

Is It Really So Strange? Homophobia, Homoeroticism, and Homopotentiality in *Stranger Things*' Billy Hargrove

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Introduction

After the success of the first season, *Stranger Things* (2016-2025) premiered its second season in 2017. Here, the Duffer brothers introduced the character, Billy Hargrove (Dacre Montgomery), who appeared as a series regular until his death at the end of season three and subsequent minor appearances in season four. Initially introduced to take over the archetypal teenage bully role previously held by Steve Harrington (Joe Keery) in season one, Billy quickly became a divisive character for fans of *Stranger Things*. His sole narrative purpose seemed to be to torment his younger stepsister, Max Mayfield (Sadie Sink), and the members of The Party—Mike Wheeler (Finn Wolfhard),

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Will Byers (Noah Schnapp), Dustin Henderson (Gaten Matarazzo), and Lucas Sinclair (Caleb McLaughlin). In season three, his function was to kidnap and recruit people to build an army of the flayed, after being possessed by the Mind Flayer, which then led to his death.

However, Billy proved a more complex character thanks to deliberate backstory decisions and Dacre Montgomery's empathetic acting. Glimpses behind the curtain of the Hargrove-Mayfield household showed causation and explanation for Billy's violent behavior. Billy's childhood abuse was explored in parallel with that of Eleven (Millie Bobby Brown), creating understanding between the characters. Additionally, fans pointed out numerous occasions where Billy exemplified queer-coded and homoerotic behaviors, namely with his on-screen rival Steve. Through these moments, Billy had cinematic parallels with the queer-coded, then later canonically queer, character of Will Byers.

Building upon previous work from Emily Roach's analysis of AIDS and homophobia in *Stranger Things*, which mainly centered on Will Byers and briefly mentioned Billy, this article further adds to the discussion of queer subtext and experiences of homophobia present in Billy's character and narrative arc throughout seasons two to four. Research exploring the presence of abusive fathers will contribute to unpacking Billy's masculinity and usage of violence as being shaped by his own violent childhood and experiences with homophobia. Through parallels to Will's own queer subtext and childhood and homophobic abuse from his father, Billy can be read through a queer lens as demonstrating homopotentiality, as analyzed through homoerotic moments displayed between Billy and Steve. I propose defining homopotentiality as the presence of potential homosexuality that is not fully explored in a work's

narrative, typically due to the presence of homophobia, which will be further explored and defined. Finally, discussions of violence as a tool of homoeroticism and homosocial bonding further contributes to Billy's own queer subtext and homopotentiality as well as furthering discussion on the homophobia present in his character, the eighties, and *Stranger Things*.

Father Figures

Stranger Things is rife with examples of bad fathers, ranging from absent or uninterested to openly abusive. The ramifications of fatherhood echo throughout character arcs, including, and especially, Billy's and Will's. During childhood, boys learn patriarchal and hegemonic masculine behaviors from their fathers (hooks 18). Fatherhood masculinities, as explored by Nicholas Solebello and Sinikka Elliott, is how fathers develop their own masculine and heterosexual identities and values to pass on to their (male) children (qtd. in Costello 57). Fathers will identify the traits they find valuable and masculine, either amongst themselves or other men, further exemplify them, and then instill them in their sons. Both Will's father, Lonnie Byers (Ross Partridge), and Billy's father, Neil Hargrove (Will Chase), exemplify stereotypical patriarchal and heterosexual masculine traits they wish to pass onto their sons, to varying degrees of success. While various fathers in *Stranger Things* exemplify different patriarchal masculine traits, Lonnie and Neil have the additional layer of specifically enforcing a heterosexual ideal into Will and Billy through homophobic remarks and attitudes.

Homophobic bullying surrounds Will from the beginning of season one, from both Lonnie and from other boys at school. When Will initially goes missing, Joyce Byers (Winona Ryder)

emphatically explains to Hopper that Will is not simply “playing hooky” because “he’s not like most” (“Chapter One: The Vanishing of Will Byers” 1.1, 17:18-17:30). She explains how the kids at school tease Will and how Lonnie “used to say he was queer, called him a fag” (“Chapter One: The Vanishing of Will Byers” 1.1, 17:50-17:57). As Roach discussed, Joyce “frames Will’s nature as different from the norm,” which positions his sensitive nature as resulting from the homophobic bullying and marginalization he experiences as a queer character (136). For example, a class bully taunts The Party members by saying Will was “probably killed by some other queer” and that he’s “in fairyland now...flying around with all the other fairies...all happy and gay” (“Chapter Four: The Body” 1.4, 30:29-30:40). Will’s more sensitive qualities put him at odds with the hyper-masculine model of boyhood that was normalized during the Reagan era (Roach 136).

During the Reagan era, the Republican cultural hegemony was able to successfully portray themselves as “distinctly masculine, not merely as men but as decisive, tough, aggressive, strong, domineering men” (qtd. in Roach 136). Lonnie attempts to instill these masculine qualities in both Will and his older brother Jonathan (Charlie Heaton). Jonathan, for example, says his dad took him hunting and made him kill a rabbit because “he thought it would make me more of a man or something” (“Chapter Five: The Flea and The Acrobat” 1.5, 29:59-30:15). Like Will and Jonathan, Billy’s father, Neil, instills Reagan era masculine qualities into Billy. Throughout season two, Billy is depicted as physically and verbally aggressive mainly towards Max, which is revealed to be internalized and repeated from his father’s own brutality (qtd. in Costello 57). In season two episode eight, “Chapter Eight: The Mind Flayer,” after Susan Mayfield (Jennifer Marshall) discovers Max has

snuck out, Neil interrogates Billy, who was supposed to watch her while Neil and Susan were out. Billy, aware of his babysitting duties, objects that Neil and Susan were three hours late and he has a date. Neil, then, says Billy has been staring at himself in the mirror “like some faggot” (“Chapter Eight: The Mind Flayer” 2.8, 6:56-7:06). Furthermore, after Billy continues to argue back, Neil shoves Billy against the wall, hits him, and makes Billy recite “respect and responsibility” as traits that Billy needs to demonstrate (“Chapter Eight: The Mind Flayer” 2.8, 7:24-7:40). Neil also refers to Billy’s date as a “whore” and that he’s going to “find his sister, like the good, kind, respecting brother that he is,” which are further traits that Neil hopes for Billy to demonstrate and display (“Chapter Eight: The Mind Flayer” 2.8, 7:58-8:10). After Neil and Susan leave the room, Billy is seen crying and shattering something out of frame, reinforcing hegemonic masculinity’s “fear of vulnerability” and displaying how Billy does not live up to hegemonic masculine standards (qtd. in Costello 57).

As an aside, it is worth noting that Billy’s stepmom, Susan, is witness to the entire scene between Neil and Billy. When Neil hits Billy, Susan is seen turning away, attempting to ignore what is playing out before her. This also provides subtext that this is a recurring scene in the Hargrove-Mayfield household. When Neil makes Billy apologize to her Susan still looking away and Billy not breaking eye-contact with Neil she briefly tries to say “it’s okay, Neil, really” before getting cut off by Neil (“Chapter Eight: The Mind Flayer” 2.8, 7:47-7:57). While Billy and Will have experienced abuse and homophobia from their fathers, their interactions with maternal figures further explain differences in their characters. Joyce is generally depicted as a loving and supporting mother. Her dedication to her sons, especially Will, provides them with a

safer upbringing to explore non-traditional and non-hegemonic masculinity. While Joyce missed that Will hadn't returned home in the series premiere, her dedication and quest to find him throughout season one narratively reinforces her love and care for her children. In contrast, Billy's lack of maternal support leaves him in a more vulnerable position. Not only does Billy's stepmom turn away and ignore his abuse, but in season three, during a flashback/telepathic scene with Eleven, Billy's mom is shown as being abused alongside young Billy. While she does briefly stand up to Neil, not much else is known about her and it is easy to presume she either died or left Billy with Neil, despite the abuse he was already enduring. This adds depth to Billy's childhood and upbringing. As well, it parallels Eleven's own lack of familial support and endured abuse at the hands of scientists, especially her "Papa", Dr. Brenner (Matthew Modine). The commonality connects the two of them emotionally before Billy, in an act of sacrifice and repentance, fights back against the Mind Flayer, only to be killed by it. One could read this as a symbolic act of Billy standing up against his continued child abuse and his death as the inevitable inability to escape a cycle of abuse and violence.

Violence among men is stereotypically used as a tool to enforce heteronormativity, posing heterosexuality and homosexuality as binary opposites (Haywood et. al. 103). Violence, as an extension of heteronormativity, polices those who do not seemingly fit into normative standards but also, as Sara Ahmed argues, to regulate masculinity (qtd. in Haywood et. al. 103). Heteronormativity, defined by Kristin Myers and Laura Raymond, is the "everyday and mundane ways in which heterosexuality and particular masculine positions are privileged and taken for granted, that is, normalized and naturalized" (qtd. in Haywood et. al. 102). Within *Stranger*

Things, male characters use homophobia and violence to maintain and regulate their own heterosexuality and the heteronormative society they operate within. Of course, this extends past Will and Billy.

Jonathan, for example, also had hegemonic masculine ideals imposed upon him by Lonnie that were in line with the masculine ideals of the Reagan era, such as the hunting story. Throughout season one, he is presented as an outcast and, to a lesser extent, also faces homophobic bullying from Steve who calls him a “pervert” and “a queer” (“Chapter Three: Holly Jolly” 1.3, 31:05-31:10, “Chapter Six: The Monster” 1.6, 31:57-32:13). In contrast, during the first season Steve models athletic and heterosexual qualities that enhance his popularity and more traditionally masculine demeanor. Despite not being present throughout most of the series, Steve’s father makes a very brief appearance during a season five flashback (“Chapter Four: Sorcerer” 5.4). He also displays traditional masculinity and heterosexuality, similar to the traits that Steve embodies in season one and, albeit a little less, in season two (“Chapter Four: Sorcerer” 5.4). Steve also uses homophobia to reaffirm and position his own heterosexuality and masculinity, after being slighted by Nancy (Natalia Dyer) when he sees her and Jonathan in her room together (“Chapter Six: The Monster” 1.6). This usage of homophobia tends to be more typical among younger male groups, as for young men homophobia “almost then becomes part of one’s own heterosexual and masculine identity-formation” (Haywood et. al. 77-78). Steve and Jonathan also get into a physical fight, both trying to reassert themselves as the dominant man, until the police intervene (“Chapter Six: The Monster” 1.6).

Billy does not directly use homophobic remarks against other boys when maintaining his masculine and heterosexual

identity. However, the threat of homophobia and homophobic abuse determines behaviors and traits Billy adopts to form his masculinity and heterosexuality in, arguably, more exaggerated methods than his male peers. Billy mainly uses sexist language and violence to establish himself as a dominant man and assert his masculinity and heterosexuality. The usage of misogynistic language and actions to reassert heterosexuality is a common method of disavowing subtextual queerness in television, as well (Greenwood). For example, when Max and Billy are discussing Hawkins Billy is complaining and Max is defending it since they are “stuck” there Billy describes the high-school girls as “cows” (“Chapter Two: Trick or Treat, Freak” 2.2, 25:25-25:57). In another scene, Billy and Steve are in the showers after basketball practice, and Billy notes, as Steve and Nancy have broken up, Steve has nothing to worry about because “there are plenty of bitches in the sea” and that he will “be sure to leave [Steve] some” (“Chapter Four: Will the Wise” 2.4, 17:28-17:50). Not only does Billy use misogynistic language to position himself as heterosexual and, as will be explored in a later section, during a moment of homosocial bonding that can be read as having homoerotic subtext but Billy also uses violence against others, namely Max and Steve, as an intimidation tactic to establish his masculinity. However, as will also be further explored, Billy’s violent masculinity ultimately fails as Max reverses the roles and uses violence against Billy as Max, too, is another victim of the cycle of violence shown in the Hargrove-Mayfield household to intimidate him into submission and mirroring the dominant traits depicted by Neil (“Chapter Nine: The Gate” 2.9).

Homoerotics of Violence

As seen, since Neil uses violence against Billy, to establish his own masculinity and dominance over Billy, it then makes sense that Billy would use violence as a means of protection and masculine identity. However, violence is also used to express queer desire and queer rage. When looking at work surrounding homoeroticism and violence, violence operates as a “socially sanctioned means of relieving homoerotic tension confirming heterosexual masculinity” (qtd. in Brookey and Westerfelhaus 28-29). Furthermore, “homoeroticism in a homosocial context can be evoked and then beaten back...before it slides into homosexuality” (Brookey and Westerfelhaus 29). In *Stranger Things*, this notion of being able to “beat back” against homoeroticism is displayed between Billy and Steve, especially when viewing Billy’s violence as him “beating back” against his own homosexual desire and inflictions of homophobia that he has experienced.

Briefly, Maria San Fillippo’s book “The B Word: Bisexuality in Contemporary Film and Television” explores the missed potentials of bisexuality among men in mainstream media and how it is profitable to screen homosocial relations without explicit reference to homosexuality and same-sex desire. Homosociality “describes and defines social bonds between persons of the same sex” often being used “as a mechanism and social dynamic that explains the maintenance of hegemonic masculinity” (Haywood et. al. 56). Additionally, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick argues that homosocial practices in male bonding “can be mapped on the same continuum of desire as homosexuality, even when those practices are homophobic or aggressively heterosexual” (qtd. in Brookey and Westerfelhaus 28). Homosociality, then, even when displaying homoerotic moments, protects it from fully being read as

homosexual (Brookey and Westerfelhaus 28). Using Fillippo's work exploring the potential of bisexuality among men in media and existing research on homosociality, I propose there is homopotentiality within *Stranger Things* through Billy and Steve. The potential of homosexuality exists solely through queer subtext, as homoeroticism becomes a profitable plot device for *Stranger Things*, rather than a legitimate avenue for male characters. Homopotentiality, then, is seen as being directly linked to instances of homophobia or the threat of homophobia, rather than a way for homosexuality to be represented in *Stranger Things*.

As previously explored, homophobia shapes the queer potential and subtext of both Will and Billy. The potential of bisexuality and homosexuality exists through multiple male characters in relation to Will and Billy, particularly Mike and Steve. Homopotentiality then becomes a tool for both reassuring heterosexuality and maintaining hegemonic masculinity, as well as legitimizing the experiences of queer desire and queer rage, demonstrated through moments of homoeroticism. Homoeroticism is used both as an avenue to explore homosexual desire but can explain away that same desire through the infliction of violence.

As mentioned earlier, a homoerotic moment between Billy and Steve occurs when they are in the showers discussing Steve's breakup after basketball practice, when Billy refers to him as a "pretty boy" ("Chapter Four: Will the Wise" 2.4, 17:28-17:35). They are naked during the interaction and aesthetically sculpted young men – it is not too far to say that both Billy and Steve are meant to be clear objects of desire, with camera shots panning over their bodies and highlighting female responses to their bodies ("Chapter One: MADMAX" 2.1). Their bodies, smooth and hairless, are almost pornographic in the showers

and closely represent “idealized images of masculinity” (Chopra-Gant 91). Steve, who still holds some semblance of popularity in season two, even recognizes Billy’s threat of attractiveness, his attention rerouted from his girlfriend, Nancy, and onto Billy, joining the ogling stares of his female classmates (“Chapter One: MADMAX” 2.1). The moment of homoeroticism between Billy and Steve in the shower is still centered around Nancy, as previously described, creating an erotic triangle of desire. Building from René Girard’s concept of a love triangle, Sedgwick observed that during love triangles “the bond that links the two rivals is as intense and potent as the bond that links either of the rivals to the beloved” and that “the use of women as...property for the primary purpose of cementing the bonds of men with men” creates an erotic triangle (qtd. in Greenwood 3). The relationship between the men is as important as the relationship(s) with the women and women exist primarily to facilitate the relationship between the men (Greenwood 3). While Billy does not romantically or sexually pursue Nancy, her presence allows Billy and Steve to homoerotically bond while still performing heterosexuality.

Billy and Steve, arguably, capture each other’s attention throughout season two. Billy seeks Steve’s attention in a way that reads as both homosocial bonding and as homosexual desire. For example, during a Halloween party, after Billy does a keg stand – beer glistening off his naked chest as the teenage boys around him celebrate his dominance, taking Steve’s position as the popular male – he goes inside the party to, essentially, stare at Steve (“Chapter Two: Trick or Treat, Freak” 2.2). Steve, then, removes his sunglasses to stare back at Billy, both of their faces giving an unreadable challenge between them – Steve, potentially, threatened by Billy usurping his “throne” and Billy, potentially, seeking Steve’s validation

despite the onslaught of cheers from the other teenage boys validating him as the new “king” of Hawkins High (“Chapter Two: Trick or Treat, Freak” 2.2, 31:07-31:31). There is, nonetheless, a charged tension between both as neither of them say anything to the other, communicating through glances. Most poignantly, if Billy is in search of homosocial validation from other men, he disregards the numerous moments of approval from his peers to seek out Steve’s, perhaps because he recognizes Steve to still be the “king” Billy’s “heard so much about” (“Chapter Two: Trick or Treat, Freak” 2.2, “Chapter Nine: The Gate” 2.9, 20:02-20:19). Roach describes the moments between Billy and Steve as undoubtedly having “a curious undercurrent of homoeroticism” to them (142). The homoerotic tension, too, is picked up by Joe Keery (Steve) and commented on, comparing their characters basketball rivalry and scenes to *Top Gun*’s homoerotic volleyball scene, saying that he hoped they the Duffers presumably would touch upon the dynamic more (they didn’t) (Jung). The homoerotic tension between Billy and Steve can be read as attempts of homosocial bonding. It also reveals the effect of closeting, further described in the following section, imposed upon Billy which hinders the potentiality of homosexuality and queerness within his character and *Stranger Things*.

The homosocial bonding activity of violence provides an avenue for queer desire to be explored. Violence allows for men to touch the skin of another man, to explore physical intimacy, without the fear of homosexuality. If homoerotic tension is present, violence allows for the tension to be relieved in a way that is more socially acceptable (qtd. in Brookey and Westerfelhaus 33). With Billy, violence allows him to explore his own homopotentiality and queerness with Steve while also operating as a tool for him to establish his dominant masculinity

over Steve. For example, in season two episode nine, “Chapter Nine: The Gate,” after Billy finds Max at the Byers house with Steve and The Party, he greets Steve with “am I dreaming or is that you, Harrington?” to which Steve replies “yeah, it’s me. Don’t cream your pants” (17:54-18:10). Many fans speculated on the tension between Billy and Steve, creating pieces of fan work and fanfiction about the two. As Roach mentions, major entertainment news publications even discussed the popularity of the “ship” (relationship) between Billy and Steve, dubbed “Harringrove” (Roach 143). Moments after the, arguably, flirtatious exchange between the two, Billy pushes Steve to the ground and calls back to another homoerotically charged moment between them in which Billy tells Steve to plant his feet to “draw a charge” (“Chapter Four: Will the Wise” 2.4, 16:52-17:00, “Chapter Nine: The Gate” 2.9, 19:05-19:12). The fact that Steve did not listen to Billy’s advice, which means Billy could once more push him to the ground in an act of dominance, hints at subtext that whatever exists between Billy and Steve is potentially one-sided.

The queer subtext between Billy and Steve aligns with a strategy film and television utilizes to hide homosexuality, where the subtext is easily read by gay audiences but remains “virtually invisible to unsympathetic and unknowledgeable mainstream audiences” (qtd. in Brookey and Westerfelhaus 28). Homosexuality, then, can be revealed and hidden through homosocial desire and hidden homosexuality can have “huge sales potential” when exotically implied but not blatantly included (qtd. in Brookey and Westerfelhaus 28). As well, *Stranger Things* demonstrates a process of queer disavowal that reads as similar to queerbaiting. Queerbaiting is described as putting in gay subtext to garner interest from queer fans but does not explicitly depict homosexuality and queer

representation (qtd. in Greenwood 2). *Stranger Things* has canonical homosexual representation but disavows homosexuality between men to insist upon the heterosexuality of male characters. Even when explicit homosexuality between men is disavowed, subtextual queerness remains present in the narrative (Greenwood 10). This process of introducing and disavowing homosexuality produces unexplored homopotentiality for male characters in *Stranger Things*, especially Will and Billy. Expanding from San Fillipo's work, I propose defining homopotentiality as the presence of potential homosexuality in a work's narrative that does not get fully realized and explored. In *Stranger Things*, homopotentiality is presented in tandem with homophobia, which further limits the potential to explore homosexuality within the narrative.

Essentially, homosexuality does not get fully explored in *Stranger Things*. Queerness, while a driving narrative tool or character descriptive, is more hinted at through subtext than presented as a full narrative arc and is primarily influenced by the presence of homophobia. For example, while Will does eventually experience a coming out scene, it is at the near end of the series and is driven by the fear of being outed and the constant surveillance of his mind by Vecna (Jamie Campbell Bower) ("Chapter Five: The Bridge" 5.7). Will's queerness, while never denied, is used more as a plot driver to signify and legitimize his character differences ("Chapter Five: The Bridge" 5.7). Will's coming out scene also is used to both canonize the popular pairing between Will and Mike (dubbed as "Byler" by fans) while rejecting the homopotentiality between them and solidifying Mike's heterosexuality when Will alludes to his unreciprocated crush being Mike ("Chapter Five: The Bridge" 5.7). Even with *Stranger Things*' first openly gay character, Robin (Maya Hawke), her lesbian identity is often used as minor

narrative driver and something to be exposed. For example, Robin's own coming out scene comes from her attempting to reject Steve's advances, but also against her own will as she has been drugged with truth serum ("Chapter Seven: The Bite" 3.7). Then, Will sees Robin kissing her girlfriend, Vickie (Amybeth McNulty), and alerts them to his presence by dropping a can of soda, causing them to fear being caught ("Chapter One: The Crawl" 5.1). Robin and Vickie's queerness is discovered by Will in a hospital setting. The fear of queerness as a disease during the AIDS epidemic remains prevalent to Will's own queer storyline, which will be explored in the next section.

In "Andrew and the Homoerotics of Evil", Patricia Pender discusses the flawed depictions of homoerotic desire in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003) and the queering of Andrew Wells (Tom Lenk). Pender argues that *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is "most queer when it is not directly addressing explicitly homosexual content" and that homoerotic undercurrents are unexplored and overshadowed by the overtly gay relationships (94-95). This is present in *Stranger Things* as well and most noticeably demonstrated with Will. Arguably, the homoerotic moments between Mike and Will become more compelling and queerer compared to when Will is openly gay in the show. However, it is worth noting that Will's overt queerness is still being displayed as hypothetical through a story delivered by Mike at the end of a *Dungeons & Dragons* campaign ("Chapter Eight: The Rightside Up" 5.8, 1:51:42-1:52:29).

While Billy's own homopotentiality parallels canonical queer subtext and storylines, his queerness does not get fully explored. Rather, his queerness is hinted at for the benefit of displaying homoeroticism without explicit homosexuality. Moments of homoeroticism typically are accompanied by stern reminders of heterosexuality or homophobia (Greenwood 6).

The presence of homophobia in *Stranger Things*, thus, squanders homopotentiality.

When Billy and Steve fight in the Byers' kitchen, it can be read, then, as Billy's experience of queer rage and internalized homophobia manifesting physically (Roach 143). If homopotentiality is rejected between him and Steve such as it was between Will and Mike violence allows for homosocial intimacy but not recognized homosexuality, as previously mentioned. When Steve takes his first swing at Billy, Billy rejoices, saying "looks like you got some fire in you after all" and that this is the "King Steve" he'd been hearing about ("Chapter Nine: The Gate" 2.9, 20:02-20:19). Billy views the fight as a bonding method initially, as also demonstrated with some of his more physically aggressive moments between him and Steve (Brookey and Westerfelhaus 29). Billy falls under the homoerotic gaze with his mostly unbuttoned shirt, perfectly curled hair, and tan skin while demonstrating violence (Brookey and Westerfelhaus 29). When Steve tells Billy to "get out," he does so while touching Billy's exposed chest, simultaneously furthering the presence of homoeroticism and "beating back" the homopotentiality ("Chapter Nine: The Gate" 2.9, 20:19-20:25). Billy, amid beating up Steve, says that nobody tells him what to do, clearly hinting at the suppressed rage and anger from Neil's control and homophobia Billy had just experienced in the prior episode ("Chapter Eight: The Mind Flayer" 2.8, "Chapter Nine: The Gate" 2.9). Max furthers the violence against Billy by injecting him with a tranquilizing drug and threatening to hit him near his crotch with Steve's nail bat ("Chapter Nine: The Gate" 2.9). Steve's nail bat can be read as a phallic object utilized to reject homopotentiality through its use as a weapon against Billy, ultimately willing him back into submission. In the scene, Max serves as the constant

surveillance of heterosexuality and violent masculinity, enacting the method of dominance that Neil uses against Billy. Furthermore, by protecting Steve from Billy, the “predatory queer” in this case, she, too, is “beating back” against homopotentiality and restoring Steve’s heterosexuality with the use of his phallic weapon, despite the previous presence of homoeroticism between the two boys. To further “beat back” Billy’s subtextual homosexual desire towards Steve and reassert his dominant masculinity, in season three, Steve crashes a car into Billy’s, while Billy is possessed by the Mind Flayer (“Chapter Eight: The Battle of Starcourt” 3.8). Then, Steve presumably leaves Billy to die as he and various other characters drive off as flames erupt from Billy’s vehicle (“Chapter Eight: The Battle of Starcourt” 3.8).

Desire, Like A Monster

As mentioned, *Stranger Things* is set during the Reagan administration (1981-1989), which coincided with the beginning of the AIDS epidemic in 1981. The second season of *Stranger Things* is set during the fall of 1984 and the third season during the summer of 1985, which were the peak years for HIV infections (CDC). Emily Roach previously explored the AIDS allegory and symbolism with the Upside Down in her chapter “AIDS, Homophobia and the Monstrous Upside Down”. In it, she suggests reading *Stranger Things* through a queer lens to explore the way the eighties are reflected in *Stranger Things* as being “unsafe for the lonely, the vulnerable and the queer” (Roach 135). Will’s tethering to the Upside Down can be read as a metaphor for closeting, as the Upside Down “is continuously present [and] pervades his world even when he tries to escape from its grasp” (Roach 137). AIDS is then metaphorized when Will’s body is taken over by the Shadow

Monster as “the monster is a virus and Will’s body is its host” (Roach 138). Will not only parallels the symptoms of AIDS, such as waking up cold, but when they force the virus from Will’s body, they do so by turning up the heat to leave “him sweating profusely” (Roach 138). As Roach also points out, Will’s queer life is seen as dispensable as “the scientists discuss whether Will should be killed to stop the virus mutating inside him to save a wider population from contamination” (Roach 138). Likewise, Billy’s sacrificial act, his life — arguably, a queer life — is seen as dispensable.

Billy sacrificing his life also comes after his body is possessed by the Mind Flayer. While Roach does briefly discuss Billy’s own closeting and how his “homophobia and hyper aggression results from abuse he himself has suffered and the self-hatred and violence that can be a product of closeting,” his season three arc adds to the previously established AIDS narrative and metaphor Roach explored with Will, in addition to how the Upside Down represents closeting. In season three episode one “Chapter One: Suzie, Do You Copy?”, Billy crashes his car while looking at himself in the rearview mirror before a date — not too dissimilar to how Billy is looking at himself while getting ready for a date when Neil calls him a “faggot” (“Chapter Eight: The Mind Flayer” 2.8). While it appears that Billy was able to potentially escape, after being dragged down into a warehouse, he briefly gets transported to the Upside Down and is subsequently tethered to it (“Chapter Two: The Mall Rats” 3.2). From the shadow emerges a group of anonymous people, only Billy’s identical copy being revealed to him (“Chapter Two: The Mall Rats” 3.2). Where the scientists were worried about Will’s virus contaminating others, Billy’s explicit purpose in season three *is* to spread the virus and feed the Mind Flayer, creating an army of the “flayed” (“Chapter Two: The Mall Rats”

3.2, “Chapter Six: E. Pluribus Unum” 3.6). Billy’s mission, “to build” and to spread the virus, actualizes and solidifies the fear of Will’s queer body and discussion of disposing of it in the previous season. Billy’s body now, too, is something to fear and dispose of.

Not only are Will and Billy’s lives seen as dispensable, but throughout seasons two and three their subtextual queerness is seen as an inherently wrong behavior. As previously discussed, Will and Billy’s fathers (and, for Will, other boys at school) subject them to homophobia. As well, the threat of homophobia results in closeting, either through the self or others, and policing. Both Will and Billy become tethered to the Upside Down, their bodies serving as spies between the dimensions. This means that the Upside Down is not only continuously present but also an “oppressive space” (Roach 137). However, their oppressive spaces extend past the Upside Down, as closeting symbolism appears throughout their scenes. For example, while both in and out of the Upside Down, Will often escapes and hides in his self-made hut, “Castle Byers.” “Castle Byers,” too, could evoke imagery of Will self-closeting by retreating into a space tied to the nuclear family dynamic with his last name, a product of heterosexual union and reproduction, enveloping the entrance to his shelter. When Mike and Will get into an argument, as Will is upset by Mike (and Lucas) having a girlfriend and not playing *Dungeons & Dragons* with him anymore, Mike says to Will: “it’s not my fault you don’t like girls” (“Chapter Three: The Case of the Missing Lifeguard” 3.3, 21:30-21:40). Mike continues that he’s “not trying to be a jerk” and they’re “not kids anymore,” telling Will it is unrealistic to expect them to “never get girlfriends” and play games for the rest of their lives (“Chapter Three: The Case of the Missing Lifeguard” 3.3, 21:40-22:10). Following this, and

the confession that Will *did* expect just that, Will is seen in “Castle Byers” reflecting on memories of The Party playing *Dungeons & Dragons* (“Chapter Three: The Case of the Missing Lifeguard” 3.3, 36:33-36:40). Upset and crying, Will says that it’s “stupid, so stupid” whether he is referring to his own expectations or members of The Party is unclear, but both could be argued and begins destroying his hideaway (“Chapter Three: The Case of the Missing Lifeguard” 3.3). If, as Roach argues, “Castle Byers” through its “repeated images of doors and confined spaces can be read...as a metaphor for closeting,” then Will is destroying the closet as an attempt to fit into the heterosexual world his friends operate in (Roach 137). Of course, as seen in the prior section, season five canonizes Will’s queerness, which further acknowledges the closeting he endured (“Chapter Seven: The Bridge” 5.7). Through these interactions, Will represents “the ‘invisible’ queer...of a tight homosocial unit” (Pender 95).

Billy, too, is closeted both in and out of the Upside Down. Arguably, his closeting is more blurred, as the Upside Down reflects more closely his reality. Dustin Bradley Goltz wrote that “the line between ‘in the closet’ and ‘out of the closet’ is not...stable or fixed” and that “the closet is a daily and moment-by-moment negotiation, contingent upon context, social assumptions and shared social cues” (qtd. in Roach 137). After Eleven, using her telekinetic abilities, sees that Billy has captured Heather Holloway (Francesca Reale), a teenage coworker of Billy’s, she and Max go looking for Heather only to find Billy and Heather having dinner with her parents (“Chapter Three: The Case of the Missing Lifeguard” 3.3). Billy’s mission to infect Heather and her family poses a threat to heteronormativity and heterosexuality through his infiltration of the domestic space. Later, when Eleven once again goes

looking for Billy, she finds him sitting in his room (“Chapter Six: E. Pluribus Unum” 3.6). For Will, “Castle Byers” operated as a space to hide in, that he then destroys, whereas for Billy, his room operates more as a space of entrapment. Because of the homophobia suffered at the hands of his father, Billy is rather confined and closeted within the space. Additionally, the memories that Eleven uses to break past the Mind Flayer’s control of Billy reveal the failings of heterosexuality and domestic space, as Neil is not only abusive to Billy but also Billy’s mother (“Chapter Six: E. Pluribus Unum” 3.6, “Chapter Eight: The Battle of Starcourt” 3.8). Billy’s mission from the Mind Flayer disrupts the nuclear family and heterosexuality, the latter being something that Billy is trapped by and fails to enact properly.

When Eleven discovers Billy’s plan, he says that she shouldn’t have come looking for him because it allows for him, and thus, the Mind Flayer, to see everything and activate their possession (“Chapter Six: E. Pluribus Unum” 3.6). Additionally, Billy says to Eleven that she let them in, allowing for the virus to spread by trying to help him (“Chapter Six: E. Pluribus Unum” 3.6). Billy’s existence poses a threat to the fragile makeup of heterosexual society, as he is, through his own vulnerability to possession, able to easily infect others. It then, makes sense that his “hero sacrifice” in the season three finale would be to rid Hawkins of himself and his queerness (“Chapter Eight: The Battle of Starcourt” 3.8).

In “Silence, Death, and the Invisible Enemy: AIDS Activism and Social Movement ‘Newness’,” Josh Gamson discusses media’s representation of the “killer queer” and how killing a person with AIDS becomes a justifiable homicide (360). Here too, *Stranger Things* justifies Billy’s death because, unlike Will, he was successful in infecting others. Roach had

initially described Barbara “Barb” Holland’s (Shannon Purser) death in season one as embodying Judith Butler’s ideas of an ungrievable life, that is a life that “does not qualify as a life and is not worth a note” as “it is already the unburied, if not the unburi-able” (qtd. in Roach 141). Arguably, as Roach’s article was written and published pre-season three, Billy’s life and death is a further example of an ungrievable life. He embodies the notion of the “forgotten queer” lost to AIDS and largely ignored by a “society who considered themselves to be unaffected to look the other way” (Roach 141). Only Eleven remains concerned with Billy’s symptoms of possession.

Just as Mike implied there was something wrong with Will for not liking girls, Billy too is seen as “wrong.” After finding Heather and Billy, Eleven remains worried and says that Billy “seemed wrong,” to which Max says, “wrong is kind of like his default” (“Chapter Four: The Sauna Test” 3.4, 1:12-1:28). Max can, essentially, ignore Billy’s symptoms and behaviors if it does not affect her and until it is too late to help. Billy’s death echoes throughout season four, though. Max and her mom are shown living in a trailer park as, Max describes, Neil was “a total mess” and he could not stand living in Hawkins without Billy which, as an aside, is very generous off-screen character redemption considering what is canonically known about Billy and Neil’s relationship (“Chapter Four: Dear Billy” 4.4, 58:48-58:59). As Max continues to read her letter to Billy’s grave, inscribed with “gone, but not forgotten,” she mourns that she is unable to tell people why Billy is dead or that he saved Eleven’s life (“Chapter Four: Dear Billy” 4.4). Mainly Max mourns that she did not do anything to help save Billy and the relationship that they did not get to have. However, when Vecna appears as Billy to Max, he says that he doesn’t believe Max and that he thinks part of her wanted him to die (“Chapter Four:

Dear Billy” 4.4). Vecna, as Billy, confronts Max with the truth that she did not do anything and could ignore Billy’s clear signs of abuse and possession, echoing the treatment of the disenfranchised during the AIDS epidemic.

Lastly, Billy’s symptoms of possession parallel Will’s in season two, with Billy profusely sweating as he loses control of his body to the virus inside of him (“Chapter Two: The Mall Rats” 3.2). However, a key difference is that Billy’s symptoms, as explored, are largely ignored. Outside of Eleven, who faced similar abusive treatment in her upbringing, many turn a blind eye when Billy is outwardly demonstrating signs of possession and suffering. When Billy first begins showing symptoms disassociating, sweating rather than noticing his sick appearance, women ogle Billy as he stumbles through the public pool area (“Chapter Two: The Mall Rats” 3.2). Like Will being tied down, with heat being used to rid his body of the virus to the point that it almost looks to kill him, The Party members lock Billy in a sauna to rid him of the virus (“Chapter Nine: The Gate” 2.9, “Chapter Four: The Sauna Test” 3.4). Billy tries to plead to Max to let him out, that he was made to do things against his will, as he lays on the ground and crying that it’s not his fault (“Chapter Four: The Sauna Test” 3.4). Unlike Will, Billy does not have knowledge of the supernatural world that they are dealing with in Hawkins and the audience can see not only Billy’s fear but also how he continues to be manipulated by the Mind Flayer, made to do “bad things” against his will (“Chapter Four: The Sauna Test” 3.4, 43:40-44:05). Billy describes the Mind Flayer as a “shadow,” the way Will described him in season two, and Will, still tethered to the Upside Down despite not serving as its host, feels the Mind Flayer’s presence right before Billy escapes the sauna by breaking the glass (“Chapter Four: The Sauna Test” 3.4).

Strikingly, Billy's pleading, entrapment, and description of the Mind Flayer's control posits its control and manipulation of Billy as akin to that of an abusive father, further stripping Billy of any autonomy. In its physical form, the Mind Flayer has multiple tentacle limbs that penetrate Billy's body several times ("Chapter Eight: The Battle of Starcourt" 3.8). The Mind Flayer then stabs Billy through the chest with another limb, bleeding him out ("Chapter Eight: The Battle of Starcourt" 3.8). Billy's death is much more violent in its imagery compared to other deaths in *Stranger Things*, such as Hopper's apparent demise in the same episode ("Chapter Eight: The Battle of Starcourt" 3.8). Billy's cause of death and the presence of his blood further exemplify reading the possession from the Mind Flayer as being allegorical to the AIDS epidemic. With his death, Billy can remain ungrieved and queer only in discussion, as to not disrupt the fragile makeup of heterosexuality constructed in *Stranger Things*. Billy's homopotentiality and queerness is, quite literally, killed.

Conclusion

Despite *Stranger Things* including queer characters throughout its run, homophobia remains too great an influence on the depiction of queer lives in the show. Because of the homophobia inflicted upon characters, as seen with Will Byers and Billy Hargrove, homopotentiality and homosexuality are depicted as something to be minimized or destroyed. Through homophobia and allegorical links to masculine traits of the Reagan era and the AIDS epidemic, *Stranger Things* fails to present queerness as its own narrative but rather reinforces eighties fears and anxieties surrounding homosexuality. Homoeroticism, then, becomes a method of profitable subtext, without having to commit to the exploration of homosexuality.

Through Billy's two-season arc, homosexuality is presented as an illegitimate avenue of creative exploration. Any homopotentiality is squandered in Billy through experiences with homophobia, abuse, and possession. By reading Billy through a queer lens, his life and death can be explored as being controlled by the homophobic influence on masculinity and the threat of homosexuality upon heterosexual society. Should Billy's queer subtext and homopotentiality have been further explored or continued to parallel Will's queer storyline, perhaps *Stranger Things* could have seen a rich, redemptive arc for his character and explored a narrative breaking the cycle of violence. Instead, the seven-foot wave crashed and Billy, and any homopotentiality he had, got washed away with it.

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