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## Masculinity beyond Gender Binaries: A Study of Rick Riordan & Mark Oshiro's

### *The Sun and the Star*

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DOI : <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20126447>

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#### ARTICLE DETAILS

**Research Paper**

**Accepted:** 25-04-2026

**Published:** 10-05-2026

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**Keywords:**

*Gender roles, Gender binaries, Gender fluidity, Queer masculinity, The Social Role theory, Gender performativity*

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#### ABSTRACT

There is a prevailing assumption among people that gender behaviour is related to biological differences. Eagerly explains that there is no direct connection between gender and gender performativity, but it is the gender roles that matter. This paper analyses the effect of gender roles on a homosexual male and how a person who has dealt with it healthily deals with them through the work *The Sex Differences in Social Behaviour* by Alice H. Eagerly and *Men and Masculinities* by Levant and Powell. In the work *The Sun and the Star* by Rick Riordan, the characters Nico and Will are a couple who exhibit the characteristics of an affected individual due to the gender binary and a healthy homosexual male. Through these characters, the authors explore the problems faced by homosexual couples and their problems related to gender roles and identities.

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#### Introduction

Richard Russell Riordan Jr. is an American author and a co-creator for a Disney+ series; his works include retellings of Greek, Roman, Egyptian, and Norse mythology. A lot of his works belong to the category of young adult fiction, as he wants people of all ages to enjoy his works. He, in his own words, says that "My goal is to get kids interested in learning more about mythology. " I hope it makes



kids want to read—that’s the most important thing!” (“An Interview With Rick”). Mark Oshiro is an American writer and activist; he belongs to the queer community. As Mark Oshiro explains, “For me, queerness is just another element of a character’s being, and because I’m queer too” (Adler). *The Sun and the Star* by Rick Riordan and Mark Oshiro, published in 2023, is a story of Nico and Will's journey into Tartarus to rescue an old frenemy, Iapetus, also known as Bob the Titan. What on the surface looks like a simple rescue story turns out to be a novel on queer relationships because Nico di Angelo, the protagonist, is accompanied by his partner, Will Solace. The couple must undergo this journey without knowing that they will be made to confront their innermost fears and insecurities.

"Gender roles are defined as those shared expectations (about appropriate qualities and behaviours that apply to individuals on the basis of their socially identified gender" (Eagly 12). *The Division of Labour in Society*, a book by Émile Durkheim published in 1893, is one of the earliest works that analyzed the division of labor and the heterogeneity that it brought into the gender roles. Eagly states that "adult social roles are more directly relevant to sex differences in adult social behavior than is prior socialization or biology" (Eagly 9). The work *The Psychology of Men and Masculinities* (2017) by Levant and Wang explores the trauma and its effects on queer community people due to societal pressure of fixed identities. This study analyzes how Nico's absurd behavior is a product of hegemonic gender roles and how transformation and healing are possible beyond the opposing factors.

## Literature Review

The literature review for this research paper, which focuses on Rick Riordan and Mark Oshiro's *The Sun and The Star*, focuses on works that delve into gender inclusivity and works that use gender inclusivity as a factor in mythological retellings. In the earlier works of Riordan, the depiction of LGBTQ+ characters has been limited to none, but in the series *The Trials of Apollo*, there has been an increase in the number of characters who represent the community. This book, *The Sun and the Star*, is the first standalone book in Riordan's literary canon that has a homosexual person; in general, these types of books starring homosexual couples focus on their own toils and how society treats them, but Riordan and Oshiro present a fiction in a mythological setting while highlighting the relationship dynamics between Nico and Will. There has been research on young adult fiction, which is a stepping stone on the journey of young children because children are bound to develop their own opinion on gender and heteronormativity (Nelson). While there have been very limited scholarly sources on the primary text, the character Nico di Angelo, one of the protagonists, has received considerable attention; his behavior of isolating himself from the living has been under study, and his attitude toward others has developed an



image of him being dark and mysterious. A significant event in Nico's life is when he was forced by Cupid to reveal his love towards Percy, which means accepting that he is homosexual; this event has been subjected to analysis by scholars since it shaped his personality (Witkowski 17).

## Methodology

This research paper employs a qualitative methodology to explore the theme of gender roles attributed to aspects of masculinity and femininity in Rick Riordan and Mark Oshiro's *The Sun and the Star* via the characters of Nico di Angelo and Will Solace. This method combines literary analysis with gender role theory to analyze how these roles influence the lives of the couple and play a major role in their psychology towards their relationship. Judith Butler, in her work *Gender Trouble*, says that there is no fixed identity in relation to gender; it is the repetition of acts that forms the idea of gender roles (Butler 25). Gender roles theory is a social theory that forges the connection of how societal roles form the baseline of gender roles, which shapes the roles and behavior of the person (Eagly, 1987). This work draws on *The Psychology of Men and Masculinities* by Levant and Wong for its analysis of gender roles in the context of queer people and their experience in it. It is inferred that women in a relationship provide more emotional support in a relationship than their spouse; it is reported that people in a homosexual relationship experience more stress than those in a heterosexual marriage (Levant and Wong). Social role theory of gender, along with additional support from Levant and Wong's analysis of homosexual relationships, forms the foundation of this research paper's theoretical framework. These frameworks provide a foundation for examining how gender roles are fluid in the work *The Sun and the Star* and how emotional intimacy between same-sex couples works. Social role theory in particular serves as a base for the resistance against the claim by general people that certain roles are particular to certain genders, which results in unfair treatment of homosexual couples.

## Analysis & discussion

Gender roles are a set of characteristics and behaviours that an individual is expected to exhibit based on socially accepted conventions. The social role theory of gender states that these social roles are not a set of innate characteristics but a set of socially constructed ones based on the social roles done by men (Eagly 9, 25). The effect of these gender roles is that certain characteristics are attributed to certain genders, where men are believed to be more assertive and controlling, while women are expected to be submissive. A common assumption is that homosexual couples too mimic the same gender roles as heterosexual couples, but it is the case in only a few couples; the rest do not confront these extremities (Peplau 4). *The Sun and the Star* (2023) by Riordan and Oshiro is a novel that deals with demigods Nico



di Angelo (son of Hades) and Will Solace (son of Apollo); they are forced to undertake a journey into the Tartarus to rescue their frenemy Bob the titan. This work draws its base from Greek mythology to narrate the story of how they navigate their homosexual relationship. This paper explores the problems faced by the couple due to gender normativity.

Eagly introduces the term "internationalization of gender roles," where individuals imbibe these gender expectations of the gender roles, which alters one's own attitude and behaviours (Eagly 18). Nico di Angelo, one of the protagonists, in a similar manner, draws in these qualities, which causes a major turmoil in his life, where he projects traditional masculine characters in his relationship. Nico, when Will tried to console him, felt vulnerable and felt like he had to override his pride to just cry to his loved one (Riordan and Oshiro, ch. 4). Levant and Wong explain those characteristics as components that are part of traditional masculinity ideology; men are expected to achieve the archetype, such as the big wheel or the sturdy oak (Levant and Powell 18). The sturdy oak translates to men are to be strong and must not show weakness. In Nawabi's questionnaire he found that men are expected to avoid crying in front of people, and a lot of them followed it (qtd. in Levant and Powell 20). This translates to Nico and his reluctance to show weakness to his partner. Before the departure towards Tartarus, Nico blindly wants to go and help Bob the Titan, and Will wonders why he has to be the voice of reason. Will mocks Nico as Noble Mr. Sacrifice, referring to his plan to sacrifice everything (Riordan and Oshiro, Ch. 5); this corresponds to the paradigm of taking risks as a characteristic of masculinity (Levant and Powell 22). Will challenges this mentality by asking

"Then why are you making this so difficult?" Will asked. "Why do you have to be the one who does everything alone? It's like you're... Noble Mr. Sacrifice or something."

Nico bristled. "That's not a thing."

"It is now," Will countered. "You think you're the only one who can handle the darkness, but you're not. We're a team, Nico. You don't have to carry the weight of the entire Underworld on your shoulders just to prove you're strong enough. You don't have to be the hero who dies to save everyone else every single time." (Riordan and Oshiro 45-46).

The text also expresses the challenges faced by Nico that made him develop such characteristics as a defence mechanism to save himself from embracement, he mentions that he commented about how pretty



Ares looked in mythomagic trading cards to his friend Henry which lead him to completely avoid Nico altogether which lead him to believe not to feel that, not to do that and not to think that. Whenever he shared too much or someone suspected he wasn't straight he would hide it but, Nico wouldn't do something like that to him, so for the first time he chose to do something he has been so afraid of he chose to believe Will (Riordan and Oshiro Ch.21). In general, these events of acceptance occur after a big event but this work shows that it doesn't always happen in such grand manner. It usually happens when one is ready to choose the other person over anything and everything.

Gender stereotypic beliefs usually describe women as manifesting the concern of the welfare of others more when compared to men. These characteristics include caring, being affectionate, kind, and helpful; additionally, few interpersonal sensitive traits such as emotional expressiveness and other soft skills (Eagly 16). From the beginning of the book, Will is an embodiment of the qualities that are socially constructed as feminine. During the conversation with Nico, Persephone tells him to continue choosing to love Nico, and he must cultivate it (Riordan and Oshiro, Ch. 24). Will calls Nico "my grumpy ball of darkness" (Riordan and Oshiro, Ch. 13); this phrase denotes the quality of expressing his love for Nico without any hesitation. The above-mentioned qualities and behaviour are traditionally embodied by the female gender. Riordan and Oshiro portray Nico as an embodiment of dynamic characteristics, thereby marking them as characters beyond the gendered constraints of social roles.

## Conclusion

Through the journey of Nico and Will, the novel critiques the social norms that a person of a particular gender has to possess the desired characteristics associated with each gender. Nico's story offers a powerful exploration of the effects these gender roles can have on a homosexual person, making his journey an inspiring narrative of self-discovery. *The Sun and the Star* by Rick Riordan and Mark Oshiro presents a journey of a homosexual couple in a mythological setting; the topography differs from reality, but the journey and the trauma remain the same. Nico's journey extends beyond this fiction; as a character, Nico always felt like an outsider in his life after the death of his sister. His view towards his sexuality played a major role in his character development; he felt a profound sense of shame when he confessed his love to Cupid in the work *The House of Hades*. The same character, when Will mocks him about that, says it was just an easy crush; the act of being broken down for expressing his love and then being able to laugh about it shows the character. The character Will is the metaphorical light in this work; he is not affected by all these things, but rather he remains with Nico and works with him while he unravels all his flaws due to gender identity.



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