or times) and of characters (such as supernatural or unnatural beings)". Another, perhaps more scholarly definition is offered by Jackson (2003, 3), according to which fantasy "is a literature of desire, which seeks that which is experienced as absence and loss" for it "characteristically attempts to compensate for a lack resulting from cultural constraints". Furthermore, Jackson (2003, 4) explains that literary fantasy, starting from within the dominant cultural order, reveals the boundaries of that order. Introducing the "unreal" challenges the concept of the "real", a concept that the fantastical questions through its contrasts (ibid.).

Attebery (1992, 1) has come up with the following two definitions for fantasy that somewhat combine ideas from the ones above:

1. Fantasy is a form of popular escapist literature that combines stock characters and devices – wizards, dragons, magic swords, and the like – into a predictable plot in which the perennially understaffed forces of good triumph over a monolithic evil.

2. Fantasy is a sophisticated mode of storytelling characterized by stylistic playfulness, self-reflexiveness, and a subversive treatment of established orders of society and thought. Arguably the major fictional mode of the late twentieth century, it draws upon contemporary ideas about sign systems and the indeterminacy of meaning and at the same time recaptures the vitality and freedom of nonmimetic traditional forms such as epic, folktale, romance, and myth.

Furthermore, Attebery uses J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* (1954–1955; abbreviated as *LOTR*) as a baseline of sorts to define the conventions of fantasy literature. Attebery argues that the novel is the quintessential example of fantasy. To reinforce this argument, Attebery

(1992, 13, italics as in the original) arranged an "unscientific experiment" where they asked friends and colleagues, who had written scholarship on fantastic literature, to rank forty titles of literature based on their genre on a scale from "*quintessentially* fantasy" to "*by no means* fantasy". Not surprisingly, *LOTR* scored the closest to the criterium of quintessential fantasy, and Attebery (1992, 14) comments that, for readers of English, Tolkien's fantasy has become the standard way to think about the genre, and it will likely stay that way until another author gains similar recognition with a completely different vision. In addition, Attebery (1992, 15) explains what specifically makes *LOTR* so recognizable as fantasy:

> The structure of *The Lord of the Rings* is that of the traditional fairy tale. It conforms to the morphology described by Vladimir Propp: a round-trip journey to the marvelous, complete with testing of the hero, crossing of a threshold, supernatural assistance, confrontation, flight, and establishment of a new order at home.

The House belongs to the fantasy genre since it incorporates imaginary "supernatural or unnatural beings" (*Britannica*, sv. "fantasy") as characters, such as gnomes, shapeshifters and sprites. In addition, the plot of *The House* features a quest that the main character embarks on as he takes on a work assignment to spend a month in an orphanage which the people in charge describe as "nontraditional" (*The House* [2020] 2021, 45), and, for instance, Ramaswamy (2014, 18) states that "[f]antasy is also considered to be a genre of quest stories, narratives in which there is a journey motif". And, as usual for fantasy literature, the main character goes through a change as he encounters obstacles and triumphs on his journey.

Even if *The House* would not be considered as "*quintessentially* fantasy" as *LOTR*, it certainly ticks most of Attebery's boxes mentioned above. It has stock characters that the reader recognizes as magical creatures, and there is a somewhat "predictable plot", although I would argue that there is no "monolithic evil" but rather the good triumphs over the persistent prejudice and discrimination of small-minded people. In addition, it can be argued that, like *LOTR*, the novel does have the structure of the traditional fairy tale listed by Attebery (1992, 15). The novel also includes "a subversive treatment of established orders of society and thought" (Attebery 1992, 1) in the form of the obvious which is the existence of magical creatures, but also in a more subtle way that is queer relationships existing (almost) completely unmarginalized. Furthermore, it "draws upon contemporary ideas about sign systems and the indeterminacy of meaning and at the same time recaptures the vitality and freedom of nonmimetic traditional forms such as epic, folktale, romance, and myth" (ibid.) as

the novel alludes to topics of stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination against a minority group but in the form of magical beings that try to exist in a world operated by humans.

In their attempt to define the mode[1] of fantasy, Attebery (1992, 3) refers to Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957) and concludes that "[i]n fantasy, characters can, as Frye says, do anything: fly, live forever, talk to animals, metamorphose into cockroaches and gods. In mimesis, by contrast, characters are limited; like everything else in the story they must conform to our sensory experience of the real world". However, Attebery (1992, 4) argues that these two modes are not opposite, and both need the other to exist. Fantasy needs mimesis for its effectiveness to be understandable and recognizable, and mimesis, perhaps more covertly, needs fantasy to be more than merely stating one's perceptions of reality (ibid.).

As I argued previously, *The House* can be said to have a predictable plot. It comes as no surprise to the reader that the novel has a happy ending where Linus finds his place and home. As mentioned above, fantasy needs some familiar ground to stay recognizable, and one way that *The House* conveys this is through a familiar plotline. It starts with a lonely, unfulfilled character who takes on a task that, despite his reservations, ends up making him find his purpose and grow as a person. This "need" to be recognizable, however, limits the writers of fantasy as it forces them to stick to conventions. This phenomenon is explained by Attebery (1992, 9) followingly:

> The freedom [fantasy] offers is offset by the need to be understood […]. Because the writer desires to connect with the reader, she submits to such restrictions and produces a more or less orderly and comprehensible narrative. She trades away a measure of freedom in exchange for the possibility of meaning.

Hence, fantasy imposes a set of restrictions due to its restricted formula that has developed since the beginning of modern fantasy, which, according to Attebery (1992, 10), started at the end of the eighteenth century. In addition, Attebery believes that each fantasy writer since then has reshaped the genre by showcasing the benefits of further limitations, but paradoxically, as the genre has become more constrained, it has produced more works (ibid.).

For some, this "restriction" of fantasy makes it too predictable and, therefore, perhaps boring. However, Attebery (1992, 15) argues that "[i]n a fiction that claimed to be based on life, such invariable resolutions might be accused of naiveté, but as a deliberate choice of form in a

[1] "A mode is a way of doing something, in this case, of telling a story. […] A mode is thus a stance, a position on the world as well as a means of portraying it" (Attebery 1992, 2).

manifestly unreal setting, it says more about the ways we seek for order than about our expectations of finding it in the real world". In other words, fantasy's purpose lies in other matters than "reinventing the wheel" of storytelling. Instead, the surprising factor of reading a work of fantasy is rather the connection between the impossible and the real. As, for instance, one is reading (or watching) *LOTR,* they can immerse themselves into an imaginary world of hobbits, wizards and orcs, while not forgetting that the story is, at least to some extent, influenced by the horrors of the First World War (Livingston 2006, 90). Similarly, *The House* does not attempt to surprise the reader with its inventive plot or new, unheard-of character types, but with its ability to remind us of the faults of humanity in the form of a heartfelt feel-good story about cute magical children and their queer parental figures.

2.2 Queer Theory

The House is well suited for an analysis that applies queer theory since it includes openly queer characters as well as themes of not fitting in and struggling to be one's authentic self. These will be amply discussed in the following chapters, but the most obvious are the main character's sexuality and the same-sex love interest that forms between the main character and the master of the orphanage. To examine these themes thoroughly in the context of the novel, I first introduce some primary aspects of queer theory that are essential for this thesis and also define my use of the term *queer*.

Queer theory is a "critical discourse developed in the 1990s in order to deconstruct (or 'to queer') sexuality and gender in the wake of gay identity politics" (Chandler and Munday 2011). Additionally, "queer theorists see sexuality as a discursive social construction, fluid, plural, and continually negotiated rather than a natural, fixed, core identity" (ibid.). In literary analysis, queer theory focuses on the themes and representations of LGBTQ+ characters found in literature either explicitly or implicitly. Furthermore, according to Bennett and Royle (2009, 219), a key focus of queer theory has been to explore how the categories of desire that shape our social and sexual experiences are not as unchangeable and self-evident, nor as "natural" as often assumed.

The term *queer* has a complicated history. Since the 1920s, when the word first appeared in a text in its homosexual sense, it became more popular in the English language but usually as a derogatory one for homosexuals (Bennett and Royle 2009, 217). In the turn of the 1990s, however,

> partly in response to the spread of AIDS among gay men, the word took a queer turn: homosexuals themselves began to 'reclaim' the word, to use it in place of the gender-specific and arguably effete term 'gay' or the clinical and cheerless 'homosexual' or the polite and even mythological-sounding 'lesbian'. (ibid.)

Similarly, Jagose (1996, 98) discusses the so-called "reappropriation" of the term: "Like early gay liberationism, queer confounds the categories that license sexual normativity; it differs from its predecessors by avoiding the delusion that its project is to uncover or invent some free, natural and primordial sexuality".

In this thesis, I use the term to refer to identities that, in one way or another, deviate from the cisgender heterosexual ones. I believe it to be the most inclusive term and free of categorization, unlike, for instance, the somewhat cumbersome abbreviation LGBTQ+. I believe, that *queer* is a term reclaimed by the community, as Bennett and Royle (2009, 217) describe it, into "a term of pride and celebratory self-assertion, of difference affirmed and affirmative difference". Furthermore, I use the term in its adjective form to refer to "weird" characters in the novel since they are products of the imagination and do not exist in the real world. In the novel's setting, where magical creatures do exist but are misunderstood and even feared, they are the "queer" elements. This allows the reader to see the "queer" creatures as the outcasts of the novel's society and connect their struggles to those happening in reality. As Battis (2007, 2) argues: "Even when the characters themselves are not, strictly speaking, homosexual, readers can sympathize with their larger-than-life struggles because being queer often seems larger-than-life". In the novel, the children living in Marsyas Orphanage have been mistreated in the past because of what they are, and now the future of the orphanage, their home, is threatened solely because people fear what they do not know.

As now established, *The House* fits the criteria of the fantasy genre, and it is appropriate to apply queer theory in its analysis. Kenneally (2016, 17) argues that

> [f]antasy is therefore, by its nature, rebellious against and transgressive of normality. Queerness, similarly, centres on transgression: contravening the normal standards, and resisting labelling and categorisation. Fantasy not only encourages but actively abets such transgressions, and is therefore well-suited to a queer perspective.

I believe, as I aim to show in this thesis, that the fantasy world setting of the novel is well suited for discussing themes of queerness. Attebery (1992, 34–35) concludes that fantasy's focus on the impossible and the sense of estrangement and wonder it gives readers can be

seen as arising from a unique use of language and an ecological view of humanity's place in the world. Similarly, Butler (2004, 29) argues the following:

> Fantasy is not the opposite of reality; it is what reality forecloses, and, as a result, it defines the limits of reality, constituting it as its constitutive outside. The critical promise of fantasy, when and where it exists, is to challenge the contingent limits of what will and will not be called reality. Fantasy is what allows us to imagine ourselves and others otherwise; it establishes the possibility in excess to the real.

A fantasy world setting can act as a safe place for discussing controversial topics that might still be too delicate to discuss in non-fictional settings. In this sense, fantasy provides a home for what is considered abnormal and then connects that abnormal to the normal, making it more acceptable. In the following chapters, I aim to analyze the novel's characters and setting to determine how fantasy is utilized to challenge the reader's sense of reality and to push the limits of what is seen as possible.

3 Queer Themes and Fantasy Archetypes

In this chapter, I focus on the analysis of the queer characters and elements found in the novel. To do this, I first summarize the novel's main characters and plot points in 3.1 and then in 3.2 I move on to examine the explicit queer themes in the novel in order to determine how they come together with the fantasy elements to reflect issues of the real world. In section 3.3, I expand the analysis of these findings to two characters, Linus and Arthur, to discuss character archetypes found in fantasy literature and their purpose in the light of a queer reading.

3.1 *The House in the Cerulean Sea*

The House is a fantasy novel by American author TJ Klune (born in 1982). As usual with his stories, this one also centers around a queer main character, Linus Baker. Linus is a forty-year-old caseworker working for DICOMY, the Department in Charge of Magical Youth. His main job consists of visits to orphanages to ensure that the magical children are being properly taken care of. In a world where magical beings exist to everyone's knowledge, they are still highly controlled as all magical creatures must be registered and known to the government.

Linus lives a solitary life, content with his mundane job and routine-oriented schedule. He is meticulous with his work and maintains a degree of separation from his cases since, according to him, objectivity is crucial in the job of a caseworker. Since Linus is content with his current position and always makes sure his reports are flawless, he is astonished when he receives a request to attend a meeting with the Extremely Upper Management, the highest committee in charge of DICOMY. Not being able to grasp the intentions of the request, Linus meets up with the Management, thinking they will fire him for some mistake he has unknowingly made. Instead, he learns they want to send him on a classified mission to oversee an orphanage Linus has never heard of before.

Doubtful but diligent, Linus packs up a suitcase and his cat and takes off to Marsyas Village. There, he is first greeted by Ms. Zoe Chapelwhite, an eccentric woman who turns out to be a sprite and the caretaker of Marsyas Island, where the orphanage is located. As they drive through Marsyas Village, Linus learns that the villagers, who are all human, do not appreciate the orphanage or its inhabitants. Even as Linus and Ms. Chapelwhite merely drive by, they are met with unapproving looks. Later, when Linus visits the village by himself, he begins to understand just how hostile some people are toward the children and their master.

At the orphanage, Linus meets the children one by one. First, he meets Talia, a female gnome who loves gardening and expresses an interest in burying live beings into the garden for fertilizing purposes. Second, Linus is introduced to Theodore, a wyvern who collects coins and other trinkets for his hoard. Next, he meets Phee, a sprite like Ms. Chapelwhite, who cares for the island's nature and trees. Then Linus meets Sal, a sturdy-looking teenager whom Linus accidentally startles to shapeshift into a small Pomeranian. A little later in the guest house, Linus meets Chauncey whose nature no one knows for sure – as he appears to be "an amorphous green blob" with "eyes on stalks that stuck high above his head" and no "arms so much as tentacles with tiny little suckers along their length" (*The House*, 89) – but whose biggest wish is to become a bellhop when he grows up. Lastly, Linus is introduced to Lucy (short for Lucifer), perhaps the strangest of the six children, as he is the son of the Devil. From the beginning, he plays tricks with Linus's mind and talks about the End of the Days, which makes Linus very apprehensive of him and worried for the safety of the other children as well as his own.

Only after meeting all the children is Linus introduced to the master of the orphanage, Arthur Parnassus. However kind and hospitable he seems, Linus has reservations about the mysterious man whom Linus knows next to nothing about since the file provided by DICOMY does not include much information. At first, Arthur's eccentric manners and almost nonchalant way of interacting with the children worry Linus. However, as more time passes, Linus is forced to recognize the unique bond between the master and the children as well as his own affectionate feelings toward them. Arthur's secret is revealed toward the end of the novel when Linus finds out that he is a very rare magical creature, a phoenix, which explains some of his queer behavior. Arthur explains to Linus that he has not even told the children of his true nature due to fear of being misunderstood. At this point, Linus believes he should tell the truth and not be ashamed of being extraordinary, especially when caring for extraordinary children.

The House is a fantasy story set in a world where humans and magical creatures coexist but not unproblematically. There seems to be a clear power separation between humans and "the others", as only humans are presented in positions of power and other species are strictly controlled and regulated. As Linus embarks on an unexpected adventure, he is forced to rethink his views about how magical creatures are perceived and treated by the system he works for.

3.2 Queer Themes in *The House in the Cerulean Sea*

Examining a literary work through a queer lens can reveal surprising things about the cultural constructs we often regard as natural. However, most of these, like the gender binary, are exactly that, constructs. This view is presented, for instance, by Butler in her renowned work *Gender Trouble* (2002, 12), where she argues that some interpretations of the idea that gender is constructed view anatomically differentiated bodies as passive recipients of unchangeable cultural law. However, when this "culture" is framed as a law, it appears that gender becomes just as fixed as it was under the belief that biology dictates destiny, and then, it is culture – not biology – that shapes our fate (ibid.).

Virtanen (2022, 37) studies the representation of queer characters in Terry Pratchett's fantasy series Discworld and refers to Butler (2002) by saying that

> [t]he norms related to sex and gender feed the representations of each other. People who regard the world through a binary male-female system will seek to reproduce and see that system in everything and assign those identity markers even to contexts where they're not needed or even accurate.

Further on, Virtanen (2022, 50) concludes that "narratives within these [Discworld] novels show that gender is a product of culture, and only dictated by societal norms, that can be broken and changed, or alternatively used to one's advantage if the situation calls for it". A similar point can be made about *The House* since, in the novel's culture, gender and same-sex relations are barely mentioned. Instead, it is the existence of magical creatures that divides opinions and raises conflicts because people view them as a threat and disturbance to their "normal" view of life.

As mentioned, the novel's main character is a gay man. It becomes clear at the beginning of the story as Linus is having a discussion with his neighbor, Mrs. Klapper:

> "No dates again, huh?"
> [Linus's] hand tightened around the handle of his briefcase. "No dates."
> "No lucky lady friend?" She sucked on her pipe and blew the thick smoke out her nose. "Oh. Forgive me. It must have slipped my mind. Not one for the ladies, are you?"
> It hadn't slipped her mind. "No, Mrs. Klapper." (*The House*, 30–31)

On top of "revealing" Linus's sexuality to the reader, this conversation raises questions about Mrs. Klapper's rather rude way of talking to Linus. Why is she addressing Linus's single status? Why does she assume Linus should have dates and specifically with ladies? At first,

this might strike the reader as plain heteronormativity or even homophobia. However, it is later revealed that Mrs. Klapper's grandson is, apparently, also queer and single, since she suggests that she could have him call Linus. As Linus tries to explain that he does not have time for dating, Mrs. Klapper notes that "[p]erhaps you should consider making time, Mr. Baker. Being alone at your age isn't healthy. I'd hate to think of what would happen if you were to blow your brains out. It'd hurt the resale value of the whole neighborhood" (*The House*, 31). Even though Mrs. Klapper's way of speaking to Linus is coarse, she does not seem to disapprove of Linus's sexuality but rather comes off as a bored elderly person who enjoys sticking her nose into other people's business.

After this conversation, however, there is no mention of Linus's sexuality for a long while. Nevertheless, the reader can detect some form of attraction from Linus toward Arthur from the very first moment they meet:

> Linus flinched a little when Mr. Parnassus extended a hand. Linus stared at it for a moment, then remembered himself. He took the offered hand in his own. The skin was cool and dry, and as the fingers wrapped around his own, Linus felt a little curl of warmth in the back of his mind. (*The House*, 95)

In spite of this, Linus tries his best to deny his feelings as becomes apparent from a later thought process of his:

> He was pleasantly surprised to find Mr. Parnassus standing on the porch of the guest house, looking windswept and warm in the afternoon sunlight, something that Linus was finding himself not only getting used to seeing, but rather looking forward to. He told himself it was because Mr. Parnassus was a cheery fellow, and if this were the real world, perhaps they could have been friends, something that Linus was in short supply of. That was all it was. (*The House*, 145)

Linus's denial is due to his occupation on the island as a caseworker as well as his belief that his chances for love are hopeless. As Linus and Arthur are having yet another discussion, Linus reflects on his feelings:

> They sat in silence again, and it was the most comfortable Linus had felt since arriving on the island. He didn't dare examine it much, for fear it would show him things he wasn't ready to see, but he knew it was there. But, like all things, it was temporary. His time here, much like his time in this world, was finite. It wouldn't do to think otherwise. (*The House*, 164)

Through a limited third-person narration, the reader gets insights into Linus's thoughts and memories. At one point, Linus is thinking about his past growing up with a religious mother who was worried that if Linus did not attend church he would end up on a path where there

would be “drugs and booze and *girls*, and she would be there to pick up the pieces because that’s what a mother did” (*The House*, 148, italics in the original). Linus reflects on the fact that drugs and booze were never a problem for him and makes a point that “as for *girls*, his mother needn’t have worried. By then, Linus had already noticed how his skin had tingled when his seventeen-year-old neighbor, Timmy Wellington, mowed the lawn without his shirt on. No, girls weren’t going to bring about Linus Baker’s downfall” (ibid., italics in the original). The last sentence of Linus’s thoughts points to the irony of his mother’s worries; whatever religion her mother practices, it can be assumed that, according to it, being gay would be considered worse than having illegitimate relations with the opposite sex.

While the narration makes Linus’s sexuality clear, it also hints at Arthur’s. When Linus and Arthur are discussing the founding of the Marsyas Orphanage, Arthur mentions another caseworker who worked at the orphanage but left abruptly because he got promoted. Linus’s inner monologue reveals to the reader something he has realized: “Linus heard all the things that weren’t being said. He understood now why Ms. Chapelwhite had laughed at him when he’d awkwardly asked if she and Mr. Parnassus were involved” (*The House*, 163). This implies that Arthur is not interested in women, and therefore, the idea amused Ms. Chapelwhite. Whether Arthur is attracted to Linus is not evident in Linus’s narration, but some of Arthur’s words certainly allude to this conclusion. For instance, when they are on an expedition in the forest of the island and discussing the children’s position in the world, Arthur says something unexpected:

> [Linus:] “For what it’s worth, I never thought I’d be discussing moral philosophy while wearing tan shorts in the middle of the woods.”
> Arthur burst out laughing. “I find you fascinating.”
> Linus felt warm again. He told himself it was the exertion. (*The House*, 182)

In another instance, Linus and Arthur are discussing Lucy’s condition and whether he could be dangerous to the other children after he has had one of his nightmares that cause the whole house to shake and sometimes things to break. After the conversation, as Linus starts to leave, the following interaction occurs:

> “I meant what I said.” Arthur’s voice was hushed.
> “About?”
> “Liking you the way you are. I don’t know that I’ve ever thought that more about anyone I’ve ever met.” (*The House*, 250)

At no point in the novel is it mentioned that Linus and Arthur could not be a couple because they are both men. All of Linus's doubts and denials are due to his belief that he is not worthy of love and that he needs to keep a professional distance from both Arthur and the children because he is a caseworker. Arthur's reservations about a possible relationship with Linus, in contrast, stem from his being a magical creature. In the end, nevertheless, all of these doubts are conquered, and love wins. After spending a month back in the city, Linus decides to quit his job and return to the island because he has realized where he truly belongs:

> [Arthur:] "Where do you belong, Linus?"
> And with the last of his courage, Linus Baker said, "Here. With you. If you'll have me. Ask me again. Please, I beg you. Ask me to stay again."
> Arthur nodded tightly. He cleared his throat. He was hoarse when he said, "Linus."
> "Yes, Arthur?"
> "Stay. Here. With us. With me."
> Linus could barely breathe. "Yes. Always. Yes. For them. For you. For –"
> He was being kissed. […] He never wanted this moment to end. For all the love songs he'd ever listened to in his life, he hadn't been prepared for how a moment like this could feel. […] Linus could hear the children cheering in the house as they began to sway in the light from a setting sun. (*The House*, 385)

Another romantic queer relationship that takes place in the novel is the relationship that forms between Ms. Chapelwhite and Helen, the mayor of Marsyas. Their genders are confirmed as they are both referred to as "she/her" throughout the novel. Their relationship is revealed in the novel's epilogue: "Linus hadn't seen their relationship blossoming, though he seemed to be the only one. It wasn't until he'd stumbled upon them kissing that he figured out why Helen seemed to be at the island more and more" (*The House*, 397). The children view Zoe and Helen as adults they can trust and want to see both of them happy, so just like Linus's and Arthur's relationship, it is simply a positive thing for everyone.

Battis (2007, 42) argues that fantasy literature offers a unique platform for exploring new relational possibilities and that "[f]antasy provides a realm where same-sex relations can be presented uniquely and provocatively, since alien backgrounds and backdrops provide a space where conservative ethics are always dismantled, decoupled, and turned upside-down" (Battis 2007, 260–261). The fantasy setting of *The House* provides a reality where same-sex relationships are so ordinary that they need not even be mentioned as anything other than. Nevertheless, a reality where no fear of the unknown existed among people would probably seem too unrecognizable, and, therefore, the prejudices that exist in the real world against queer people exist in the novel's world toward magical creatures. This perspective will be elaborated on in Chapter 4.

3.3 Character Archetypes: The Everyman and the Mentor

Linus is the novel's main character, and Arthur is his love interest, making them opportune choices for more profound analysis when examining the novel's main themes and conventions. In addition, they are both openly queer characters, which makes them intriguing candidates for a queer reading. In this section, I want to expand my examination of these two characters by exploring their possible character archetypes typical for fantasy literature while applying a queer reading to this analysis. I refer primarily to Ramaswamy's (2014) dissertation "Archetypes in Fantasy Fiction: A Study of J. R. R. Tolkien and J. K. Rowling".

As discussed in Chapter 2, fantasy literature is a genre of certain rules and conventions necessary for a feeling of understandability in a setting full of impossibilities. Character archetypes are one of these ways that fantasy can convey recognizability: "[A]rchetype, (from Greek *archetypos*, 'original pattern'), in literary criticism, a primordial image, character or pattern of circumstances that recurs throughout literature and thought consistently enough to be considered a universal concept or situation" (*Britannica*, sv. "archetype"). Furthermore, Ramaswamy (2014, 5–6) explains that "[t]he presence of the archetype […] becomes an easy mode of communication with the reader, a short-cut that conveys a wealth of emotional meaning. It leads to immediate response because it evokes deeply-embedded patterns of thought in the reader". For these reasons, I think it worthwhile to look into the possible archetypes that the two main characters of *The House* represent.

Linus is the hero of the story, but not in the most traditional sense that depicts heroes as brave, strong and selfless. Instead, Linus can be seen as the "Everyman" as hero, which, according to Ramaswamy (2014, 46), emerged in the twentieth century as a contrast to the "[n]oble virtues such as courage, wisdom, patriotism, generosity, kindness and willingness for self-sacrifice [which] are universally admired qualities in a hero". Linus does not yearn for adventures and does not wish to be noticed for his actions. At the beginning of the novel, he is, in fact, very reluctant to take on the assignment and leave his cozy life at home for a month. However, as he is "called to adventure", he is forced to grow as a person and stand up for others, eventually becoming the hero of the story. Throughout his journey, he receives help from others to grow and finally finds it within himself to act according to his beliefs.

Ramaswamy (2014, 48) believes that in *LOTR,* there are two hero characters, Aragorn and Frodo, who represent well the contrast between the traditional heroic archetype and the more

modern version: “Aragorn falls into the first category and Frodo into the second. Aragorn is shown as flawless but Frodo is endowed with endearingly human attributes and this makes him a very modern hero”. Linus is everything if not flawless, and he is very self-aware of his shortcomings. Only toward the end of the novel, he finds his courage and acts like a hero as he must face a crowd of angry villagers who have gathered at the dock of Marsyas Village wanting to cross to the island. For the first time in his life, Linus is able to confront his fears as he stands up for the children:

> [Linus:] “Who in the world has threatened you aside from me?”
> “They have!” a woman cried in the back of the crowd. “By simply existing, they’re a threat!”
> “I don’t believe you,” Linus said. “I have been by their side for a month, and I have heard nary a whisper of a threat. In fact, the only time I’ve ever thought there was danger, aside from Marty’s ill-advised attempt against a child, was from you lot here. Say you crossed to the island. What would you do? Would you lay your hands upon them? Would you strike them? Hurt them? Kill them?” (*The House*, 323)

A moment later, someone in the crowd throws a rock at them, and as it is flying toward Helen, Linus moves in front of her, trying to shield her. Even though he never has to suffer the impact, thanks to Arthur, this shows that Linus has found within himself a willingness to protect others, even at the risk of getting hurt in the process. Just like Frodo, Linus does not choose to be the hero, but with the help of others, he is able to do the right thing and find courage within himself in a time of need. “Frodo’s reluctance is not cowardice but humility, based on his realistic assessment of himself and his circumstances” (Ramaswamy 2014, 50). This makes both Frodo and Linus characters easy for readers to identify with.

Another way that Linus showcases bravery is by encouraging Arthur to be truthful to the children. When Arthur finally tells Linus he is a phoenix, Linus is disappointed to learn that the children do not know about it. When Arthur resists at first, Linus gets frustrated:

> “Because they have to see they aren’t alone!” Linus cried, slamming his palms back against the wall. “That magic exists where we least expect it to. That they can grow up to be whoever they choose to be!”
> “Can they?”
> “Yes! And though it may not seem like it now, things can change. Talia said that you told her in order to change the minds of many, you have to first start with the minds of few.”
> He smiled. “She said that?”
> “Yes.”
> “I didn’t think she was listening.”
> “Of *course* they listen,” Linus said, exasperated. “They listen to every single thing you say. They look up to you because you are their *family*. You are their –” He

> stopped, breathing heavily. He shouldn't say it. It wasn't right. None of this was. It wasn't – "You are their father, Arthur. You said you love them more than life itself. You have to know they feel the same about you. Of course they do. How can they not? Look at you. Look at what you've made here. You are a fire, and they need to know how you burn. Not only because of who you are, but because of what they have made you into." (*The House*, 307, italics in the original)

This reaction of Linus shows how much he has grown to care about Arthur and the children and wishes them to prosper and have the best possible future. He does not see Arthur as a master of an orphanage anymore but as the children's father, and he wants to help Arthur become the best version of himself. Ramaswamy (2014, 59) refers to Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949) and states that "[t]he hero may not be extraordinarily gifted. He is acceptably normal, but due to his innate sense of justice is helped along the way by higher forces. His appeal lies in the sense of identification that he instills in the reader".

If Linus can be seen as the hero of the story, Arthur Parnassus can be seen as the "Wise old man" or "Mentor" character type. He is the master of Marsyas Orphanage, and he is mainly described as a calm and composed man who gladly listens to others and gives good advice. Through his interactions with Linus and the children, it becomes clear that he deeply cares for the safety and well-being of the children and wants to see them succeed in life. In contrast to Linus, Arthur appears to have clear morals and knows exactly what he stands for. In his essay "The Phenomenology of the Spirit in Fairytales" included in the Collected Works, Jung (1969, 222) argues that "[o]ld man thus represents knowledge, reflection, insight, wisdom, cleverness, and intuition on the one hand, and on the other, moral qualities such as goodwill and readiness to help, which make his 'spiritual' character sufficiently plain". Arthur can be seen to fit these criteria perfectly, but only until his secret comes out. Once Linus learns that Arthur is a phoenix, he begins to see his "fiery side" which makes an appearance whenever the children are threatened or facing any chance of mistreatment, and this makes Arthur, in my opinion, a complex rather than plain character.

As the Mentor character of the story and the master of a facility in charge of children, it is easy to see similarities between Arthur's character and that of Albus Dumbledore from the Harry Potter series. In addition, these two characters share other resemblances. As mentioned, Arthur is a phoenix, a magical creature, which is why the Extremely Upper Management is so mysterious and apprehensive about him. Dumbledore, on the other hand, has a phoenix as a pet, and his Patronus (a wizard's magical guardian animal) is also a phoenix. Furthermore, in an interview in 2007, after the release of the last book of the series, J. K. Rowling revealed

that Dumbledore was gay: “My truthful answer to you… I always thought of Dumbledore as gay” (Smith, 2007). This further exemplifies the similarities between these two characters, making both of them the wise (old) queer man who acts as a mentor to the main character.

In the first half of the Harry Potter series, Dumbledore is depicted as the perfect opposite of evil and corruption. As Olsen (2013, 38) puts it, “[h]e is a character that is enormously admired for his mind and his heart. He is the epiphany of goodness and kindness. He is fighting for muggles and muggle-borns, as well as treating and understanding house elves better than any wizard”. In the last three books of the series, however, Dumbledore’s character becomes more fleshed out as he is given more background, and the flawless image that Harry and the reader have of the headmaster slowly begins to crumble: “[A]fter his death in [*Half Blood Prince*] Rowling does something interesting in the following book, [*Deathly Hallows*]. Rowling is brutally wrecking Dumbledore’s pedestal, and he is suddenly a mere mortal with flaws, like the rest of us” (Olsen 2013, 38). Furthermore, Olsen (2013, 49) argues that Dumbledore should not be seen as the moral leader many take him for because of his questionable actions both in the past as well as in the present.

Just like Dumbledore, Arthur also has an obscure past that makes him unreliable in the eyes of the government. In the beginning, both characters are illustrated as the stable and wise character on whom the hero of the story can rely, but later, these characters become more complex – and, as a result, less reliable – as certain details are revealed about them. The main difference between Arthur and Dumbledore is, of course, the fact that Dumbledore dies, whereas Arthur lives. Holen (2024, 41) argues that as Rowling announced Dumbledore to be gay, she “unintentionally or not – placed Dumbledore in a long line of dead queers who die in order for the straight protagonist to survive and grow”. Unlike Dumbledore, whose legacy ends when he dies while helping the protagonist to succeed in their quest, Arthur’s legacy continues after helping Linus to fulfill his purpose. In addition, he becomes more than the mentor character in Linus’s story as they together decide to adopt the children and help others in need. This begs the question of whether Arthur is a rewritten version of Dumbledore, the wise old queer man who deserves a happy ending but has been deprived of one in previous stories.

Thus, both Linus and Arthur represent fairly typical fantasy archetypes. Linus is the Everyman as hero, who initially resists the call to adventure, but with the help of others, can eventually fight for what he deems right. Arthur is the traditional Mentor character who,

however, turns out to be more complex than initially insinuated. Ramaswamy (2014, 9) states that "[t]he unconscious activation of the archetypal image by the author touches the deepest springs of life in the reader. This is the reason for the success of many works, a secret that eludes critics who search for other parameters of literary excellence". Hence, archetypes play a critical role in fantasy literature, and therefore, they are also present in *The House*.

Nevertheless, the fact that Linus and Arthur are openly queer characters combined with their being given a happy ending makes them stand out from most (fantasy) literature characters. To rerefer to Kenneally's (2016, 236) statement, now that LGBT fantasy is no longer "hiding in plain sight", it is time to examine how it retains its power. I believe this power remains in the shift that the genre is making toward telling stories of queer characters winning and receiving the happily ever after. This viewpoint is expanded upon in the next chapter as I examine acceptance and representation as significant topics for the discussion of the novel's queer themes.

4 Queer Be Magical Creatures

In this chapter, I first explore the theme of acceptance in the novel and how it reflects issues of the real world. Then, I move on to discuss the topic of representation in fiction and the possible issue of writing outside of one's identity and its implications for representation. By exploring these themes, I aim to deepen the analysis of the relationship between the fantasy and queer elements in the story. Finally, in section 4.3, I briefly look into Klune's *Somewhere Beyond the Sea* (2024), the sequel novel for *The House*, to determine whether these themes I have examined are expanded on further and whether some new viewpoints can be recognized.

4.1 From Fear to Acceptance

In Chapter 2, I discussed fantasy's ability to allude to real-life events and issues. Even though fantasy is, by definition, a construct of imagination, it originates from something factual and tangible. Therefore, just as well as fiction that claims to be based on the real world, fantasy literature can, and often does, address real-life topics. For instance, Kenneally (2016, 19) argues that "[p]roblems of definition, identity, boundaries, and transgression are all integral elements of fantasy's history and its development as a genre. These elements all allow fantasy to incorporate, and even embrace, queer elements".

Linus Baker works with orphaned magical children, ensuring they are properly cared for in the orphanages assigned to them. Even though Linus seems to believe that the magical children in the orphanages have a chance of being adopted, it appears that other people do not think so. Already in the first chapter of the novel, when Linus is visiting an orphanage and discussing with its master, the master "snorts" at Linus's statement regarding his outlook on the matter that the magical children "'should be given a chance, as all children should. What hope would they have to be adopted if they're treated as something to be feared?' The master snorted. 'Adopted'" (*The House*, 15). Arthur later makes a similar point: "You know as well as I do that the term orphanage is a misnomer, Mr. Baker. No one comes here looking to adopt" (*The House*, 122).

In addition to no one wanting to adopt orphaned magical children, some people appear to fear their mere existence. The inhabitants of Marsyas make their opinion of the orphanage clear by sending rafts to the island with messages such as "LEAVE. WE DON'T WANT YOUR KIND HERE" (*The House*, 139, emphasis in the original). When Linus finds out about this, he is appalled, but Ms. Chapelwhite knows better: "It's not only this village, Mr. Baker. Just

because you don't experience prejudice in your everyday doesn't stop it from existing for the rest of us" (*The House*, 140). The conversation between Linus and Ms. Chapelwhite continues with her making a statement about the children:

> "And yet these children are separated from their peers."
> [Linus:] "For the safety of others, or course –"
> "Or for their own safety."
> "Isn't that the same thing?"
> She shook her head. "No. And I think you know that."
> He didn't know what to say in response, so he said nothing at all.
> (*The House*, 141)

Ms. Chapelwhite's comment points to the possibility of plain hostility and maybe even violence toward magical beings, even when they are just children. This reminds the reader of the severity of the situation facing the children living in these orphanages.

Even people in positions of power express a level of ignorance and prejudice against magical children. As Linus is being briefed about the assignment, the Extremely Upper Management of DICOMY is certainly ambiguous about what awaits Linus at Marsyas Orphanage:

> "Think of this as more of a checkup," the bespectacled man said. "We haven't received a word of any wrongdoing, but the orphanage you'll be going to is… It's special, Mr. Baker. The orphanage is nontraditional, and the six children who live there are different than anything else you've seen before, some more than others. They're… problematic." […] The six children are of the more extreme variety, and we must make sure that Mr. Parnassus continues to be capable of managing them. One would be a handful, but six of them?" (*The House*, 45)

These attitudes toward children reveal quite clearly their slim chances in society. Most recognize their existence but also see it as a burden. Fear of the unknown is the root cause of these prejudices, especially for the people of Marsyas Village. They have heard about the children who live at the Marsyas Orphanage, but most have not seen them, let alone interacted with them, which causes horrible things to be imagined and unfounded rumors to be spread. When Linus visits the post office of the village, the man working there says to Linus that he should close the orphanage, and when Linus asks why, he replies:

> "There's rumors, you know."
> Linus struggled not to recoil. "No, I don't. What rumors?"
> "Dark things," the man said. "Evil things. Those ain't children. They're monsters who do monstrous things. People go to the island and never return."
> "What people?"
> The man shrugged. "You know. People. They go on out there and are never heard from again." (*The House*, 168–169)

This kind of thinking happens in the real world constantly. People fear what they do not know and are too afraid or stubborn to find out whether their fears are, in fact, rational. At the beginning of his stay at the Marsyas Orphanage, Linus is very scared of the idea of the son of the Devil, the Antichrist, residing there with the other children. As Linus is discussing the children with Arthur for the first time, his assumptions about Lucy become quite clear:

> "Is he…" Linus hesitated. Then, "Is it true? Is he the actual Anti – I mean, the son of the Devil?"
>
> "I believe he is," Mr. Parnassus said, and Linus's breath caught in his throat. "Though the notion of what someone like him is supposed to be is more fiction than fact."
>
> "If that's true, then he's supposed to bring about the End of the Days!" Linus exclaimed.
>
> "He's six years old."
>
> "He proclaimed himself to be hellfire and darkness when he threatened me!"
>
> Mr. Parnassus chuckled. "It was his way of saying hello. He's got a morbid sense of humor for one so young. It's endearing once you get used to it."
>
> Linus gaped at him.
>
> Mr. Parnassus sighed as he leaned forward. "Look, Mr. Baker, I know it's – a lot to swallow, but I've had Lucy for a year. […] Regardless of his parentage, he is a child. And I refuse to believe that a person's path is set in stone. A person is more than where they come from." (*The House*, 123–24)

This conversation clearly addresses the difference between Linus and Arthur. Even though Linus has worked with magical children all his career, he has not lived with them and has never taken the time to get to know any of them on a deeper level, whereas Arthur seems to have a close understanding of his wards and their past. For instance, when Linus points out that Chauncey's dream of becoming a bellhop is absurd due to his appearance, Arthur replies: "I allow him to dream of such things because he's a child, and who knows what the future will bring? Change often starts with the smallest of whispers. Like-minded people building it up to a roar" (*The House*, 118).

The contrasts between Linus and Arthur are highlighted even further as they discuss the children's origins. Linus is shocked to hear that Marsyas is Sal's twelfth orphanage, but when Arthur asks Linus what other options he could have had besides being sent to one of DICOMY's departure-run schools, Linus does not seem to have an answer: "Linus started sweating. 'I don't – I don't suppose I can be sure. I… do what is required of my position, and nothing more.' 'Nothing more?' Mr. Parnassus echoed. 'How unfortunate'" (*The House*, 118). After a while, the discussion gets more heated as Arthur tries to make Linus understand the damage he could cause by filing a negative report about the orphanage:

> "They have no one, Mr. Baker. No one but me. Do you really think DICOMY would allow someone like Lucy into one of their schools? Think hard before you answer."
>
> "That's neither here nor there," Linus said stiffly.
>
> Mr. Parnassus looked toward the ceiling. "Of course it's not. Because that's what happens after you're done, and that's none of your concern." He shook his head. "If you only knew."
>
> "If there isn't anything amiss, then you have nothing to worry about," Linus said. "You may think me callous, Mr. Parnassus, but I assure you I do care. I wouldn't be in this position if I didn't."
>
> "I believe that if you believe that." He looked at Linus again. "My apologies, Mr. Baker. Yes, you will do your job, one way or another. But I think if you opened your eyes, you'll see what's right in front of you rather than what's listed in a file." (*The House*, 125)

Linus's intentions seem pure, and he really believes that he cares about the children he works with. Nevertheless, some of his words reveal that he might be too fond of the rules and regulations provided by DICOMY to see the harsh reality that faces these magical children.

Another instance that shows Linus's ignorance is when Arthur points out that the rules provided by the government regarding the conduct of orphaned magical children were created by humans only. As Linus tries to protest, Arthur asks:

> "In what position? No magical being has ever been in a position of power. Not at DICOMY. Not in any role in the government. They aren't allowed. They're marginalized, no matter their age."
>
> "But… there are *physicians* who are magical. And… lawyers! Yes, *lawyers*. Why, I know a very pleasant lawyer who is a banshee. Very respectable."
>
> "And what sort of law does she practice?"
>
> "She works with magical beings attempting to fight… their registration…."
>
> "Ah," Arthur said. "I see. And the physicians?"
>
> Linus felt his stomach tighten. "They treat only magical beings." (*The House*, 179–180, italics in the original)

These attitudes toward minorities are very common in the real world. Many do not realize the struggles of these groups if they cannot see them or if these struggles do not directly affect their lives. Furthermore, many believe that if they are not actively causing problems to these other groups, then they are not the issue and do not have to do anything about it.

However, due to Linus's unusually long work assignment at the orphanage, he is forced to face his fears and unlearn his initial ideas about Lucy. The more time passes on the island, the more Linus gets to see Lucy in his whole existence, including the friendships and trust he has with the other children and Arthur. Little by little, the fear subsides and leaves room for affection for the small, strange boy. Linus's acceptance of Lucy, as well as his understanding

of the orphanage as a whole, reflects the acceptance of the unknown that people have to learn again and again. Things that are new and that we do not yet understand can feel scary, but judging something without learning about it first is one of our fundamental faults as humans. As Linus becomes aware of his misconceptions about the children, he is able to spread his awareness to others who are still stuck in their ways.

When Linus returns to his job at DICOMY, he is summoned by the Extremely Upper Management to explain his final report. Despite Linus's thorough descriptions from his time in the orphanage, the Extremely Upper Management still seem to be unsure of whether the orphanage should stay open because of their apprehensions about Lucy:

> The woman frowned. […] "If I recall from your last report, his nightmares were capable of manifesting themselves. Someone could have been hurt."
>
> "They could have," Linus agreed. "But they weren't. And it wasn't because *he* wanted to hurt anyone. He's a child who came from darkness. That doesn't have to be who he becomes. And it won't be. Not with who he has around him."
>
> "Would you leave the other children with him?" Jowls asked. "In a locked room with no supervision."
>
> "Yes," Linus said immediately. "Without hesitation. *I* would stay in a locked room with him. Because I trust him. Because I know that no matter where he came from, he is more than the title you've given him." (*The House*, 361, italics in the original)

The Extremely Upper Management still clearly have their presumptions of the children, as well as of Arthur, and cannot seem to get rid of the fear that drives their actions. At this point, however, Linus is not afraid to speak his mind anymore and to make his position on the matters clear:

> [Linus:] "And what of Arthur? Because I think that's why I'm really here, isn't it? Because of what he is. You have classified these children as a level four threat when by all rights they are just like every other child in the world, magical or not. But it was never about them, was it? It was always about Arthur."
>
> "Careful, Mr. Baker," Charles warned. "I told you once I don't like being disappointed, and you are very close to disappointing me."
>
> "No," Linus said. "I will *not* be careful. It may not have been by your hand that he suffered, but it was by your ideals. The ideals of DICOMY. Of a registration. Of the prejudice against them. You allow it to fester, you and all the people before you who sat where you do now. You keep them segregated from everyone else because they're different than the rest of us. People *fear* them because they're taught to. See something, say something. It inspires hatred." (*The House*, 361–362, italics in the original)

After this interaction with the Extremely Upper Management, Linus's mind about DICOMY's policies is made up, and he does not see his work as a caseworker as meaningful as he used to.

Therefore, he attempts to do more for the orphans he knows are being left behind by the system:

> He took his time, going back through his old files, reviewing the reports he'd written for all the orphanages he'd visited, making notes, preparing for a shimmery future he wasn't even sure was in his grasp. He winced at some of what he'd written (most of it, if he was being honest with himself), but he thought it important. Change, he reminded himself, started with the voices of the few. Perhaps it would amount to nothing, but he wouldn't know unless he tried. At the very least, he could follow up with some of the children he'd met before and find out where they were now. And, if all went as he hoped, he wouldn't let them be left behind or forgotten. (*The House*, 367)

This scene shows some serious self-reflection in Linus and the growth he has gone through in the course of the month he spent on the island. He no longer believes that the system he works for serves the best interests of magical children and wants to change these problematic structures.

I argue that through Linus's realization of the issues in treating magical youth in the novel's society, the story alludes to problems in our society through a fantasy world setting. Kenneally (2016, 11) states that fantasy was born from myth and folktale created to explain human experience, and that they "provided explanations for natural phenomena, defined what was culturally appropriate or forbidden, and enabled the formation of tribal, cultural, and individual identities". The acceptance of fantasy creatures in the novel's society draws a clear parallel to accepting queer people in ours: "[I]n order to change the minds of many, you have to first start with the minds of few" (*The House*, 307). Like in the real world, acceptance often starts on an individual level and spreads to larger groups.

4.2 Representation in Fiction

When doing a discourse on queer themes, I believe it is necessary to address the importance of representation. As mentioned in the introduction, fantasy literature can offer those who enjoy reading it an escape from reality and, perhaps, even some perspective on their worldly problems. In addition, works of fantasy can serve as a kind of safe haven for queer people because even if there are no overtly queer characters, the themes of discrimination and not fitting in often depicted in these works can make it easy to identify with the stories as these are feelings that queer people frequently face in real life. Pearson (2009, n.p.) discusses the history of queer theory and points out that

> [i]t is thus unsurprising that queer theoretical work on sf has concentrated at least as much on work that appears "straight" or that even seems, on the surface, to have little to say about sexuality as it has on work by lesbian and gay writers or which overtly addresses sexual and gender issues. Just as feminist critiques of sf reveal the workings of sexist and patriarchal discourses within the genre, so queer critiques of sf reveal the workings of hetero-normativity.

Since the appearance of more and more fantasy literature with overtly queer characters, it has opened up even more opportunities for the genre as well as the discourse to explore these themes that are not only common for queer people, but for all who at some point in their lives have felt marginalized. As Virtanen (2022, 11) states, "[w]hat we write, and read, in fiction will influence our thoughts on reality too", and fantasy possesses the advantage of depicting the impossible as possible which allows it to explore new, queer possibilities for existing.

The House does not only have an openly queer character as its main character but has an openly queer main character whose story does not center around him being queer. His queerness does not affect him negatively, and the struggles he faces are not due to his queerness. Positive depictions of queer people's lives are still scarce and their slow appearance in mainstream media shows a shift in the public's perception of what it means to be queer. As our society becomes more accepting of queerness, the lives of queer people become simpler and less affected by other people's fear and prejudices. This is why representation matters. Virtanen (2022, 9) refers to Levitt's and Ippolito's (2014) study which found that by questioning society's gender norms fictional works were able to help transgender people in self-acceptance, and argues that "consuming media featuring queer people can not only normalize the existence and experiences of this minority to the majority, and potentially make them more accepting towards these minorities, but also help queer people feel more at home in their own identities." Be it in works of fantasy where impossible things happen, the mainstream media we consume reflects the time we live in.

The main plot of the novel, which is the people of Marsyas accepting the magical children living on the island, repeats the age-old lesson of not judging a book by its cover. Nevertheless, it is a lesson that most of us need to learn again and again and, therefore, it does not get tedious, especially if it is presented refreshingly. What makes *The House* refreshing, in my opinion, is its combination of magical creatures and queer characters – human and magical alike – that creates a unique setting for rethinking queer and reminding us that acceptance is easier than hate. As Bennett and Royle (2009, 218) note, "[s]ome of the strangeness or uncanniness, some of the power and fascination of literary texts, that is to say,

has to do with the singular space which they offer for thinking (differently) about gender and sexuality".

When discussing the representation of marginalized groups in literature, it brings forth the question of who is "entitled" to write about what and whether the author's identity should match that of their characters. It does, of course, create a sense of credibility when the author has first-hand experience of what they project onto their characters. However, the solution for this is not black and white, since determining how closely the identities should match one another can turn out to be more difficult than expected. Furthermore, in fiction specifically, writers sometimes imagine identities that do not even exist (yet). According to Owen (2023, 9), who writes about the possible issues regarding "#OwnVoices representation", "the nonlinearity and fluidity of queer phenomena is such that fiction can be an ideal place for writers to explore experiences and identities that have not yet been named or even imagined and therefore cannot be claimed by authors". In addition, Owen (2023, 17–18) discusses the difficulty of depicting marginalized characters because of existing prejudices and bias and suggests that

> [s]ometimes, the challenge of depicting marginalized characters with full human dimensionality requires stepping to the side of 'reality' as we know it, stepping to the side of what is normal or expected, so as to rewrite existing social realities of harm. I think ethical relationality, one informed by recognition and respect for the complex personhood and unknowability of others, makes these types of portrayals more possible and more likely.

In other words, instead of focusing too much on who is allowed to do what, as long as writers recognize their shortcomings in creating characters with divergent backgrounds and origins, they should be able to depict characters who represent different, lived or imagined, experiences. Owen (2023, 18) concludes by stating that there will always be certain ethical concerns that writers must take into consideration and that the relationship between the writer and the reader "is an impossible relation, […] only insofar as it is always partial and fleeting, punctuated by social power dynamics, limited by the constraints of language and meaning. We must try to do it anyway. We cannot live without it". In addition, White (1997, 382) defends fiction as the perfect way to demonstrate human feelings and argues that

> [t]hat our feelings run high when we discuss queer fiction only attests to the central role it plays in the formation of our new culture. It sometimes seems more people discuss fiction than read it, but this intense scrutiny, even anxiety, reveals that for us, perhaps more than for any other group, fiction is a way of preserving the past, recording the present, creating the future.

Thus, there will always be problems and risks with representation, but this should not stop writers from creating stories that speak about their experiences, be they based on real events or hopes that can, for now, only be imagined.

When it comes to *The House* and its author, however, it is safe to say that the author's identity is quite similar to that of his main character, Linus. Klune is a 42-year-old Caucasian male and queer (tjklunebooks 2022), so he is probably, at least to an extent, drawing from his own experiences as a queer man. Nevertheless, writing fantasy allows him to portray his characters in a positive light in an imagined reality where being queer does not have negative impacts on the individuals. Therefore, the fantasy setting allows the author to imagine a world where being gay is a neutral factor in one's life. Owen (2023, 14) elaborates on their ideas about authenticity by arguing that we feel more authentic when we can choose our own meanings and names and that this can also be sensed in others, including fictional characters: "Authenticity is much more about how we inhabit the world around us, what we do and how we feel when we do not act out of fear or need to be found acceptable". With his novel, Klune is able to do both, depict positive and authentic representations of queer characters and push the limits of reality by imagining a world where queer people can live without the fear of being scrutinized for their identities.

4.3 The Sequel

The House got a sequel in 2024 while this thesis was in process. After reading it, I decided it would be beneficial to add here a section where I could elaborate on the themes of discrimination, acceptance and, as a new addition, generational trauma, which continue to develop in this sequel. *Somewhere Beyond the Sea* (2024) is told from Arthur's point of view, delving deeper into his past and providing more insights into his character. This change in perspective also gives the reader a clearer perception of Arthur's feelings about the children and Linus, which adds to the affectionate tone of the series.

In the sequel, in addition to the bonds between the children and their father figures growing stronger, the fight for magical beings' rights expands. Marsyas Village has now become a safe destination for magical creatures to visit and inhabit, but the rest of the world is still divided about whether they should have the same rights as humans. Arthur and Linus are in the process of adopting the six children who live in the orphanage, and they also want to help other children in need of a home. However, it seems that in the government, there are people

who want to put a stop to these pursuits. A day before Arthur and Linus head to the city to attend a hearing regarding Arthur's past, which will be broadcast to the entire country, Arthur wants to explain the hearing's meaning to his children:

> "But this isn't just about me or even us. It's about the wider magical world, and what we want going forward. The changes that must be made. The laws that must be repealed to make way for a world where anyone and everyone has a chance to be free to do with their lives what they wish."
>
> "That sounds like a lot of work," Talia said, tugging the end of her beard, something she did when she was thinking hard.
>
> "It does," Arthur said. "Because it will be." He looked at each of them in turn. "I won't lie to you. The road ahead will not be smooth. No matter what I – *we* say, there will always be those who refuse to accept the truth. They surround themselves with likeminded people, and it creates an echo chamber that's nigh impossible to escape." (Klune 2024, 38, italics in the original)

Furthermore, in the sequel, significant topics of human rights are brought up that were not mentioned in *The House*. In one instance, Linus is telling Arthur about a government worker who supported a legislation

> that would have made it illegal for children who came from queer families to talk about them, saying that it would only confuse children who came from *proper* families. There were even rumblings about coming down hard on parents of transgender children seeking medical care. (Klune 2024, 67, italics in the original)

This indicates that the society of the novels has not always been as accepting of queer people as suggested in *The House*, and that even in this fantasy realm no minority group has had their rights handed to them for free.

This issue is mentioned another time when the children explain to Arthur and Linus why they should be allowed to join the fight against the government's plan to take them away from their fathers, and Sal has a powerful point:

> "[Y]ou can't be everything to us," Sal said. "No matter what you're capable of, the power both of you have, you can't understand certain things. I have to navigate three worlds. Being human. Being magical. Being black. Can you help with two of those? Yeah, you can. But you know nothing of the last. You can't. That's something I need to figure out. Luckily, I don't have to do it alone."
>
> "You don't," Zoe agreed.
>
> "Bigotry comes in all forms," Sal said, "not just against magical people. It wasn't too long ago that you and Linus couldn't get married, and look at you now." (Klune 2024, 302)

The sequel not only confirms the hardships of being queer in the novel's society, but also those related to ethnical background. It seems that by expanding the issues of being

discriminated against to other minority groups besides magical beings, the sequel further asserts the meaning of acceptance and compassion.

The other battle for acceptance that takes place in the sequel is with Arthur trying to become at peace with himself and his "inner monster", the phoenix. In his past, Arthur has been mistreated and even physically punished for it, which, understandably, creates conflicted feelings within himself. It also appears that the government is trying to use his identity against him in an attempt to find reasons for shutting down the orphanage and taking the children away from him. These inner conflicts Arthur deals with create contradictions with his attempts to teach the children to be themselves while he himself struggles with it. Linus tries his best to help Arthur overcome his fears, which places these two characters in opposite roles compared to the first novel: Linus, in a way, becomes Arthur's mentor as Arthur has to find the courage to fight his inner demons.

An interesting discussion takes place between Arthur and Lucy about the moral quandaries of acting upon others' beliefs about a person being a monster, and the frustration of being seen as a monster even though one has not given any cause to it. Lucy suggests that he could use his powers to change all the people's minds who fear him and his siblings only because they are magical and make them believe that they are not scary. Arthur asks Lucy whether he believes that it would be morally right to rid people of their free will, and while Lucy seems to understand the dilemma, he also has an insightful question:

> [Arthur:] "But if we were to take away those monsters – either real or imaginary – by imposing your wants and whims upon those who fear you, what would they have learned?"
>
> "Nothing," Lucy said begrudgingly.
>
> "That's right," Arthur said with a nod. "They wouldn't have learned anything because they were never given the chance. That's why free will is important. It gives us the potential to change minds."
>
> "But why is that up to us?" Lucy asked. "Why do *we* have to be the bigger people and teach them? Shouldn't that be their responsibility?
>
> "In a perfect world, yes", Arthur said. "They would endeavor to dismantle their prejudices and welcome those who are different with open arms. But we don't live in such a world, and we must do what we can with what we have." He leaned forward. "However, you are correct. It *shouldn't* be up to us to prove we are not a threat. And yet, we find ourselves in the unenviable position of having to do exactly that." (Klune 2024, 190–191, italics in the original)

Throughout the novel, Arthur has these insightful conversations with his children, and their intellectual maturity never ceases to amaze him. One night, Arthur finds Phee alone in the

garden, practicing her magic. While discussing the threat that the orphanage faces and what they could do about it, Arthur asks Phee whether there is anything that her heart desires. After a moment of gathering up her courage, Phee asks Arthur if he would want to fly with her, which takes him by surprise:

> She mistook his shock for reluctance. "It's okay," she said. "You don't have to." She shook her head. "Sorry. We… we talked about it. After you told us what you are. But we weren't sure if *you* wanted to talk about it anymore."
>
> "Why would you think that?" he asked gruffly.
>
> "Because you don't let the phoenix out very often," she said. "You keep it hidden away, like a secret. And we get why. After what you went through here" – she said it hurriedly, with a wince – "it must be hard to even think about the phoenix. And after what that nasty woman made you do at the hearing, I guess you don't want to –"
>
> He stood, extending his hand. She took it without hesitation, allowing him to pull her up. Leading her down the gazebo steps, he squeezed her hand and said to his daughter, "It would be my honor."
>
> The fire came, then, the phoenix rising with a piercing cry. Flames overtook Arthur, but they did not burn Phee. They could never. He was hers, and she was his. He would rather die than harm her, or any of them. As he sank into the phoenix, his mind shifted, changed, the troublesome thoughts of humanity falling away. His vision sharpened as he and the phoenix became one, a crystal clarity impossible with human eyes. (Klune 2024, 273–274, italics in the original)

This interaction between Phee and Arthur shows the children's understanding of Arthur, even if he is still hesitant to fully embrace his being a powerful magical creature around them. For a little while, Arthur gets to be himself, surrounded by love and trust.

However, when he accidentally finds out about a governmental plan to abduct Lucy from the island and blackmail him into using his powers in the government's favor, the "monster side" of Arthur's phoenix starts to raise its head:

> No matter what he did, he couldn't stop the fury from growing. It latched on to him, a black shroud wrapped snugly around his shoulders. Sticky. Understanding. Knowing. *Come into the darkness where it's safer*, it whispered. *They think you a monster. Why not give them what they ask for?* (Klune 2024, 288, italics in the original)

Eventually, Arthur's anger gets to the point where he considers telling Lucy to execute his plan of forcing people into believing that magical beings are not to be feared:

> And it *was*, wasn't it? Another day. And then another and then another, where the screws were being tightened, where the shadow of the government stretched long, and he *wanted* to go to Lucy. Wanted to open the door to his room […] and say, "You were right. We can't win. Do what you have to do. Don't hurt anyone, but take their fear away. Take their anger. Take their hatred, their bigotry, and remake the world as it should be." (Klune 2024, 290, italics in the original)

Shortly after this, Arthur's fury reaches a climax as he turns into the phoenix and flies out of the window to the sea to make sure he will not hurt anyone as his anger explodes. Later, washed up to the shore of the island as a man again, he has a moment of self-pity and allows himself, for the first time, to feel the grief he has carried for so long for everyone who has been mistreated because of who they are. After this, with Linus's help, he is able to pick himself up and return home to his children.

Somewhere Beyond the Sea continues the themes of its predecessor and further establishes the meaning of acceptance and understanding beyond differences. The story explores the complexities of identity, the long-lasting effects of discrimination and the personal growth required to overcome internal and external struggles. Arthur's fear of passing down his insecurities and struggles to his children is a powerful allegory for how the discrimination of a certain group can cause trauma that passes down to generations that did not have to suffer first-hand but will through their antecedents.

Just like *The House*, I do not believe that the sequel attempts to come up with groundbreaking new ideas about how to fight discrimination and bigotry but instead aims to remind the reader of the simplicity of being compassionate and accepting to make the world slightly more humane.

5 Conclusions

In this thesis, I have examined TJ Klune's novel *The House in the Cerulean Sea* intending to showcase the compatibility between fantasy literature and queer themes. The story features a gay main character and queer romantic relationships. Still, the main focus is on the orphaned magical children and the struggles they face in a human-led society. In the beginning, I set the questions of what purpose a queer character serves in a fantasy world setting and where queer literature's power resides when the plots do not center so closely around the characters' queerness anymore.

"Helen scoffed. 'A home isn't always the house we live in. It's also the people we choose to surround ourselves with. You may not live on the island, but you can't tell me it's not your home. Your bubble, Mr. Baker. It's been popped.'" (*The House*, 283). It takes Linus a while, but eventually, he realizes that he has found a place where he truly belongs: on Marsyas Island with six exceptional children and their unusual guardian. He can choose this family as his own, just like many queer people who have chosen families instead of their biological families that did not accept them as they were.

This island and house of magical inhabitants provide Linus with a home, just like fantasy can offer a home for those who do not feel comfortable in their reality. Fantasy offers a space where difficult societal topics can be discussed from different perspectives to make them more approachable. Butler (2004, 29) expresses this followingly:

> How do drag, butch, femme, transgender, transsexual persons enter into the political field? They make us not only question what is real, and what 'must' be, but they also show us how the norms that govern contemporary notions and reality can be questioned […] [which] makes us see how realities to which we thought we were confined are not written in stone.

Being openly queer automatically places one in the center of political discussion, whether one intends to be part of this discussion or not. Like fantasy literature, being queer and discussing queer topics have always been forms of questioning society's ideologies about what is and is not "normal" and challenging these views.

Establishing the novel within the fantasy genre gave insights into fantasy literature's origins and purpose. Fantasy literature relies on certain conventions, like predictable plots and character archetypes, to keep the story recognizable enough while pushing the limits of imagination and stretching the perspectives of what is considered possible. These findings led

to a deeper understanding of the story's allusions to reality. A fantasy world setting allows the writer to insinuate issues happening in the real world by creating a fantasy world where the rules of what is possible and what is not can be turned upside down. For instance, Battis (2007, 14) states that

> [w]hen the institutional structures of the social world declare your life itself to be a fantasy, even as they grudgingly accept your coital relations as an unpleasant but necessary crisis to be managed within the larger scene of transgression or abnormality, then fantasy necessarily becomes a cipher for the interpretation of your mode of life, your life-style.

Hence, even before the emergence of fantasy literature with openly queer characters, the genre has offered its queer readers material within which to find themselves.

Examining the two main characters of the novel more closely led to the conclusion that Linus and Arthur represent typical fantasy character archetypes, while their queerness makes them less typical. Providing an analysis of these two characters deepened my understanding of the power of depicting familiar character types in a new light. Linus can be seen as the modern hero, not characterized by traits of bravery and nobility but rather by his humane attributes that make his character easy to identify with. Arthur, in contrast, represents the mentor character, typical in fantasy literature, whose primary purpose usually lies in helping the hero to complete their quest. However, with his secret, Arthur turns out to be a more complex character and, eventually, he plays a much larger role in Linus's story as the two fall in love and decide to adopt the six children. Therefore, Linus and Arthur can be seen to represent a new development of queer characters who are not defined by their suffering and, in the end, prosper.

One of the main themes I have explored in this thesis has been *acceptance* and how the acceptance of the magical children in the story reflects the acceptance of queer people in the real world. The fantasy setting in the novel allows for controversial subjects to be discussed in a new light, as the main character comes to understand just how complicated the lives of orphaned magical children can be in a societal system that was not built for their benefit. Magical beings represent a minority that are seen by many as "queer" since they deviate from the norms of being a human. This is how the fantasy world setting of the novel ties well together with queerness: "Magic makes all characters queer, in a sense, since it places them at a remove from normal human relations, but it also releases a potentially global queerness, a

force like an enormous spell that can change human relations, bodies, psyches, class positions, and gender expressions" (Battis 2007, 261).

I have also discussed the significance of *representation* in fictional literature and the possible issue of writing outside of one's own identity. How marginalized groups are depicted in fiction is as important as in non-fiction, and even though the representation of queer people has come a long way in showcasing positive portrayals of these people and their lives, it can still be challenging to find stories that do not focus on the adversities of being queer. Even though these stories will always be meaningful for understanding what queer people have had to suffer through in order to get to where we are today as a society, there is now a longing for stories of queer people being happy and prospering, and not just despite their queerness, but because of it. When it comes to the possible issue of writing outside of one's identity, I came to the conclusion that it is authenticity that matters the most and that writers should be allowed to explore new possible identities as long as they remain respectful and informed of these identities that do not necessarily align with theirs. What Klune has managed to do is create a queer story with queer characters who live in a world where their identity is not a source of conflict, and this allows for a new, desperately needed positive representation.

Finally, I have briefly examined the sequel *Somewhere Beyond the Sea* to *The House in the Cerulean Sea* to see whether the themes established in the first novel would be continued and expanded on as the narrative perspective changes from Linus to Arthur. The sequel not only continues the themes of its predecessor but also brings forth new dimensions for acceptance as it deals with Arthur's struggles to accept himself. The consequences of trauma are also present in the novel as it alludes to the fear of passing on trauma from one generation to the next.

These are significant topics to discuss in any context, and with my analysis of *The House in the Cerulean Sea* and its sequel, I hope to have demonstrated just how effective fantasy literature can be in addressing controversial subjects. Now that queer characters and themes do not have to be sought out in literature anymore, new perspectives for queer literature's potential await to be examined in the discipline. With this thesis, I hope to have piqued an interest for broader acknowledgment of the prospects that fantasy can offer in discussing queer themes.

References

Primary sources

Klune, TJ. [2020] 2021. *The House in the Cerulean Sea*. London: Tor.

Secondary sources

Attebery, Brian. 1992. *Strategies of Fantasy*. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

Battis, Jes. 2007. "Queer Spellings: Magic and Melancholy in Fantasy-Fiction". PhD Dissertation. Simon Fraser University. Summit Research Repository https://summit.sfu.ca/item/8288.

Bennet, Andrew and Royle, Nicholas. 2009. *An Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory*. 4th Edition. Harlow: Pearson.

Britannica. The Editors of Encyclopaedia. s.v. 'fantasy'. *Encyclopedia Britannica*, September 17, 2024. https://www.britannica.com/art/fantasy-narrative-genre. Accessed March 26, 2025.

— —. s.v. 'archetype'. *Encyclopedia Britannica*, January 27, 2025. https://www.britannica.com/topic/archetype. Accessed April 14, 2025.

Butler, Judith. 2002. *Gender Trouble: Tenth Anniversary Edition*. London: Routledge. ProQuest Ebook Central. [Originally in 1992]

— —. 2004. *Undoing Gender*. Oxford: Taylor & Francis Group. ProQuest Ebook Central.

Chandler, Daniel and Munday, Rod. 2011. s.v. 'queer theory'. *A Dictionary of Media and Communication*. Oxford University Press. https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/acref/9780199568758.001.0001/acref-9780199568758-e-2220. Accessed September 29, 2024.

Holen, Jarle. 2024. "Revelio – Revealing What Is Hidden between the Lines: A Queer Reading of the Harry Potter Novels". MA Thesis. Oslo Metropolitan University. Oslomet Open Digital Archive. https://hdl.handle.net/11250/3162370.

Jagose, Annamarie. 1996. *Queer Theory: An Introduction*. New York: New York University Press.

Jackson, Rosemary. 2003. *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*. Oxford: Routledge. ProQuest Ebook Central. [Orig. 1981.]

Jung, C. G. 1969. *The Collected Works of C. G. Jung, Volume 9 (Part 1): Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. ProQuest Ebook Central.

Kenneally, Stephen. 2016. “Queer Be Dragons: Mapping LGBT Fantasy Novels 1987–2000”. PhD Dissertation. University of Dublin, Trinity College.

Klune, TJ. 2024. *Somewhere Beyond the Sea*. London: Tor.

Livingston, Michael. 2006. “The Shell-shocked Hobbit: The First World War and Tolkien’s Trauma of the Ring”. *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature* 25, no. 1, article 6: 77–92. https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol25/iss1/6. Accessed October 12, 2024.

Mendlesohn, Farah. 2009. “Going Boldly on … to the 1950’s?” *Science Fiction Studies* 36, no. 3 (SFS Symposium: Sexuality in Science Fiction): 385–403. http://www.jstor.org/stable/40649545. Accessed March 26, 2025.

Olsen, Lisa Therese. 2013. “The Ethics of Albus Dumbledore: A Critical Discussion of Professor Dumbledore as a Moral Leader and Ideal in the Harry Potter Series.” MA Thesis. University of Oslo. UiO vitenarkiv. http://hdl.handle.net/10852/37051.

Owen, Gabrielle. 2023. “Impossible Relations, Ethical Relations: The Stakes of #OwnVoices Representation in LGBTQ Young Adult Fiction.” *International Journal of Young Adult Literature* 4, no. 1. DOI: 10.24877/ijyal.125. Accessed March 26, 2025.

Pearson, Wendy Gay. 2009. “30. Queer Theory (Part II: Theory)”, *The Routledge Companion to Science Fiction*, edited by Mark Bould, Andrew M. Butler and Adam Roberts. Abingdon: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group. ProQuest Ebook Central.

Ramaswamy, Shobha. 2014. “Archetypes in Fantasy Fiction: A Study of J. R. R. Tolkien and J. K. Rowling.” *Language in India* 14, no. 1: 402–670. https://research-ebsco-com.ezproxy.utu.fi/linkprocessor/plink?id=b9ea3f6c-7dd1-3b83-8664-91bc02606cf7

Smith, David. 2007. “Dumbledore was gay, JK tells amazed fans.” *The Guardian*. October 21, 2007. https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2007/oct/21/film.books. Accessed March 26, 2025.

tjklunebooks. 2022. TJ Klune’s website. https://www.tjklunebooks.com/about. Accessed March 7, 2025.

Virtanen, Essi. 2022. “The Representation of Queer Identities in Terry Pratchett’s Discworld.” MA Thesis. University of Turku. UTUPub. https://urn.fi/URN:NBN:fi-fe2022061446418.

White, Edmund. 1997. “The Personal Is Political: Queer Fiction and Criticism.” In *Queer Representations: Reading Lives, Reading Cultures*, edited by Martin Duberman. A Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies book. New York: New York University Press.

Appendix – Finnish Summary

Pro gradu -tutkielmani tarkastelee queer-teemoja TJ Klunen fantasiakirjassa *The House in the Cerulean Sea* (suom. *Talo taivaansinisellä merellä*) päämääränä selvittää, mitä tarkoitusta fantasiamaailma palvelee queer-teemojen valossa. Kirjan päähenkilö Linus on avoimesti homoseksuaali hahmo ja tarinassa nähdään myös samaa sukupuolta edustavien romanttisia suhteita, mutta pääjuoni keskittyy orpoihin maagisiin lapsiin, joiden parissa Linus työskentelee. Pyrin tutkielmassani osoittamaan, että kirjan fantasiamaailma toimii hyvänä alustana vaikeiden yhteiskunnallisten aiheiden käsittelylle. Lisäksi argumentoin, että kirjan maagiset lapset, joita yhteiskunta vieroksuu, toimivat vertauskuvana queer-ihmisten kokemalle sosiaaliselle diskriminaatiolle.

The House in the Cerulean Sea (2020) sijoittuu fantasiamaailmaan, jossa ihmiset ja maagiset olennot elävät yhdessä, mutta eivät ongelmitta. Vain ihmiset työskentelevät korkeissa asemissa ja maagisten olentojen tulee olla rekisteröityneitä, jotta heitä ja heidän toimiaan pystytään seuraamaan (ja kontrolloimaan). Linus Baker on 40-vuotias ihminen ja sosiaalityöntekijä. Linuksen työ koostuu vierailuista maagisten lasten orpokoteihin, joissa hän selvittää, että lapsista pidetään asianmukaista huolta ja raportoi käynneistään valtion virastolle, joka vastaa maagisista lapsista ja nuorista. Eräänä päivänä Linus saa kutsun ylemmän johtoportaan luokse, missä Linukselle selviää, että hänet halutaan lähettää salaiselle tarkastuskäynnille orpokotiin, josta hän ei ole koskaan ennen kuullut. Epävarmuuden kourissa Linus jättää tylsän ja turvallisen elämänsä kaupungissa ja suuntaa Marsyaksen saarelle kuukaudeksi suorittamaan saamaansa tehtävää. Marsyaksen orpokodissa hän kohtaa kuusi epätavallista – ja ylemmän johtoportaan mukaan vaarallista – maagista lasta sekä heidän erikoislaatuisten huoltajansa, Arthur Parnassuksen. Eniten huolta orpokodin asukkaista Linuksessa herättää 6-vuotias Lucy (lyhenteenä Luciferista), joka on itse paholaisen jälkeläinen. Ajan kuluessa Linus alkaa kuitenkin ymmärtämään niin Lucya kuin muitakin orpokodin ”eriskummallisia” asukkaita ja lopulta Linus ei pysty enää kieltämään hänessä heränneitä hellyyden ja suojelun tunteita näitä kohtaan.

Tutkielmassani hyödynnän fantasiakirjallisuuden tutkimusta ja viittaan pääosin Atteberyn uraauurtavaan *Strategies of Fantasy* -teokseen (1992). Fantasiakirjallisuuden yleisimpiin elementteihin kuuluvat maagiset olennot, vaihtoehtoiset todellisuudet sekä seikkailut, joita kaikkia löytyy myös *The House in the Cerulean Sea* -teoksesta. Kirjan määritteleminen fantasiagenreen kuuluvaksi mahdollistaa syvemmän ymmärryksen fantasian alkuperistä ja sen

tarjoamista mahdollisuuksista. Fantasia rikkoo todellisuuden rajoja, mutta kumpuaa kuitenkin aina todellisuudesta, sillä ilman sitä fantasia olisi liian vaikeasti ymmärrettävää. Parhaimmillaan fantasia yhdistää sopivissa määrin todellista ja epätodellista, jolloin sillä on kyky venyttää todellisuuden rajoja ja esittää uusia mahdollisuuksia.

Toinen teoria, johon pohjaan tutkielmani analyysia on queer-teoria, joka muodostui 1990-luvulla kyseenalaistamaan ja purkamaan tiettyjä ennalta määriteltyjä käsitteitä seksuaalisuudesta ja sukupuolesta. Queer-teoria sopii hyvin kirjan teemojen tarkasteluun, sillä kirja sisältää hahmoja, jotka ovat avoimesti queer, eli heidän identiteettinsä poikkeavat tavalla tai toisella cissukupuolisesta ja heteroseksuaalisesta ”oletusarvosta”. Tämän lisäksi argumentoin, että queer-teoria soveltuu yleisesti fantasiakirjallisuuden tutkimukseen, sillä fantasiamaailmat ja -hahmot ovat lähtökohtaisesti outoja eli ”queer”. Näiden näkökulmien tarkasteluun hyödynnän muun muassa Battisin väitöskirjaa “Queer Spellings: Magic and Melancholy in Fantasy-Fiction” (2007) ja Kenneallyn väitöskirjaa “Queer Be Dragons: Mapping LGBT Fantasy Novels 1987–2000” (2016). Nämä tekstit käsittelevät juuri queer-fantasiakirjallisuutta ja tarjosivat inspiraation tutkimuskysymyksilleni.

Tutkielman analyysiosio alkaa kirjan pääkohtien tiivistelmällä, jota seuraa eksplisiittisten queer-teemojen tarkastelu fantasiakirjallisuudelle lajityypillisten konventioiden valossa. Näitä lähtökohtia yhdistäen teen loppupäätelmän, että kirjan fantasiamaailma tarjoaa uniikin miljöön, jossa queer-hahmot voivat elää ilman yhteiskunnan jatkuvaa tarkkailua. Näin fantasia voi haastaa todellisuuden näkemykset ennakkoluuloista ja muistuttaa lukijaa yhteiskunnan puutteista. Laajennan queer-teemojen tutkimista edelleen keskittyen analyysissani kirjan kahteen päähahmoon, Linukseen ja orpokodin johtajaan, Arthuriin, josta muodostuu Linuksen romanttinen mielenkiinnon kohde. Analyysin apuna hyödynnän fantasiakirjallisuudelle tyypillisiä henkilöhahmotulkintoja ja totean, että Linus edustaa modernia sankaria, jonka hyvyys ja kyvykkyys ei kumpua hänen epätavallisesta rohkeudestaan, vaan siitä, että hän edustaa helposti samaistuttavaa hahmoa, joka muiden avulla onnistuu löytämään rohkeuden ja toimimaan omien aatteidensa mukaisesti.

Arthur sen sijaan edustaa fantasiakirjallisuudessa usein tavattua ”mentorihahmoa” ja vertaankin analyysissani Arthurin hahmoa Harry Potter -sarjasta tuttuun Albus Dumbledoreen. Molemmat hahmot kuvataan aluksi viisaiksi, moraalisesti vankoiksi ”oppi-isiksi”, joiden päätarkoitus vaikuttaa teosten alussa olevan tarinan sankarin avustaminen tämän matkalla. Kuitenkin niin Dumbledoresta kuin Arthurista paljastuu tarinan edetessä

yllättäviä seikkoja, jotka tekevät näistä hahmoista monitulkintaisempia kuin aluksi voisi olettaa. Arthurin salaisuudeksi paljastuu hänen todellinen olemuksensa, eli se että hän on maaginen olento, feenikslintu, joka Potter-kirjasarjassa on myös Dumbledoren lemmikki ja suojelius-eläin. Tämän lisäksi Potter-kirjojen kirjoittajan Rowlingin paljastus siitä, että hän näki Dumbledoren homoseksuaalina henkilöhahmona lisää entisestään näiden kahden hahmojen yhtäläisyyttä. Tämän perusteella argumentoin, että Arthur on uudelleenkirjoitettu versio Dumbledoresta, queer-mentorihahmosta, joka on fantasiakirjallisuudelle tyypilliseen tapaan joutunut uhraamaan itsensä sankarin onnistumisen edellytyksenä, mutta Arthur saa jatkaa tarinaansa Linuksen rinnalla ja heille suodaan onnellinen loppu. Tämän vuoksi kirja edustaa minusta fantasiakirjallisuuden uutta aaltoa, jossa vanhoja konventioita voidaan uudistaa niitä kuitenkin edelleen kunnioittaen.

Yksi kirjan pääteemoista, jonka valitsin tarkasteltavaksi, on hyväksyntä, sillä koen, että se tuo ilmi fantasiamaailman ja todellisuuden yhteyden. Linuksen pelko Lucya kohtaan hänen saapuessaan Marsyaksen saarelle sekä hänen ymmärtämättömyytensä orpokodin lasten kohtaamasta todellisuudesta muistuttavat suuresti tosielämän tilanteita, jossa ihmiset pelkäävät ja luovat ennakkoluuloja asioista, joita he eivät tiedä. Linuksen viettäessä kuukauden saarella hän ei voi muutakaan kuin alkaa näkemään Lucyn tämän kokonaisuudessaan, 6-vuotiaana kekseliäänä poikana, joka kärsii toisinaan kamalista painajaisista, mutta välittää syvästi kasvattisisaruksistaan ja -isästään. Linus alkaa myös käsittää, kuinka huonot mahdollisuudet orvoille maagisille lapsille on yhteiskunnassa suotu, ja palatessaan kuukauden kuluttua takaisin varsinaisen työnsä pariin, hän pyrkii korjaamaan menneisyytensä virheitä selvittämällä, mitä niille lapsille tapahtui, joiden orpokodit suljettiin. Linuksen läpikäymä kasvun ja itsereflektion taival kuvastaa queer-ihmisten hidasta sosiaalista hyväksyntää, mikä alkaa usein yksilötasolta, josta se leviää suurempiin ryhmiin.

Queer-aiheita ja -teemoja käsiteltäessä on tärkeää puhua myös representaatiosta ja sen tuomista hyödyistä sekä haasteista. Niin kuin kirjallisuudessa, joka pyrkii kuvaamaan todellisuutta, myös fiktiossa marginalisoitujen ryhmien kuvaileminen vahvistaa sitä, miten nämä ryhmät nähdään todellisuudessa. Toisin sanoen representaatiolla on väliä ja negatiivisia ja harhaanjohtavia kuvailuja tulisi aina pyrkiä välttämään. Tähän aiheeseen liittyen pohdin myös sitä, kuinka tiiviisti kirjailijan ja hänen henkilöhahmojensa identiteettien tulisi sopia yhteen ja kenellä on oikeus kirjoittaa yhteiskunnassa marginalisoitujen ryhmien tarinoita. Viittaan kappaleessa ensisijaisesti Owenin (2023) artikkeliin “Impossible Relations, Ethical Relations: The Stakes of #OwnVoices Representation in LGBTQ Young Adult Fiction”, jossa

puhutaan eettisyyden ja hienovaraisuuden merkityksestä fiktiivistenkin henkilöhahmojen luomisprosessissa. Näitä ajatuksia tulkiten argumentoin, että niin kauan kuin kirjailijat tiedostavat omat vajavaisuutensa heillä tulisi olla oikeus tutkia uusia identiteetin mahdollisuuksia, vaikka ne eroavaisivatkin heidän omastaan, sillä juuri tällaiselle innovatiivisuudelle fiktio on oiva alusta. 40-vuotiaana ja queeriksi itsensä identifioivana Klunen kohdalla voidaan todeta, että kirjailijan ja hänen henkilöhahmonsa Linuksen identiteetit ovat hyvinkin samanlaisia. Tämän vuoksi voidaan olettaa, että Klune hyödyntää teoksessaan omia kokemuksiaan, mikä luo tarinalle uskottavuuden tuntua.

Useat aikaisemmat kirjalliset teokset queer-ihmisistä ovat keskittyneet heidän kohtaamiin ennakkoluulohin ja vastoinkäymisiin. Representaation kannalta olisi kuitenkin tärkeää myös esittää positiivisia kuvauksia queer-ihmisten elämistä, minkä avulla queer normalisoituisi yhteiskunnassa. Queer-kirjailijana Klune on onnistunut luomaan teoksen, joka tarjoaa positiivisia kuvauksia queer-yksilöistä vaarantamatta kuitenkaan sen uskottavuutta. *The House in the Cerulean Sea* kuvastaa queer-hahmoja, joiden queerness ei vaikuta millään tavalla heidän elämiinsä. Kirjan fantasiamaailma luo mahdollisuuden kuvastaa queer-identiteettejä sellaisessa yhteiskunnassa, jossa seksuaalinen suuntautuminen on neutraali seikka, joka ei vaikuta yksilön elämään niin hyvässä kuin pahassakaan.

Tutkielmani viimeisessä osiossa tarkastelen *The House in the Cerulean Sea* -teoksen jatko-osaa *Somewhere Beyond the Sea*, joka julkaistiin vuonna 2024. Jatko-osan tarkastelun tarkoituksena on selvittää, kuinka tutkielmassa jo käsiteltyjä teemoja mahdollisesti syvennetään ja mitä uusia näkökulmia tuodaan esiin. Tarinan kertojaäänen siirtyessä jatko-osassa Arthurille, hänestä muodostuu myös kirjan päähahmo. Kirjassa syvennytään Arthurin hankalaan menneisyyteen ja sen jättämiin arpiin, joiden vuoksi hänen on edelleen vaikeaa hyväksyä itsensä täysin. Tämä luo ristiriitoja hänen yrittäessään kasvattaa lapsiaan olemaan ylpeä itsestään sellaisina kuin he ovat. Edeltäjänsä teemoja jatkaessaan *Somewhere Beyond the Sea* käsittelee myös sukupolvien välisen trauman mahdollisuutta Arthurin navigoidessa isän roolia samalla kun hän kamppailee ”sisäisen hirviönsä” eli feeniksinsä kanssa.

Somewhere Beyond the Sea laajentaa hyväksynnän teemaa itsensä hyväksymiseen ja sen merkitykseen. Edeltäjänsä tavoin kirja ei pyri ratkaisemaan ennakkoluuloista ja syrjinnästä johtuvia yhteiskunnallisia ongelmia, mutta muistuttaa lukijaa myötätunnon ja hyväksynnän voimasta ja siitä kuinka pienilläkin teoilla voi olla suuret seuraukset. Lopputulokseni

analyysistäni on, että kirjojen fantasiamaailma tarjoaa kelvollisen alustan mahdottomilta tuntuvien todellisuuksien esittelylle.

Tutkielmassani käsittelemät teemat ovat merkityksellisiä missä tahansa kontekstissa ja toivon, että analyysini *The House in the Cerulean Sea* -kirjasta ja sen jatko-osasta tarjoaa esimerkin siitä, kuinka sopiva alusta fantasiakirjallisuus voi olla kiisteltyjen aiheiden käsittelylle ja niiden pohtimiselle uudessa valossa. Nykyään kun queer-hahmoja ja -teemoja on helpompi löytää myös valtavirran kirjallisuudesta, uuden näkökulmat queer-kirjallisuuden potentiaalisuudesta odottavat tutkimista. Tutkielmani myötä toivon herättäneeni kiinnostusta laajemmalle tunnustukselle fantasian mahdollisuuksista käsitellä queer-teemoja.