

# Everyone Could Judge Me: The Demonization and “Rescue” of Teenage Queerness in *In My Skin*

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**Abstract:** This paper takes Season 1, *In My Skin* as the case study. Through the textual analysis to onscreen significant moments, I will deeply highlight the contextualized expression of queer identity as adolescent symptom on Bethan, and the ways in which she deals with the panics towards this “shameful” identity. And these interpretations not only reflect the self-rescue of young homosexual just as imitating from the standpoint of other heterosexuals/homophobia, but also suggest that for the overall television landscape, queer presentations actually show signs of succumbing to heterosexual-centred order. In this regard, it must be acknowledged that the cultural struggle of LGBTQ grouping is still not optimistic.

**Keywords:** Queer Youth; *In My Skin*; LGBTQ; Teen television; Gender.

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## 1. Introduction

Whilst reading teen television, the peculiarity of adolescent roles is that, according to Johan Forhas (1995, p.244), “[this generation] lives in a state of inner and outer flux, of rapid transformation...in their very bodies and mind as well as in their social conditions.” The sensitivity and turbulence about self and identity are embedded into the narrative structure of youth television, sometimes dealt with a tenuous, temporary and marginalized way. Especially in the expression towards LGBT young people, it echoes Whitney Monaghan (2016, p.50) who states that “queer girls are temporalized as ‘a passing phase’ within the teen genre.” Indeed, in many cases, the teenage protagonists on-screen do not firmly anchor and acknowledge their gay or lesbian orientation, and the construction of ambiguous queer clues is exactly the crucial point of narrative pleasure about telling a homosexual story (Marshall 2016, p.95). As demonstrated in *In My Skin* (Forbes, 2018), Bethan Gwyndaff may be frequently suspected by others just because she glances at the girl, or stays the same room with an apparent lesbian teacher, which arouses the spectral possibility of homosexuality. Although ostensibly, Bethan denies it every time, the accusation of being a minority still evokes the further psychological dilemma, which is explained detailly by Augus Gordon (1999, p.19): “one refused interpellation as queer, which has rendered adolescence a site of shame...” And more importantly, this might be due to the fact that the society largely privileging heterosexuality does not seem to accept other intimacy easily (Ridder and Bauwel 2015, p.780), as shown in the context of this television drama, Bethan’s shame is mainly activated by the overt/latent isolation and exclusion from heterosexuals and homophobes on campus. Hence, it is not so hard to figure out that at least in Season 1 of the TV series, the girl’s queer experience is not decent at all, but is rather defined as the growing pains of adolescence. This show deliberately places the anxious girl in a liminal arena between self and mainstream heterosexuals to create viewable plot conflicts. Thus, in this essay, I am going to consistently take Season 1, *In My Skin* as the case study. Through the textual analysis to onscreen significant moments, I will deeply highlight the contextualized expression of queer identity as adolescent symptom on Bethan, and the ways in which she

deals with the panics towards this “shameful” identity. And these interpretations not only reflect the self-rescue of young homosexual just as imitating from the standpoint of other heterosexuals/homophobia, but also suggest that for the overall television landscape, queer presentations actually show signs of succumbing to heterosexual-centred order. In this regard, it must be acknowledged that the cultural struggle of LGBTQ grouping is still not optimistic.

## 2. A Pathological Narrative of a Homosexual Adolescence

Through highly designed narrative frame, one could figure out a pathological narrative of a homosexual adolescence. And there are two key elements in this narrative. First, television text believes that depicting the portrait of the people around Bethan is as vital as describing her own mental activity, as it can build up an authoritative “normal standard” for Bethan, activating the identity differences among social events with peers from the very beginning. As observed, on this high school campus, rebellious/radical heterosexual youth seem to be the regular norm here. Scattered throughout the episodes, their distinctive features can be fully identified. And here, the television programme generally characterizes the sexual dogma and order commonly running among coming-out-of age teens through two core characters. Priest, Bethan’s classmate, is supposed to be an out-and-out heterosexual boy who is consistently depicted as either being barely able to keep uncontrollable sexual impulses, or easily being provoked by girls exuding provocative femininity (Tolman et al. 2015, p.4). The examples abound: even when he encounters the serious questioning from the female literature teacher, he still frivolously offends her, saying “*Oh my god, are you pregnant?*” While facing peers, especially on the occasion of Bethan’s menstrual blood leaking in PE class, masculinity for Priest is hegemonic. Whether using the words “*disgusting, embarrassing*”, or the insulting nickname “*jam rag knickers*” all indicate the representations of a gender hierarchy in which Priest is able to do the slut shaming on the girl condescendingly. As Jessica Ringrose and Emma Renold (2012, p.341) suggest, it is the pervasive sexual regulation and violence in heterosexual order, where the girl body has become again and again the focus of patriarchal censorship

and criticism. And in the meanwhile, in such scenes, other teens always seem to be silent bystanders. They reject intense emotional labour, proving that currently, they are potentially accustomed to and accepting of Priest's utterance (see Figure.1: Priest in obvious white always in the middle). These performances provide a collective answer to the institutionalized heterosexuality belonging to the campus, showing an endorsement of the unfair gendered binary of heterosexuality (masculinity-centred)—indeed, a mainstream order—crafted by many hands.

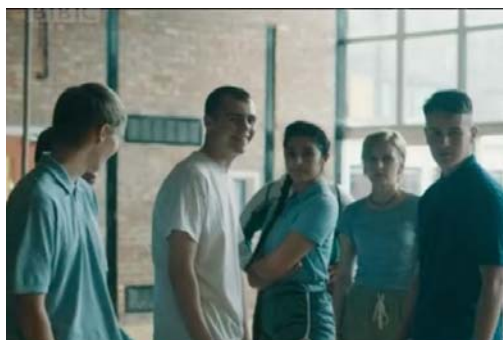


Figure.1 *In My Skin* [frame capture]

And if Priest is portrayed as the head male builder in this framework, then according to Deborah Tolman et al. (2015, p.23), a normative heterosexual key structure requires being jointly constructed by both masculinity and femininity ideologies for both boys and girls. Or put it in another way, there should also be a typical girl in television programme who loyally follows so-called feminine conventions in heterosexual relationship. Bethan's close friend Lydia is exactly the one. Tolman et al. (ibid, pp.17-8) go on explaining, in this system, the ways that girls themselves manage their bodies and the frequently unfair consequence: "most of the girls described [some coerced experience with sexuality] was verbal and emotional rather physical... [and] girls are punished by sexual activity." As *In My Skin* shows, even though Lydia often pretentiously acts as a hegemon in the patriarchal framework, for instance, she also uses obscenities to insult girly peers as Priest does, publicly calls Poppy "cunt", and boldly flirts with Tony Chippy, a middle-aged man owning a fish and chips shop, however, the subsequent narrative firmly frames her at the inferior position of the gender hierarchy.

The manifestations of Lydia being abjected is representational, which almost perfectly fit the trajectory of Tolman's assertions: she tries to escape the fact that she is physically raped by Tony Chippy. Spectators can detect that all available testimonies, such as "*she didn't have any knickers on*", are provided by her male friend Trav. As the actual victim, Lydia is willing to downplay the rape incident, claiming that it is just an emotional outlet for herself. Be that as it may, in the end, she pays the price alone—consciously taking the contraceptive pill. Lydia's fragilely underage sexual experience foregrounds her strong attachment to and involvement with the heterosexual system throughout. Somewhat, it makes her a threat to Bethan's closet door.

Although Bethan and Lydia appear to be quite intimate, the social moment with Lydia often evokes a certain compulsion and anxiety to Bethan. Their relationship is replete with dialectic properties. As a standardized symbol representing the regular order, Lydia's dominance is orientationally emphasized on the occasions where Bethan and Trav are

framed together. From the very beginning of Season1, accompanied with dream pop music, a fast-rhythmic montage introduces their chaotic entertainment life for the first time. Specifically, Lydia performs far more active than the other two in this sequence. Here, she becomes the only role who has the authority to interfere with the effect of non-diegetic sound. The sound of her uninhibited vomit interrupts the musical rendition, further independently supporting the disorderly youthful atmosphere at this time. Afterwards, the audio-visual rhythm slows down, and the programme returns to the normal narrative pattern. At this point, the pictorial layout is instructive: Lydia lies in the middle of the frame, initiatively holding Bethan's hands (see Figure.2). The close-up here consciously enlarges and highlights Lydia's power. These visual signs not only provide viewers with a retrospective overview about their friendship, but more importantly, it endows Bethan with an emotionally forceful leader who can induce her to a smoother path in this context. Indeed, Lydia's world is also enthusiastic to open to Bethan, as Lydia later says, "*I just like it when it's the three of us.*" As for Bethan, however, her response to Lydia's enthusiasm is subtle and wobbly. Through a series of deliberate performances of Bethan, one can indeed perceive that she is struggling to imitate and learn from Lydia. Especially before Poppy gradually matters, Bethan rarely ever turns down Lydia's requests, including Alprazolam abuse and the prank of flirting with Tony. For many young people, drug abuse, adventures and sexual activity may represent adherence to group norms and show fidelity to other group members (Newman and Newman 1976, p.276). Yet, when Bethan leaves Lydia's supervision, her real state in private is incompatible with them. A symbolic act proves this profoundly: Bethan says goodbye to Lydia, after confirming she is gone, Bethan decisively throws away the pill she gave. This contradictory behaviour drives a distance between her self and the reality around: Bethan is able to realize that it is enough safe to integrate into Lydia's community, but she never actually does it.



Figure.2 *In My Skin* [frame capture]

Seemingly, the liminality between Bethan and the heterosexual order is supposed to be more severe than imagined. Then the second element to the pathological narrative frame, building on the first, is the badly collapsing development between the homosexual teenage and heterosexual peers. In order to reflect the seriousness of "minority label" on her, *In My Skin* constructs a series of events, recording that the excessive nature of her lesbian impulse draws rapid and anxious attention from those heterosexuals. Television programme highly embellishes Bethan's secret love and lust: she is once addicted to Poppy. Through the interspersed use of hazy light shots, Bethan lives with a rollercoaster of several ups-and-downs between the inner fantasy world possessing Poppy and the harsh reality of

gloomy tones. “Losing contact with ‘reality’ can be seen as a strategic necessity for non-normative sexual persons to find the impetus to live a hopeful life.” (Munt 2006, p.272) And this also allows audience to get access to her internal mind, recognizing that she seems to be uncontrollably immersed in the dreamy happiness. Further, this undercurrent even disturbs the real outside world. A fixed combination of some specific shots indicates her eager sexual desire, which extends to the screen: firstly, there is always an over-the-shoulder shot along Bethan’s sight focusing precisely on Poppy, and then the sequence cuts to the close-up of Bethan’s front face, externally presenting her fascinated shy smile. This pleasure, which is a high point for Bethan, is supposed to be a personal respite space. However, when she is contextualized into reality, peer pressure starts to pull her and her sexual utopia back and apart.

Undoubtedly, while Bethan ignores the supervisions from heterosexuals, she encounters their mass siege and shame. The shots combination mentioned in the former paragraph arises multiple times in the third episode, with the similar developmental trajectory of plot later: almost every youth is aware of Bethan’s “strange symptom” and responds differently according to their masculinity or femininity ideology inside the heterosexual framework. As previously analyzed, Priest, as a hegemonic boy leader, continues to amuse himself by sexual bullying, mocking her lesbian sex with lewd words and body languages— “*Have you been Scissor Sistering?*” And at this moment, it is the reaction of Bethan that is intriguing. Instead of the tough attitude last time (she curses Priest as “*ugly dumb fuck*”), currently, she turns to be silent, her eyes keep dodging, and the trembling of hand-hold camera also aggravates this uneasiness. Apparently, these negative physical responses imply the logic of her fear of public censure towards homosexual things. In the meantime, as the best friend, Lydia might believe that supervision to Bethan is equivalent to rescue her. When she notices their unusual intimacy, she is shown staring Bethan apprehensively, and finally taking some action: Lydia deliberately mentions the gossip of Poppy having heterosexual behaviour, but actually reminds Bethan nearby— “she gave a boy a toothy blowjob, she is heterosexual and such a relationship is not good for you”. Such subtexts here, however, is devastating for Bethan, which means that her beloved object is not merely lost, but her desire is fully negated. Lydia’s self-righteous behaviour overstates the spectral possibility of homosexuality that Bethan tries to hide, prompting her gay label to be a very fact from the stance of heterosexual mainstream at this time. Although Lydia does not exhibit any homophobic repulsion (as explained above, she would happily accept Bethan instead), her actions do, to some extents, openly expose the long-standing spatial boundaries between different camps. The exclusion places Bethan into a non-primary space in social terms. Forced out of regular group, Bethan begins to fear and tremble at the loss of the security. In this way, she turns to negate her authentic selfhood, decisively rejecting the identification of queer label in any cases. For example, Bethan’s queer tendency naturally attracts the attention of her lesbian PE teacher. She understands Bethan’s tribulation and calls her into a small, locked warehouse, thoughtfully creating a safe space to isolate heterosexuals for the girl’s possible moment of coming out, but Bethan consistently resists communicating with her. From nebulous queerness to concrete homophobia, what should be discerned here is that, for Bethan, rejection of the sexually

diverse camp is not based on ignorance of homosexuality, but rather on “a ‘logical’ assessment that being homosexual is against their own...cultural values” (Allen 2019, p.663). Furthermore, in this context, homophobia is referred to by Allen (ibid.) as a product of heterosexuality, which is ingrained in its power structure. Hence, based on the above statements, this is Bethan’s selfdiagnosis that she herself also pathologizes queerness as a symptom of “unhealthy and abnormality” in such a commonly heterosexual context.

In the face of the panic due to the excessive volume of queer clues, in the programme, the ways the teenage girl is granted relief to are quite subtle, leading the overall narrative to tilt heavily towards the normative framework of heterosexuality. To begin with, Bethan is manually constructing her external homophobic appearance. Particularly on some occasions, she does this by creating and exaggerating the possibility of other’s homosexuality in front of Poppy who she has a crush on. Different from the avoidance of conflict and anger while usually facing with Priest and Lydia, the quality which Sandra Bartky (1990, p.112) classifies into the category of femininity ideology, Bethan yet shows considerable hegemony towards a more tender “average girl” Lorraine. Poppy complains that Lorraine always keeps stalking her when they two date on the lawn, and at this time, Bethan’s behaviour remotely echoes with Priest’s consistent style. Equally, Bethan is condescendingly arrogant:

“*I bet she’s stealing [your knickers] off your washing line to sniff at home.*” She teasingly portrays Lorraine as a lesbian voyeur. Homophobic bullying brings certain positive benefits to her: she hilariously imitates Lorraine’s obscene movements, expectedly, attaining the affirmation from onscreen viewer Poppy for her humour— “*How did I not know how funny you are?*” Being assertive and pleasant, Bethan shakes her body with excitement (see Figure.3). She has temporarily succeeded in deflecting the torture and anxiety of being a victim once, by adapting herself into the perspective of a heterosexual, and now becomes a faithful representative of this mainstream order. In doing so, the girl reproduces the power that should be owned by boys in such an environment of the sexual double standard, and the process and effect of such socialization is stated “the male-in-the-head” by Deborah Tolman et al. (2016, p.7). It explicitly points to the key to teenage girl alleviating the stress under “the minority suspicion”: Bethan transforms the gender temperament, legitimizing her presence by immersing herself in playing the masculine role which represents the classical heterosexual framework. It must be declared that the rendition of the transformation, of course, has a prerequisite, that is, being situated in such a non-public environment away from explicit heterosexuals (being alone or only with Poppy). A short sequence with the similar setting but diametrically opposed ending to the sequence of “dating on lawn” proves this afterwards: this time Lorraine still bothers them, but now Bethan is silent and cowardly, as she is under strict surveillance from Lydia. The presence of these genuine heterosexuals distracts Bethan, forcing her to get out of her fantasy frame and then associate with the outer reality where she is discriminated minority girl all the time. It can be therefore seen that Bethan’s means of alleviation is only internalized and private, and even more ruthlessly, it seems to announce a tragic fact: this teen drama does publicly eschew the sensitive and complicated arguments of queer desire itself, unambitiously slipping into the narrative parody of

heterosexual lifestyles—more on that subsequently.



Figure.3 *In My Skin* [frame capture]

As matter of fact, in order to further demonstrate loyalty to the heterosexual narrative, the show frequently explores possible means of portraying Bethan as a masculine character in their dating moments. Her masculinity is not only textually expressed by her performance signs, but also significantly constructed by the television camera, allowing her to engage in “male gaze” in some specific circumstances. The term “male gaze” here, following the work in Laura Mulvey’s (1975) seminal article “*Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*”, is seen as the utterance of heterosexual male desire in the dimension of moving images. Mulvey adheres to the binary statement in the law of heterosexuality, which is “subjectivity... with masculinity and passivity and objectification with femininity” (Oliver 2017, p.452). In this view, a woman who is traditionally feminine in appearance is strictly described “as erotic object for the [active] characters within the screen story” (Mulvey 1975, p.11). In order to discuss further the male-female sexuality metaphors between Bethan and Poppy, I decide to provide a concise reading of a brief sequence in Episode 3 of Season 1, which records the vital moment when Bethan first visits Poppy’s house. From the start of this segment, erotic possession has been implicitly constructed in multiple ways. When Bethan physically shows up in front of Poppy’s house, the action of “insert” is highlighted, and given the iconic meaning. The exterior world from which Bethan comes is dim, while the interior room is rather bright and warm—this strong contrast of lighting colorations initially establishes the binary discrepancy between the preliminary nature of these two characters. And just after “entering”, Bethan is blissfully happy, as if experiencing an orgasm. Television programme, at the present time, manifests her internal activity, providing an opportunity for viewers to perceive something authentic. Bethan shouts out repeatedly: “*I’m IN Poppy’s house!*” (see Figure.4) This thought coincides with the psychological trajectory of heterosexual boys during sexual intercourse, as Panteá Farvid and Virginia Braun (2006, p.301) say, “real” heterosex is supposed to be primarily penetrative, resulting in a great erotic experience, as the final output achieves sexual pleasure.



Figure.4 *In My Skin* [frame capture]

Since that, the camera movement has acted as an agent, representing Bethan’s active position and creating a sense of dynamics in relation to voyeurism, showing her unprecedented possessiveness for Poppy. The camera

captures Bethan’s visual objects one by one—she is so obsessed with the femininity that poppy exudes: not only is there a secret gaze on Poppy’s hands, but there are also several extreme close-ups targeting on her personal belongings (typical feminine icons such as clutch bag, high heels, and pink photos etc.). The camera, on the behalf of Bethan’s eyes, uncontrollably captures images inside the room, seemingly eliminating the influence of her other sensory channels in which the diegetic world is manually muted, leaving her absorbed in the thrill of occupying all the Poppy. The background music chosen here is instructive: the addition of ethereal vocal chanting slows the narrative pace that follows, and indeed, this category of music is proved by Felicity Simpson et al. (2021, p.8) to availably induce a physiological relaxation response. Thus, it overall evokes an audiovisual metaphor of an immediate clear soberness after the high point, which means that the act of voyeurism does makes Bethan orgasm once again and completely. Besides, in this sequence, *In My Skin* also apparently defines Bethan’s behaviour through a real communicative context. Poppy interrupts the music and reminds Bethan to concentrate in a somewhat awkward tone. Poppy’s ruthless attitude further reveals that these previous ones are just Bethan’s unilateral sexual fantasies. Bethan’s attempt to penetrate, though disturbed midway, still embodies an irrepressible hegemonic impulse to female, making her ultimately firmly anchored in canonical catalogue of heterosexual masculinity. And this procedure is validated by Deborah Tolman et al. (2015, p.5), who claim that the idealized boyish masculinity should be coercive and hegemonic, which is seemingly the only way to be an appropriate man.

With the relentless insistence on heterosexual positioning, *In My Skin* limits the growth of teenage homosexual temperament. Actually, its genre is defined by critic Alan Sepinwall (2020) when its first season just released, it is a dark comedy that runs through the lily lesbian’s overactive imagination; and in the second season sequel, Bethan does have a real lesbian partner Cam, and her fear has been overcome in later moments. Be that as it may, before the coming-out narrative, her sexual orientation and gender temperament are still something the television programme is willing to have fun with ambiguously. In the first season, Bethan incarnates multiple possibilities in such a society: growing lesbian, queer victim, homophobia, inner heterosexual model. These expose an unspeakable complexity in the treatment of gay youth, “[their] identity as an intractable depth and inner substance” (Butler 1990, p.146). And this also supports the context research at the beginning of this essay—the statement of Whitney Monaghan, revealing the turbulent and temporary nature of queer sentiment.

Perhaps, queer identity is never treated seriously and fairly in some teen televisions, and as Frederik Dhaenens (2013, p.305) argues, when contemporary TV shows negotiate with people who do not conform to heterosexual norms, they would show how these people are portrayed on screen as deviant, excluded, or inferior to those privileged by the heterosexual order. It seems inevitable that the heterosexual framework and its hegemonic ideology prevail on television, because it is the only one that is positively deconstructed and represented, becoming the ultimate safe destination that can guarantee the pervasive continuity for the Western society. However, paradoxically, looking through current objective environment, in order to attract diverse spectators, television is usually open to polysemic stances (ibid, pp.304-5), and in

the meantime, many scholars make an observation towards recent situation: television dramas across the Western market are increasingly full of self-identified gay and lesbian characters (Marshall 2016, p.85). Although on the surface, these does indicate a positive tendency, that is, contemporary modern societies might have “accepted” or “allowed” the gay identity position, quite ironically, queer images are more and more than ever before, they still cannot escape the “curse” of the so-called superior sexual order. Struggling for mainstream recognition of gays and lesbians is based on the exploitation and forced assimilation of oneself. It must be admitted that this is a stain that symbolizes a failure for LGBT equality movement.

### 3. Conclusion

In one word, it has illustrated that Season 1 of *In My Skin* is an epitome among television dramas portraying on adolescent homosexuality’s “certain failures”. Examining the gay teen representations reveals a weak portrait of queerness from the perspective of ruthless heterosexuals. The negativity of homosexuality is disclosed and expressed step-by-step: on a macro level, the school environment evolves into a carnival arena for heterosexuals and homophobias. Through perfectly constructing the idealized binary masculinity of boys and femininity of girls, the show provides a heterosexual mechanism that inherently embeds a strict gender hierarchy. This not only clarifies the hegemonic characteristics of heterosexual (especially boys) in this context, but more significantly, for queer youths, due to the difference between the self and social mainstream space, an internally subtle conflict come into being, consistently wandering between one’s own real impulses and group norms. This tense relationship is easy to trigger, and the sexual utopia designed in queer’s mind collides with the cold reality quite soon. The excess of homosexual libido draws onlookers from heterosexuals who have no qualms about positioning queer teenage outside the boundaries of the heterosexual matrix. As for the punishment of this exile, its effect is of great success, in which not only does the queer teen begin to suffer and self-loathe, but in fact, it also brings about a cautionary guide: telling her where the ultimate, relatively safe space is. As expected, the rapid surrender of queer teen enables the televisual text to set the heterosexual subject mechanism at the core of this narrative solution. Queer girl plays the dominant role of “hetero boy” in certain scenes before “genuine” heterosexuals intervene. Through the consumption and possession of girls who are inferior and passive under the sexual double standard, in some sense, she has gotten orgasms multiple times, with her symptom of queer anxiety successfully eased and even cured. Nevertheless, turning queer adolescence into a pathological narrative, and further using restless heterosexual adolescence to cover up and divert the queer focus that should have been confronted and explored in depth, the approach of *In My Skin* is unmistakably cunning. Queer representations on television avoids most of the sensitive and vanguard issues in relation to LGBT demands for everyday justice, and merely guides viewers into the specific events in its own avowed story to gain support and resonance. Despite a possibly cultural flinching for today’s television market, which is, to some extent,

depressing, there is no need to be overly pessimistic towards the future audiovisual development of the LGBT community. As shown in its near following Season 2, Bethan acknowledges her queer identity and finally obtains her homosexual satisfaction in the arms of her lover. The continuous large-scaled production of mass queer television has created ample space for thought and adjustment of narrative, and it is still able to impel viewers and critics toward broad hopes.

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