

## Representation of Sexual Identity Struggle in *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*

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### Abstract

This paper discusses the journey of finding sexual identity in the novel *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*. The analysis focuses on the effort of finding the sexual identity. The struggles before and after coming out are represented in the novel, as well as the critical position of the author. Stuart Hall's representation theory was used as a qualitative approach to analysis. The data of this study were obtained from words, phrases and sentences related to the phenomenon of gay and trans-gender in the selected novels. People are still uncomfortable with the behavior of the LGBT group, so it causes violence against groups associated with them. When the protagonist admits to being gay, he is abused and discriminated against by others, like in the novel. By relating the problem in the story to the author's biography and the struggle to establish his own sexual identity, the topic of sexual identity seems crucial to address as a part of this social phenomenon. This research was conducted as an initial research on the LGBT group, which is expected to be useful for future research.

**Keywords:** *coming out, gay, LGBT, sexual identity*

### INTRODUCTION

*Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* by Benjamin Alire Saenz is one of the young adult-themed novels he ever wrote. The setting of this novel takes place in the place where he grew up in El Paso, picturing the simple life of two teenagers in that era, wondering what life might lead them to be. A story about the friendship of two teenage boys in the late 80's who battle with their own sexual identity and later discover that they are falling in love with each other. The central theme for this topic discussion is LGBT. It is a shorthand for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender. This term refers to sexual orientation and gender identity. The popular conversation of sexual orientation is described by two clashing thoughts regarding why some people are lesbian, gay, or bisexual. Some people think that this is a choice, while others believe that they are born with it (Mayer & McHugh, 2016).

The idea of discussing sex and gender became obvious around the twentieth century. Although it may have brought some attention to some people at that time, it was not very common. Around the 1990s, a variety of sexual orientation issues, such as gay and lesbian issues, had made their way into most Americans' homes via talk programs, television, and movies, as well as those who were forthright in their remarks, from their own extended families and local communities. In 1993, the United States Congress passed, and President Bill Clinton signed "Don't Ask, Don't Tell," enabling homosexual and lesbian people to serve in the military. They would

not be asked about their sexual orientation during the recruitment process. An entire generation was responsible for the rise of the LGBT community, but it's a shame that many did not survive to see their efforts thrive. A control over enunciations where and when it was not possible to talk about such things as sex and sexuality became much more strictly defined; in which circumstances, among which speakers, and within which social relationships (Foucault, 1978). Sexual identity develops in some way is called social sex-role that characterizes each individual based on their masculinity and femininity (Shively & De Cecco, 1977). The most feminine men and the most masculine women have labelled or identified themselves as homosexual and/or bisexual, and it can happen whether or not they had ever even had any same-sex interests, whether or not they identified themselves as one (Devor, 2002). Identity is a term that has been psychological practice but is also applied in everyday discussion. People regularly identify as homosexual or consider themselves heterosexual as their 'identity.' Individuals could identify themselves as transsexual or intersexed without being specific as to what the term means (Diamond, 2002). To determine the sexuality of someone can be seen in two factors that consist of physical preference and affection preference (Shively and De Cecco, 1977).

Research on sexual identity in literary works has been reported in international scientific journals for some decades. Trevenna (2002) examined some of Angela Carter's fiction entitled *The Magic Toyshop* (1967), *The Passion of New Eve* (1977), *Nights at the Circus* (1984), and *Wise Children* (1991). The research shows that the process of getting their gender identities is similar to the gender debate offered by Simone De Beauvoir, not that proposed by Judith Butler. Another study was conducted by Willis (2016) about slash fiction on the internet. Willis concluded that slash fiction was created as a technological platform to reveal sexual identity, whether male, female, gay, lesbian, or transgender. Antoniolli (2017) examined fan fiction, significantly slash fiction and femslash fan fiction written by authors around the globe. This fan fiction is not created for commercials; they tend to freely express the writers' experiences, such as sexism, psychological illness, consent, abuse, and so on. These studies, as mentioned above, are not the same as what we will present in this paper.

Since the topic is about finding sexual identity, we will take a closer look at what identity is. According to Merriam – Webster's dictionary, identity is the distinguishing character or personality of an individual. Identity is a modern definition of dignity, pride, or honor that indirectly ties these concepts to social categories. Identity gives us a feeling of who we are, connecting to other people and our surroundings. Identity defines how we are similar to those in comparable positions and how we differ from those who do not. Identity has long been an essential notion in the social and behavioral sciences. This construct has various roots because it was developed across disciplines as a tool for explaining human thought and behavior. In psychology, for example, identity has long been viewed as a crucial component of self and self-concept, serving to give people and their self-images meaning. In sociology, identity is commonly understood as social roles, which aids in understanding how social position affects one's sense of self. Individual identities are conveyed through social behavior through communication; identity not only defines a person but also reflects societal roles and relationships.

Furthermore, social behavior is a result of identity through communication (Jung & Hecht, 2004).

Butler (2007) perceives identity as a compelling illusion produced by our physical appearance. To the extent that "identity" is secured through the stabilizing concepts of sex, gender, and sexuality. The notion of the "personal" is questioned by the cultural emergence of "incoherent" or "disconnected" gender beings who appear to be people but who fail to conform to the gendered norms of cultural understanding by which people are defined. The characters achieve their identities by establishing and maintaining coherence and continuity between sex, gender, sexual activity, and desires for each other by examining their self-image through experiencing specific experiences.

From the aforementioned description, the paper aims at exploring 1) how the sexual identity struggle of main character is represented in the story, and 2) what the critical position of the writer is portrayed in the novel.

## **METHOD**

This research is in the domain of qualitative research because the data are non-numerical. We gathered primary data, in the form of words, phrases, sentences from the novel *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* by Benjamin Alire Saenz published in 2012 by Simon & Schuster BFYR. The secondary data to support the analysis will be taken from the internet, like journal articles and theses. To reveal the representation of the gender identity struggle, we utilized the theory of representation proposed by Stuart Hall, especially the constructionist approach.

Anchoring in the idea of Michel Foucault, Stuart Hall (2020) suggests the concept of discourse. Foucault believed that we have knowledge of things only if it has a meaning, and it is a discourse that produces knowledge (Hall, 2020:45). There are two classifications in the way of finding their true sexual identity through the struggle of the main characters, the denial behavior of the main characters, and the acceptance of themselves and from the people's surroundings. The next thing to do is to find the discourse constructed in the novel that shows the main characters' struggle or journey to find their identity. Then the contextual condition will be put to attention, like the historical and the social situation, between the time in the novel and real life to give more information for the data so it can be more accurate to analyze the sexual identity of the main character.

The final stage is to examine the author's critical position in writing the discourse of the novel. This stage is done by looking for information on the internet about the author's intention or motivation to write this novel. We traced the author's critical position from the language and the tone he expressed in the story, primarily connected to the characters' sexual identity, to reach a conclusion explaining the actual sexual identity of the main characters.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **The Sexual Identity Struggle of Aristotle and Dante**

Aristotle and Dante, the two leading characters in the selected story, felt that they were different from society's sexual standard, which led them to the journey of

finding their sexual identity, especially to one another. A person may feel more comfortable revealing a gay or lesbian classification after participating in numerous phases of the study and learning to trust that their privacy is assured. Aristotle and Dante, in the story, experience the phases of their sexual identity struggle.

Identity refers to either (a) social category or expected behavior described by a membership rule or (b) socially distinguishing features that a person takes special pride in. Identity is the modern formulation of dignity, pride, or honor that indirectly associates these with social categories. Identity gives us a sense of who we are in relation to people and the environment around us. Identity distinguishes how we are similar to people who hold the same position and how we differ from those who do not (Fearon, 1999; Woodward, 2018).

Sexual identity relates to how we feel about someone in a deeper connection, as in sexual attraction to someone else. This includes the appeal to someone, whether they are the opposite sex or the same sex as the other person or, as it is called, sexual orientation. How sexual orientation works brought many terms that we know today, such as straight, gay, lesbian, etc. Individuals' sexual identity labels reflect how they perceive, describe, and categorize their sexual orientation. The following table shows the aspects of sexual orientation.

Table 1. The different aspects of sexual orientation taken from (Joloza, Evans, & O'Brien, 2010:7)

Sexual attraction	It indicates sexual interest in another person based on a combination of factors including the person's appearance, movement, voice, smell, etc. that attracts the person to whom they are attracted. Sexual attraction can also be defined as a sexual feeling towards someone.
Sexual behaviour	It represents the sexual behavior of people. Regardless of whether you have a same-sex partner or not. Sexual behavior is not necessarily the basis of an individual's sexual identity
Sexual identity	What each person thinks of them. This does not necessarily match their sexual behavior or attractiveness and may change over time.
Sexual orientation	Someone' sexual orientation can be originated based on any of the above.

The story of the selected novel is about the struggle of the main characters to express their true sexual identity and we found two factors that construct the discourse of the identity struggle in the story. The first is the denial stage, and the second is the acceptance, where finally, they realize that they do not need to hide anymore. Coleman, (1982) shows that there are some steps or models regarding the process or the journey of gay or lesbian individuals. Coleman (1982) showcased some proposed models that postulate five stages that described many patterns in individuals with predominantly same-sex sexual orientation. The stages are pre-coming out, coming out, explorations, first relationship, and identity integrations.

The aspects or model that I follow is based on the concept Coleman suggests, but I put it in a different term and simplified it so it can explain the purpose of this study. These two aspects are denial and acceptance. The two words are the ones brought in the story that show how meaning is constructed through language (Hall, 2020).

### ***Denial***

The expression of 'phase' emerges to bring up images from the conclusive path to the extreme objective when young individuals fight through the chaos of the period and develop with their original personality or correct. Perceiving sexuality and gender identity as a phase can disempower and prevent access to support, which are not advertised because of a misunderstanding that it is not significant that can develop someone from becoming part of LGBT + (Toft, Franklin, & Langley, 2020). It is the linguistic system that is utilized to express ideas and the social actors who generate meaning, to communicate about that world meaningfully to others (Hall, 2020:4). In the story, Aristotle's behavior is a little bit defensive towards his surroundings and also about his feelings around people. He often does not really care about what happens, yet he is still curious about the people around him. In this particular paragraph, he narrates what he thinks about how he hates doing the usual thing but still manages to pay attention to what the other boys are talking.

“... Yeah, rules. I hated taking a shower with a bunch of other guys. I don't know, I just didn't like that. You know, some guys liked to talk a lot, like it was a normal thing to be in the shower with a bunch of guys and talking about the teacher you hated or the last movie you saw or the girl you wanted to do something with. Not me, I didn't have anything to say. Guys in the shower. Not my thing.” (Sáenz, 2012, p.20).

Ari always feels like he never really belongs to another guy group and even feels uncomfortable having a small conversation with them. This kind of behavior might have been triggered by the previous events that happened to him that might traumatize Ari. As a negative self-consciousness, shame detrimentally affects a person's brain science and conduct, like improved anger. Assaulting others is one of the four commonplace ways that people manage shame. People are frequently reluctant to acknowledge guilt when they experience it, so they externalize shame by coordinating outrage at others or the extreme climate, which somehow or another empowers them to feel the lessened shame (Wang & Sang, 2020).

The act of heteronormativity is the assumption and favoring heterosexuality. Research on how young people understand and notice heteronormativity in their lives is needed to inform the theory of heteronormativity. It is internalized by all those who live in heteronormative communities and young people who are very vulnerable to these social messages when they begin to imagine their future lives. Many young people presume their future to be heteronormative and learn to strengthen heteronormativity through social experiences (Pollitt, Mernitz, Russell, Curran, & Toomey, 2021). An example of homophobic behavior goes from way back to June 1981, the AIDS Epidemic began in the United States, dominating the fight for gay rights. Homophobia and a lack of support from Ronald Reagan's administration resulted in virtually no AIDS relief at the federal level across the country. During his first years in office, the administration's silence on the epidemic cost the country many lives and thousands of dollars in federally financed research. Many young people presume their future to be heteronormative and learn to strengthen heteronormativity through social experiences (Pollitt et al., 2021).

Fewer studies have examined how young adult sexual minorities, defined as

18-24-year-old youth who support lesbians, gay, bisexuals, or queer persons, interact with their social environments to disrupt or reinforce heteronormativity. This issue happens because the meaning associated with sexual identity is one of the fundamental ways heteronormativity operates in society. These encounters reveal the complexities of heteronormativity's emergence and reinforcement in society. By identifying as a sexual minority, young adult sexual minorities harm heteronormativity and should interact with heteronormative messages in the community while changing their sexual messaging with their sexual identity (Pollitt et al., 2021). Showing a little compassion for Ari feels a little bit strange or unusual. But with the arrival of Dante, he may understand a little bit that having feelings or emotions are okay. As in the matter of showing a little more emotion is forbidden because it may violate the rules of society. Lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) young people undergo various changes, with other breakthroughs, sequences, and timing depending on the individual. They include peer reactions, the start of same-sex curiosity, addressing one's sexuality, the same sexual encounter, self-recognition and labeling, disclosure to others, the first love relationship, and finally, self-acceptance (Savin-Williams & Cohen, 2015).

The little things that Ari thinks about Dante's appearance show that he is interested in him more than he knows, whether he realizes it or not. As Ari is still in denial about his sexuality in this situation, his conduct is pretty understandable for why he wants to pay a little bit more attention to Dante but also denies that it is a type of emotion for Dante. As is explained that the coming out process is defined as the experience of recognizing, embracing, and enjoying one's non-heterosexual identity and beginning to expose one's sexual orientation to others (Petrocchi et al., 2020), and in this situation is why Ari is not aware of his behavior. In proving that he is actually not a homosexual himself, he is taking some precautions, as it is shown in the line below:

“So what are the rules?”

“I don't kiss boys.”

“Okay, so the first rule is: No trying to kiss Ari.” (Sáenz, 2012, p. 209)

These are the precautions that Ari takes to prove that he is not interested in a same-sex person. When Ari states he does not kiss boys, it appears that he is still suppressing his affections. Even though he is aware that Dante has already made a gesture of coming out to him, Ari may be pushing back sentiments because he still believes that being different, or in this instance, homosexual, is unacceptable. Being gay or homosexual is not easy, as individuals must deal with various challenges as part of their journeys, such as attempting to have a relationship with someone of the opposite gender. It could be a factor that influenced Ari's decision to become gay, although he still maintains a denial face. When someone is on the road to learning their actual sexual orientation, they may acquire a preference for a different gender than the one they are currently dating. This proof is the first extensive experience of sexual and social connection with other individuals, similar to how adolescents explore and experiment with different sexual identities (Fausto-Sterling, 2019; Coleman, 1982).

“I guess I did miss Dante—even though I tried hard to not think about him. The problem with trying hard not to think about something was that you thought about it even more. Dante. For some reason I thought of Ileana.”  
(Sáenz, 2012, p. 139)

“She is a good kisser.

She’s taught me a lot in that department. But she finally said to me, “Dante, I think that when you kiss me, you’re kissing someone else.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Guess so.”

“Are you kissing another girl? Or are you kissing a boy?” I thought that was a very interesting and forward question.

“A boy,” I said.”  
(Sáenz, 2012, p.191)

Both Ari and Dante began to experience their curiosity of sexual closure, such as kissing, towards the opposite gender for curiosity alone. Although some feelings may be involved, this does not imply that they are in love. The first developmental activity of the coming out stage may be as simple as acknowledging an idea about awareness or identification at the start. This event is not to claim that the person fully comprehends the term homosexual and what it entails. Regardless of whether he enjoys going out to public, the fear of someone who wants to come out is still frightening. Denial is regarded as a step in the process or journey of gay or lesbian individuals before coming out, as evidenced by how it is brought into the story as evidence of how meaning is constructed through language (Hall, 2020, p.25).

### *Acceptance*

We describe acceptance in which practically everyone who has gone through the denial phase recognizes themselves as a member of the LGBT community. Having had the experience of having to tell people about their own choices and beliefs regarding sexuality, identity, and/or gender may be considered a significant event for each individual. An example of coming out and accepting their true color that is pretty known is from Ellen DeGeneres, a comedian, TV actor, and television host, who was one of the first significant performers to come out as a lesbian publicly. We can see her during an interview on Oprah Winfrey's show in 1997, and then went on to play the first openly homosexual character on the TV show "Ellen." She was then featured on the cover of Time Magazine as well as other news outlets. Though we do not know what happens in every person's experience or what they have to cope with, in this session, we will explore what happens to the main characters in this story and what kinds of phenomena they encounter.

There are some lines where Ari admits that he likes Dante, albeit this might be because he has finally found a friend who can console him or because he has begun to develop genuine affection for Dante. The line when Ari says that he truly loved Dante continuously expresses that he liked him. Although Ari does not really say it out loud, the feeling exists because he keeps on having that kind of thought can be considered that he is starting to accept his actual sexuality. Even among those who consider themselves out, lesbians, homosexuals, and bisexuals employ

various tactics to disguise their sexual orientation (Malterud & Bjorkman, 2016)—also, admitting that his best friend is getting his attention more than usual, like loving a little thing that Dante is doing. Though maybe he does not realize the homosexual part of himself, accepting that he is interested in Dante more than just a friend is considered an acceptance.

“Dante was staring at his feet. That made me smile...

... I got to thinking that one of my jobs in the world was to laugh at Dante’s jokes. Only Dante didn’t really say things to be funny. He was just being himself.” (Sáenz, 2012, p. 47)

Apart from the person's acceptance, the acknowledgment and approval of the person's parents or relatives about the changing situation of someone who is just coming out are deemed vital. Family approval of their children's coming out is critical for some people. Parents' reactions can be one of the turning points in their journey as members of the LGBT community. There was criminalization, prejudice, and homophobic violence throughout the twentieth century. In the first stage, parents gather enough information after the initial shock to recognize the gravity of new details and deny their child's homosexuality. Rejection creates a buffer zone in which parents can regain control (Castro-Peraza et al., 2019; Savin-Williams, 1989). A community was also formed to support the family and friends called The National Organization of Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) established chapters around the United States in 1979. It has been an inspiration and resource for numerous families who want to be involved in their gay and lesbian children's fight for equality.

When someone who comes out decides to tell the public or society about their new status as a member of the LGBT community, what occurs next is not always straightforward to foresee. Some events that may occur after someone decides to come out may not be as beautiful as the LGBTQ community's flag. Every person's journey is unique, but one thing that almost always occurs is rejection in various forms from many different people. Matthew Shepard, a 21-year-old University of Wyoming student, was beaten severely and left to die because he was gay, taken as an example. Depression and suicidal ideation, family persecution and bullying, lack of social or peer acceptance, poor academic achievement, and substance abuse are all variables that raise the likelihood of bullying among young people (<https://www.matthewshepard.org/about-us/our-story/>). The characteristics are frequently present at high levels in the young LGB population, owing to the disruptive and discriminating experiences they encounter, particularly following exposure to family, friends, and classmates. Dante's first experience after coming out and deciding to communicate his feelings with someone else is also detailed in this story. Someone else ended up beating Dante because they witnessed him kissing another male. To summarize, acceptance is a part of the process or journey that gay and lesbian people go through before coming out. It is the turning point in someone's path when they can finally accept or confess who they are, accept or admit that they are a member of the LGBT community, and come out to those around them.



### ***Critical Position of Author***

Critical position is an idea that represents the author's purpose, opinions, expectations, or goals regarding a matter that is presented through their literary works. To find a critical position in a literary work, one must connect the background or biography of the author and the discourse through the narrations in the novel. By linking these two factors, the critical position of the author can be put to a conclusion whether the author criticizes, negotiates, or agrees with the topic discussed.

In *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*, Saenz emerges his characteristic as a gay man who struggles to reveal his true self after so many years of being someone else other than being true about himself. The language that he uses is made up of signs, and it is the existence of common languages that translate his thoughts into words, and then utilize these as a language to express meanings and communicate to others through his writing in this novel (Hall, 2020:4). He was once married to a female for 15 years and later in 2009 he filed for divorce and declared that he was gay. In his novel, Saenz uses Aristotle and Dante's points of view to represent his thoughts and feelings. Through the characters of the story and by using the main characters' narrations, Saenz is involved in constructing the way gay people's thoughts and struggles come out and accept their true selves. He utilizes the novel's main characters to deliver his thoughts, feelings, emotions, and knowledge from a man's point of view to respond to specific struggles or problems of how LGBT people and how the family and people surrounding them react to that.

As a result of the primary analysis, we know that discrimination towards the LGBT community plays a significant role in making the discourse of the struggle of the LGBT community come out in the story of this novel. Thus, Sáenz experienced how hard it is to grow up feeling different and not constantly uncomfortable in his skin. He had been watching with his own eyes how being the genuine person himself is discriminated against and considered wrong becomes the central issue in his novel. Moreover, through the result of the first research question, it can be seen that Sáenz shows how society treated Ari and Dante badly, and the pressure of the family itself also becomes the main problem for people in the LGBT community that do not dare to come out yet. Saenz believes literature is an excellent tool for conveying many issues, including being part of the LGBT community.

"I think I **needed to write this book** because I had such difficulties coming to terms with my own sexuality. **I was abused as a boy**, and the thought of being with a man was not very appealing, to say the least and other difficulties. But I finally came to terms and I think just wanted - I'll put it this way. A friend of mine who read the book - after she read it, she said, oh, Ben, you gave yourself a gift" (Sáenz, 2013)

Saenz uses Ari and Dante's points of view to represent his thoughts and feelings through the character of the novel. Using a teenager as the main character, Saenz wants to share the ideals of finding one's sexual identity through a teenager's thoughts, feelings, emotions, and knowledge, who are struggling to express their feelings to a problem about revealing someone's sexual identity and how to handle

it. It is also shown that Saenz, as part of society, wants to represent his ideas and perspective of someone who is struggling to come out in the community. Saenz maintains the landscape of his hometown for his story settings. He depicts himself as the character of Ari and Dante, who struggle to come out to society.

“I don't think it's easy to come out at any age, during any era. I think it's easier now, but I think it's a difficult journey for all gay young men - especially Latino gay young men - to really come out and feel comfortable with themselves, because there is the norm in this country, and that is heterosexuality. And maybe that's the way it should be. I don't know, but that's just the way it is, and they know it. And as I say in my dedication: To all the boys who've had to learn to live by different rules. It's difficult.”

(Sáenz, 2013)

Apart from the quotations above, Sáenz also wanted to show what it was like to be part of the person struggling to come out as gay, based on his personal experience. *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* is a medium for him to tell the truth since the two main characters in this novel portray the experiences of the struggle of coming out of the closet as a homosexual to be part of the LGBT community.

## CONCLUSION

A story about a gay teenager's struggle to come out is quite common and frequently based on actual events. Sáenz, the author of the novel, illustrates the struggle of "coming out of the closet" as a gay that is felt by others and by himself. Ari and Dante recount the story of two young boys who use their friendship to discover their sexual identities. As a result, we come across the phrase LGBT, which many people are familiar with and even embrace but also oppose. The journey of searching for sexual identity in this novel is expressed in how Ari and Dante feel about one another in deeper connection as in sexual attractions. Sáenz seeks to highlight the pattern of acceptance in society for coming out culture and people's behavior towards people in the LGBT community by bringing together reality in America as the novel's contextual background over this story. He shows the journey of finding a sexual identity that emerged in a place where homosexuality is not something welcome in society. He also underlines that determining one's sexual identity is difficult regardless of when or where one is because society will always have opposing opinions. *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* demonstrate that the issue of sexual identity is recorded in social phenomena by tying the problem that occurs in the novel to the author's history and the fight to identify his own sexual identity.

Theoretically, this research is useful for deepening research on gender, especially for the application of the representation theory offered by Stuart Hall. Practically, this research can be a lesson for the development of gender identity which is not accepted by society, especially about a person's sexual orientation. At least we realize that this LGBT phenomena have come to the surface and become a topic of discussion in the academic world. In the future, research covering more

literary works needs to be done to find out the development of LGBT both from Indonesia and from abroad.

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