

Capstone Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Japanese Major:  
The Unexpected World of Boys Love: Challenging the Nuclear Family, Defying Labels, and  
Finding Happiness

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Boys Love (ボーイズラブ), or BL is a genre in Japan that encapsulates “...manga, novels, anime, movies, and now computer games, that features love relationships between young men” (Kawano). While it has many different fans of different sexual orientations and genders, the majority of BL fans are heterosexual young girls and women, 60% of them being between the ages of 15 and 29 years old (Kawano). These women have even coined a term for themselves – “fujoshi”, translating to “rotten woman”. Like the name implies, fujoshi typically are not seen positively by society. Since these women call themselves this, Kirsty Kawano notes that “...by labeling themselves “fujoshi,” BL fans prevent others from sticking a different label on them. With this subversive term, they voluntarily cut themselves off from the demands of the world of men, with “rotten” making it clear that they are no longer fit for male consumption” (Kawano). By establishing themselves as abject, they take away the authority from others to label them. Furthermore, through BL they are able to claim autonomy in a male-dominated society through their consumption and enjoyment of the genre.

There are a variety of reasons to why women enjoy BL - some enjoy the being able to see the perspective of the seme, a term that is given to the role of the pursuer in BL, which is similar to the role traditionally taken by men in heterosexual relationships. Others enjoy the stress-free environment when there is no female heroine that they can compare themselves to, and some simply just enjoy the added complexity and challenges that must be navigated by queer characters in society (Kawano). BL as a medium offers a multitude of possibilities and perspectives for women to utilize. Scholars note this as well, saying that BL allows for “...readers to challenge fixed identities and explore alternative ways to navigate desire” (Kawano). Societal pressures and expectations alienate and confine individuals to what they are

labelled as. Women in particular within society are unable to freely express their desires or individuality and BL provides an opening for expression.

While the subject matter of BL is men and the relationships between them, there is not a great amount of involvement from real men – though there are authors that are men, some even being queer. Its authors are predominantly female, a detail important to note, as the roots of this genre began in the 1970s when female writers were beginning to create a place for themselves in the male-dominated sphere of writing manga for girls (Kawano). In the 1950s and 1960s, there were not many women who were manga writers (Thorn). Thus, the early female writers of BL created a community that was made by women for other women, resulting in a place where they are not only the majority, but also a place where they have a position of power.

BL has become a world, created by mainly women, where using stories depicting relationships between men, can explore different perspectives and break social norms from a different perspective and different position. The rigid rules of society are bent with queer relationships and challenges the idea that Goldstein poses, in which the idea of happiness in Japanese society is the nuclear family, which consists of “...a salaryman husband, a full-time housewife, and their children” (Goldstein 3). Women are drawn to narratives that break from the strict order that societal norms have set up, and the world of BL has the ability to “...release women from a judgmental gaze and create a world that frees them from the constrictive social norms of reality” (Kawano). BL, through its representations of non-nuclear families and queer relationships, along with characters who challenge strict social order and labels, appeal to women as they offer alternatives to the painted ideal of happiness in Japan, the nuclear family, and demonstrate how individuals can reject society’s labels and independently define

themselves. They show that happiness is possible through different means and is unique for each individual in society when they are minorities.

While some stories in BL take place in a world free of prejudice, most do not and typically portray modern Japanese society's expectations and norms, which includes the ideal of the nuclear family. As stated earlier, one of BL's attraction to women is the complexity of the challenges gay individuals face in society. These characters challenge societal norms, or their stories touch on these societal norms and show that they can be harmful or limiting. One work that reflects this and showcases the lives and challenges of regular people who are queer in Japanese society is the *Love Nest* series by Minazuki Yuu, consisting of *Love Nest* and its sequel *Love Nest 2nd*, both containing two volumes each. The series is a spin-off of an earlier work of the author, *Sayonara Game* and *Change World*. Another spin-off that takes place in the same world with characters that have appeared before in these books is set to be serialized later in 2021, signaling the strength of popularity BL works can have.

*Love Nest* is about Hozumi Masato, a gay salaryman who was hurt almost ten years ago by a straight ex-lover who wanted to live a "normal" life. This event leads Masato to separate himself from others in order to protect himself, particularly from straight and bisexual men. His grudge also leads him to developing a bad habit of breaking up couples that consist of a gay man and a man that previously identified as straight. However, he meets another man, Yajima Asahi, who changes Masato's perspective and allows him to heal. Asahi, like Masato, has faced difficulties living up to society's expectations and norms. These have also shaped his life, since he cannot have children, which leads to his wife cheating on him and leaving him for a man that impregnates her. Their views on happiness, strongly based on the ideal of the nuclear family, and how they truly desire to live within the series as they heal and grow as individuals. The series

falls under the category of BL and showcases the lives of two queer men in Japan, the problems they face in Japanese society, how societal expectations and pressures shape their lives and relationships, and how they overcome them to show how happiness is not assigned to a singular ideal that has been set upon them.

Within *Love Nest*, there is clear representation of the tie between having a heterosexual relationship and a nuclear family as the key to happiness, as Masato's ex-lover leaves him to have a more stable life in society. Before his ex-lover graduates, he impregnates a coworker from his part time while he and Masato are dating. When he informs Masato, he is angered and hurt. His ex-lover in response to Masato's anger says, “「けど僕らこのまま一緒にいても何にもんない。結婚も子供も社会的保障も。。。匡人も分かっただろ？」 (*Love Nest* Vol 1, 108) [*Romanization*: kedo bokura kono mama isshoni ittemo nanimon nai. Kekkō mo kodomo mo shakai hoshō mo... Masato mo wakatta darou? *Translation*: But there is nothing even if we are together like this. Marriage, children, societal security... Masato you also understand right?]. In Japanese, this sentence conveys how being together and nothing coming out of it is an unexpected result. This sentence implies that when two people are together, their relationship should result in something. From this scene, it can be seen that what is expected to come out of a relationship, or two people being together is marriage, children, and societal security. Furthermore, it implies that all of these can only result from a heterosexual relationship. It is suggested that the result of a relationship being marriage, specifically heterosexual marriage, and children is a societal expectation that is considered “normal”. Goldstein mentions that “In the social context of Japanese middle class, it is impossible to ignore the centrality of marriage as the marker of normativity or normative maturity” (5). Masato's ex-lover is perpetuating this as he believes that being in a heterosexual relationship and creating a nuclear family will lead to one

being fulfilled and secure one's place in society after he graduates, as "Marriage remains a resilient marker of becoming a full adult member of society (shakaijin)" (Goldstein 4). This mindset, however, is narrow and leaves little room for any deviation in society. However, this norm is one that is perpetuated from the beginning of many individuals' lives.

The idea of being married, having children, and having the structure of the nuclear family being equated to happiness is perpetuated in the sequel of *Love Nest*, *Love Nest 2nd*. While Masato has healed more from his past hurt and trauma, societal expectations and pressures are evident not just in his romantic relationships, but also in his surroundings growing up. Masato reflects on his mother's words to him when he was a child, in which she says "「あんたは普通にお嫁さんもらってかわいい子供使って幸せになってくれたらそれでいいよ」 (*Love Nest 2nd Vol 1*, 212) [*Romanization*: Anata wa futsuuni oyomesan moratte kawaii kodomo tsukatte shiawase ni nattekuretara sorede ii yo. *Translation*: If you ordinarily take a wife and have a cute child, and become happy, that is good enough]. Within this sentence, the Japanese expresses how Masato having a wife, a child, and becoming happy through building this family is an action that he would be doing for her and is a request in a way from her. Masato knows he cannot fulfill this wish for her, and he worries about this as he loves his mother and cares for her. This again, is another reminder in BL of how present societal expectations and pressures are, and how they put pressure on individuals. These ideals are pushed on individuals from a young age, and this affects them greatly. The idea of the nuclear family is a narrow view of happiness. Being surrounded by the societal expectations and pressures of getting married to a woman, having a child, and creating a nuclear family have created a divide between Masato and the ability to be "normal", thus making him put up boundaries against others to protect himself.

BL through its narratives also shows how a society that perpetuates the nuclear family ideal leads to how labels are placed on individuals and the effect these labels have. However, it also shows how individuals are able to free themselves in their own way, rejecting the labels being placed on them by others, and changing how they define themselves. The nuclear family is seen as the idea of happiness, and “The Joy of Normal Living” states that, “The idea of happiness is often conditioned by dominant social values” (Goldstein 2). Thus by perpetuating this idea of happiness, which has been crafted by the majority, allows the majority to dominate and have control over minorities, giving them the power to define them and their place in society. Labels, while helping others to define themselves, can also allow society to confine other individuals. Masato is well aware of this, as in *Love Nest 2nd*, he recalls a colleague in a “forward” workplace he was at was known to be gay and speaks how his sexual identity ultimately defined him - being gay ended up in how people spoke about him and to him, leading his identity to be singularly as “gay”. Masato explains that he does not want to just out himself as, “「僕は「ゲイの穂積匡人」じゃなく、ただの「穂積匡人」として認識されたい。」 (Love Nest 2nd, Vol 1, 84) [Romanization: boku wa gei no Hozumi Masato janaku, tada no Hozumi Masato toshite ninshikisaretai. Translation: Rather than “the gay Hozumi Masato”, I want to be known as just “Hozumi Masato”]. This is an important moment where Masato rejects the idea of others and society defining him. Masato claims his own autonomy in his own way as he desires to be seen as he is and not by just one singular aspect of him. Queer individuals are very often defined too simply by their sexual orientation. BL like *Love Nest* showcase how complex these individuals are and how they do not want to be defined by simple labels within society, and how damaging and pressuring these labels can be.

Masato shows great change from who he was at the beginning of *Love Nest*, who, similar to the society he lives in, has a very narrow mindset due to his horrible experience. Society has established a singular idea of happiness, and consequently forces queer individuals like Masato to feel as if they do not necessarily have the ability to be happy. Since society has labelled queer individuals and created a boundary towards them, Masato does the same to individuals that seem straight or become queer later as well. Asahi, however, helps Masato to realize otherwise – that people and their experiences are not defined strictly by society’s standards and labels of gay and straight. Masato talks about the problems of having a relationship with a straight person and Asahi asks him if that is important. He tells Asahi that he would not understand and implies that he is unable to do so because he is straight. Masato continues to express that he does not understand why he continues to be hurt by what has happened. Asahi responds to him saying that after working at a bar in Ni-chōme, a famous spots for queer individuals, he has learned that, “「確かにゲイの世界は独特っつーか即物的な面もあるけど、いろんな客の話聞きながら誰かを好きっつー気持ちにゲイとかノンケとか男も女も関係ねえな、って気がしたよ。」 (Love Nest Vol 1, 124) [Romanization: tashika ni gei no sekai wa tokudoku ttsuuka sokubtsutekina men mo arukedo, ironna kyaku no hanashi kikinagara dareka wo suki ttsuu kimochi ni gei toka nonnke toka otoko mo onnna mo kankeineena tte ki gashitadayo.

*Translation:* “The gay world certainly should I say, has unique and realistic facets, but while listening to various customers talk, I feel that being gay or straight, man or woman are not connected to liking someone”]. Asahi, who has seen individuals who are both straight and queer interact, realizes that while there are labels that can be utilized this does not define their experiences and feelings. He recognizes that the queer individuals and the queer community do have their own unique set of experiences and views, but that individuals and their feelings cannot



be singularly categorized. Asahi, by breaking down the barriers Masato has set, ends up altering his world view a bit more and helps him to recognize his true feelings.

Asahi, while helping to widen Masato's view of the world, still experiences the limitations of society and still is affected by the societal ideal of happiness. In both *Love Nest* and *Love Nest 2nd*, the fact that he is unable to have children makes him feel abnormal, and this in some ways defines him and labels him as "defective". Asahi grew up in a broken home and his dream was to ultimately create his ideal home, however he was unable to. He says that his regards to his dreams that, "「自分で家を建てればほしいものは全部手に入る」あれにはそんなバカな妄想が詰まっていたんだよ。」 (*Love Nest Vol 2, 28*) [*Romanization: jibunde ie wo tatereba hoshii mono wa zenbu te ni hairu are ni wa sonna bakana mousou ga tsumattetandayo. Translation: I was filled with wild delusions that if I built a house myself, I would obtain everything I desired*]. Within this sentence, the Japanese expresses regret that he was filled with these delusions and shows his reflection on his past self's thoughts of how he wanted to live his life. This also shows how he believes he could control his life and happiness by creating it himself. Within the sentence it expresses how the house is built by Asahi himself, which again indicates that he was trying to obtain happiness and what he wanted by building a figure of what he thought happiness was defined as. However, Asahi too changes and his idea of happiness, as well as other characters in *Love Nest's* ideas of happiness are changed from the nuclear family ideal that society promotes.

Change can also be seen in Masato's mother, whose wish for Masato evolves from the nuclear family ideal to whatever makes Masato, as an individual, happy. Early in *Love Nest 2nd*, we can see her idea of happiness for Masato would be for him to have a nuclear family - a wife and children, which particularly is emphasized in her mind as she raised Masato alone and wants

him to have what he could not in his childhood. She wished this for Masato not to intentionally confine him, but simply because she has been conditioned to think that the nuclear family would be what makes him happy. This simple wish she had for him, however, does pressure Masato. But her perspective of happiness has changed from that point in time to the present, which can be seen when Masato tells her that she should just live for herself, she responds with “「あんたも自分の好きに生きればいいんだよ」 (Love Nest 2nd Vol 1, 328) [Romanization: anta mo jibun no sukini ikireba iindayo. Translation: It's okay if you also live the way you like]. While this situation may not be considered realistic to some, BL, as a form of fiction, can show that change within individuals is possible and explore this scenario and show the potential of a world where parental figures and others support queer individuals. Masato's mother recognizes that happiness is not tied down to the ideal of the nuclear family or how society defines the idea of happiness, but how each unique individual sees their happiness to be. By saying this, she is freeing Masato from the confines and expectations of the societal ideal of the nuclear family that had been so deeply ingrained in him.

Within *Love Nest*, limitations by societal pressures and expectations are explored, but they also are challenged and show how change is possible from the conditioning of these norms that have been pushed onto individuals. This can be seen through Asahi's change in what he desires, as he previously held a different idea of happiness. Initially, the only idea of happiness Asahi held was creating his own home as stated in the previous work, but in *Love Nest 2nd*, he says “「僕はアイツとあの部屋でこのまま穏やかに暮らせりゃそれでいい」 (Love Nest 2nd Vol 1, 176) [Romanization: boku wa aitsu to ano heya de kono mama odayaka ni kuraserya sore de ii. Translation: For me it is enough if I can live quietly in this room like this with him]. This image of living together with Masato is now his new image of happiness and shows how

happiness can be achieved past the ideal of the nuclear family. The idea of happiness can be recreated by individuals and being happy and satisfied with one's life is not dependent on one's position in society or what they are labeled as.

*Love Nest* demonstrates how BL can touch on how the ideal of the nuclear family is perpetuated and pushed on individuals through Masato, who grows up with the idea that this is the ideal for happiness. His ex-lover, who believes that this ideal will lead to not only happiness but also security in society, also shows how individuals will dutifully try to recreate this ideal to the best of their abilities. BL shows how the perpetuation of the nuclear family ideal has given power to assign labels to minorities, the effects of these labels within society, and how characters fight against them to claim their own autonomy in defining themselves. BL is able to strongly showcase this problem as they focus on queer individuals whose very existence goes against societal ideals, and their existence is often written away by the mere label of their sexual orientations. BL offers a medium where struggles and experiences of queer individuals can be shared, showing their uniqueness and value as individuals as well as the similarities in their lives to others who are different from them. This representation helps to move them past the narrow minded and shallow label of just their sexual orientation. We also can see through *Love Nest* how damaging and dividing labels formed by the majority can be, as it pushes Masato to project in a similar manner onto others, which causes him to struggle with his own ability to understand and heal from his own struggles and eventually hurting others as well. In his own way, he claims his own autonomy in defining himself, as a multi-faceted individual.

Masato and Asahi in the *Love Nest* series do individually grow and heal from their past traumas and hurt, but also equally support and help each other in doing so. As Kawano states, BL rejects "...socially mandated gender roles. Its characters typically pursue shared goals in an equal

partnership that breaks through the traditional male-female hierarchy” (Kawano). As they are queer characters, both being men, they show how partnership works beyond traditional “man” and “woman” roles. The representation of a shared and equal partnership of a non-nuclear relationship and family challenges that the idea of happiness is the nuclear family and breaks the unequal power distribution in relationships that the nuclear family has perpetuated as its structure places “... the man as the ‘pillar of the house’” (Goldstein 3). BL can show that there is happiness that can be found outside this structure, and that it can be a mutual effort between two individuals. *Love Nest* is an example of how BL is a medium that allows individuals to be able to explore different scenarios outside of what might happen in reality, present a world in which societal norms and labels can be challenged and broken, and show that happiness can be found by individuals who did not think they would be able to.

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Appendix

Minazuki Yū. *Love Nest*. Vol. 1, 108





Minazuki Yū. *Love Nest 2nd*, Vol 1, 84





Minazuki Yū. *Love Nest* Vol 1, 124





Minazuki Yū. Love Nest 2nd Vol 1, 328



