

*Call Me by Your Name: How André Aciman explores gender, sexuality and religion through a coming of age text*

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Abstract:

This article review explores how André Aciman represents a young American-Italian Jewish teenager, Elio, and his awakening sexual desire for Oliver, a 24-year-old male who also shares the same cultural and religious background in the early 1980s. The themes I will be discussing are gender, sexuality and religion in relation to a coming of age genre. Further, I will be discussing how Elio and Oliver come to awaken this sexual desire for each other despite the relationship being a taboo in their culture and the inappropriate relationship that blossoms as Oliver is a doctoral student who is working as an intern for Elio's father. Finally, in this article review of *Call Me by Your Name*, I will examine Elio and Oliver's resilience opting to stay together against all the odds.

In this article review, I will be discussing André Aciman's novel, *Call Me by Your Name* and how Aciman explores gender, sexuality and religion through this coming of age text. Firstly, according to the Cambridge dictionary, coming-of-age relates to or describes a 'time when someone changes from a child into an adult'<sup>1</sup>. It is discussed throughout the article that the effect of sexual orientation within religious environments has prominent impacts on a coming-to-age person. I will be applying Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theories to further support Aciman's exploration of said themes in the two main protagonists of the novel, Elio and Oliver.

*Call Me by Your Name*, is a novel that takes its setting in 1980s Northern Italy following an American-Jewish adolescent, Elio, who follows his family there for his Father's research. In this Italian summer vacation, a romance blossoms between the pubescent boy and his father's graduate research assistant, twenty-four-year-old American-Jewish man, Oliver. The cultural and religious background of both characters carries considerable significance as these two male characters are homosexual, which we unravel throughout the novel. However, it is important to note, according to the Jewish Virtual Library "Homosexual acts that are forbidden, not homosexual orientation"<sup>2</sup> and that Judaism focuses on 'a person's action rather than a person's desires.'<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, as Judaism only focuses on the individual's actions, along with Italian and American 1980s society's stigma against homosexuality, Elio's moral anxieties are heightened, which are embodied within his unconsciousness.

Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory of defence mechanism can be used to support some explanation towards Elio's emotions he emits through the novel while he goes through his adolescent sexual awakening.

Sigmund Freud wrote the *Neuro-Psychoses of Defence* and defined the defence mechanism as an unconscious process which 'generally involves concealing from oneself internal drives or feelings that threaten to lower self-esteem or provoke anxiety.'<sup>4</sup> With this in mind, the emotions Elio emits through the novel during his adolescent sexual awakening can be analysed using Freud's theory on the defence mechanism.

For example, the quote 'if I were no longer transparent and could disguise so much of my life, then I was finally safe from them, and from him — but at what price, and did I want to be so safe from anyone,'<sup>5</sup> shows Elio's anxieties about the world to discovering he desires Oliver and to not only have them but to act on those desires. Furthermore, this supports a typical coming-of-age theme as Elio is beginning to question his sexuality. In addition to this, the quote suggests that Elio's defence mechanism is to conceal his identity. The quote explores Elio confusion surrounding his sexuality while he evaluates his feelings towards Oliver. Elio's struggle to accept his sexual identity can be linked to his religious morals and societal norms; however, it could also be his desire to be seen the same as any other young man his age which caused his anxieties.

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<sup>1</sup> "Coming Of Age | Meaning In The Cambridge English Dictionary", *Dictionary.Cambridge.Org*, 2020 <<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/coming-of-age>> [Accessed 16 January 2020].

<sup>2</sup> "Homosexuality In Judaism", *Jewishvirtuallibrary.Org*, 2020 <<https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/homosexuality-in-judaism>> [Accessed 16 January 2020].

<sup>3</sup> "Homosexuality In Judaism", *Jewishvirtuallibrary.Org*, 2020 <<https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/homosexuality-in-judaism>> [Accessed 16 January 2020].

<sup>4</sup> "Defense Mechanism | Human Psychology", *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 2020 <<https://www.britannica.com/topic/defense-mechanism>> [Accessed 16 January 2020].

<sup>5</sup> Andre Aciman, *Call Me by Your Name* ([S.L.]: Atlantic Books, 2017)

A significant factor of growing up involves wanting to be accepted by society and your surrounding peers. Throughout the novel, Oliver represses his feelings towards Elio, despite both equally desiring one another. Oliver's typical goodbye, consisting of 'Later!', leads Elio to believe he is cold and distant frequently. When Oliver first arrives at the Italian villa, Elio is infatuated with not only his handsome features but his confidence; guiding him analyse Oliver's moves and mannerisms obsessively. Due to the fear of rejection and judgement, Elio suppresses his identity the more he finds himself longing for his affections to be returned by Oliver.

In addition to Elio's anxieties, he fears Oliver's indifference towards him as well, which further extends his fears to limit himself from revealing his feelings to Oliver. Through the bond of friendship and personal interests, such as literature and music, Elio confesses his desires to Oliver. However, Oliver dismisses Elio and tells him he should not speak like that; nevertheless, Oliver does not abandon him.

In addition to this, when Elio takes Oliver his secret reading spot, Oliver kisses Elio but refuses to go any further. This suggests Oliver's self-restraint originates from his fear of feeling ashamed as he believes it is wrong for two men, especially of their moral code, to act upon their desires. The following weeks after this incident, Elio and Oliver met with silence and avoidance. This suggests the Freudian defence mechanism theory can be used to explain the process Elio and Oliver take as they conceal their identities from their internal drives.

Nevertheless, both characters struggle to suppress their desires as while living in the same house and while sharing a connecting bathroom; in addition to this, Oliver is also sharing a bed with Elio. As Elio becomes more attracted to Oliver's seemingly appealing body as his chin is described as rounded. His throat, gentle and soft. the effects of repressing his sexuality results with him dreaming about having sex with Oliver.

The quote 'felt like coming home'<sup>6</sup> is significant as the home is charged with connotations. 'Home' has the effect of warmth, comfort and affection. Elio feels at home with Oliver in his dream when they can act out their desires with no shame attached. Furthermore, this scene suggests that the only way Elio can have his needs met is through his unconscious mind, which takes form through dreaming.

On the contrary, after Elio and Oliver share a kiss, Elio builds the courage to break the continued silence and awkwardness between them. Afterwards, Oliver shortly invites Elio to his bedroom at midnight where the two make love. Oliver then holds Elio's gaze and tells him to call him by his name. This is a liberating moment for the pair, especially for Elio. For example, Elio being a shy young man who wanted to explore his new sexual desires but was restrained by fear of rejection and shame. Thus, leading him to repress his needs and identity time after time only until Oliver gave him the confidence to be who Elio is and wants to become.

Throughout the novel we can see many examples of how Aciman explores a complicated dynamic between a coming-to-age male and an older man. Using Freud's defence mechanism theory, I have explored Elio's and Oliver's internal struggles between themselves, in particular Elio's desires and his morals. Furthermore, I have also explored how Elio lack of confidence originates from his desire to be accepted by society. On the other hand, I have

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<sup>6</sup> Andre Aciman, *Call Me by Your Name* ([S.L.]: Atlantic Books, 2017), Pg. 15

analysed Oliver's strong presence and confidence throughout the novel, while considering how he had a more profound desire, he was hesitant to act upon.

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