

# Challenging or Embracing Heteronormativity in Fictional Riverdale: An Analysis of the First Gay Character in *Archie Comics*

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In 2000, Linda Holtzman, sociologist, told us that homosexuality had been a difficult issue in American culture for many decades (beginning with its negative reception in the early 1900s and it continues today). Through the early decades of the 1900s, public discourse about (homo)sexuality was described as “repressed” and it wasn’t until the Stonewall Riots in 1969 that a Gay Liberation Movement clearly emerged.<sup>1</sup> Since the early 1970s, despite more social awareness, many homosexuals have continued to suppress their homosexuality in fear of personal and professional repercussions (*After Stonewall*; Kendall). From there, it wasn’t until the American Psychological Association removed, in its *Diagnostic Statistics Manual*, the word “disease” from its descriptions of homosexuality in 1974 (some conditions remained until 1987), and, more recently in 2013, removed the word “disorder” from the description of “gender identity disorder” that some GLBTQ rights were secured; since then more people have “come out” to others (Cameron, par 1).

Surely their struggle is ongoing and, as many scholars note, “coming-out” is a lifelong process of acceptance and rejection (e.g., Bacon; Dow;

<sup>1</sup> See *After Stonewall*; Felluga; and Foucault.

Gorman-Murray; Kendall). However, “coming out” stories “offer valuable insights into how to solve the dilemma of being absolutely sure of identity at the same time as being keenly aware of one’s relativity to all others in one’s class or group. This will make them a central element in any academic discourse about gay and lesbian studies and research” (“Coming Out Stories,” par. 9); it is also “through interpersonal contact and the media, persons who are ‘coming out’ search both interpersonal and *media* environments for clues to understanding their feelings and sense of difference” (Fejes and Petrich 396; emphasis added).

Therefore, media discourse is a place where these stories and GLBTQ characters are presented to audiences in support of and/or as a challenge to assumed social norms present in public discourse. This article contributes to the public discourse with a focus on a fictional gay<sup>2</sup> teenager in the *Archie* comic book series *Veronica* and its embedded miniseries “Kevin Keller” (*Veronica* #202-208). Specifically, the author uses Connell and Messerschmidt’s “process of social embodiment” and “dynamics of masculinity” to analyze this gay character in a heteronormative comic book culture while also suggesting how doing so offers a much-needed reshaping of hegemonic masculinity that appeals to critics and readers alike.

<sup>2</sup> Although the terms *homosexual* and *homosexuality* are used early in this essay, the author acknowledges that those terms are considered “derogatory and offensive by many gay and lesbian people” and will not be used in the remainder of the essay (“Glossary of Terms” 6). The context early in this paper necessitated their use.

## Literature Review

While much comic book research exists (e.g., Goulart; Lowell; Trushell; Wright), none has had the opportunity to explore the presence of an explicitly gay character in *Archie Comics*. According to Archie Comics Publications, the comic series began in 1939 and is still running strong, despite announcing its “Death of Archie” in the last issue of *Life with Archie* series in 2014, where he stands up for his gay friend and pays the ultimate price (“The Death”). Not surprisingly, *Archie Comics* has prided itself on dealing with current issues throughout the decades, including bullying, drugs, Vietnam, and introducing diversity through depictions of African-American and Hispanic American characters on a regular basis in the 1970s and 1980s (“Archie Comics Publications, Inc. History”; Heater). However, it was not until September 2010 in *Veronica* (#202) that *Archie Comics* presented another type of diversity: sexual orientation (Gustines, “A New Character”; Parent, “Isn’t It Bro-Mantic?”). In this first issue, we meet Kevin Keller, the first openly gay character in Riverdale, who also happens to be White, has blonde hair and blue eyes, and is athletic; thereby reflecting the series’ Caucasian focus and the privileges that come along with being a White male in today’s society. In Battles and Hilton-Morrow’s article from 2002, they discuss how gay characters are often depicted as “handsome, muscular, and physically fit,” all of which are reflected in Kevin Keller and emphasized in his performance of masculinity (90).

While some academic research has analyzed gay and lesbian characters (e.g., Astor; Dennis; Diaz; Lowry; Mangels; Palmer-Mehta and Hay) in comic books, graphic novels, TV series, film, and comic strips since 2010, none has focused on gay non-superheroes in comic books, like the gay character analyzed here. Despite the positive tone set by the publisher, some loyal readers were against this character’s development and threatened to end their subscriptions. Eventually, only about a dozen

subscribers cancelled their subscriptions, with overall subscriptions increasing by 1000%; the issue actually sold out and had to be reprinted to meet public demand (Phegley3). Clearly, as Pellerito, a president of the company, notes, most readers were ready to have a gay character enter *Archie Comics* discourse, to better reflect the social discourse (Phegley 3). This is evidenced by the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation's (GLAAD) nominations of Dan Parent (writer and illustrator) for Outstanding Comic Book in 2011 for *Veronica* #202, *Veronica* and gang as allies for the GLBTQ community, *Veronica* #207 in 2012, and Parent again in 2013 ("24<sup>th</sup> Media GLAAD Awards"). Clearly, an analysis of Kevin Keller in *Archie Comics* is necessary.

### Heteronormativity

With such hubbub surrounding this new gay character, Kevin Keller, the focus of this analysis is on several *Veronica* issues and the early issues of the "Kevin Keller" miniseries (Gustines, "Gay *Archie*"; Parent, "Meet Kevin Keller"). Specifically, the author uses two elements of Connell and Messerschmidt's hegemonic masculinity framework, "process of social embodiment" and "dynamics of masculinity," to assess the heteronormative culture of fictional Riverdale and Kevin's position in that culture. To draw conclusions about the heteronormative culture of *Archie Comics*, the author identifies the following: Kevin's hypermasculinity that emerges when readers are presented with his presumed "fault" or "weakness" (his being gay) in his masculinity, as defined in a heteronormative culture; the contradictory, yet plausible, meaning of his absence and then renewed presence in *Veronica* following

his “coming out” debut issue (#202); and the self-empowerment depicted in his “coming out” story (#207).

Prior to the analysis, it is important to note how heteronormative culture<sup>3</sup> is present not only in fictional Riverdale but also in the U.S., since there is often a symbiotic relationship between societal and media discourses. History suggests that gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transsexual or transgender (GLBTQ) culture did not publicly emerge until after the 1969 Stonewall Riots and the commencement of the Gay Liberation Movement in the 1970s. Readers may also know that someone would not have to be liberated if s/he was not oppressed, and that this oppression occurred, and still occurs in some instances, in the workplace, social venues, privacy of one’s home, and the general public discourse, such that many GLBTQ people repress their true identities. Therefore, when Kevin Keller is introduced into *Archie Comics* culture, where few minorities reside and no members of the GLBTQ community are openly present (thus oppressed and repressed), this is a major step forward in the world of pop culture, and specifically, *Archie Comics*. Unlike other comic book characters (e.g., the Green Lantern’s Alan Scott or Marvel’s Northstar) and research articles about gay superheroes (e.g., Bartlett; Kornfield), it took 71 years for an openly gay teenager, Kevin Keller, to “arrive” in Riverdale (*Veronica* #202; entitled, “Isn’t It Bro-Mantic?”). Here, Kevin is introduced to Riverdale’s heteronormative culture and all of its gender expectations with masculine confidence, when the female lead character, Veronica, assumes from the outset that Kevin is heterosexual and thus available as a romantic interest. He is clearly labeled the “Hot New Guy”

<sup>3</sup> “. . . the institutions, structures of understanding, and practical orientations that make heterosexuality seem not only coherent—that is organized as a sexuality—but also privileged” (Berlant and Warner 1722).

for Veronica to pursue, which supports Battles and Hilton-Morrow's claim above about gay leads and their female counterparts. Kevin Keller is relentlessly pursued by Veronica as a viable boyfriend in heterosexual Riverdale until she learns of his sexual orientation. The writers position Kevin as part of this heteronormative framework, but do so to allow character development and for Veronica to learn about his sexuality over time, which then also allows readers time to embrace this new character.

Additionally, hegemonic masculinity guides Kevin's gender performance until Veronica learns he is gay. Connell and Messerschmidt offer a thorough investigation and criticism of prior research on "hegemonic masculinity" and explain it this way:

Hegemonic masculinity was understood as the pattern of practice (i.e., things done, not just a set of role expectations or an identity) that allowed men's dominance over women to continue . . .  
Hegemonic masculinity was not assumed to be normal in the statistical sense . . . but it was certainly normative. (832)

These researchers use this normative component when reformulating hegemonic masculinity in four key areas: gender hierarchy, geography of masculine configurations, the process of social embodiment, and the dynamics of masculinity. For analytic purposes and publishing constraints, this author employs both the "process of social embodiment of masculinity" and "dynamics of masculinity" as the analytic framework for how Kevin Keller is depicted within this heteronormative culture and how one gay character initially embraces hegemonic masculinity when it is desirable, but also distances himself strategically from hegemonic masculinity at other moments; thus allowing readers to note that he is not a hegemonic male and that he may have to reshape assumptions people have of masculinity before being accepted in Riverdale.

## Analysis

The “process of social embodiment” and the “dynamics of masculinity” are keys to Kevin’s success as a (gay) teenager in heteronormative Riverdale. First, Connell and Messerschmidt explain how the process of social embodiment emerges in many contexts:

In youth, skilled bodily activity becomes a prime indicator of masculinity . . . [b]ody practices such as eating meat and taking risks on the road also become linked with masculine identities . . . involve specific patterns of internal division and emotional conflict, precisely because of their association with gendered power (851-852).

With Kevin Keller, the process of social embodiment includes, among other things, events in which he partakes, the physicality of his body, and the ways in which he comports himself in public, ranging from his risk-taking behavior in coming out to Jughead to his run for Class President, his sports prowess (track and field), and to his “competitive eating,” formally via pie-eating contests and informally with Jughead. Connell and Messerschmidt discuss how the eating of meat, especially in large quantities, is a reflection of masculinity in hegemonic culture, and Kevin Keller is no exception. Also, his physicality is emphasized by his competitive edge so that when other boys threaten him or others, he challenges them to a sports-related event or directly confronts them, sometimes verbally and other times through practical jokes (e.g., a locker full of pudding). Kevin also embodies an alternative masculinity when he “comes out” to Jughead and others throughout the series and does so as a matter of course, not as an exception in the culture.

For example, Kevin announces he is gay to Jughead on page six of *Veronica* #202 and then to the Archie gang later in the first issue; which in comic book time and space is relatively short, especially for a new

character or any introduction into a social group. He “presents” himself as a confident, young gay man to a new male friend without fear of consequences, which is quite unexpected for readers and many GLBTQ youth. It is at the end of the first issue that Kevin’s sexuality is revealed to others in the community through Jughead’s ploy to embarrass Veronica, the lead female and his nemesis. Jughead does not address or discuss Kevin’s pronouncement when it is revealed to him, but he intends to use this information to set up Veronica, whom he knows is romantically pursuing Kevin. When others, such as Betty and Archie, Veronica’s friends, learn of Kevin’s sexuality, they too treat it as a nonissue and no member of this new core group of friends further questions his sexuality pronouncement or his masculinity; instead, he is readily accepted by his social peers.

However, when Veronica learns Kevin is gay, her response was one of surprise and also great relief that his not liking her as a girlfriend was not about her after all. With dramatic effect, she falls to the ground in disbelief as she hears Kevin’s news. When she sees Kevin giving Jughead the candy heart she actually offered to encourage *him* to be *her* boyfriend, she is depicted as angry as she says “I’ve lost boys to Betty! That I can deal with. And to Cheryl Blossom! Which is tough indeed! But when I start losing to Jughead—! AARGH!” (Parent, “Isn’t it Bro-Mantic?” 22).

The readers then notice that within three to five frames of Kevin’s sexuality being revealed to her, she and Kevin become fast friends. This assures the readers that Veronica’s anger was not directed at Kevin for his being gay but with the apparent disappointment she felt in “losing him” to her frequent male nemesis, Jughead. Clearly, Kevin’s homosexuality now becomes secondary to Veronica’s tense relationship with Jughead. Specifically, Kevin’s sexuality is a nonissue for Veronica, except that she wants to develop her newfound friendship with Kevin, which is one way the comic book offers positivity towards the gay community. Similarly, like many other gay male leads and their female cohorts, Kevin and



Veronica are later portrayed as BFFs (best friends forever) and ultimately become the “lead couple;” which fits the pattern Helene Shugart discovered in her article “Reinventing Privilege: The New (Gay) Man in Contemporary Popular Media,” where being a “lead couple” supports heteronormative culture and practice.

Additionally, in being part of this heteronormative culture, we also see the dynamics of Kevin’s masculinity, where his masculinity seems more like the masculine stereotypes than the representations of his being gay and are often at odds in the social discourse. Up to the point where Veronica discovers Kevin’s sexual orientation, Kevin and Jughead have been serious food competitors, comic book lovers, and friends. Kevin, just like Jughead, is a serious food competitor, which is just the beginning of his performance of masculinity in the series that positions itself against traditional gay male stereotypes of gay men liking musicals and engaging in feminine activities and behaviors. Readers actually “see” how Kevin’s masculinity has developed over the years. For example, in Parent’s “The Write Stuff” (the second issue of the miniseries), we see a younger Kevin relating his childhood idolatry of his military father into the receipt of the superhero cape from his father so younger “Superhero Kevin” could battle dragons, dinosaurs, witches, and wizards as other boys typically do (7). In this same issue (#208[2]), readers then see a slightly older Kevin being bullied at various times in middle school, where his masculinity is being questioned; he does not retaliate or engage these bullies like a superhero would until the story and dialogue focus on how Kevin was teased by two boys in his previous school. The boys say, “Look! Keller’s trying out for track! Isn’t he one of them Girly Boys?” (11). Here his masculinity is directly attacked and his sexuality directly questioned. Yet, he stands up to these bullies and challenges them to an athletic competition, which heightens his masculinity through sports and once again reminds us of Battle and Hilton-Morrow’s claim about gay characters being physically fit and Connell and Messerschmidt’s reminder that sports prowess can

“establish relations of distance and dominance over other men’s bodies,” which are part of the heteronormative culture and its hegemony (852).

In the frames that follow in this same issue of “The Write Stuff,” Kevin also emphasizes his athletic prowess, challenges the boys to a running race, and verbally puts them “in their place” (perhaps even a type of bullying itself), which is a form of hypermasculinity that occurs when males embrace and go beyond stereotypes of masculine behavior to further their own masculinity in the presence of others. Kevin finds his behavior acceptable and empowering as he wins the race against these bullies and then says to them, “If I’m such a Girly Man, and you can’t keep up with me—what would that make YOU?” (11). Here Kevin belittles the bullies by using their own words against them and making them “guilty by association,” thus “Girly Boys” too by their own definition.

However, this author notes that Kevin “ups the ante” when he uses the word *man* instead of *boy* in his response to the bullies and emphasizes their identity with a capital lettered *YOU*, thus further empowering himself and placing more distance between him and these boys, and thus also “upping” his masculinity in the moment (11). In doing so, he engages in the “culture of cruelty,” where boys who don’t measure up are ridiculed or beaten up in order to secure one’s own masculinity in the heteronormative culture (*Boys Will Be Men*). Even more so, we see Kevin move from not defending himself to defending himself and then to defending other boys in his current high school (Parent, “The Write Stuff” 12). This supports the idea that he now understands how the dynamics of masculinity have become about defending himself and providing a space for him within the heteronormative culture.

Moreover, in this same issue (#208[2]), Kevin witnesses a smaller-sized high school boy, Sydney, being bullied by other boys and having his belongings knocked to the ground. He assists Sydney in gathering his things and tells Sydney he will report the bullying, but before doing so he gets revenge when he puts pudding in one of the bully’s lockers and tells

him, “I suggest you take your bullying *elsewhere!* Because *I’m* on the case, moron!” (12-14; emphasis added). Here we once again see his hypermasculinity displayed in the vision of manhood defined by being the aggressor (*Tough Guise: Crisis in Masculinity*), yet we also see its opposite when Kevin assists Sydney without worrying about the “boy code” present for most males in American culture, where boys must defend themselves and always be “real men,” not “women” or “gay,” as (stereo)typically defined in our culture (*Boys Will Be Men*). It is clear that Kevin is now not afraid of what the other boys think, and so he defies the “boy code” that emphasizes not caring about others who don’t measure up and also finding boys who rescue other boys “guilty” of not measuring up as well.

Kevin cares about what happens to Sydney and defends him which is both hypermasculine yet not, and provides an alternative to hypermasculinity and traditional masculinity, thus demonstrating the process of social embodiment of masculinity and dynamic nature of masculinity that Connell and Messerschmidt put forth. Ultimately, we see Kevin grow from confident little boy who idolizes his “superhero” military Dad, to weak and silent junior high school student who is bullied from school to school in the “culture of cruelty” (*Boys Will Be Men*), to confident, physically able, caring Kevin Keller we meet in high school, even though his confidence often borders on bullying others. Yet, Kevin’s hypermasculine behaviors are necessary in order to balance his interest in more traditionally “feminine” things that he and Veronica do appear to have in common, as evidenced below. In other words, Kevin sometimes offers even more alternatives, changing dynamics, to his performance of masculinity.

For example, once Veronica is aware of Kevin’s being gay in #202, Kevin suggests that he and Veronica have a lot in common and that they should go to the mall, which is a shift to a gender assumption about his apparent masculinity or lack thereof (Parent, “Isn’t It Bro-Mantic?” 24).

Kevin's invitation assures Veronica that her feminine prowess and beauty were not at fault for his lack of romantic interest in her, thus securing her own femininity and making them the perfect "lead couple" to which Shugart refers in her research.

In this case, Kevin can like feminine things but still be masculine; in a sense, Kevin has more gender fluidity than most other young men his age because of his confidence and ability to physically and athletically prove himself to others when questioned. In fact, his invitation to Veronica seems to lessen the harshness of Kevin's "bullying" of others by reminding the reader that he is a man who does appreciate some feminine behaviors and interests, and does seem to care about others who may not be able to defend themselves. His appreciation of these traditionally feminine things lessens his hypermasculinity and yet also maintains his alternative masculinity, thus assuring readers of the dynamics of masculinity. In support of Kevin, Veronica is shown to appreciate his performance of masculinity and his interest in some feminine behaviors and activities, thereby allowing her to embrace him as her friend at the end of this issue, ultimately making him one of the Archie "gang," and in a later issue, her very own BFF.

However, before developing this relationship with Veronica, Kevin, like many GLBTQ people, becomes somewhat "invisible" as he is backgrounded for a few consecutive *Veronica* issues. This author believes that the publisher may have been concerned about the aforementioned pressure some subscribers expressed about having a gay character—don't do too much too fast.

In #203, the fourth installment, readers encounter a BFF challenge focused on Veronica and Betty; therefore Kevin is absent (as are all regular boy characters from the series), because Betty is her true BFF in Riverdale. Then in #204, Veronica has a new goal: identify the second rich kid in Riverdale. On page four of this issue we can see Kevin sitting with other students at a cafeteria table in the background, but she says nothing

directly to him, and he in turn is silent, which acknowledges the issues of absence and presence for GLBTQ people. On page five he is shown holding a hamburger up to Jughead in Pop's Diner, reminding us of his masculine competitiveness, but once again he is silent. So, the few frames where Kevin is present, he is silent, even silenced through his presence as a new primary character in the series, and it is not until later that he is once again given "voice." He is also shown with the Archie gang at Pop's Diner where they, Kevin included, invite Veronica to join them at their table despite her bad behavior evident throughout the issue (Simmons 21). Finally, Kevin says of the rich guy, "He's won me over," when that character orders pizzas for everyone (Simmons 22). Kevin's reference to the new kid is about that character's wealth and pizza offering, not his attractiveness; and Kevin's remark reminds us once again that eating is masculine behavior and a focus for him within heteronormative culture.

In summary, Kevin is absent from #203 and appears sparingly throughout #204, but is back to his "eating and competing self," thereby re-embracing his masculine performance in the presence of others by the end of #204. It appears that assumed subscription pressures, if existent, were short-lived for this comic book series as Kevin returned in full presence and focus. However, the fact that he "disappeared" for largely two issues (which in comic book subscription time is a long time) raised suspicion and questions: Had *Archie Comics* introduced a gay character only to identify him in his absence and his silence? Had his lack of presence allowed readers sufficient time to get used to him as part of the group in a general way, rather than emphasizing his character and what it means to be a gay teenager in Riverdale? Since he becomes a focus again, this author's concerns are quelled and also emphasize the importance of Kevin Keller's experience in Riverdale and the *Archie Comics* universe. Perhaps Archie Comics Publications soon recognized the danger of Kevin's absence and fears about the pressures of heteronormative culture dictating the storyline.

In his reintroduction issue, (Parent's "The Buddy System," # 205) the publication directly acknowledges Kevin's absence in the previous issues and now makes visible what was invisible for largely two issues by labeling the front cover *Veronica: Kevin Keller Returns*. Suddenly, Kevin and Veronica are BFFs (usually reserved for referencing women in our lives) while Veronica's friend Betty feels left out of her best friend's life and complains to Archie, the lead male heterosexual character both Betty and Veronica desire, about this situation. Archie<sup>4</sup> quickly dismisses Betty's concerns when he says he likes when Veronica is with Kevin because he does not have to worry about her "seeing other guys.... since he's gay" (Parent, "The Buddy System" 11). Then, readers witness Kevin's portrayals of alternative performance of masculinity when, for the first time in *Veronica*, a fashion spread appears in #205 (and again, in #207). In these fashion spreads, readers see Veronica's and Kevin's fashions on a two-page centerfold. Here, Kevin is identified as fashion conscious, which reflects his more feminine, non-heterosexual side identified in previous issues, or as coined in discussions of *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, his "metrosexuality"<sup>5</sup>:

<sup>4</sup> This is the first time the leader of the "gang" in Riverdale, Archie, makes Kevin's sexual orientation obviously present in his own discourse since Kevin came out (Parent, "Isn't It Bro-Mantic"). In fact, Archie, the primary lead character of the self-named publication, has no prolonged conversation with or about Kevin in the comic book issues until he is giving Kevin dating advice in the first issue of the Kevin Keller miniseries, which raises some interest for this reader in knowing how Archie feels about Kevin and his being gay (18). Archie clearly feels secure in his own masculinity since Kevin is gay and not a direct competitor for Veronica in the heteronormative culture in Riverdale. But, he seems to only engage in conversation with or about Kevin when that characteristic is made clear in dialogue.

<sup>5</sup> Although Kevin is not heterosexual, his performance of hypermasculinity allows this reader to claim the use of "metrosexuality" since the heteronormative culture of Riverdale has not yet tackled homosexuality in more detail up to this point.

“[m]etrosexuality” is defined as a male heterosexual who “is said to endorse equal opportunity vanity through cosmetics, softness, hair care products, wine bars, gyms, designer fashion, wealth, the culture industries, finance, cities, cosmetic surgery, David Beckham, and deodorants. (Miller 112)

His performance of this alternative masculinity in this heteronormative culture resurfaces in this issue and others and also challenges traditional notions of masculinity. First, he is shown using the phone to call “Ron” (his nickname for Veronica), thus interrupting her BFF time with Betty. The women are shown watching the *Laguna Hills* marathon on TV (an obvious reference to a recent Orange County TV show) and it is atypical for young men to show open public interest in this type of show or discuss it with their male friends, yet Kevin engages in a discussion about the show with his BFF, Veronica. In fact, the amount of time Kevin and Veronica spend “chatting” or “texting” is the initial focus of this issue and certainly brings to light their status as “lead couple” as Battles and Hilton-Morrow previously suggested.

Then, to reassure the reader that Kevin is not “too gay” and to thus challenge a gay stereotype Veronica holds about gay men, he directly scolds Veronica in a discussion about the soundtrack for *Phantom of the Opera*: “As a matter of fact, I hate musicals” (Parent, “The Buddy System” 15). She questions Kevin’s statement and says, “That’s impossible.” He responds with a bit of anger when he says, “Why, *Oh!* I see . . . enforcing old stereotypes . . . eh?” She quickly apologizes and says, “Sorry you got me!” He then smiles and says, “I’ll forgive you this time” (Parent, “The Buddy System” 16).

So, readers see traditional stereotypes about gay men exhibited through Kevin’s chatting on the phone, liking certain drama TV shows, and embracing fashion shoots early in the issue, but then the reader sees a direct questioning of a more obvious stereotype of gay men liking musicals by the gay male character himself, who in turn controls his

interaction with Veronica, such that he corrects her and her faulty assumptions in a verbally aggressive manner. Thus, reminding us of his hegemonic masculinity within a heteronormative culture; ultimately, as Shinsuke Eguchi suggests in her research about gay men in straight worlds, Kevin is clearly negotiating his masculinity in a “straight,” heteronormative world that embraces current and expected hegemonic masculinity in U.S. culture. While being a BFF to Veronica allows him to present his more stereotypical “feminine side” or “metrosexual side,” it is when he is confronted with one stereotype he does not embrace that he is empowered as a gay man to “call her out” and correct her assumptions in a verbally aggressive, hypermasculine way.

Clearly, Kevin represents some gay stereotypes and refutes others through his alternative, dynamic masculinity, which enables readers to encounter the complexity of being gay and in performing masculinity, without assumed contradictions. In #205, Kevin is now quite visible and demonstrating that gender performance is complex and fluid, and therefore, the performance may not accurately reflect assumed societal stereotypes. This is a positive depiction of gender fluidity connected to sexual orientation presented in the series and supports Connell and Messerschmidt’s argument for reshaping masculinity: process of social embodiment and dynamic masculinity.

As the *Veronica* series progresses to #206, Kevin is once again absent, as are other male regulars like Archie and Jughead, while Betty and Veronica “rekindle” their BFF status as superhero agents (Parent, “Spy Girls”). However, noticeably, Kevin’s upcoming four issue special series as part of the *Veronica* subscription is well advertised in this issue. He gets the focus from an ad on the inside cover, where readers learn that Kevin will take center stage in his own series and that two covers will be released. He draws attention from *Veronica* with a subscription insert for the four-issue miniseries, followed by another reminder later in the issue on a two-sided advertisement for readers. Clearly, the publication wants to



make Kevin more present and challenge heteronormative pressures from some subscribers by providing more background on Kevin and his family. This is where his character is further empowered and heteronormativity is again challenged in *Archie Comics*.

Then, in issue #207 Kevin is brought into full visibility by being foregrounded on the cover, while the others are placed in the background. To begin, we are reminded of Kevin's competitive side as he is shown with a devilish look and smile when competing with Jughead. Then, an abrasive exchange occurs with two strangers, where one new male character calls Kevin "pretty boy" (an expression of homophobia) and they both move physically closer together as though prepared to fight, but instead they begin to laugh aloud because the strangers are actually Kevin's old friends from his previous hometown, Wendy and William (Parent, "Meet Kevin Keller" 3). Readers may recognize them as Kevin's friends with whom he has exchanged quick texts in one of the previous issues, but the Archie characters were not privy to these exchanges.

Veronica then quickly assumes that since William and Kevin are *best* friends, they must be "an item" or a couple. She awkwardly asks, "So, how exactly did you and William meet. . . What I mean is . . ." to which Kevin sets the record straight about their friendship (4). Wendy then tells Veronica of her long-held crush on Kevin and how in her high school Kevin explained that he wanted to be friends with her but that he was interested in boys (12). Wendy, as was Veronica in issue #202, was immediately relieved that no girl would ever take her place with Kevin (12); both women are now secure in their femininity since neither is rejected because of looks, but rather because of sexual orientation, which ultimately reaffirms the heteronormative culture. However, Kevin's sexuality becomes more problematic and socially difficult when current social issues are raised for the readers.

For example, in that same issue, Kevin and Veronica have a discussion (13-14) about Kevin's desire to be in the military and be a journalist, and

she worries about him being hurt or wounded (14). But, at no point does she raise the conundrum of his being gay and being in the military, which were still clearly at odds in our culture (“Don’t Ask Don’t Tell” and its repeal have not resolved the rampant homophobia, despite the legal rights of our GLBTQ military members). Yet, Kevin then points out that his dad, his highly decorated military idol, supports his son’s sexuality, which counteracts a societal assumption held by many people that men in the military are homophobic, by saying, “And he’s proud of his son, gay or straight” (18). Kevin further negates this societal assumption when he tells his original “coming out” story; this is an act of empowerment for him and some readers in the heteronormative world who want to “come out” to their friends and family.

During his story, readers and his Archie friends learn that Kevin tells his mom first because he saw her as someone who would be understanding of his sexuality, but for fear that he might paint his military idol father in a bad light, clarifies this by saying, “Even though I knew my Dad would *accept* me . . . I was still scared to tell him! So I let my Mom pass the word on” (19; emphasis added). One downside to this part of the story is that the reader can only assume the “why” of Kevin’s being scared. But, Kevin doesn’t discuss why he is afraid of how his dad’s response would be manifested, especially from a man whose masculinity itself has been at least partially defined by the hypermasculinity often found in the military.

Ultimately, Kevin’s empowerment in coming out to his mother is initially short-lived when his mom accepts and supports his sexuality, but then lessens when he thinks about telling his dad. Kevin salvages his own fear in telling his dad with his Archie friends by clarifying how his dad supports his son’s sexuality and other goals, such as Kevin’s military aspirations, by remembering that his dad said, “I don’t want this to stop you! It takes a special person to serve their country! Someone with heart and courage! And that’s you, Kevin! To a tee!” (21). This supportive comment further empowers Kevin to be the best military recruit and son

despite some negatives in the heteronormative discourse on gays in the military and in society.

Clearly, Kevin's coming out narrative in this issue (# 207[1]) is empowering to him and perhaps many of his readers despite the reality that not all coming out narratives have the same result. Here, *Archie Comics* clearly allows the reader to see that coming out to one's friends and family doesn't always lead to negative repercussions or the denial of one's personal dreams and goals. Readers may also note just how masculinity can be quite complex when heteronormative culture is primary.

## Conclusion

Overall, *Veronica* provides a formidable representation of the issues many young gay men face today within heteronormative culture. In telling Kevin's story within *Veronica* and his self-named miniseries, the writers depict him as a confident young man who is proud to be gay and male, yet sometimes uses hypermasculine acts to offset traditional gay male stereotypes that emphasize the "culture of cruelty" young men experience growing up today (*Boys Will Be Men*). Kevin's process of social embodiment of masculinity and dynamics of masculinity are sometimes restrictive and gender stereotypical, but also varied enough at other times to offer alternatives which Connell and Messerschmidt suggest is necessary for a reshaping of hegemonic masculinity in the social discourse, and now, particularly, in *Archie Comics*.

Clearly, *Archie Comics* has offered positive depictions of gay men and enhanced current media and public discourse surrounding the GLBTQ community. Perhaps Kevin Keller can continue to be a role model for other GLBTQ readers and their allies, while *Archie Comics* can continue to be an ally to this community by representing masculinity in nuanced ways that appeal to critics and readers alike.

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