

Lise Albertsen

Bachelor's thesis

**Portrayal of sexuality in André Aciman's
novel *Call Me by Your Name* (2007) and
Luca Guadagnino's film adaption *Call Me
by Your Name* (2017)**

June 2020

NTNU

Norwegian University of Science and Technology
Faculty of Humanities
Department of Language and Literature



Norwegian University of
Science and Technology

Bachelor's thesis

2020



Lise Albertsen

**Portrayal of sexuality in André Aciman's
novel *Call Me by Your Name* (2007) and
Luca Guadagnino's film adaption *Call Me
by Your Name* (2017)**

Bachelor's thesis
June 2020

NTNU

Norwegian University of Science and Technology
Faculty of Humanities
Department of Language and Literature



Norwegian University of
Science and Technology

ABSTRACT

This bachelor's thesis explores how sexuality is portrayed by the narrative in André Aciman's novel *Call Me by Your Name* (2007) and Luca Guadagnino's film adaption *Call Me by Your Name* (2017).

Contents

Introduction 2

Analysis 3

Conclusion..... 10

References 12

Introduction

Call Me by Your Name is a novel written by André Aciman which was first published in 2007 and ten years later, in 2017, the adapted film with the same title was released (Aciman, 2019). Both of these works tell the story of seventeen-year-old Elio and his father's summer guest Oliver and their obsessive and blossoming summer romance (Aciman, 2019). The novel starts with Elio thinking back to the summer of 1983 when he met Oliver and goes on to tell the story of a sensual Italian summer (Di Mattia, 2018, p. 9). Oliver, a 24-year-old graduate student has been hired as Elio's father's intern for the summer. This is something Professor Perlman, Elio's father, does every year, and this particular summer when the story takes place it is Oliver who comes to live with them in their summer villa in Northern Italy. At first the friendship between the two main characters can be described as hesitant, it then evolves into a more faithful friendship before it eventually turns into something more than that. However, it is not a relationship that can be labelled, but it is indeed a love story, a bittersweet one. The novel is written in first person perspective and this gives the reader access to Elio's thoughts and experiences. The reader has full access to Elio's self-discovery, his confusion, his insecurities, his snarkiness and awkwardness and his intimate thoughts and experiences. The film is described by Di Mattia (2018, p. 9) to develop almost exclusively from Elio's point of view and the audience stay with him from the opening scene when Oliver arrives at the Perlman's villa. There is a similarity between the novel and the film in this sense, that this is Elio's story, his story about the summer he met Oliver and how it affected him. In the film *Elio* is played by Timothée Chalamet and *Oliver* is played by Armie Hammer. Di Mattia (2018, p. 10) points out that the words "gay", "bisexual" or "queer" is not mentioned once in the film. These words are not used in the book either to describe Elio or Oliver; also, their sexuality is never explicitly questioned or addressed (Aciman, 2019). This is an interesting aspect of the story, considering it is a love story between two men. The novel and the film seem to rely on its characters' exploration of their feelings, like insecurity, curiosity, desire, attraction, passion and love. Particularly Elio's thoughts and feelings are on display because he narrates the entire novel and because the events in the film follows his actions. The film adaptation shows the story mostly from Elio's perspective and his self-discovery, like Di Mattia (2018, p. 9) pointed out. Sexuality is indeed a theme in the story about Elio and Oliver, however, the narration does not explicitly address it, and any definitions of sexuality seem to evaporate in both versions of *Call Me by Your Name*. This makes it interesting to explore how the narrative portrays sexuality in both versions.

Analysis

In the first chapter, in the first page of the novel we are thrown into the story with no introduction or prior knowledge about what is about to happen, in medias res (Hawthorn, 2017, p. 281). The first-person narration is set as Elio is looking back to a summer in Italy many years ago and he describes meeting Oliver for the first time: “I shut my eyes, say the word, and I’m back in Italy, so many years ago, walking down the tree-lined driveway, watching him step out of the cab (...) It might have started right there and then...” (Aciman, 2019, p. 3). Elio continues to offer suggestions and descriptions of situations the so called “it” may have started, meaning the relationship between Elio and Oliver, although it is not explicitly described what is starting. However, it alerts the reader that something is about to start and by Elio’s internal monologue which the first-person narration allows, the reader is at all times a part of Elio’s first impressions of Oliver (Hawthorn, 2017, p. 291). This could be read as a way to avoid labels on the relationship, what is going on between them is an attraction between two human beings, and their gender does not matter. So much is revealed in the first pages of the novel due to the access the reader has to Elio’s thoughts: “... the fumbling around people I might misread and don’t want to lose and must second-guess at every turn (...)” (Aciman, 2019, p. 10). This is particularly descriptive as to how Elio is and how he approaches Oliver. It suggests how he is insecure, even though he constantly fumbles with his thoughts that addresses his interest and attraction to Oliver: “Is it your body that I want when I think of lying next to it every night or do I want to slip into it and own it as if it were my own (...)” (Aciman, 2019, p. 68). This lust and the constant dance of desire between them is most definitely evident in Elio’s internal monologue, however, the fumbling, the insecurity, the way he does not always know how to read into Oliver’s words and actions is evident. This fumbling never makes Elio specifically question his sexuality. In the film adaption a lot of these elements are harder to interpret. The narrative aspect is not as clear in film as it is in novels, however, it is definitely crucial for the function of the film and for its effect on its audience; although literary texts and screen texts are different in many ways (Lothe, 2000, p. 8). This is true for the film adaption of *Call Me by Your Name*, because a lot of what is narrated has to be interpreted by the audience. The beginning of both stories, novel and film, therefore, is quite different. What the film offers instead, in its opening scene, gives the audience a completely different interpretation regarding sexuality and how the start of a new relationship is on its way. Elio is in his room with Marzia, and when Oliver arrives the camera angle is at Oliver as seen from the window in the second floor where Elio stands, and

the conversation is a bit distant because it is as if we are seeing it through Elio's eyes. Because Marzia is with him, the attraction he has towards Oliver at first sight is not as clear and because he has a girl in his room it is easier to make the assumption that she is his girlfriend. Therefore, the opening gives a different narrative portrayal where the novel is able to show the immediate attraction Elio has towards Oliver.

One example from the novel where Elio's insecurities and his sexuality are addressed is when he is practicing on his guitar in the garden and Oliver asks him to play it again, Elio's first response is: "But I thought you hated it." (Aciman, 2019, p. 12) Oliver replies: "Hated it? Whatever gave you that idea?" (Aciman, 2019, p. 12). Because the novel is narrated by Elio the reader does not have access to what Oliver is thinking, however, this partakes in the understanding of Elio's insecurities, especially those insecurities he has towards Oliver. Also, his fumbling and second-guessing. When Elio is asked to play the same one again, he goes inside the villa to use the piano. He alters the way he plays it two times and is called out by Oliver both times. "Can't you just play the Bach the way Bach wrote it?" (Aciman, 2019, p. 12). Elio is teasing Oliver:

I knew exactly what phrase in the piece must have stirred him the first time, and each time I played it, I was sending it to him as a little gift, because it was really dedicated to him, as a token of something very beautiful in me that would take no genius to figure out and that urged me to throw in an extended cadenza. Just for him. We were—and he must have recognized the signs long before I did—flirting. (Aciman, 2019, p. 13).

The fact that this is quite early in the novel is an indicator of how Elio displays different versions of himself from the beginning. Showing these different versions can imply that Elio is young and that he has not yet found out who he is, and that he is on a journey of self-discovery, including discovering his sexuality, although it would be more accurate to say that he is discovering his desires. The arrival of Oliver may have caused Elio to question who he is and by playing three versions on the piano he confesses through music the internal divide between versions of himself, and in a sense asks Oliver which versions he prefers. This event is followed up by Elio writing in his diary: "*P.S. We are not written for one instrument alone; I am not, neither are you.*" (Aciman, 2019, p. 13). These intimate thoughts which the first-

person narration allows the readers to see can be understood to represent Elio's view on sexuality. It suggests that sexuality is fluid. Gender is a non-issue when it comes to attraction and lust. The film on the other hand is able to put this music to life, which makes it more powerful (Guadagnino, 2017, 0:21:50). Also, the cinematic effects, the visual aspect and the sound allows for the following interpretations. In the film, in the first version Elio makes silly faces and this piano version is quite upbeat and quirky, in the second his face is angrier, harder, his mouth is open, and the versions is louder in a sense. In both of these versions he gesticulates. In the third version the attitude is more innocent, he is calm, no faces, the version is cleaner and quiet and there are no gesticulations. This version seems to be the one Oliver wanted, and he sits down which might be a way to signal that this is the version of Elio he wants. Also, the fiction film narrative communicates filmically, which makes the audience interpret events that are visual and full of images (Lothe, 2000, p. 11). Another central concept of a narrative is, among other things, space, which is absolutely crucial to the film adaption of *Call Me by Your Name* (Lothe, 2000, p. 11). While it is important in the novel, the way it works in the film adaption as another element of the narrative which can be related to what Davison (2007, p. 213) says about music being able to encourage an audience in the direction of particular narrative elements. These interpretations have been made even more possible by the visualisation of the film adaption. Therefore, music is arguably one of the most central narrative elements in the film adaption of *Call Me by Your Name*, which will be elaborated more on in other parts.

Like Di Mattia (2018, p. 10) pointed out that the words "gay", "bisexual" or "queer" is not mentioned once in the film. The word "gay" is mentioned once in the novel and this is when it is used to describe a gay couple who is coming to dinner. The underlying tone of: "My father had warned me not to misbehave in the presence of the scholars from Chicago" can be interpreted like Elio is seen by his father as an adolescent who needs a reminder on how to behave. (Aciman, 2019, p. 124). Dr. Perlman continues: (...) "saying I was too old not to accept people as they were" (Aciman, 2019, p. 125). In the film Dr. Perlman's words are:

"No misbehaving tonight. No... No laughing. (...) You're too old not to accept people for who they are. What's wrong with them? What's wrong with them? You call them Sonny and Cher behind their backs. The only person that reflects badly on is you. Is it because they're gay or because they're ridiculous?" (Guadagnino, 2017, 1:18:11).

This directly addresses sexuality and it sends a strong message to the audience of the film. The inclusion of this to the story can be seen as a tool to challenge viewers on their potential prejudice against homosexuals. This inclusion both in the novel and the film adaptation represents the idea that equality is the only acceptable opinion. Also, this demonstrates how liberate Dr. Perlman is, considering the story is set to the 80s. This liberal attitude also seems to have been adopted by Elio, although Dr. Perlman is not aware of that at this point. In the novel the words of this dialogue between father and son is shorter than the one in the film adaptation. This is a good example of what a novel is able to give access to which the film is not. In the novel the reader has access to Elio's train of thought on what he thinks of the gay guests, which does not have any prejudice against the gay couple, instead he is curious and reflects:

“I wonder what their life together was like. It seemed strange to be counting the minutes during supper, shadowed by the thought that tonight I had more in common with Tintin's twins than with my parents or anyone else in my world. I looked at them, wondering who was top and who was bottom...” (Aciman, 2019, p. 125).

The novel offers more information and insight into what Elio really thinks, because a literary text has that ability, which a film does not. Extended dialogue is a device used in the adaptation to bring forward important elements of the narration. This can be said to be true about film adaptations in general, they often have to rely on the dialogue to be able to show literature on screen. The novel also shows how curious Elio is by him wondering who is top and who is bottom. This event leads up to the event when Elio is having sex with Oliver for the first time, which might be another reason to include it in the story prior to this. By killing prejudice first, the audience and the readers are more likely to have an open mind when Elio has his first sexual encounter with a man. Prior events seem to play a huge factor on how sexuality is portrayed. The film adaptation is 2:11:58 hours long, and the first sex scene between the main characters happens 1:25:33 hours into the story (Guadagnino, 2017). This shows how much the story relies on attraction, desire, and hesitation, but also how the setting is vital because it is a slow summer in a romantic small town in Italy. It is possible to question if this has anything to do with the way sexuality evaporates as a factor, because the setting is so idyllic and romantic. These factors are given more power in the film adaptation. While the novel relies more on Elio's narration with his inner thoughts. The dance of desire between them happens in what should be called an Italian paradise. Guadagnino (2017) seem to want to push the

audiences' romantic buttons, and although it is true for the novel that the first sexual encounter between Elio and Oliver takes time, the film adaption with its visual advantages sets a mood so desirable it seems unimportant to question sexuality. Regarding both versions, the same could be said about the fact that Elio has sexual intercourse with Marzia before he is with Oliver, and that Oliver is said to have multiple partners: "It seemed clear that after Chiara there had been a succession of *cotte*, crushes, mini-crushes, one-night crushes, flings, who knows. To me all of it boiled down to one thing only: his cock had been everywhere in B. Every girl had touched it, that cock of his." (Aciman, 2019, p. 67). This brings in the aspect of not being able to label Elio and Oliver as gay. Which is an important aspect that makes the questions about sexuality feel like a non-issue. After Elio has had sex with both Marzia and Oliver and he is about to have another sexual encounter with Marzia he thinks:

"How strange, I thought (...) Barely half an hour ago I was asking Oliver to fuck me and now here I was about to make love to Marzia, and yet neither had anything to do with the other except through Elio, who happened to be one and the same person."
(Aciman, 2019, p. 145).

This, again, shows how the narrative in the novel has introduced two different sexual partners for Elio and in a way address sexuality, even though this is never introduced or addressed as an issue. The narrative lacks a clear antagonist and a clear conflict, which is often found in a story's plot and it might be explained by the tone that is set. The narrator, Elio, tells this story in a particular way that suggest the attitude that is held (Hawthorn, 2017, p. 126). If we consider the attitude that is held in both versions of *Call Me by Your Name*, which is one that is particularly open and liberal regarding sexuality, it seems to have a huge impact on its readers and audiences. The underlying attitude that sexual partners of both genders is totally fine, no conflict, no questions asked is present in both versions, however, the novel has some advantages here because its narrative has the ability to describe events more, or readers are able to understand more because of Elio's narration. The film adaption, as mentioned, is like Di Mattia (2018, p. 9) said, developing almost exclusively from Elio's point of view, however, it has to rely on cinematic effects instead of descriptions from Elio. Music does not often have a major role in novels, and adaption from novel to film turn a novel into a soundtrack (Davison, 20, p. 212). Music often has a significant role in adaptations and music in films always affects our experience of the narrative and image in some way. This can be considered especially true for the film adaption of *Call Me by Your Name* and the way the

music helps narrate the film. It contributes to the slow Italian summer; it is sensual, and it can be argued that it leaves the audience feeling peaceful, romantic and in a sense of timelessness. Narration can control tone, and like Hawthorn (2017, p. 126) described, the tone that is set might suggest the attitude that is held. The tone is without a doubt sensual and full of love, the narration is eager to show the love between all the characters, love for the environment they find themselves in and love for northern Italy. Throughout the entire film sounds of the trees rattling, birds singing, the wind are present, most striking is the sound of silence. Whenever Elio and Oliver are together the music seem to stop, to make place for the intimacy of their presence in each other's company (Guadagnino, 2017).

Elio, no matter how confused he is as a person, never seems to be confused about his sexuality, there is always other things that fuel his insecurity. The things he is confused about revolves more around what Oliver is thinking, which Elio of course has no access to. The peach episode in the novel offers a lot of clues to what Elio might be thinking about his own sexuality: "If Oliver had walked in on me now, I'd let him suck me as he had this morning. If Marzia came, I'd let her help me finish the job." (Aciman, 2019, p. 146). This obviously suggests that he is open to either one of them walking in on him, and the narrative of the novel in this sense does not allow for sexuality to be determined. What is also brings is the aspect of curiosity and lust for exploration by Elio: "The peach was soft and firm (...) its reddened core reminded me not just of an anus but of a vagina (...) I began to rub myself, thinking of no one and of everyone, including the poor peach" (...) (Aciman, 2019, p. 146-147). These thoughts confirm his openness to sexual experiences and can also be seen as how free Elio feels to explore and pursue sexual experiences. He is 17-years-old, which makes it natural for him to want to chase these sexual desires. The peach episode is also included in the film adaption; however, these specific thoughts are lost in the adaption. What the adaption instead is able to show is the intimate moment where Elio ejaculates into the peach and in this sense suggests the lust to explore his sexuality. Still, this is harder to interpret. After Elio comes back from his trip with Oliver and they have said their final goodbyes, an important monologue by Dr. Perlman directed at Elio takes place:

"Nature has cunning ways of finding our weakest spot. Just remember: I am here. Right now you may not want to feel anything. And perhaps it's not with me that you'll want to speak about these things. But feel something you did." (Aciman, 2019, p. 224).

He continues: “You had a beautiful friendship. And I envy you. In my place, most parents would hope the whole thing goes away, or pray that their sons land on their feet soon enough. But I am not such a parent.” (Aciman, 2019, p. 224). Even though Elio and Oliver have kept their relationship secret, Dr. Perlman has taken notice. The entire monologue takes up two pages of the novel, and in the film adaptation the entire monologue is uttered word for word like the novel. This monologue directly affects how sexuality is portrayed. Dr. Perlman is demonstrating to Elio that his sexual preferences and feelings are accepted. Because the story is set to have found place in the 80s, it is even more powerful considering the fact that equality in same sex relationships was not as advanced as it is today. Dr. Perlman also opens up about own experiences: “I may have come close, but never had what you had. Something always held me back or stood in the way. How you live your life is your business.” (Aciman, 2019, p. 225). This demonstrates the liberal views Dr. Perlman has, also, it is not the first time he has advocated on behalf of “otherness”. Like with the dialogue he has with Elio before the gay couple comes to visit, this shows what kind of environment Elio is living in. By including the entire event in the film adaptation is also stands out as an important moment in the history of Elio’s self-discovery. In the novel the events of the summer in 1983 are told in the future, this means that even though Elio was 17-years-old at the time when the story takes place, he is in fact older when he is looking back and narrating the story: “When I think back to that summer, I can never sort the sequence of events. There are a few key scenes. Otherwise, all I remember are “repeat” moments (Aciman, 2019, p. 57). This suggests that Elio might not be the most reliable source which makes him an unreliable narrator. Lothe (2000, p. 26) describes aspects where the narrator may be an unreliable narrator, and one of these are when the narrator has a strong personal involvement which may colour his or her narration to be especially subjective. Although the narrative portrays Elio as insecure, the fact that he is looking back over 20 years later may suggest that he in reality is confident about who he is at the point of narration. This could contribute to how the novel and the film is able to leave sexuality out as a factor. If Elio is bisexual or homosexual is not important to the story, and if he is indeed confident about who he is 20 years later, this absolutely contributes to the evaporation of sexuality in the story. Especially the novel, which is narrated by Elio as he is looking back. In the film adaptation the events appear to happen in a chronological order, the aspect of looking back disappears, still, the same could be said about the novel up until the ending where the aspect of looking back becomes more evident. If there is any evidence that contributes to sexuality being an issue it is in the ending of the film adaptation and the ending of the novel. In the novel Oliver comes back at Christmas and after telling Elio he is getting

married, to a woman, they have a conversation: “They know about us.” “I figured,” he said. “How?” “By the way your father spoke. You’re lucky. My father would have chartered me off to a correctional facility.” (Aciman, 2019, p. 227). In the film adaption this conversation also takes place, although Oliver does not visit, they talk on the phone:

“They know about us. *I figured*. How? *Well, from the way your dad spoke to me. He made me feel like I was part of the family. Almost like a son-in-law. You’re so lucky. My father would have carted me off to a correctional facility.*” (Guadagnino, 2017, 2:06:05).

First, this shows how the film adaption has to rely more on the dialogue, like in other examples, the dialogue is longer. However, the mention of the correctional facility shows how Oliver’s father would never approve of their relationship. If Oliver had been the narrator, the story might have turned out quite different. Elio has supportive loving parents who accept him as he is, while Oliver does not. This makes it possible for sexuality to be a non-issue in both versions of Call Me by Your Name because of the environment and setting of the story but also because Elio is looking back as a grown-up who presumably is more confident about himself. Also, time may have clouded his memory, which allows us to call him an unreliable narrator. By analysing the novel and the film adaption side by side it is possible to argue that the insight the novel gives clouds and colours the way the film adaption is seen because hidden meanings may be easier to spot. Also, the film adaption is similar to the novel in a lot of ways because it tells the events in pretty much the same way but with its cinematic advantages and disadvantages.

Conclusion

The way the novel is narrated by Elio, and how the film adaption is narrated from Elio’s point of view makes it possible for sexuality not to be an issue. Elio can be considered to be an unreliable narrator because he narrates the story by memory over 20 years after it occurred, it is thought that this has played a crucial role in the narrative to make sexuality less important to the story. In the film adaption the story develops almost exclusively from Elio’s point of view and the audience stay with him from the opening scene (Di Mattia (2018, p. 9). By never

addressing sexuality, by introducing several sexual partners, by having a supportive and non-judgmental environment and the slowness and the timelessness the setting provides, makes it possible for sexuality to evaporates as a factor in both versions of *Call Me by Your Name*.

References

- Aciman, A. (2019). *Call Me by Your Name*. Great Britain: Atlantic Books
- Davison, A. (2007). High fidelity? Music in screen adaptations. In Cartmell, D. & Whelehan, I. (Eds.). (2007). *The Cambridge Companion to Literature on Screen*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Di Mattia, J. (2018). BREATHING HEARTS: Compassion and Self-discovery in Call Me by Your Name. *The Australian Teachers of Media Inc*, (91), 8-15. <https://search.proquest.com/docview/2279761444?accountid=12870>
- Hawthorn, J. (2017). *Studying the Novel* (7th ed.). London: Bloomsbury
- Lothe, J. (2000). *Narrative in Fiction and Film: An Introduction*. New York: Oxford University Press
- Guadagnino, L. (Director) & Peter Spears (Producer). (2017). *Call Me by Your Name*. [Motion Picture]. USA: Sony Pictures Classics