

**Magical Children as Metaphors for Nonconformity: A Queer Reading of TJ
Klune's *The House in the Cerulean Sea***

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Abstract

Fantasy is a literary genre that can provide a platform for marginalized voices to subvert dominant cultural norms and often address larger, sensitive, and complex societal issues. Thus, making queer authors utilize this genre of writing to explore and represent diverse identities and experiences. This study dives into the profound fantastical world of TJ Klune's *The House in the Cerulean Sea* to uncover its depiction of magical characters as representation of real-world gender nonconformity. Drawing upon the foundational theories of queer theory, particularly Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, this research study scrutinizes how the novel subverts and challenges the prevalent paradigm of heteronormativity. This research employed the method of qualitative data analysis to obtain precise data. The findings reveal that the depiction of the three magical children in *The House in the Cerulean Sea*, Talia, Chauncey, and Theodore, embodies the concept of gender nonconformity in the real world. Ultimately, this research highlights the whimsical narrative of *The House in the Cerulean Sea* that serves as a platform to explore and affirm the complexities of gender beyond binary norms, advocating for a world where all identities are embraced and celebrated.

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INTRODUCTION

Contemporary society is witnessing a significant shift in the understanding of gender. The increased visibility of gender-diverse individuals challenge traditional binaries that link biological sex to gender identity. This evolution is evident in the growing recognition of non-binary and genderqueer identities, alongside greater acceptance of expressions that defy societal expectations (Barsigian et al., 2020; Clarke, 2019).

Individuals increasingly expressing their nonconformity to the traditional, highly restrictive gender norms through their diverse expressions and identities (Brown, 2022). Gender expression, which includes aspects of appearance, behaviors, and interests, becomes gender nonconformity when it diverges from societal standards tied to one's sex assigned at birth. Often, gender nonconformity involves traits associated with a different gender identity (Thoma et al., 2021). However, despite these progress, gender

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nonconformity remains a contested topic, with individuals still facing discrimination and a continued lack of representation in media (Clarke, 2019).

In the realm of literature, fantasy genre has a long history of exploring themes of gender and identity. Fantasy departs from conventional realism, allowing for plots, characters, and settings that question society norms about sexuality, gender, and race (Fabrizi, 2016; Łaskiewicz, 2019). This genre allows underrepresented voices to challenge dominant cultural assumptions, making it especially powerful for both LGBTQ+ readers and writers (Henderson, 2022). As a result, this genre provides a valuable opportunity to depict the intricacies of queer experiences (Pearson, 2022). By creating multidimensional and relatable characters who defy traditional gender norms, authors can depict the full spectrum of queer lives, from the challenges of self-discovery to the joys of finding acceptance and community.

Pearson (2022) further asserts that fantastical elements allow authors to subvert traditional notions of gender and sexuality through metaphor. Characters who defy binary constructs or challenge expectations of sexual orientation encourage readers to reconsider these concepts, fostering a more inclusive environment. In line with this, Butler (2004) states that fantasy is crucial to “an experience of one’s own body, or that of another, as gendered.” (p. 15) and that fantasy “is what allows us to imagine ourselves and others otherwise.” (p. 29).

One fantasy novel, *The House in the Cerulean Sea* by TJ Klune, offers a unique perspective on these matters through its depiction of magical characters that could be interpreted as metaphors for real-world gender nonconformity. *The House in the Cerulean Sea* is a 2020 fantasy Young Adult novel about magical children, hidden on a magical island because they are different from others and deemed as dangerous creatures and a threat to society. The novel explores how society frequently marginalizes and stigmatizes those who are different or viewed as dangerous because of their qualities, abilities, or identities.

The researcher carried out a literature review to have a better understanding of the research. There is only one study that has been found that analyzes *The House in the Cerulean Sea* by TJ Klune titled “*They’re Abominations*” - *Instances of Othering in a Contemporary Fantasy Novel The House in the Cerulean Sea* by Ryyttäri (2023). The study focuses on the depiction of the “othering” of non-human characters, while also examining the influence of institutional power in this portrayal by employing Fairclough’s Critical Discourse Analysis as the theoretical framework.

The researcher also conducted a deeper analysis related to the depiction of fantasy creatures and narratives as representations and metaphors for queer individuals. Such fantastical creatures like mermaids, faeries, witches, werewolves, and vampires are often utilized by many authors in their works to serve as metaphors for LGBTQ+ individuals (Bryan, 2021; Prestwich, 2020; Ricks, 2020; Westengard, 2022). These studies found that magical creatures often serve as a metaphor for queer individuals as they possess many magical attributes outside the gendered binary of human construction, thus may represent gender and sexual ‘otherness.’ This review of related studies has yielded valuable supplementary data that will significantly contribute to the research at hand.

In order to support the analysis at hand, this research applies queer theory, specifically drawing on Butler’s theory of gender performativity, as a lens for reading *The House in the Cerulean Sea* by TJ Klune. Queer theory as literary criticism scrutinizes how LGBTQ+ identities and themes are portrayed in literature, frequently challenging heteronormative views and binary gender and sexuality categorizations (Jagose, 1997; Tyson, 2023).

Gender Performativity

Judith Butler, a prominent figure in queer theory, introduced the influential concept of performativity in the 1990 book. Butler’s central idea is encapsulated in the statement,

There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very

‘expressions’ that are said to be its results (1999, p. 33)

Butler (1999) posits that gender is not inherently tied to biology but is instead constructed through repeated acts or performances. This notion forms the basis of their theory of gender performativity, suggesting that individuals continually enact and perform gender roles in their everyday lives, thereby shaping their identities. Individuals continually perform these roles, shaping their identities, through “stylized repetition of acts” (p. 179). Importantly, Butler emphasizes that masculine and feminine traits are not innate, but learned behaviors that anyone can embody (p. 10).

This framework aligns with the present study’s exploration of non-human identities and the fluidity of magical abilities in TJ Klune’s *The House in the Cerulean Sea*. By analyzing the magical characters as metaphors for gender nonconformity, the study examines how their performances reflect and challenge societal expectations of gender.

Ultimately, this analysis will reveal how the novel uses fantasy to illuminate and subvert traditional notions of gender, offering insights that resonate with real-world experiences of gender nonconformity.

METHODS

The qualitative research approach was selected for this study to align with its objective. The adoption of a qualitative methodology was purposeful, given its efficiency in exploring complex social phenomena. Qualitative research emphasizes the socially constructed nature of reality and the close relationship between the researcher and the subject, while also accounting for situational influences on the inquiry process (Denzin & Lincoln, 2012). It seeks a comprehensive understanding of phenomena within their specific social and cultural contexts, considering broader historical and cultural factors (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017, p. 3).

The primary data source is the novel itself, while secondary data sources include journals, theses, books, and other materials offering additional perspectives. The study began collecting data by using a close reading approach to uncover deeper meanings, intricate details, and key themes

in *The House in the Cerulean Sea*. Along with close reading, data collecting entailed critical review of secondary sources such as textbooks, theses, journal articles, and other pertinent resources.

The data taken was then analyzed by applying Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity to achieve a thorough understanding. The analysis covered various elements such as the narrative, characterizations, descriptive features, fantastical settings, and dialogues. The analysis began by identifying heteronormative perspectives in the novel as reflections of real-world viewpoints. This initial analysis enabled the researcher to proceed with examining the novel’s subversion of heteronormativity, applying a queer reading to explore how the magical characters subvert traditional heteronormative notions and depict gender nonconformity.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Queer reading, also called queering, is a strategy for challenging heteronormativity in texts by identifying instances of heterosexuality or identity binaries. Queering, which emerged from queer theory in the late 1980s and 1990s, is a strategy to investigate literature, film, and other forms of media (Sedgwick, 2013). Initially, the practice of queering focused solely on gender and sexuality, but it swiftly evolved into an umbrella phrase for tackling identity as well as a variety of oppressive institutions and identity politics (Barker & Scheele, 2016). As a result, *The House in the Cerulean Sea* depiction of magical beings characters with non-normative abilities and traits is well-suited to be examined through queer lens.

The narrative introduces Marsyas Island Orphanage, foreshadowing its queer nature through descriptions of its “unconventional” and “problematic” inhabitants. This peculiarity arises from the orphanage housing magical children deemed the most “dangerous” due to their unique abilities. Set apart on a secluded island, Marsyas Island provides a sanctuary for six extraordinary residents: Talia, the garden gnome; Theodore, the wyvern; Phee, the sprite; Sal, the were-Pomeranian; Chauncey, the unidentified blob; and

Lucy, the Antichrist. Overseeing these remarkable children is the patient headmaster, Arthur Parnassus, with the additional protection provided by Zoe Chapelwhite, a fierce island sprite.

Heteronormativity in a Fantasy World

TJ Klune's *The House in the Cerulean Sea* features a fantastical world populated by magical beings. However, despite this fantastical setting, the novel explores the persistence of heteronormative attitudes. This persistence can be attributed to the deep societal influence of heteronormativity, mirroring the real world's tendency to view unconventionality with suspicion. This section focuses on how the novel utilizes heteronormativity within this magical context.

Linus Baker, the protagonist, is a caseworker for the Department in Charge of Magical Youth (DICOMY), a government agency tasked with regulating magical children. He is entrusted with a high-priority mission: a month-long evaluation of Marsyas Island Orphanage, rumored to house particularly unusual children. As emphasized by a superior, "the orphanage is nontraditional" and its residents are unlike any Baker has encountered.

"[...] 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." (Klune, 2020, p. 36).

While DICOMY may not explicitly enforce heteronormativity, its practices implicitly reinforce it. The department segregates magical children from their non-magical counterparts by placing them in specialized orphanages. The department also aims to ensure these magical children do not exhibit behaviors considered out of the ordinary through the use of their magical abilities. As a result, these magical children, viewed as problematic due to their magical traits, symbolize identities considered outside the norm within this societal framework. The practice of categorizing and potentially isolating children who deviate from the norm can be seen as reinforcing heteronormativity.

Linus Baker, a rigid adherent to DICOMY's rules and regulations, embodies a heteronormative perspective. His discomfort with deviations from established norms, including those related to gender, is evident. This is exemplified by his surprise at encountering a boy named Lucy in the Marsyas Island children's files, suggesting his adherence to traditional gender norms, "A boy named Lucy, [...] That's certainly a first. I wonder why the chose... the name... Lucy" (Klune, 2020, p. 48).

Then, upon arriving at Marsyas Orphanage, Linus discovers a garden gnome named Talia, whom he initially misidentified as a plain statue. Linus' surprise at realizing that Talia is not only alive, but also a girl illustrates his conformity to traditional norms and heteronormative thinking.

A little statue.

A garden gnome. "How quaint," [Linus] murmured as he moved toward the tree.

(...)

"Strange statue, aren't you" he said, hunkering down in front of it.

"You can't just say something like that about a person. It's rude. Don't you know anything?"

[Linus] scream was strangled as he fell backward, hand digging into the grass underneath him. The gnome sniffed. "You're awfully loud. I don't like it when people are loud in my garden..." And she (because she was a she, beard and all), reached up and straightened her cap. (Klune 2020, 65)

These instances, along with his reaction to Lucy's unconventional name, demonstrate how heteronormativity can shape individuals' perceptions and responses to the unfamiliar. Linus' initial surprise and discomfort with these deviations from the norm highlight the pervasive influence of societal expectations on individual thinking.

Heteronormativity further dictates that ideal romantic and marital partnerships involve opposite-sex couples. This framework establishes a default assumption: individuals are presumed heterosexual unless explicitly stated otherwise. This presumption reflects the broader concept of *heterocentrism*, which positions heterosexuality as the normative and universal sexual orientation (Tyson, 2023).

The narrative continues to depict heteronormative attitude through a pervasive assumption of heterosexuality. Despite the characters' undisclosed sexualities, the narrative reflects a heterocentric viewpoint. For instance, Linus faces condescending questioning from his neighbor, Mrs. Klapper, who implies an expectation of a heterosexual relationship: "No lucky lady friend? [...] Oh. Forgive me. It must have slipped my mind. Not one for the ladies, are you?" (Klune, 2020, p. 22). Similarly, when Linus meets Zoe Chapelwhite, a sprite from Marsyas Island, he automatically assumes she is in a relationship with Arthur Parnassus, the orphanage master. Furthermore, the Marsyas Island's children's immediate inquiry about Linus' wife upon hearing about marriage, "You're married? [...] Who is your wife? Is she still in your suitcase?" (Klune, 2020, p. 97) reinforcing the assumption of heterosexuality. These instances demonstrate the prevalent heteronormative worldview held by both magical and non-magical characters, in which it is assumed that people are naturally attracted to the opposite gender.

In this narrative, heteronormativity remains prominent despite the fantastical setting, positioning the magical children as social outliers. Both the magical authority, DICOMY, and ordinary humans express unease about the children's existence, which exceed conventional understanding and are thus viewed as disruptive. This results in the children being labeled as "monsters," casting both the orphanage and its inhabitants as deviants – a portrayal that parallels the experiences of queer individuals challenging heteronormative expectations.

Nonconforming Magical Children

Through a queer reading approach, three particular magical children of Marsyas Island Orphanage – Talia, Chauncey, and Theodore – could be examined as challengers to heteronormative binary perspectives. These characters do not conform to the constraints of society's expectations of identity, which resonates perfectly with the concept of gender nonconformity, and can thus be interpreted as

embodiments of gender nonconformity in real world context.

Talia the Bearded Girl

The first magical child is Talia the garden gnome. Talia is a female gnome and identifies as a girl. Talia's character could be read as gender nonconforming as evident in how she expressed her gender contrary to conventional expectations of femininity. Upon Linus' arrival at the orphanage, he describes Talia as:

bigger than the ones [Linus] had seen before, the tip of its pointed cap was about waist-high. It had a white beard [...] The eyes were bright blue, and its cheeks were rosy. (Klune, 2020, p. 65)

This depiction challenges traditional notions of femininity, as the beard is typically associated with masculinity. Talia's personality further reinforces her nonconformity; she is assertive, grumpy, and even violent. Her love of gardening, which she fiercely protects with a fondness for shovels and a somewhat morbid curiosity with utilizing human bodies as compost. She would not hesitate to bury alive anyone who disturbed her garden.

"Are you Mr. Baker? If you are, we've been expecting you. If not, you're trespassing, and you should leave before I bury you here in my garden. No one would ever know because the roots would eat your entrails and bones." (Klune 2020, 66)

Talia's fixation and demeanor defy established norms associated with femininity where society expects girls to be nurturing, patient, sensitive, and emotional (Cranny-Francis et al., 2003). Talia also affirms her identity as a female gnome while playing explorers with the other children, countering Lucy who refers to the group as "men" by stating, "We're not all *men*," Talia said with a scowl. 'Girls can be explorers too. Like Gertrude Bell.'" (Klune, 2020, p. 163). By asserting her identity as a girl with traditionally masculine appearance and traits, Talia highlights restrictive gender norms and further reinforces her rejection of gender stereotypes.

The reactions from other characters emphasize her gender nonconformity. Both Linus, upon their initial meeting, and a record store

shopkeeper who remarks, “Little dude's got a beard. And she's a *lady-dude*.” (Klune, 2020, p. 237) expresses surprise at her appearance, reflecting the societal bafflement with individuals who resist gender expectations.

Chauncey the Unidentified Jellyfish

The second nonconforming magical child is Chauncey. Described as “an amorphous green blob with bright red lips. And black teeth. And eyes on stalks that stuck high above his head” (Klune, 2020, p. 76). No one really knows what kind of species Chauncey is, but the best theory is he is a type of jellyfish. He is a bubbly, caring, and enthusiastic youngster who aspires to be a bellhop.

“Chauncey is here simply because of what he is. And given that we don't know what that is exactly, DICOMY needed a place to put him. I believe [...] he is considered classified level four simply because of the way he looks. He was told repeatedly he was a monster—by children, by masters, by people in positions who should have known better.” (Klune, 2020, p. 214)

Dubbed a “monster” due to his appearance, he ascribed these societal expectations and performed his identity to fit the role of a monster. This is evident in his behavior prior to arriving at Marsyas Island Orphanage, where he would hide under beds to frighten children, conforming to typical monster stereotypes.

He was told the stories of monsters hiding under beds whose calling in life was to frighten others. He thought that was who he was supposed to be. That it was his job to scare people, because it'd been ingrained in his ... head that was all he was capable of. It wasn't until he came here that he realized he could be something more.” (Klune 2020, 103)

However, Chauncey actively resists this imposed identity. He defies conventional expectations of monsters by performing like a typical male kid. His desire to become a bellhop emphasizes his aversion to categorization.

“Why do you wish to become a bellhop?”

Chauncey grinned. “Because they get to help people.”

“And that's what you want to do?”

His smile faded slightly. “More than anything. I know I'm...” He clacked his black teeth. “Different.” (Klune, 2020, p. 187)

Aware of his peculiar appearance, Chauncey persisted in practicing to become a bellhop, expressing a deep desire to help others, a characteristic far removed from a ‘monster.’ He diligently practices the position, exuding professionalism and exceeding the expectations that are generally associated with monsters. This ambition illustrates his ability to build his own personality, unrestricted by labels or conventional expectations.

Theodore the Unordinary Boy

Theodore, the resident wyvern on Marsyas Island, represents the final representation of nonconformity. A wyvern is a two-legged, winged creature that resembles a dragon. Linus' initial description highlights Theodore's extraordinary appearance.

His scales were iridescent... His hind legs were thickly muscled, the claws at the tips of his feet black and wicked sharp. He didn't have front legs; instead, his wings were long and leathery like a bat's. His head was curved downward, the snout ending in twin slits. His tongue snaked out and flicked against Linus's loafers. (Klune, 2020, p. 68)

Nonetheless, Theodore's identity extends beyond his physical traits. Arthur underlines that by stating, “He's not just an animal, ... Theodore is special.” (Klune, 2020, p. 109). Linus later expresses similar sentiments, acknowledging Theodore's human-like intelligence and emotional complexity. Theodore, like Chauncey, does not let his physical constraints limit his ability to express himself. Despite his wyvern appearance, he is accepted as both a boy and an invaluable part of the Marsyas Island family.

Although incapable of human speech, Theodore effectively communicates and is understood perfectly by the island residents, except for Linus at the beginning of the story. He is a humorous and highly expressive character, utilizing his entire body and vocalizations to convey emotions. He participates in communal activities such as dining, playing with the other children, walking upright, and even studying.

The children were invited to the front of the class in order to tell a story of their own creation, either true or made up. Theodore

(according to Mr. Parnassus) had spun a jaunty limerick that caused everyone (except for Linus) to laugh until they had tears in their eyes. [...] Mr. Parnassus clapped his hands. "Well, then. Shall we move on? Since it's Tuesday, that means we will begin the morning with maths." Everyone groaned. Theodore thumped his head repeatedly against the surface of his desk. (Klune, 2020, p. 121)

By performing and engaging in these childlike behaviors, Theodore breaches societal expectations that define him solely as an animal, pushing the restrictive boundaries between human and non-human and broadening the narrative's significance associated with a 'child.'

The Magical Children through Butler's Perspective

Butler contends that gender is "a free-floating artifice," which is a substantial shift from the notion of gender as a stable category related to biological sex.

When the constructed status of gender is theorized as radically independent of sex, gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice, with the consequence that man and masculine might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and woman and feminine a male body as easily as a female one. (1999, p. 10)

Butler posits gender as a performative construct, functioning like a label or role that any individual can adopt, regardless of biological sex. Masculine and feminine, along with people's understanding of manhood and womanhood, are not tied to one's anatomy but are shaped by societal expectations. Moreover, Butler asserts that people constantly do gender through their behaviors, appearances, and expressions, meaning, there can be no correct or incorrect way to do gender (1988, p. 528).

The House in the Cerulean Sea reflects this idea by featuring characters who actively challenge and resist these norms. The magical children characters at Marsyas Island Orphanage represent a wide range of identities and expressions that defy traditional gender classifications. Talia, Chauncey, and Theodore are all characters who embody this concept of gender nonconformity. Their non-normative bodily forms - gnome, undefined creature, and animal - do not limit them to a certain

role or classification as "monsters" or "animals." Rather, individuals transcend their biological characteristics through their actions and presentations, or performance, to honestly express their identities in ways that are consistent with regular females and boys, unrestrained by conventional standards.

CONCLUSION

The House in the Cerulean Sea by TJ Klune presents a fantastical narrative that challenges traditional notions of identity and societal norms through the portrayal of its magical characters. By analyzing these characters through the lens of Queer theory and Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity, this study highlights how Talia, Chauncey, and Theodore serve as metaphors for gender nonconformity. These characters defy rigid classifications imposed by heteronormativity, embodying the fluidity and performative nature of gender that Butler describes.

Talia, with her traditionally masculine attributes and assertive demeanor, Chauncey, whose form defies any specific category, and Theodore, who transcends the boundaries between human and non-human, all exemplify the performative aspects of gender. Their actions and identities are not dictated by their physical forms but by their behaviors and interactions, mirroring the real-world experiences of gender nonconforming individuals. Through their stories, Klune encourages readers to reconsider the constructs of gender and the limitations of societal expectations.

This analysis underscores the importance of recognizing and validating diverse expressions of identity, both in literature and in reality. By interpreting the magical children as symbols of gender nonconformity, this study not only deepens our understanding of the novel but also contributes to broader conversations about inclusivity and acceptance in contemporary society. *The House in the Cerulean Sea* thus becomes a powerful tool for exploring and affirming the complexities of gender beyond binary norms, advocating for a world where all identities are embraced and celebrated.

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