

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

The depiction of queer and non-heterosexual relationships has been increasingly prevalent in literature due to the emergence of queer theory and the growing academic interest in studying sexualities (Culler, 2000: 101). Although these themes were first explored using harmful stereotypes, authors now write these representations with more nuance. Literary works today are expected not only to entertain, but also to offer spaces for repressed and marginalized identities where different relationship dynamics can be represented. These portrayals not only mirror real life; they also operate as a theme within the narrative to move the story along. Therefore, analyzing queer relationships in fiction becomes an important effort to understand how sexuality is explored in literary discourse. This issue can be observed in contemporary campus novels, particularly M.L. Rio's *If We Were Villains*.

If We Were Villains is a 2017 American novel written by M.L. Rio as her authorial debut. The story centers a group of young adults studying Shakespearean drama at a prestigious college in Illinois. The setting alternates between two timelines: the fall of 1997 when the central incident occurs, and the present timeline ten years later. This group's interpersonal bonds are shaped by loyalty, rivalry, affection, and obsession. Within this circle, the relationship between the protagonist, Oliver Marks, and one of his peers, James Farrow, stands out for the

intensity of their emotional bond and the subtextual romantic attraction. The Shakespearean setting further complicates their dynamic, blurring the boundaries between performance and reality, acting and sincerity.

The term ‘queer relationship’ is used in this research thesis as opposed to gay or bisexual relationship. A gay relationship generally refers to a romantic relationship between two individuals who identify as homosexual and are exclusively attracted to the same gender. Meanwhile a bisexual relationship usually refers to a relationship involving individuals who identify as bisexual, meaning they experience attraction towards two genders. In contrast, the term queer relationship is used to describe a bond that does not clearly conform to fixed identity labels. This term aligns well with the relationship between Oliver and James, because their relationship remains ambiguous and largely unspoken within the narrative. The novel never explicitly confirms whether James reciprocates Oliver’s feelings or how either character defines their own sexual identity. Because of this uncertainty, their connection is better understood as a queer relationship characterized by emotional intimacy and ambiguity rather than a clearly defined gay or bisexual relationship. Their relationship is non-conventional and outside of the norm, hence queer.

To examine this relationship, this study focuses on two central aspects. First, it considers how sexual identity is constructed within the narrative, particularly how desire, repression, and silence shape the way Oliver and James understand themselves and each other. This research views their sexual identities as something formed through interaction and circumstances. Second, the study

traces the progression of their bond throughout the story, observing why and how their connection develops, intensifies, encounters conflict, and eventually changes over time. By examining both identity formation and relational progression, this research aims to reveal the complexity of their queer bond within the structure of the novel.

This research will focus more on how queer identities and relationships are explored within a narrative structure rather than its accuracy in portraying real life queerness in society. By doing so, the exploration of this topic will provide an insight regarding how queer themes can be used as a narrative tool to expand on complex emotional and psychological journeys to push a character's drive and motive, especially in contextualizing Oliver Marks and James Farrow's relationship stages in *If We Were Villains*.

1.2 Research Questions

The writer has come up with three research questions regarding the title, which will be reflected in analyzing the two characters in M. L. Rio's *If We Were Villains*.

1. How do Oliver Marks and James Farrow identify themselves sexually in M. L. Rio's *If We Were Villains*?
2. What factors contribute to the development of the queer relationship between Oliver Marks and James Farrow in M. L. Rio's *If We Were Villains*?
3. How does the queer relationship between Oliver Marks and James Farrow develop throughout M. L. Rio's *If We Were Villains*?

1.3 Objectives of the Study

In accordance to the research questions above, the objectives for this study are as follows:

1. To analyze how Oliver Marks and James Farrow identify themselves sexually in M. L. Rio's *If We Were Villains*.
2. To find out the factors that contribute to the development of the queer relationship between Oliver Marks and James Farrow in M. L. Rio's *If We Were Villains*.
3. To analyze the queer relationship development between Oliver Marks and James Farrow as depicted in M. L. Rio's *If We Were Villains*.

1.4 Previous Studies

The writer finds two studies that mention this literary work. The first one is a dissertation titled *The American Campus Novel, 1985-2020: Neoliberalism, Higher Education and the Student Experience* (Campbell, 2021) for her PhD. This study argues that the novel *If We Were Villains* depicts the oppressive role of the educational institution the characters are studying at. The author uses Foucault's theory of neoliberalism that emphasizes on the shifting procedures of institutional power. The second one is titled *Secret Histories: The Rise of Dark Academia* (Taylor, 2022) for her master's degree in Fine Arts in Writing and Literature of Bennington College. This piece argues that the examples of the literary works, including M. L. Rio's *If We Were Villains*, are a criticism to elitism in academia.

Other than that, the writer also finds a couple of studies that use the theories which the writer will be using. The first one is titled *The Hidden Truth of*

Jack Twist's Characterization in Brokeback Mountain Movie (Damara, 2017) written for his undergraduate degree in English Department of State Islamic University Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta. This thesis uses Michel Foucault's ideas that are reframed in Tamsin Spargo's *Foucault and Queer Theory* to analyze Jack Twist's sexual identity and his negotiation of his own identity.

Meanwhile, George Levinger's stages of relationship development is also used in a journal (Prema et al., 2020) titled *Roller Coaster Ride in Life Is What You Make It: ABCDE Stage of Relationship*. This article analyzes the stages of relationship that the character Ankita Sharma experiences.

Based on the studies above, previous research on *If We Were Villains* mainly discusses institutional criticism and academic elitism, while studies using queer theory of Levinger's model tend to examine identity or relationship stages separately in other works. None of them analyze how sexual identity and relationship development operate together within the queer bond between Oliver Marks and James Farrow. Therefore, in order to make the study differ from the previous studies, this study applies both queer theory and the relationship development model to examine the queer relationship between Oliver Marks and James Farrow.

1.5 Scope of the Study

In order to limit the scope of the study, the writer focuses on two main things: queer theory by Michel Foucault as adapted by Tamsin Spargo and relationship development model as designed by George Levinger. These aspects are applied in analyzing the sexual identities and the relationship development of

the two characters, Oliver Marks and James Farrow, through their characterization and the conflicts that happen between them.

1.6 Writing Organization

This thesis is arranged into five main chapters which will then be divided into sub-chapters. The organization of the writing is as follows:

1. Chapter I: INTRODUCTION. This chapter explains the background of the study, research problems, objectives of the study, previous studies, scope of the study, and writing organization.
2. Chapter II: THEORY AND METHOD. This chapter consists of the theories and methods that the writer uses in analyzing the novel.
3. Chapter III: DISCUSSION. This chapter examines the intrinsic and extrinsic elements of the novel according to the chosen topic.
4. Chapter IV: CONCLUSION. This chapter concludes the analysis from the previous chapter.
5. REFERENCES. This lists the literature used as reference in helping the analysis.