

**COMING OUT OF THE GHOSTLY GAY CHILDREN
IN TRUMAN CAPOTE'S «OTHER VOICES, OTHER ROOMS»
AND HARPER LEE'S «TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD»**

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*The author of the proposed article traces and analyzes literary representation of queer children (using Kathryn Bond Stockton's terminology) in two American novels: Truman Capote's *Other Voices, Other Rooms* (1948) and Harper Lee's *To Kill A Mockingbird* (1960). He claims that queer children have long been a part of American literature. Capote's Joel Knox and Idabel Thompkins just like Lee's Dill Harris and Scout Finch appear as "protogay" and different to other "normative" children in the novels, such as Idabel's sister and Scout's brother, who represent how a "real" Southern girl and boy should dress and behave like. The authors show that re-reading and re-interpreting *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Other Voices, Other Rooms* helps queer theory to allow the "closeted" queer children to finally come out of their closets.*

Keywords: *queer children, queer theory, American literature, childhood, boyhood, girlhood.*

The queer child thus tells me something that is no longer a secret: despite those who've been whispering in my ear that queer theory is dead, repetitive, or even "over," queer theory, it seems, is nonetheless alive and kicking.

Michael Cobb

Kathryn Bond Stockton in *The Queer Child, Or Growing Sideways In the Twentieth Century* (2009) claims that the figure of the child is a fantasy available for adults only as a memory, as they can only ask themselves, "what can I remember of what I thought I was?" [17, p. 5]. Consequently, these recollections can produce numerous notions of children, who appear as "getting queerer" [17, p. 6]. Stockton argues that instead of only growing up in the conventional sense, which is "a shortsighted, limited rendering of human growth, one that oddly would imply an end to growth when full stature (or reproduction) is achieved," children also grow sideways in a type of growth which "suggests that the width of a person's experience or ideas, their motives or their motions, may pertain at any age, bringing 'adults' and 'children' into lateral contact of surprising sorts" [17, p. 11]. Thus the figure of the child

is constantly growing sideways because the retrospective search for one's childhood self is an act of continuous recreation. Moreover, this retrospection proves that there is more than just one image of the child that has been created by historians and adopted by Western societies. Stockton accurately points out that children – historical and literary figures – “lead fictional lives,” because the image of the child created by historians and popularized in Anglo-American literature simply do not match [17, p. 9-10].

The Western idea of a “normative child,” who is white, middle-class, as well as heterosexual – but at the same time supposed to be nonsexual – made some children appear as outlaws [17, p. 7]. Normative children should be innocent and the only “acceptable” vision of child's sexuality involves child abuse which consequently takes away its innocence, something that adults are supposed to protect. In *Encyclopedia of Children and Childhood in History and Society* we read that children “are not legitimate objects of adult sexual desire or behavior,” and thus “[a] whole constellation of social practices have been created because modern societies attempt to protect children from sex and adult sexuality” [10, p. 743]. Lee Edelman in *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004) claims that “the image of the child, not to be confused with the lived experience of any historical children, serves to regulate political discourse” [9, p. 11]. Consequently, the “normative child” that needs protection but not freedom is a political tool, and as Edelman argues “the cult of the child . . . permits no shrines to the queerness of boys and girls, since queerness, for contemporary culture at large . . . is understood as bringing children and childhood to an end” [9, p. 19]. Similarly, Stockton observes that the child is not only a political tool but also “a kind of legal strangeness,” because it cannot “divorce its parents, or design its education” [17, p. 16].

Not every child, as Stockton shows in *The Queer Child*, is a “normative child” who fits into the Western scheme of “the figure of the child.” She presents a set of children previously not recognized by history and childhood studies but present in American and British literature of the twentieth century: “the ghostly gay child,” “the grown homosexual as a child,” “the child queered by Freud,” and “the child queered by innocence or queered by color”. Moreover, all of these incomplete versions can braid and appear in the same child.

I would like to elaborate on the notion of “the ghostly gay child.” Given that “gay children,” as Stockton claims, appear only as a memory in adulthood, “they never ‘are’ what they latently ‘were’” [17, p. 15]. Consequently “gay children” – or, to use Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's notion, “protogay children” – are like ghosts. Realizing that someone was a “gay child” means a metaphorical death of the “not-yet-straight” (nonsexual yet believed to be heterosexual) child. Furthermore, as Stockton states, “this kind of backward birthing mechanism makes the hunt for the roots of queerness,” as well as “a retrospective search for amalgamated forms of feeling, desires, and physical needs that led to this death of one's straight life” [17, p. 6-7]. Previously de-

scribed as «'strange,' 'weird,' 'odd,' 'clumsy'» or “The Artist,” some queer children are labeled “gay” or homosexual” [17, p. 19]. Children described by Stockton appear as the direct opposite of what adults associate with the image of a “normative child.” To illustrate “the ghostly gay child” I have chosen to analyze two semiautobiographical American novels: Truman Capote’s *Other Voices, Other Rooms* (1948) and Harper Lee’s *To Kill A Mockingbird* (1961). The children found in both texts are queer, and even though most literary critics perceived Lee’s young characters as normative, I would like to prove that some of them are as queer as Capote’s protagonists, whose queerness is undeniable. Taking into account the autobiographical elements in both novels, I want to show that a “protogay” or “ghostly” child does not have to become a homosexual adult.

Sissies, tomboys, and “grown homosexuals as children” vs. white middle-class norms

Truman Capote grew up in the 1930s in the American South, where he met one of his best friends – fellow author Nelle Harper Lee. Years later both of them debuted with semiautobiographical novels that describe their small-town southern childhood. Published in 1948, Capote’s *Other Voices, Other Rooms* debuted at №9 on the New York Times Best Seller list and was one of the first popular Southern works that contained openly homoerotic motifs (the others being, for instance, William Goyen’s *The House of Breath* (1950) and Richard Wright’s *The Long Dream* 1958). In 1995 the novel was adapted into an independent movie directed by David Rocksavage. Officially released on December 5, 1997 the film met with a mixed response from critics and viewers and was commercially unsuccessful. Since its release, the novel has been a matter of controversy. Harold Helma’s infamous back cover photograph of the then twenty-three-year-old effeminate Capote dreamily lounging on a lavishly imprinted sofa helped the author to get further recognition and brought him publicity. The novel’s autobiographical elements, which were observed by the reviewers but in 1948 dismissed by the author, caused an even greater controversy. In the conservative Christian South same-sex desire was seen as a sin, an act against God and the Bible, punishable by death. Capote’s controversial public persona made the reviewers, who perceived the protagonists of *Other Voices, Other Rooms* as “disappointing freaks” or “perverse variations,” even more convinced that the author encouraged “a very dangerous social attitude” [16, p. 18, 40]. Accusations of Capote promoting pedophilia were amongst the most frequently dropped by critics; according to a review printed in *Time*, the novel’s main adult character, Cousin Randolph, wants to seduce Joel, the young protagonist [16, p. 39]. Even the positive reviews, while not focusing on the novel’s homosexual theme, still mentioned it with disapproval. For example, Jesse E. Cross called the characters “all queer,” and Diana Trilling summarized the novel as a text about “a boy [who] becomes a homosexual when the circumstances of his life deny him the other, more

normal gratifications of his need for affection” and called Joel “a passive victim of his circumstances” [19, p. 133-134].

Even though both Lee’s and Capote’s texts deal with their childhood in the same town, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, unlike *Other Voices, Other Rooms*, was met with positive critical response upon its release. “The find of the year” 1960, as it was called by the *Commonweal’s* review, it has remained one of the most beloved American texts ever since, appearing in popular novels like *The Help* by Kathryn Stockett, and television shows such as *Pretty Little Liars*, & *Simple Rules*, and *The Simpsons*. After winning the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1961, it was adapted in 1962 into a popular film starring Gregory Peck as Atticus Finch, whom the American Film Institute named “the greatest hero in the 100 years of film history.” (quoted in Tribunella xxv) Because the screenplay had to simplify the fictional narrative, children presented in the film also seem less complex. Even though the novel was extremely successful, it has been frequently underrated by scholars who claimed that it is no more than popular children’s literature and therefore needs no further critical examination. However, Gary Richards in *Lovers & Beloveds* argues that residents of the small Southern town of Maycomb in the novel present “an array of sexual otherness” [16, p. 119].

The parallels between the two texts seem obvious. The protagonist of Capote’s *Other Voices, Other Rooms* (1948) is an effeminate boy named Joel Harrison Knox, who can be also found as one of the main characters in Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960). Lee’s protagonist is a tomboyish girl nick-named Scout, who appears in Capote’s novel as Idabel Thompkins. Even though none of the characters is clearly homosexual, most of them are not gender intransitive and normatively heterosexual. Truman Capote, however, is more direct when it comes to the otherness of his characters.

In *XY: On Masculine Identity*, Elisabeth Badinter writes about “the sissy boy syndrome” characterizing boys who from a very young age show traditionally feminine features [2, p. 167]. According to a case study by Richard Green, a noted sex scholar, quoted in Badinter’s *XY*, three-fourths of boys whose behavior is deemed socially feminine become homosexual or bisexual in their adulthood. Joel Knox, the young protagonist of Truman Capote’s *Other Voices, Other Rooms*, is a good example of a typical “sissy boy,” who was “too pretty, too delicate and fair-skinned,” whose “voice was uncommonly soft” and whose “girlish tenderness softened his eyes” [5, p. 8]. Due to similarities between Joel’s and Capote’s appearance, the character was seen by some of the early critics as a self-portrait of the young author [16, p. 29]. Protagonists of the novel are stereotypically deemed as gay and thus do not fit into the social norms of the conservative American South. Non-heteronormative figures in *Other Voices, Other Rooms* are tender, delicate, effeminate and passive. As argued by Gary Richards, “Capote holds male same-sex desire and gender transitivity to be mutually and exclusively indicative of one another and crucial to structuring an inescapable gay identity” [16, p. 30].

Joel Knox is not as typically queer as his cousin Rudolph, who identifies himself as a homosexual, but Joel's looks and "sissy" appearance are sufficient to view him as a gender transitive person. The boy epitomizes the "sissy boy syndrome"; moreover he also fits into the notion of a "ghostly gay child" described by Stockton. Consistent with Stockton's claims, semiautobiographical *Other Voices, Other Rooms* can be perceived as Truman Capote's "hunt for the roots of queerness," and its protagonist as the author's "protogay" self. After the loss of his mother, Joel Knox moves to Skully's Landing from New Orleans to live with his father, who abandoned him at birth. At the beginning of the novel, we get to see Joel as not completely accepted by his community. The masculine truck driver Radcliff, who can be seen as the only male character fitting into the heterosexual social norms, "had his notions of what a 'real' boy should look like, and this boy somehow offended them" [5, p. 8]. Joel's otherness is even more visible in comparison with Radcliff's own body: "a big balding six-footer with a rough, manly face" [5, p. 8], and his typically masculine equipment of the truck: a pistol, ammunition, tools, and the like.

Aware of his effeminate looks, Joel is afraid of being rejected by his father, because he believes that the latter thinks that his son should be "taller and stronger and handsomer and smarter-looking" [5, p. 55]. Joel, who had a close relationship with his mother, has problems with accepting his stepmother and the absence of his father. The boy constantly blames himself for being rejected before he finds out about his father's illness and the multifaceted story behind it. When he learns the truth, it is easier for him to understand his situation and find shelter with his cousin.

Joel's behavior is atypical of a Southern boy: he reads Hollywood movie magazines, prefers a purse to a wallet, and he is not afraid to cry. What is more, just like Randolph, Joel spends a lot of time at home with his cousin and Afro-American maids. His best friend Idabel Thompkins thinks he is not boyish enough. The boy's otherness is clearly visible in comparison to Idabel, who also seems to be not girlish enough. Because of her tomboyish looks and behavior, the girl is not fully accepted in her community, especially since she is being constantly compared to her feminine twin sister. Similarly to Joel, Idabel can be considered a "protogay child." Even though she seems to be Joel's opposite, the differences between the characters lead us to the conclusion that their otherness made the two rejected outsiders build a strong relationship based on understanding. Next to Randolph, Idabel becomes Joel's only true friend, a person who despite the differences recognizes his need for love and acceptance.

Stockton points out that although the American society wants to see children as non-sexual with "delay[ed] sexual activity," they are constantly perceived as already heterosexual. Even though it is socially unacceptable to call the young Joel a homosexual, it seems that he is beginning to see his queerness. The boy confides in Randolph because he feels "very much at

ease” with him, and wants to look like him. The novel ends with Joel’s metaphorical acceptance of his own, as well as his cousin’s, homosexuality: “the queer lady” “beckoned to him [Joel], shining and silver, and he knew he must go: unafraid, not hesitating, he paused only at the garden’s edge where, as though he’d forgotten something, he stopped and looked back at the bloomless, descending blue, at the boy he had left behind” [5, p. 173].

If we consider the autobiographical elements in the novel and assume that the characters of Joel and Idabel are reconstructions of Capote’s and Lee’s “protogay” selves, we can notice that such queer children may, or may not, become gay adults. Still, the openly homosexual Truman Capote and non-homosexual Harper Lee constructed, or rather reconstructed, children who are evidently non-heteronormative and do not fit into the Western idea of “normative children.”

Like Capote’s Joel Knox, Dill Harris, one of the young protagonists of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, is an effeminate and noticeably non-heterosexual boy. His effeminacy seems even more visible than Joel’s since he is constantly compared to the novel’s normative masculine boy Jem Finch. Dill is shorter than Jem, he is even smaller than Scout – Jem’s sister. Once Dill arrives in Maycomb to spend the summer at his aunt Rachel’s house, he quickly befriends the Finches. However, when the siblings meet Dill they think that the boy is four-and-a-half years old because of his height. Once Dill informs them that he is almost seven, Jem says: “You look right puny for goin’ on seven” [15, p. 11]. Even their names signify differences between the boys:

Jem brushed his hair back to get a better look. “Why don’t you come over, Charles Baker Harris?” he said. “Lord, what a name.”

“s not any funnier’n yours. Aunt Rachel says your name’s Jeremy Atticus Finch.”

Jem scowled. “I’m big enough to fit mine,” he said. “Your name’s longer’n you are. Bet it’s a foot longer.”

“Folks call me Dill,” said Dill, struggling under the fence [15, p. 11].

Jem believes that his physique justifies the length of his full name; consequently he thinks that Dill should only use his short nickname because he is not big enough to be called Charles Baker Harris.

Dill seems odd for his friends not only because he is. His clothes, “blue linen shorts that buttoned to his shirt” [15, p. 12] and his behavior are effeminate and similar to Joel’s of *Other Voices, Other Rooms*. Although Dill seems bold because he claims to have seen the horror movie about Dracula and wants to meet the Finches’ mysterious neighbor Boo Radley, an alleged killer and psychopath, he is afraid to come close to the Radleys’ house. As with his effeminate looks, his cowardice is contrasted by Jem’s courage, since the more masculine boy is the one who manages to touch his strange neighbor’s house.

Similar to Joel Knox, Dill seems to be a portrait of Harper Lee’s best friend Truman Capote, who according to his biographer Gerald Clarke was

also a “sissy” and “As the years passed, the differences between him and other boys became even more pronounced: he remained small and pretty as a china doll, and his mannerism, little things like the way he walked or held himself, started to look odd, unlike those of the other boys. Even his voice began to sound strange, peculiarly babylike and artificial, as if he had unconsciously decided that that part of him, the only part he could stop from maturing, would remain fixed in boyhood forever, reminding him of happier and less confusing times. His face and body belatedly matured, but his way of speaking never did” [6, p. 42].

Dill is similar to Truman Capote not only because of his long name – Capote was born Truman Streckfus Persons – and hair that “stick to his head like duckfluff” and shaped “a cowlick in the centre of his forehead,” but also due to his high-pitched voice and interest in reading books and telling his friends stories.

Just like Joel in Capote’s *Other Voices, Other Rooms*, Dill is not the only queer character in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Jean Louise “Scout” Finch, the story’s protagonist and narrator could be seen as a “ghostly ‘gay’ child” but one can also perceive the character as “the child queer by innocence.” Stockton states that such queer children “share estrangement from what they approach: the adulthood against which they must be defined” and “[t]his is why ‘innocent’ children are strange” [17, p. 30]. Scout is a white, middle-class girl whose sexual otherness is not as vivid as Joel’s, yet her gender transitive appearance and behavior seem enough to treat her not only as a child queered by innocence, but also a “ghostly ‘gay’ child.” Although some of the novel’s adults force Scout to behave like a typical Southern girl, she is a tomboy, just like Joel’s best friend Idabel. Even the girl’s boyish nickname implies her gender transitivity: Scouting, established in 1908 by Lord Roberts Baden-Powell, has been known as “the most successful boy work institution on both sides of the Atlantic” as well as “the repression of ‘feminine’ traits demanded by the project of masculinity” [12, p. 11]. Scout, whose real name is Jean Louise, does not like dresses and other feminine clothes, typical of a Christian girl from the South. Neither does she like playing with toys that other girls love. She does not want to get a doll as a Christmas present because she prefers to receive a boyish gift of an air rifle. Scout’s lack of stereotypic femininity is contrasted by the character of Aunt Alexandra, her father’s sister, who tries everything to force her niece into behaving in a more feminine way.

The woman is a typical feminine southern lady with good manners. Scout describes her as “not fat, but solid,” and calls her “the last of her kind” because “she had river-boat, boarding-school manners; let any moral come along and she would uphold it; she was born in the objective case; she was an incurable gossip,” what is more “[s]he was never bored, and given the slightest chance she would exercise her royal prerogative: she would arrange, advise, caution, and warn” [15, p. 131]. Alexandra mostly desires to “arrange” Scout, whom she wants to behave like “a proper white lady.” When the young

girl finally wears a dress and states that she wants to be “just a lady,” her aunt’s friend Miss Stephanie replies: “Well, you won’t get very far until you start wearing dresses more often” [15, p. 233], implying that in order to become one, Scout has to change her boyish behavior. Amusingly, when tomboyish Scout wears feminine clothes for her Aunt’s friends she appears as if she were cross-dressing.

Alexandra is strict only when it comes to Scout’s lack of femininity. The “proper white lady” tolerates her grandson’s non-normative behavior and even wants to teach him to cook and clean, because she believes that men should know how to take care of women when they are sick. Next to Dill Harris, the effeminate Francis Hancock appears as the queerest male child character in Lee’s novel. He likes gossiping, his Christmas wish list includes a set of dandy clothes: “a pair of knee-pants, a red leather booksack, five shirts and an untied bow tie” [15, p. 85]. Even his first name seems ambiguous, as Francis/Frances is a unisex name suitable for a boy or a girl. Despite being obsessed with cultivating strong Southern femininity, Alexandra seems to tolerate the lack of stereotypical masculinity in her own grandson.

Scout and Dill can be perceived as queer, but just like Joel Knox and Idabel Thompkins in *Other Voices, Other Rooms*, they are the novel’s only heterosexual “couple.” As Scout recollects, Dill “asked me earlier in the summer to marry him, then he promptly forgot about it. He staked me out, marked as his property, said I was the only girl he would ever love, then he neglected me” [15, p. 46]. Their relationship is platonic, since neither of them even knows where babies come from. Moreover, as Michelle Ann Abate points out in *Tomboys: a Literary and Cultural History*, “[f]oreshadowing contemporary queer interpretations of tomboys as protolesbians and sissies as protogay men, their friendship does not contain an erotic charge.” (xvii) Similarly to Capote, Harper Lee paired two queer children who seem to be performing gender roles typical of the opposite sex. Scout “beat [Dill] up twice” when he wanted to spend more time with her brother, but “it did no good, he only grew closer to Jem” [15, p. 46].

Scout’s otherness is highlighted not only by her tomboyish looks and acts but also, as Holly Blackford points out, by the girl’s “black” behavior and language [4, p.174]. She has a close relationship with her maid Calpurnia, who takes her to the black church and even alleges Scout of “nigger-talk.” Besides, during Tom’s trial she sits in the black section of the court. Not only does she take part in an event reserved for adults, but also she performs the role of a black person by sitting among the defenders of Tom. Because Scout’s father is perceived as a “nigger-lover,” she is sometimes treated as a girl of color: for example Aunt Alexandra accuses Scout of acting black and when Mr. Radley hears her and Jem he mistakes them for African-Americans. Blackford argues that since she is motherless, Scout is “a composite of black and white women whose voices she has internalized” and is “Cal[purnia]’s child too” [4, p.175]. This interesting observation suggests that because an

African-American maid raises Scout, she unintentionally acts as if she were black.

Conclusion

Both *Other Voices, Other Rooms* and *To Kill a Mockingbird* present a variety of gender transitive persons in small towns of the conservative American South. The young characters in the authors' novels illustrate Stockton's notion of a queer child. The autobiographical elements apparent in both debut novels suggest, as Michael Cobb said that "children are also tokens of the past – they remind us, perhaps, of when in our own histories we were young, of how we all made a tour through childhood, and of how that tour was laced with nostalgic goodness or traumatic horror, or some combination of both" (119). Moreover, the novels are more than Capote's and Lee's "tokens of the past." Published in 1948 and 1960, respectively, they prove that queer children have long been a part of American literature, even in classic texts where they have been frequently interpreted as "normal" or as victims of "perverse freaks." Re-reading and re-interpreting *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Other Voices, Other Rooms* helps queer theory to be "alive and kicking," but it also allows the "closeted" queer children to finally come out of their closets.

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РОЗСЕКРЕЧЕННЯ ПРИМАРНИХ ГОМОСЕКСУАЛЬНИХ ДІТЕЙ В РОМАНАХ «ІНШІ ГОЛОСИ, ІНШІ КІМНАТИ» ТРУМЕНА КАПОТЕ ТА «УБИТИ ПЕРЕСМІШНИКА» ГАРПЕР ЛІ

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У запропонованій статті автор простежує та аналізує літературні уявлення про квір-дітей (використовуючи термінологію Кетрін Бонд Стоктон) у двох американських романах: «Інші голоси, інші кімнати» (1948) Трумена Капоте і «Убити пересмішника» Гарпер Лі (1960). Він стверджує, що образ гомосексуальних дітей уже давно є частиною американської літератури. Джоел Нокс і Айдабель Томпкінс, герої Капоте так само, як Дилл Гарріс і Скаут Фінч, герої Лі, з'являються як «протогеї» і відрізняються від інших «нормативних» дітей в романах, таких, як сестра Айдабель і брат Скаута. Останні одягаються і ведуть себе як «реальні», звичайні дівчинка і хлопчик з Півдня. Автори показують, що перечитування і нові інтерпретації романів «Убити пересмішника» й «Інші голоси, інші кімнати» крізь призму квір-теорії, дозволять «замкнути» квір-дітям, нарешті, «вийти зі своїх шаф», тобто відкрито заявити про свою нетрадиційність.

***Ключові слова:** квір-діти, квір-теорія, американська література, дитинство, хлоп'ячість, дівочтво.*