

**EXEGESIS**

In the Dog Box

## **PART ONE:**

### **Genre:**

*In the Dog Box* can be classed as a lesbian romantic comedy that explores themes of coming of age through a break-up. Though lesbian romantic comedy will be a strong focus, many heterosexual coming of age break-up stories will be discussed when analysing story elements. This is due to the relative scarcity of queer/lesbian representation within the coming of age break-up romantic comedy.

### **Case for Genre:**

Chaney (2017) argues that in recent years, romantic/sexual relationships have often been used as a plot device for a character to “establish their own identity” rather than an “end goal” (para. 12). Themes of self-actualisation are commonly found in the coming of age story (Lynley, 2017). Therefore, a genre crossover is suggested, where letting go of a relationship, leads to the protagonist’s coming of age.

Moylan (2015) discusses the rise of a new kind of self-reflective “meta” romantic comedy, which is commonly moving to television (para. 8). Chaney (2017) argues that this modern form of romantic comedy commonly “deconstructs” and subverts traditional tropes (para. 4). Television shows such as *Crazy Ex Girlfriend* (Bloom, et al., 2015-Present) and films such as *500 Days of Summer* (Novik, Tuchinsky, Waters, Wolfe, & Webb, 2009), *Her* (Ellison, Landay & Jonze, 2013) and *Annie Hall* (Joffe & Allen, 1977) question the conventions of romantic comedy and explore a different outcome (Chaney, 2017).

While the film *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (Bregman, Golin & Gondry, 2004) ends in a romantic union, it also explores the complexity of breaking up. Rodriguez (2014) draws a correlation between *Her* (Ellison, et al., 2013) and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (Bregman et al., 2004), believing that they both explore similar complex themes around the deterioration of relationships. Film critic Jensen (2016) has described *Crazy Ex Girlfriend* (Bloom et al., 2016-Present) as an “ingenious anti rom-com” (para. 1).

Film critic Johnston (2009) correlates *500 Days of Summer* (Novik, et al., 2009) as a modern-day *Annie Hall* (Joffe et al., 1977). Furthermore, audience critic Roy (2009) states that *500 Days of Summer* (Novik et al., 2009) “completely reinvented” the traditional romantic comedy (para. 1). Mark Webb (as cited in Wiseman, 2009), the director of *500 Days of*

*Summer* (Novik et al., 2009) views the film as more closely aligned with a coming of age story, than he does a romantic comedy. This further reinforces the notion of a cross-over genre.

### **History of Genre:**

Queer/lesbian representation in film and the emergence of the lesbian romantic comedy will be a primary focus. However, discussion will also include the heterosexual coming of age break up story. These coming of age break up stories can be linked to the ‘nervous romance’ cycle of the late 1970-early 80’s (Grindon, 2011). A critical film depicting these themes is *Annie Hall* (Joffe et al., 1977). Nine key cycles/clusters have been identified within the romantic comedy genre, spanning from the 1930’s to the present day (Grindon, 2011). However, the ‘nervous romance’ cycle is specifically relevant when discussing coming of age break up stories.

Regarding the representation of queer identities within film, there was a significant period of liberation for gays and lesbians in the German Weimer Republic (1918-33). However, this period of liberation came to an abrupt halt when Hitler rose to power in 1933 (Mennel, 2012). Additionally, in 1934 the Hollywood Production Code came in, which was a set of strict censorship laws to uphold moral standards on screen (Grindon, 2011). The Hollywood Production Code (1934) forbade the depiction of nudity, sex, adultery, physical or sexual affection, and acts of homosexuality (Mennel, 2012). As a result, films that explicitly explored queer content were relegated into low-budget/B-grade, experimental, sexploitation, camp and art house cinema between the 1940s-1970s (Mennel, 2012). During this time, gays and lesbians were only permitted to work in big-budget Hollywood film studios under the condition that their “identity was barred from film representation” (Mennel, 2012, p. 27). Consequentially, the Production Code 1934 led to a new kind of queer story-telling, “associated with subtexts, subversion and subcultures” (Mennel, 2012, p. 26). In the 1950’s filmmakers started to challenge the Production Code (1934) and it was successfully repealed in 1968 (Mennel, 2012). Additionally, the Stonewall Rebellion in 1969 marked a turning point in the homosexual rights movement (Mennel, 2012).

Between the late 1960s-80s Hollywood underwent its own transformation associated with the changing political attitudes of the time. This shift is particularly relevant when discussing the evolution of the coming of age break up story. This transformation was partly influenced by global cinema which emphasised director-focused auteurism. This auteuristic shift had a

strong influence on the ‘nervous romance cycle’ of romantic comedy. Similarly, the relaxation of past censorship laws enabled love and courtship to be portrayed more realistically, and directors such as Woody Allen, were now able to tell more personal stories (Grindon, 2011). Woody Allen’s film *Annie Hall* (Joffe et al., 1977) was seen as a groundbreaking work in which the traditional conventions of the romantic comedy were critiqued and subverted (Grindon, 2011). The romantic comedy no longer required a ‘happy ending’, and the focus could shift to the complex dynamics of a relationship, rather than the fantasy of the one true love. The character’s internal development and coming of age became of paramount importance, rather than the survival of the couple. This shift correlated with the rising divorce rates of the time (Grindon, 2011).

Though Hollywood films became less conservative, this auteuristic shift did not necessarily favour women and gay men in the industry, as directors were often privileged heterosexual men. Women and gay men typically worked in departments such as set design, costume, hair and make-up. Their voices were therefore further side-lined, in favour of the director’s creative vision (Mennel, 2012).

Throughout the 1980-90s Hollywood realised there was a potential market in queer audiences, through film trends such as New Queer Cinema (a term coined to describe a cluster of critically successful films in the film festivals during the 1990’s) (Aaron, 2004). Examples of New Queer Cinema films were *Paris is Burning* (Livingston, 1990), *Poison* (Vacon & Haynes, 1991), *Swoon* (Vachon & Kalin, 1992), *Tongues Untied* (Riggs, 1990) and *Edward II* (Clark-Hall, Root, & Jarman, 1991). Consequentially, Hollywood began its own appropriation of these film trends. As a result, queer identities underwent a process of mainstreaming, which is described as a way to create a “cross-over audience” appealing heterosexual audience members (Mennel, 2012, p94). The process of mainstreaming allowed queer stories to be told through traditional ‘genre’ cinema (particularly the romantic comedy/drama), as opposed to art house, experimental and B-grade cinema (Mennel, 2012).

An example of such appropriation from a lesbian perspective can be seen in Alison Bechdel’s comic series *The Essential Dykes to Watch Out For* (Bechdel, 2009) that ran between 1987-2008. It featured many elements of the romantic comedy, documenting the love and lives of a group of radical queer feminists. The characters were diverse in race, body image and gender presentation/sexuality. Many of the characters were working class or academics. In 2004 the lesbian TV serial drama *The L Word* (Hartle et al., 2004-2009) was released. It presented

many similar character archetypes to *The Essential Dykes to Watch Out For* (Bechdel, 2009). For example, the lesbian sex addict, the bi-racial lesbian couple trying to have a baby, and the foreign lesbian with a secret husband. However, many of the characters in *The L Word* (Hartle et al., 2004-2009) were white, slender ‘femmes’ living upper middle class lives in West Hollywood.

Since the 1990’s, lesbians have undergone a significant feminisation in film and television due to mainstreaming (Mennel, 2012). It is argued that this feminization occurred because ‘butch’ lesbian identities symbolise a larger threat to heterosexuality (Mennel, 2012). In recent years, lesbian films in particular, such as *Kissing Jessica Stein* (Wurmfeld, Zions & Herman-Wurmfeld, 2001), *My Summer of Love* (Collins, Seghatchian, & Pawlikowski, 2004) and *Loving Annabelle* (Brooks, Carroll, Young, & Brooks, 2006) have followed the more “traditional narrative conventions of the love story” (Mennel, 2012, p95). While a more conventional ‘lesbian-romantic comedy’ genre has emerged, many of these lesbian romantic comedies have featured white, middle class women who explore lesbianism, without claiming it as an identity.

Lesbian romantic comedy within the New Zealand film industry has been sparsely represented. However, portrayals of queer identities can be seen in films such as *Desperate Remedies* (Downie, Main & Wells, 1993), *When Love Comes* (Dowling, Fantl & Maxwell, 1998), and the short film *Peach* (De Nave & Parker, 1995). Additionally, a lesbian civil union was depicted between Maia and Jay on an episode of *Shortland Street* (Bennet, 2006). Arguably, the most notable on-screen lesbians in New Zealand were Pauline and Juliet in *Heavenly Creatures* (Booth & Jackson, 1994). A significant lesbian subplot is evident between Xena and Gabrielle in *Xena Warrior Princess* (Tapert & Raimi, 1995-2001). The New Zealand lesbian web series *Potluck* (Murphy & Simons, 2015-2017) aired two seasons, and has a more light-hearted tone associated with the traditional romantic comedy. Heterosexual romantic comedies have been more prevalent in recent years in New Zealand. For example, *Eagle Vs Shark* (Curtis, Gardiner, & Waititi, 2007) and *My Wedding and Other Secrets* (Barnett, Davis & Liang, 2011).

### **Genre Signifiers:**

The romantic comedy is often described as formulaic, with unrealistic notions about love. However, Grindon (2011) argues that the romantic comedy has the ability to explore “dramatic conflict central to the human experience” (p. 1). Grindon (2011) also states that the

romantic comedy is not bonded to a “predetermined ideology” (p. 81). Grindon (2011) argues that there is an important distinction between films that exist in the mainstream of the genre, and those that exist in the margins. Often films on the margins of the romantic comedy have a different set of conventions, compared to those that exist in the mainstream (Grindon, 2011). In the mainstream, love is portrayed as a mystical force, in which soul mates are meant to be, and the couple usually achieve a happy union. The margins explore the inherent realism within relationships and love. On the margins, the character often comes of age and individuates as a result of the relationship, sometimes leading to the demise of that relationship (Grindon, 2011).

It is common for characters within the margins of romantic comedy be eccentric. For example, Annie in *Annie Hall* (Joffe et al., 1977) is odd and flusters over her words. Alvy, also struggles with his own oddness and over-thinking nature. In fact, Alvy’s neuroticism heavily influenced the term ‘nervous romance’ (Grindon, 2011). Rebecca Bunch in *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* (Bloom et al., 2015-Present) is flamboyantly strange. Summer in *500 Days of Summer* (Novik et al., 2009) is whimsically odd. Clementine in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (Bregman et al., 2004) is radical and mentally unsound. Branching outside of the break up story, both Lily and Jarrod in *Eagle Vs Shark* (Curtis et al., 2007) are socially awkward. Stella and Dotty in the lesbian film *Cloudburst* (Pettigrew & Fitzgerald, 2011) are also subversive. Pat and Tiffany in *Silver Linings Playbook* (Cohen et al., 2012) find safety in their mutual mental illness.

Within the mainstream, obstacles parting the couple are often external/interpersonal and are portrayed through family, class and age. In the margins, the obstacles are usually internal, portrayed through character’s personal instabilities (Grindon, 2011). For example, Tom in *500 Days of Summer* (Novik et al, 2009), like Alvy in *Annie Hall* (Joffe et al., 1977), struggles with his own internal neurosis, which he directs towards the relationship. Rebecca Bunch in *Crazy Ex Girlfriend* (Bloom et al., 2015-Present) pathologically fixates on a potential relationship. Additionally, in the episode *Josh is Irrelevant* (Bloom, McKenna, Peña & Winkler, 2017) Rebecca is diagnosed with Borderline Personality Disorder, and is faced with a long road to recovery.

Regarding the coming of age break-up story, the protagonist’s needs, usually heavily conflicts with what the character wants. Audiences can expect characters to go through a period of pathological ‘holding on’, before they eventually let go of the desired or past

relationship and are freed. The characters grow through the process of grief. The audience expect a personal liberation/coming of age as the big take away, irrespective of the character entering a new relationship. Towards the end of *Her* (Ellison et al., 2013), Theodore writes a heartfelt letter to his ex-wife Catherine, acknowledging that she made him who he is. Theodore's letter is written after his relationship with his operating system, Samantha, has ended. He now must truly face the world alone and grow. Tom in *500 Days of Summer* (Novik et al, 2009) manages to accept his heartbreak without giving up his personal beliefs surrounding fate and love.

*Crazy Ex Girlfriend* (Bloom et al., 2015-2019) explores coming of age through heart break from a uniquely female perspective, and powerfully subverts traditional notions of love and romance often presented in the mainstream romantic comedy. Rebecca obsessively stalks her love interest, Josh Chan, who she eventually ends up in a relationship with, only to be jilted at the altar in the season two finale *Can Josh Take a Leap of Faith* (McKenna, 2017). Consequentially, Rebecca attempts suicide in *I Never Want to See Josh Again* (Dolgen & McDonald, 2017) and begins a journey of self-discovery. In *Nathaniel Gets the Message!* (Averick & Ahktar, 2017) Rebecca finally comes to a point where she is able to break things off with her new love interest, Nathaniel. Here she states "I'm happy, but it's not real. It's a high. It's infatuation" (02:57). Rebecca learns to acknowledge that her fixation on romantic love is a psychological tool that she uses to avoid her own issues. Rebecca is forced to focus on self-actualisation.

It is not uncommon for queer/lesbian stories to end in the deterioration of a relationship. For example, *Blue is the Warmest Colour* (Chioua, Maravel & Kechiche, 2013), and *Disobedience* (Guiney, Torresblanco, Weisz & Lelio, 2018). However, these stories often differ in tone from the romantic comedy, and commonly bridge into romantic drama. Queer stories often deal with issues surrounding identity and discrimination, and therefore can have strong elements of tragedy within them. For example, *Pariah* (Cooper & Rees, 2011), *Handmaiden* (Lim & Chan-Wook, 2016), *Moonlight*, (Romanski, Gardner, Kleiner & Jenkins, 2016). This contention between identity and discrimination can make it more difficult for queer love stories to experience the same light-hearted freedom of the heterosexual love story (Glover, 2018). However, there are several examples of the queer/lesbian romantic comedy (Glover, 2018). Films such as *But I'm a Cheerleader* (Creel, Sperling, & Babbit, 1999), *Saving Face* (Smith, Lassiter, Zee, & Wu, 2004), *Imagine Me and You* (Thompson & Parker, 2006), *I can't Think Straight* (Kattan & Sarif, 2008) and

*Cloudburst* (Pettigrew et al., 2011) explore lesbianism and identity, while still having strong comic elements. These films follow many conventions of the ‘mainstream’ romantic comedy but are shown through a queer lens.

*But I’m a Cheerleader* (Creel et al., 1999), *Saving Face* (Smith et al., 2004), and *Imagine Me and You* (Thompson et al., 2006), are particularly formulaic and reminiscent of the mainstream romantic comedy. In each, lovers meet, fall in love, face an obstacle and are eventually united. Wil in *Saving Face* (Smith et al., 2004) must contend with her own internalised homophobia and her mother’s rejection of her identity, before she individuates and becomes her authentic self, uniting with Vivian. Similarly, in *But I’m a Cheerleader* (Creel et al., 1999), Megan must come to terms with her identity, and convince Graham that she does not require her parent’s acceptance. *Imagine Me and You* (Thompson et al., 2006) sees Rachel reject the ‘wrong’ love, in pursuit of ‘true love’. Though *Cloudburst* (Pettigrew et al., 2011) omits some convention of the mainstream romantic comedy (the couple were already established, and Dotty dies in the end), the end goal of marriage/union is still achieved. Additionally, a significant contention between lovers and family is a present in *Cloudburst* (Pettigrew et al., 2011). The lesbian romantic comedy appears to have a strong focus on *both* internal and external obstacles. This is arguably due to many queer/lesbian films navigating at least one character’s coming out, and therefore, a self-actualisation/coming of age.

### **Contemporary Expectation:**

Guerrasio (2017) describes the 1980-90’s as the “golden era” for the romantic comedy (para. 1). During this time, they were consistently successful in the box office. However, Guerrasio (2017) states that around 2010, the genre began to dramatically decline in cinematic popularity, and over the next few years all but stopped, on a box office level. While the box office decline is multi-faceted, Guerrasio (2017), states that the primary reason is the disconnection between big studios and their audience. There has been a cultural shift surrounding how young people experience romance. Fewer people are getting married, and typically have more sexual partners than in the past. The notion of the ‘one true love’ does not reflect how many people are now experiencing relationships (Guerrasio, 2017)..

Grindon (2011) argues that the romantic comedy is not disappearing, but instead is undergoing a transformational shift, where new, diverse and more realistic/culturally appropriate portrayals of love and romance are being explored. The romantic comedy has

found new traction within independent films, as well as in television (Guerrasio, 2017). *The Big Sick* (Apatow, Mendal, & Showalter, 2017) grossed approximately \$40 million at the box office, the highest grossing independent film of 2017 (Brueggemann, 2017). Though *The Big Sick* (Apatow et al., 2017) follows many traditional tropes of the mainstream romantic comedy (boy meets girl, they end up together), the primary focus of the film is the protagonist's (Kumail) coming of age. Emily, the love interest, is in a coma for the majority of the film.

Mennel (2012) discusses a rise in global popularity of modern queer/lesbian story-telling. Series such as *Orange is the New Black* (Herrmann et al., 2013-Present) and *Wentworth* (Porter, 2013-Present) depict a range of different queer women, both butch and femme. *Orange is the New Black* (Herrmann & Kohan, 2013-Present) has many elements of the modern romantic comedy but is explored largely through a queer lens. Similarly, *Please Like Me* (Abbot & Wang, 2013-2016) explores the awkward truth about love and being queer, whilst having strong comic elements. Additionally, TV shows such as *Transparent* (Soloway & Sperling, 2014-Present) represent a range of queer identities, particularly exploring trans and non-binary identities.

Some lesbian versions of the coming of age break-up story have also appeared in recent years. The film *Portrait of a Serial Monogamist* (Lentin, Zeidler & Mitchell, 2016) could be seen as a coming of age break-up story, told through a lesbian lens. The film depicts the journey of Elsie as she struggles with the regret of breaking up with her long-term girlfriend. The film is described as a “coming-of-middle-age romantic comedy” (“Rotten Tomatoes”, 2016, para. 1). Additionally film critic Knight (2016) has related scenes in *Portrait of a Serial Monogamist* (Lentin et al., 2016) to scenes in *Annie Hall* (Joffe et al., 1977). Lesbian coming of age through a break up can also be seen in episode *Tattoo You*, *Orange is the New Black*, (Hermann, Paiz, & Burley, 2017). Here the character Nikki calls her love interest's (Lorna) husband to ensure that he stays with her throughout her pregnancy. Even though Nikki is unable to be with Lorna herself, she still cares for her deeply, a selfless act committed by an often selfish and hard character.

### **Genre Expectation – *In the Dog Box*:**

*In the Dog Box* has many elements of the coming of age break-up romantic comedy, told through a lesbian lens. *In the Dog Box* depicts the deterioration of Sophie's relationship with her girlfriend Mika, and explores Sophie's coming of age through the process of grief.

Similar to many of the characters described above, Sophie is extremely eccentric. Mika also has her own oddness and neuroticism, which she must contend with. Sophie goes through a period of pathological ‘holding on’ before letting go and is willing to do anything to keep her relationship. Similar to *500 Days of Summer* (Novik et al., 2009) and *Crazy Ex Girlfriend* (Bloom et al., 2015-Present) Sophie must reach her lowest emotional point before she is willing to let the relationship go and eventually come of age.

### **Fresh Elements - *In the Dog Box*:**

There are many ‘fresh’ elements to *In the Dog Box*. It is extremely queer, with an almost exclusively female cast. It tells a coming of age story, without it being a coming out story. Though Mika’s coming out is discussed, other elements of the character’s internal lives are the primary focus. The protagonist (Sophie) is quite butch, and unlike many lesbian films, there is no male or homophobic obstacle that causes pain and tragedy. The obstacles are created by the characters, often as a result of their *own* actions and internal issues.

*In the Dog Box* explores themes of heart break and coming of age through the absurd and ridiculous. It could be seen to be a cross-over and reference to several genres and subgenres. For example, the screw-ball comedy where mistaken identities and comedies of error are abundant. In addition, it references the queer family drama (*Meet the Fosters* (Hartle et al., 2013-2018), *The Kids are Alright* (Gilbert, et al., 2010)) where the unique dynamics of a queer family are explored. *In the Dog Box* references films that explore a transformation of an adult character through the meeting of a child (*Big Daddy* (Giarraputo, Covert & Dugan, 1999), *Hunt for the Wilderpeople* (Neal, Noonan, Saunders & Waititi, 2016), *The Fundamentals of Caring* (Burnett, Gigliot, Spies & Burnett, 2016)) from a uniquely female perspective. It also satirises films about human-canine connections (*Lassie Come Home* (Marx, Schary & Wilcox, 1943), *Old Yeller* (Disney & Stevenson, 1957), *Beethoven* (Gross, Medjuck, Reitman, & Levant, 1992)). In addition it parodies the court room drama (*Boston Legal* (Broch et al., 2004-2008), *Twelve Angry Men* (Fonda, Rose & Lumet, 1957)).

In relation to the theme of self-actualisation through a break-up, Sophie’s journey is not exclusively about leaving her girlfriend, Mika. Often in these break-up stories (and in romantic comedies in general) the love interest will be the primary antagonistic force. However, *In the Dog Box* features a dual antagonistic force between Mika, and Santana, a 13-year-old girl who Sophie learns to care for. While Mika pushes Sophie to act and consider change, Santana ultimately forces Sophie to grow up and be the person that she needs to be.

## **PART TWO:**

### **Synopsis:**

Sophie and Mika have wanted a baby for a while. But Sophie is faced with a conundrum when she discovers that Mika is unable to have children and wants Sophie to carry the baby for them. Sophie thinks she might have the solution when she steals a dog from the backyard of a violent man. If Sophie forges an identity for the dog as their *actual* daughter, maybe Mika will let her off the hook. A dog is an excellent substitute for a child, right?

But things get even stranger when Sophie's canine dependent leads her back into the clutches of the violent man, and she is forced to rescue a mysterious adolescent girl, Santana. If a dog won't work as a stand in child, surely a *real* child will do the trick. All Sophie must do is convince Mika that Santana was excommunicated from a religious cult for being a newly out 'baby gay'. Having her heart strings correctly played, Mika allows Santana to stay until they can decide what to do with her. But it's not long before Santana is pulled into a vortex of their dysfunctional day to day life.

If there were cracks in their relationship before, a dog and a moody teen manage to turn them into gaping crevices. On top of it all, Adrienne, the Child, Youth and Family officer has received notice of a suspicious birth certificate that has been filed, without any medical records. She is also trying to work out what happened to that 13-year-old girl who went missing just a few blocks away.

After a series of misunderstandings regarding obedience and adequate fencing, Sophie and Mika are taken to court for child abuse. It doesn't help that the judge refuses to listen to Mika when she tries to explain that the child in question is in fact a dog. Here in court, the fate of their relationship is decided, and Sophie is left to make a decision about parenting, and what it means to care for someone beyond herself.

### **Theme:**

A significant theme within *In the Dog Box* is vulnerability and abandonment. I wanted to tell a story about three people who feel incredibly vulnerable and inadequate but express it in completely different ways. I also wanted the audience to question the 'Hollywood' notion of romantic love and the concept of the one 'true love,' or a soulmate who 'completes you'. On Mount Victoria, Santana and Sophie surmise that people can have multiple soulmates, and

that they are just people who connect with your soul. This implies that a soulmate does not have to be a romantic partner who ‘completes’ someone, but can be anyone in a person’s life, whether they are a family member, a friend, or even a pet. Platonic love, friendship and community can be as deep and powerful as romantic love. I believe as humans, we innately thrive on belonging to a wider network.

I also wanted to portray the process of grief and then acceptance. My intention is for the audience to ride this emotional wave with Sophie, where she desperately clings to the relationship, then experiences the freedom and growth that comes from letting go. Similarly, Mika must accept that her meticulous life plans are not going to come to fruition. Towards the end of the story, Mika tells Sophie that, “Maybe life is like some crazy fucken river, and the best you can do is build yourself a little boat.” I wanted to imply that sometimes life forces people on a trajectory that they do not expect or desire, but they must adapt within the uncontrollable. People must ride the chaotic current of life, with whatever boat they can design for themselves. I wanted to show how heartbreak can be a part of growing up, and that growth and coming of age can be found in pain.

Another major over-arching theme within *In the Dog Box* is motherhood/guardianship. Each character contends with her own desires, feelings and beliefs around motherhood. I wanted to tell a story about the multi-faceted and complex relationships that women can have with one another, and how caring for someone more vulnerable than yourself can force a person to grow up in unexpected ways.

A key image that embodies the big ‘take away’ in a single moment is the final scene. In this scene, Sophie, Santana, and the Bimbos (Tash and Mary) walk together through the park with Tubby and a group of shelter dogs. It is a profound moment of philanthropy, where a group of vulnerable ‘out-casts’ come together. Sophie may have lost her relationship with Mika, but she has gained a powerful friendship with Santana, and the ability to care for someone. Santana forces Sophie to choose what type of guardian and friend she is going to be now that she is an adult. Though Sophie does not want her own biological children; motherhood, guardianship, friendship, and responsibility go deeper than genetics. I wanted to show a truly ‘queer’ concept of family, love and community.

**Protagonist:*****Motivation:***

The protagonist of *In the Dog Box* is Sophie. Her primary motivation is to keep her girlfriend Mika, without having to carry a child for them. In Sophie's eccentric mind, she believes that if Tubby becomes their official daughter, Tubby will be an adequate 'stand in' child. When Tubby fails as a stand in child, Sophie resorts to using Santana. With each unsuccessful attempt, Sophie becomes increasingly desperate, and eventually agrees to have a baby for Mika. However, she cannot bring herself to do this. When Sophie and Mika are in court and everything is falling apart, Sophie tries to beg Mika to stay, once more agreeing to have the child. When this still does not work, Sophie eventually tells Mika that she "needs" her but is forced to accept that she cannot maintain or fix the relationship.

***Stakes:***

The primary emotional stake for Sophie is the potential loss of her relationship. If this happens, Sophie will be left to face an overwhelming world alone, that she feels alienated from. If Sophie chooses to have a child for Mika, she would need to unpalatably compromise her core self, as well as take responsibility for someone else. Ironically, Sophie is forced to take responsibility for someone else when she rescues Tubby (and then Santana). However, Sophie still manages to use Tubby (and Santana) for her own benefit.

Sophie progressively puts more 'on the line' throughout the story, first by forging a fake identity for Tubby as their actual daughter. The stakes escalate dramatically when Sophie rescues Santana, and a real child is thrown in the mix. Eventually Sophie is willing to put everything on the line by refusing to tell the truth in court. Sophie is blinded by her own pain and is willing to completely destroy her own life and hurt those around her.

***Arc:***

Ultimately, Sophie evolves from pathologically 'needing' to learning how to be 'needed'. In the beginning, Sophie is a selfish, co-dependent drop kick. By the end, she has significantly transformed into a self-sufficient person who is able to care for someone more vulnerable than herself. Sophie learns to manage a frightening world and gains community. She also gains deep sense of acceptance.

**Core:**

Sophie is wrestling with an intense sense of inadequacy and fear of abandonment, due to her own childhood (an adult) experiences of rejection. These core emotions are revealed strongly in the court scene when the judge asks Sophie why she originally agreed to raise a child with Mika. Here Sophie states, “I thought we could be happy! Because she was the only one who ever accepted me... She always looked back.” This references Sophie’s step mother, who did not look back at Sophie when she abandoned her as a child.

These emotions can resonate deeply with audiences. In my personal experience, I have noticed that it is common for people to continue a relationship that is disintegrating. This is often out of fear that no one else will ever love them. People believe that they are intrinsically unlovable, commonly because they have experienced rejection in childhood by parents or peers. These feelings can particularly resonate with a queer audience, as many queer people have experienced significant social rejection and feel like they do not ‘belong’ in the world. Many people can also relate to the experience of being incompatible with a person that they love deeply. When wrestling with such inner turmoil, it can be difficult to navigate being a good person. However, learning to care for someone in a healthy way can be a very healing experience. Learning the difference between dysfunctional love and healthy love is part of growing up. These are all emotions that Sophie must wrestle with.

**Antagonist:**

*In the Dog Box* features a dual antagonistic force between Mika and Santana. Mika is the primary antagonist who forces Sophie to act and consider change. Santana is the secondary antagonist, who enables Sophie to enact that change. The majority of Sophie’s actions are in response to Mika’s wishes and the fear of losing her. However, many key turning points for Sophie involve Santana. Mika forces Sophie into an ultimatum (have a baby or face a potential break up). This pushes Sophie to come up with her own eccentric solutions.

In many ways, Mika evolves as a person before Sophie, and is willing to let go of the relationship. This in turn forces Sophie to develop as a person. If Mika did not end the relationship, Sophie would continue to clutch to the remnants of it, until there was nothing left. Mika also forces Sophie to consider the prospect of raising a child of her own, and what it would mean to be responsible for someone else. Santana forces Sophie to achieve this.

Santana creates real motivation for change within Sophie, because ultimately, Santana *needs* Sophie to be a better person, while Mika only *wants* Sophie to be a better person.

When Mika terminates the relationship, Sophie no longer has the option to use her relationship as a false sense of security. After this, Santana leaves Sophie with a decision about what type of person she is going to be.

### **Dramatic Question:**

The primary dramatic question is: will Sophie's efforts to maintain her relationship, in the face of this problem, work? The problem is Mika's desire for Sophie to carry a child for them. Sophie's efforts to maintain the relationship are her use of Tubby and Santana as substitute children.

The dramatic question is set up after Sophie steals Tubby and tries to convince Mika that it is a good idea for them to keep her. Similarly, this is where the 'setting-up' section ends and the 'story proper' begins. Soon after this, Sophie gets the idea to forge an identity for Tubby as their legitimate daughter.

The middle of the story finishes and it moves into the end section after Sophie, Santana and the Bimbos (Tash and Mary) break into Mika's work. Mika is extremely hurt by this. Consequentially, Sophie agrees to carry a child for Mika out of desperation and guilt. However, Sophie experiences cold feet when she goes to the fertility clinic for a swab. This causes an extremely painful argument between Sophie and Mika. Soon after this, the story escalates dramatically, and they are called into court for child neglect.

The dramatic question is answered in court, when Mika ends the relationship with Sophie once and for all. Here Mika implies that the "gap" in their relationship goes beyond their conflicting desires surrounding children. At this point the audience realises that there is absolutely no hope for the relationship. Significant suspense has also been built throughout the story regarding what will happen to Santana, and in the end, Sophie is left to choose whether or not to be there for her.

### **Story Structure and Turning Points:**

The first major turning point for Sophie is when Mika proposes that Sophie carry a child for them. When the prospect of being the birth mother is placed in front of Sophie, she is forced

to consider this choice seriously. Before this, Sophie was happy to go along with whatever life plans Mika decided for them.

Sophie experiences another major turning point when she rescues Tubby. Here, Sophie is faced with the challenge of caring for someone else. However, Sophie chooses to manipulate the situation to her own benefit by forging an identity for Tubby as their actual daughter. Sophie is creating problems for herself that she may not be able to later fix.

A primary turning point occurs when Sophie tries to abandon Santana. This happens after Sophie realises that Santana is a complicated problem and is not going to be a good 'stand in' child. When Sophie tries to abandon Santana, Santana tells her that "you can't just abort me." Here, I wanted to imply that to Sophie, Santana is a lesbian metaphor for an unplanned pregnancy. Sophie is forced into a position of responsibility for Santana and cannot run away from this problem. Overcome by guilt, Sophie decides to go back for Santana. From this point on, Sophie forms a real bond with Santana, beyond using her for her own benefit.

Another turning point happens when Sophie gets cold feet at the fertility clinic after agreeing to have a child for Mika. This causes a vicious argument between Sophie and Mika, and Mika tells Sophie to "stay away". Faced with the prospect of losing Mika, Sophie opens up to Santana about her past trauma over being abandoned by her step mother. Here Santana asks Sophie if her childhood trauma is the reason she does not want to have a baby. Sophie must admit that it was always Mika's plan to have a baby, and that she herself does not know what it means to have a child. Santana and Sophie also discuss soulmates, and Sophie must consider life beyond her relationship with Mika.

A further turning point occurs when Sophie and Mika are called into court for child neglect. Here, everything begins to unravel, and Sophie is confronted with the reality of Santana's situation. This happens when Santana tells her that "You fucking used me. And you used her [Tubby]... You're worse than home." Sophie can no longer avoid the consequences of her own actions. When they find Santana on the beach, Mika and Sophie are forced to see beyond their own dysfunction. For a moment, Sophie behaves like a functional adult for the sake of Santana.

The next major turning point happens when Sophie and Mika go to court. In court, Mika tries to convince Sophie to be honest and put an end to this situation. Here Sophie is faced with a decision: throw in the towel or take this to the end of the line. After finding out that Mika has

been unfaithful, Sophie tries to spite Mika out of intense pain, and the court session continues. Sophie is left with the ramifications of her actions when Mika finally breaks up with her. Even at this point, Sophie does not give in. Instead she tries to burn her own birth certificate, only to be tackled to the ground by two security guards. Sophie now reaches her lowest point. Outside court, Sophie is left alone with Tubby, as she watches Mika walk away and Santana being driven off in Adrienne's car. It seems as if Sophie has lost everything. Sophie now must scrape up the remains of her broken life. There is no going back from what has happened, or what she has done.

Sophie develops a key insight when she clears her belongings from the house. While she is cleaning up, Sophie finds an old photograph that is hidden under Santana's pillow. It depicts Santana and her mother, when Santana was a young child. The photograph forces Sophie to confront Santana's desperate longing for a mother/female role model in her life. After Sophie hands the keys over to Mika, and they both accept the end of their relationship, Sophie looks at the photograph again. This is the final and most crucial turning point for Sophie. Now that Santana is in her life, Sophie must choose whether to be like her own step mother who abandoned her, or to 'grow up' and be the caring person that she needs to be. Sophie does not need to have her own biological child to heal her past wounds. Sophie can forge her own path and decide what type of boat she is going to build for herself. She chooses to be there for Santana. She chooses to grow up.

### **Conclusion:**

In conclusion, the romantic comedy genre was explored as a whole, however, research was primarily focused on films, television series and other media that used the genre as a way to subvert traditional themes and tropes. *In the Dog Box* is an exploration of the romantic comedy that intends to subvert traditional notions of heteronormativity often found within the genre, whilst also challenging the 'Hollywood' concept of romantic love. Additional themes surrounding self-growth, coming of age, acceptance, parenthood and the value of platonic love and friendship were also explored.

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