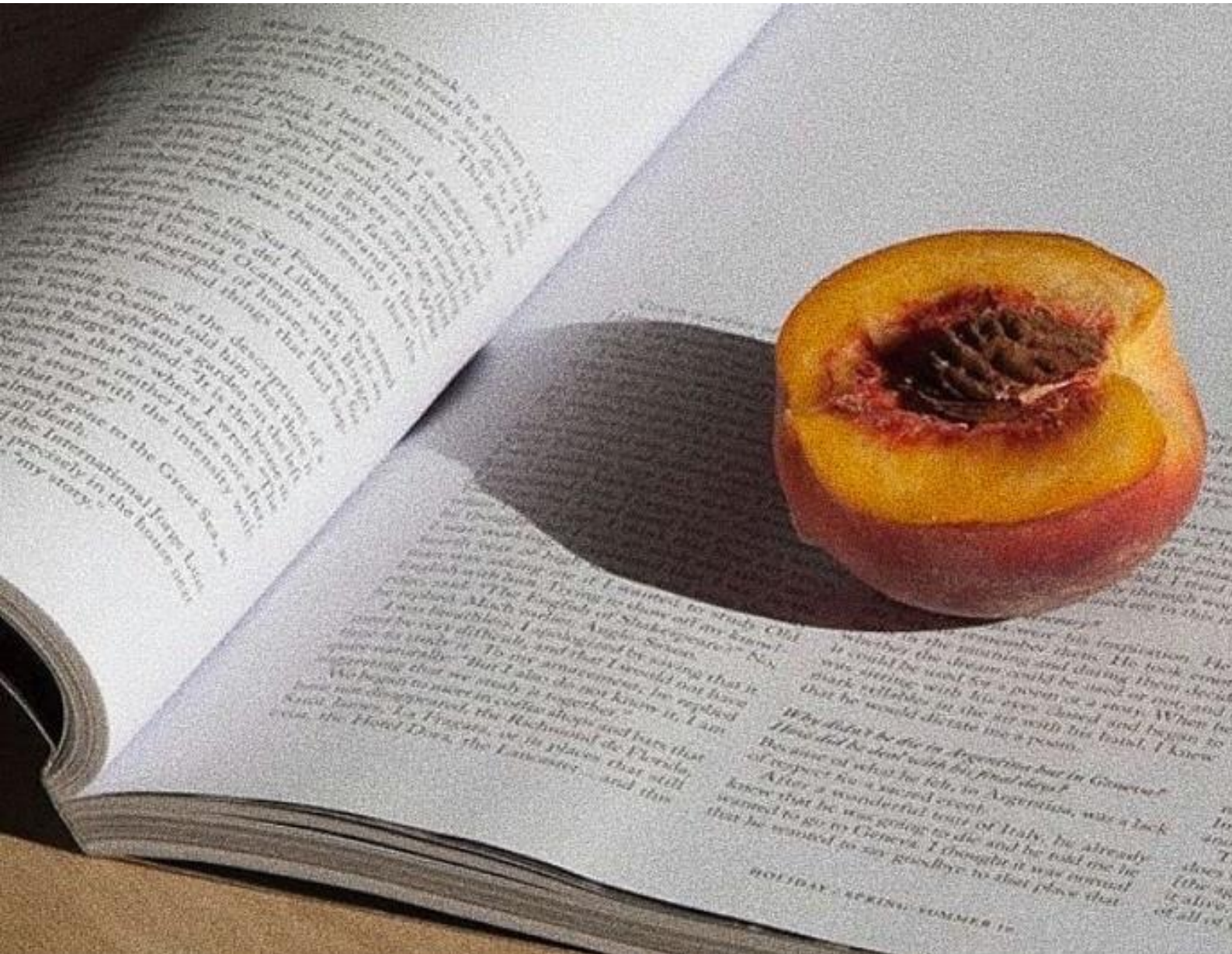


The Changing Perceptions of Gay Identities

Queer Representation in *Call Me by Your Name* and *The Song of Achilles*



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Bachelor Thesis

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The changing perceptions of gay identities:
Queer representation in *Call Me by Your Name* (2007)
and *The Song of Achilles* (2011)

Abstract

Queer literature has a long history of development throughout the past centuries and nowadays presents a recurring theme in novels that are internationally published, such as *Call Me by Your Name* (2007) by André Aciman and *The Song of Achilles* (2011) by Madeline Miller. These two narratives in particular provide valuable insights into the representation of gay identities in modern-day literature and allow for an insightful examination of their depiction of homosexual desire and the role of family in connection to these identities. This thesis will therefore carefully analyse the position of sexual and familial ties in the two narratives, in order to grasp the portrayal of the characters, their actions, and their words. Several scenes that shed a light on these specific themes will be highlighted, to determine in what way these novels represent gay individuals and the expression of their identity. By implementing notions like the disruption of norms and queer ecologies, this thesis will hopefully lead to a better understanding of modern queer representation and its possible implications.

Key words: queer literature, homosexual desire, disruption of norms, Call Me by Your Name, The Song of Achilles, identities, queer ecologies.

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	7
Chapter 1: Theoretical Framework	12
1.1 <i>Queer Theory</i>	12
1.2 <i>Identities</i>	13
1.3 <i>Familial Ties and the Disruption of Norms</i>	14
1.4 <i>Sexual Relations</i>	16
Chapter 2: The Song of Achilles.....	20
2.1 <i>Sexual Relations</i>	20
2.2 <i>Familial Relations</i>	25
Chapter 3: Call Me by Your Name	28
3.1 <i>Sexual Relations</i>	28
3.2 <i>Familial Relations</i>	32
Conclusion	35
Bibliography	39

Introduction

Gay identities have been, and still are, constantly reshaped and reinvented throughout the centuries, and thus present a concept that is hard to define. As social tendencies and the political climate are at all times affected by — but simultaneously an influence on — literature, these two systems can be considered as an incessant reflection of each other's actions and developments. Correspondingly, queer literature and its reflections have manifested various reinventions of gay identities in both the societal and cultural landscape. Robert McRuer, a theorist in the field of transnational queer studies, argues that during one of these reinventions there was a so-called 'Queer Renaissance': a period in the 1980s and 1990s in which gay and lesbian rights were recognised to a greater extent, and an immense group of artists erupted that explored corresponding themes.¹

As McRuer himself observes; however, it is important to note that this Renaissance does not hold all the characteristics other periods of rebirth possess. Instead of being the transcendence of a nation's historical and cultural field, as many other renaissances tend to embody, it is rooted rather in smaller fragments of society: in particular histories, hardships, and communities.² One of the significant arguments McRuer makes regarding the change of queer identities in this renaissance, is that the stability and 'fixed' nature of sexual categories should be questioned. Instead, they have transformed in something more fluid: "identities were reborn in the interstices between various genders and sexualities."³ What this entire renaissance in queer literature implies, is that an evolution has taken place within the themes and style of the works that belong to the oeuvre of queer texts.

Mark Lilly characterises the evolution as a change in the connotation that homosexual aspects in literature have. He claims that in the past "instead of erotic celebration there is fear

¹ Robert McRuer. *The Queer Renaissance: Contemporary American Literature and the Reinvention of Lesbian and Gay Identities*. (NYU Press, 1997): 1.

² *Ibid.*, 2-3.

³ *Ibid.*, 4.

and disgust, instead of openness there is closetry, instead of assertiveness and joy there is negativity and pain.”⁴ Lilly hereby asserts that earlier literature, in the age of Lord Byron and Oscar Wilde (centuries in which homosexuality was not yet considered to be something one was open and straightforward about in Western Europe and America), for example, was much less positive towards homosexuality than modern queer literature is. Whereas earlier works were unfavourable with regard to gay characteristics and expressions, modern books are predominantly inclined to present positive and celebratory representations of such aspects.

Despite the fact that these past interpretations are easily translated into shortcomings, as Lilly seems to do in his book, it is important to realise that even though these literary works might not be principally positive manifestations of queer identity, they are still manifestations. This means that they should not be downplayed as a whole because they are nevertheless part of queer history and its evolution, and thus paved the way for the emancipation of queer identity and the place that it holds in society in this day and age. Developing further upon this idea, it can be argued that there should not even be a distinction between past and present, because social processes cause their relationship to be a two-way street. As Bravmann argues in *Queer Fictions of the Past: History, Culture, and Difference*, the past does not only shape us but we also shape the past.⁵ We do this by constantly reconstructing and interpreting it through a dynamic frame of reference; it is everchanging and impossible to define as something established and set.

What is crucial to note, is that all of the aforementioned observations were made around the turn of the century and thus in a sense are already outdated. This raises the question of how queer identities have developed since the turn of the century and in particular the homosexual component of this spectrum, as the research of this thesis is male-centred. More recent research

⁴ Mark Lilly. *Gay Men's Literature in the Twentieth Century*. (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1993): 14.

⁵ Scott Bravmann. *Queer Fictions of the Past: History, Culture, and Difference*. (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1997): 128.

by Blackburn et al. analyses the status of several 21st-century novels that handle queer themes. Through the concept of the ‘disruption of norms’ they find that the most contemporary books particularly disrupt sexual norms through the means of desire, action, and explicit identifications. The characters defy the heteronormative standards that dominate society by both implicit and explicit acts that challenge the self-evidence of homosexual desires being deviant.⁶

In order to build further upon this theory and give more insight into contemporary novels and how they present gay identity, two relatively recent novels will be thoroughly analysed: *Call Me by Your Name* (2007) by André Aciman and *The Song of Achilles* (2011) by Madeline Miller. The former is a fairly popular book and an even more popular film. Therefore, it has been quite extensively examined by scholars. However, these examinations all took place from very particular angles such as classical music or Jewish representation; all of them are scrutinized from a specific point of view. What seems to be missing is more essential engagement with the construction of queerness. Furthermore, in an article on Aciman’s book, Frederick S. Roden states how Aciman “challenges the modern historicization of homosexual essentialism”⁷, confirming the novel’s importance when it comes to the perception of queerness historically and in combination with modern perspectives on the essence of homosexual representation.

The Song of Achilles is a less popular novel but a significant component of this research, nevertheless. As a consequence, there is very little research when it comes to Miller’s novel, let alone combined with a queer approach. But a book that has been analysed so little, leaves a whole field of uninterpreted chapters that lay waiting to be examined and put into perspective with other novels handling similar themes. In addition, the novel presents an

⁶ Mollie V. Blackburn, Caroline T. Clark, and Emily A. Nemeth. “Examining Queer Elements and Ideologies in LGBT-Themed Literature.” *Journal of Literacy Research* 47, no. 1 (February 17, 2015): 29-31.

⁷ Frederick S. Roden, “Queer Jewish Memory: André Aciman’s *Call Me by Your Name*,” *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 18, no. 2 (March 2019): 194.

intriguing merger of two different eras. The combination of the author's present-day frame of reference and a story that takes place in classical times allows for a valuable observation of possible historical tensions when it comes to the representation of gay identities. On top of that, *The Song of Achilles* is a narrative with motives and themes that are very similar to the ones in *Call Me by Your Name*. This reinforces a fruitful comparison of the two books as to how both novels engage with both familial and sexual relations. The book also offers a further illustration of recent developments in the literary depiction of queerness, particularly in its engagement with familial relations in connections to the characters' sexuality. Together they will fill a gap in the current field of this research by showing how the narratives in combination with each other represent gay identity and their reception in this day and age.

The implementations of the studies that have been taken into account lead to the following research question: how do both familial and sexual relations reflect changing representations of gay identities in *Call Me by Your Name* (2007) and *The Song of Achilles* (2011)? The focus is deliberately put on familial and sexual relations because these two themes can methodically complement each other in sketching a clear picture of gay identity from several angles. Where sexual relations will offer an illustration of how erotic and intimate actions and desires are represented in contemporary novels, familial ties will reflect the social reactions to these actions and desires. The family is one of the most significant and influential social groups, and therefore represent the level of (un)acceptance by the characters' surroundings. McRuer also refers to this motif and asserts that gay fiction that deals with either family or community "exposes the ways those concepts cover over difference"⁸, thus confirming the importance of familial ties through the way they respond to the gay identity of the characters.

⁸ Robert McRuer. *The Queer Renaissance: Contemporary American Literature and the Reinvention of Lesbian and Gay Identities*. (NYU Press, 1997): 70.

The thesis will add to the analysis of contemporary novels by scrutinising scenes from the narratives and connecting them to the overall representation of gay identities in male relationships in *Call Me by Your Name* and *The Song of Achilles*. It will shed a new light upon the tendencies towards queer manifestations in our current society and how this correlates with the presentation of gay relations in contemporary literature. By analysing these novels this thesis will combine observations that were made in the past on gay identity in literature with its change throughout the decades, hereby adding new perspectives to the larger field of queer studies.

Chapter 1: Theoretical Framework

1.1 *Queer Theory*

Whereas a lot of literary theories have an extensive history of research, queer theory is a relative newcomer to the academic field. While some theories tend to focus on categorising and classifying people into groups — like the theoretical and methodological framework of Marxism — queer theory aims to enforce the exact opposite. Queer theory considers it defective when people are divided into unnecessary groups. This is precisely why this theory commits to avoid any way of homogenising and hierarchising, and attempts to avoid unnecessary forms of generalisation that have a place in other literary theories.⁹

Accordingly, this thesis will apply queer theory along the lines of Sue-Ellen Page's analysis, in which she argues that "queer theory, unlike lesbian theory or gay male theory, is not gender specific," and thus does not function on the site of gender, but rather on the site of ontology.¹⁰ By focussing merely on the nature of being according to the principles of ontology, this mode of literary analysis will omit any form of generalisation that will harm the long evolving progress of queer theory that has led to the avoidance of putting people and genders into boxes.

Rather than adhering to the historical limitations of both lesbian and homosexual literary criticism, queer theory aims to challenge the essentialization that exists in the categories of sex, gender, and sexual orientation.¹¹ This theoretical approach is considerably relevant in Miller's book as well as Aciman's when it comes to analysing and comprehending the way in which the main characters and their queer identities are portrayed. As both stories handle love relations that have been deemed as out of the ordinary for so long, this framework allows the

⁹ Donald Eugene Hall. *Queer Theories* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005): 15.

¹⁰ Quoted in *ibid.*, 55.

¹¹ David Halperin, *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality and Other Essays on Greek Love* (London: Routledge, 1990), 79.

books to be examined from a different perspective; that of homosexual love and desires. It does not do so with a stereotypical frame of reference but a fresh outlook that does not make clichéd judgements.

1.2 Identities

Queer theorists argue that, as a concept, identity is widely interpretable, and thus hard to describe. Even when looking at the term as a form of defining a person's sexual preference, it still proves to be very difficult to classify. But maybe this is exactly what identity should stand for: something so broad it cannot be put into a few words or defined by a single term. However, the majority of people seem to be uncomfortable with this interpretation. In *Queer Theories* (2005), Donald E. Hall describes this phenomenon as the following:

[...] fear of “discomfort” hardly captures the power of classification systems to hold us in/to one-dimensional identifications. One of the underlying thrusts of the drive to categorise and fix securely is to delineate “healthy” normality from abject abnormality in clear and powerful ways [...] While objectivity is often claimed — indeed, the credibility of the drive to classify depend upon claims of objectivity — the impulse is invariably to distinguish the proper from the improper, to assign values to identities and activities [...] ¹²

The fear that Hall describes here ties in with the principles of the disruption of norms, which will be further elaborated in the next passage. In both cases — that is, the disruption of norms and the notion of identity — people tend to shy away from things that are not standard for them, and uncertainty and concern can consequently transform into ignorance or even rejection. The fear and discomfort related to dissolving the boundaries of identity is precisely what queer theory should leap into, as it is all about challenging social standards and the things that these standards (in)directly suppress.

¹² Donald Eugene Hall. *Queer Theories* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005): 13.

Queer theory, therefore, regards identities as something that gets rid of the normative distinction between proper and improper, as described by Hall: instead of being one-dimensional, identities become infinite. This means that the concept is something fluid and cannot be put into boxes. This thesis will consequently follow this definition when it comes to identities, so the analysis of familial and sexual relations cannot be limited in any way. Both *Call Me by Your Name* and *The Song of Achilles* will be analysed in *how* they present gay identity as something that is free from restraints or ignorance, in order to wholly understand the portrayal of the story and its characters.

Furthermore, while considering the two novels, it is important to keep in mind the important relation between sexuality and identity and how these two are excessively interconnected. As Earl Jackson notes in his book and study on gay male representation: “Any expression of gay male desire traverses antagonistic and mutually overdetermining configurations of the psychosocial constituents of a sexed identity that condition both the subject's selfrepresentations and his relation to normative masculinity.”¹³ This shows how men are generally unconsciously bound to certain stereotypes that society connects to male identity. In order to get rid of these boundaries it is important to cross these limits that are set by society; sexual desire should be used to go beyond these restricted identities rather than being limited by them. This restriction depicts the defining relationship between sexuality and identity: through the former one can to a certain degree define the latter.

1.3 Familial Ties and the Disruption of Norms

As mentioned above, Blackburn et al. have used the principle of the disruption of norms in their research into LGBT-themed literature. The *Cambridge English Dictionary* defines norms

¹³ Earl Jackson. *Strategies of Deviance: Studies in Gay Male Representation*, (Boulder, CO: NetLibrary, Inc., 1999): 17.

as “an accepted standard or a way of behaving or doing things most people agree with”¹⁴ Whenever these accepted standards are contrasted with behaviour that deviates from the expected norms, this behaviour is deemed as out of the ordinary. By following through with expressing one’s self in spite of the belief that it is considered abnormal by others, these norms are disrupted and simultaneously challenged. Blackburn et al. argue that when combined with queer theory, the disruption is predominantly focused on — but not limited to — gender and sexual norms such as the binary between heterosexual and homosexual.¹⁵

Even though the disruption of norms reaches much further than gender and sexuality, this thesis will focus on these two components in the theory. In this way, it can be found *how* exactly gay identities are portrayed in the novel, and in combination with what form of disruption this portrayal is achieved. It will also shed a light on whether disruption is a recurring theme in recent queer novels as Blackburn et al. argue, or if the parallels are coincidental and thus not a characteristic of another evolution in queer literature.

Furthermore, the disruption of norms is tightly bound to the motive of familial ties. This is due to the fact that disruption calls for a reaction by the characters’ surroundings. It can even be argued that without these reactions the disruption would barely exist; when the characters’ surroundings react to a disturbance of what they perceive as normal, they create the disruption itself. If there is no one to deem certain actions as something out of the ordinary, the notion of the disruption of norms would cease to exist. Family and friends make up a primary aspect of the social group that reacts to behaviour that they perceive as a disruption, which leads to these two concepts being significantly interconnected. This is precisely why in this thesis the notion of the disruption of norms will be implemented to analyse the familial ties in the narratives in order to understand their importance and relevance.

¹⁴ “Cambridge Dictionary: English Dictionary, Translations & Thesaurus,” Cambridge Dictionary | English Dictionary, Translations & Thesaurus, April 29, 2020, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/>.

¹⁵ Mollie V. Blackburn, Caroline T. Clark, and Emily A. Nemeth. “Examining Queer Elements and Ideologies in LGBT-Themed Literature.” *Journal of Literacy Research* 47, no. 1 (February 17, 2015): 15.

Another reason why family is significant for queer individuals and their identities is the fact that these individuals are bound to the society around them. Jackson elaborates on this interconnectedness by stating:

[...] since any sign or "identity" (itself a sign) is always conditioned by its meanings for the dominant order as much as by the innovative meanings held by dissenting minorities, gay male sexualities and their representations are typically selfcontesting negotiations of oppressive and subversive, hegemonic and heterodox mythemes of the psychosexual and sociosexual possibilities of a gay male subject.¹⁶

Jackson here describes how gay male individuals are inevitably bound to society and the dominant order, and are therefore impossible to define individually; the minority does not stand apart from the dominant (heteronormative) majority. They are conditioned by this majority and its representations, standards, and presumptions. Queerness can thus not exist in isolation, which strengthens the argument that it should always be interpreted in the context of a broader society, in which the dominant majority often opposes the normality of 'alternative' identities. This thesis will therefore scrutinise queerness from this broader context, namely the family. Familial ties are a fitting representation of this dominant society and their assumptions, and will consequently present a valuable frame of reference through their reactions to queer manifestations in the family. In both novels, these reactions will be thoroughly analysed in order to grasp the importance of their connection to the main characters and their identities.

1.4 Sexual Relations

When considering the implications of the history of homosexuality and desire it is crucial to acknowledge the historical determinacy of the frames of references that are under discussion.

¹⁶ Earl Jackson. *Strategies of Deviance: Studies in Gay Male Representation*, (Boulder, CO: NetLibrary, Inc., 1999): 3.

Yet it can be decidedly insightful to compare different eras of homosexual activity in order to gain more insight into the modern-day depiction of queer desire.

In classical times sex between men was generally not regarded as a threat to society and even was a common phenomenon among the privileged Greek citizenry. Also, in Greek mythology, homosexuality is repeatedly present and there are many references to same-sex erotic desire.¹⁷ This is perfectly illustrated in Sappho's famous and influential poems that depict love and desire for other women. These poems have had a huge influence on (historical) queer representation, which marks the level of tolerance and neutrality in classical literature when it comes to same-sex desire. Hall argues, however, that adult *male* sexuality was in those time probably more a form of power status and social positioning than an expression of self-identity.¹⁸ So, representation in literature then is unquestionably different from representation in literature now.

Another important era regarding homosexual literature and its representation of sexual activities is the Libertine movement in the 17th and 18th century. After a dark period of prevailing Christianity — in which homosexual activities were considered to be crimes against nature, and were sodomites were punished with castration — homosexuality was revived in popular literature.¹⁹ This concerns works like *Edward II* (1594) by Christopher Marlowe, which explores homoerotic desire and accompanying power relations.²⁰

The period of World War I proves to be a very interesting one when it comes to the portrayal of homoeroticism. During this period of time, the “norms of tactile contact between men changed profoundly.”²¹ This was due to the men being widely exposed to a world of

¹⁷ Donald Eugene Hall. *Queer Theories* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005): 26.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid., 28.

²⁰ Claude J. Summers. *Homosexuality in Renaissance and Enlightenment England: Literary Representations in Historical Context*. (New York: Routledge, 2013): 4.

²¹ Santanu Das. “‘Kiss Me, Hardy’: Intimacy, Gender, and Gesture in First World War Trench Literature.” *Modernism / modernity* 9, no. 1 (January 2002): 52.

darkness, annihilation, and brutality. They were extremely alienated by these surroundings that were in no way comparable to their previous lives. This led to a different and often unfamiliar level of intimacy between the male soldiers, in which the norms of ‘civilian’ society slowly crumbled to a position in which they were no longer the abided standard.²² This extreme change in circumstances lead to a certain displacement of sexuality; the male body was now more often considered an object of admiration and eroticism, and the gruesome horrors of the battlefield were displaced with the love for the care that it required afterwards.²³ During the years of the Great War, it became increasingly common to use elevating language to describe the male body and to characterise the intimate relationships that developed between men.²⁴ This tradition in homoerotic writing proves to be a very insightful genre when looking at similar writing written in the decades that followed after the First and Second World War.

As for an even more modern approach to homosexual activities — that is, the end of 20th century and 21st century — Hall describes the historical erasure of many homoerotic themes in American literature and how this has influenced later works. He uses this loss to advocate for “the need to continue to legitimate a sense of collective, powerful, and empowering identity even as intellectual inquiry calls into question the very notion of “sexual” identity.”²⁵ Following this approach, he argues that more recent literature should be focused on upholding this empowered and collective form of queer identity, and the expression of sexual desire in literature occupies an important part in achieving this goal.

An additional analysis of homosexual relations in modern literature can be found in *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire* (2010), in which Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson advocate for a significant relation between queer sex and nature, and aim to define

²² Santanu Das. “‘Kiss Me, Hardy’: Intimacy, Gender, and Gesture in First World War Trench Literature.” *Modernism / modernity* 9, no. 1 (January 2002): 52.

²³ As can be read in Robert Nichols’ World War I Poem ‘*The Secret*’.

²⁴ Sarah Cole. “Modernism, Male Intimacy, and the Great War.” *ELH* 68, no. 2 (2001): 473.

²⁵ Donald Eugene Hall. *Queer Theories* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005): 46.

the ongoing relationship between the two. Considering the term queer they state the following: “[it] is both noun and verb in this project: ours is an ecology that may begin in experiences and perceptions of non-heterosexual individuals and communities, but is even more importantly one that calls into question heteronormativity itself as part of its advocacy around the issues of nature and environment — and vice versa.”²⁶ The connection between nature and sex is present in both *Call Me by Your Name* and *The Song of Achilles*, and can give more insight into sexual relations in the narratives. Another important aspect of this analysis is the fact that queer sexual relations are considered as something that challenges the normativity of heterosexual sex. It is thus, in harmony with the theory of Blackburn et al., a form of the disruption of norms; questioning what is usually seen as ordinary.

The history of homoeroticism is important to be taken into account when examining current depictions of this topic, and sets an important frame of reference for this thesis when it comes to the analysis of homosexual relations in the designated books of this research. By considering other literary techniques and phenomena in the depiction of gay identities and possible accompanying sexual relations — such as the Libertine movement and displacement in World War I poetry — this thesis is able to make constructive comparative observations of present-day literary depictions. In addition, the notion of queer ecologies is applicable to certain aspects of *Call Me by Your Name* and *The Song of Achilles*, and therefore has a valuable relevance for this thesis and its analyses. Together, all of these aspects form an expansive historical and cultural understanding through which the novels will be thoroughly scrutinised and justifiably relativized.

²⁶ Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson. “*Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire*”, (Indiana University Pres, 2010): 5.

Chapter 2: The Song of Achilles

2.1 Sexual Relations

In terms of describing sexual activities and desires, *The Song of Achilles* can be considered as quite an understated and even restrained novel. Although one of the main themes that preoccupies the story is the desire and love the main characters, Patroclus and Achilles, feel for one another, Madeline Miller illustrates the sexual activities between the two with a lot of metaphors and euphemisms. This minimalization is implemented from the first sexual encounter on and depicts a high level of discretion, despite the erotic nature of the scene:

He stroked me gently, as though smoothing finest cloth, and my hips lifted to his touch. I pulled him to me, and trembled and trembled. He was trembling too. He sounded as though he had been running far and fast [...] There was a gathering inside me, a beat of blood against the movement of his hand. His face was pressed against me, but I tried to clutch him closer still. Do not stop, I said. He did not stop. The feeling gathered and gathered till a hoarse cry leaped from my throat, and the sharp flowering drove me, arching, against him.²⁷

Miller's use of language thus evades any direct mention of words such as 'sex', 'penis' or 'orgasm', which makes the scene much less explicit.²⁸ However, it still conveys a sensual feeling to the reader, depicting how certain pleasures can be implicated and conveyed without specific descriptions of male orgasms or other sexual sensations.

Additionally, the excerpt above can also be connected to the theory of queer ecologies by Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson. The scene namely takes place in the midst of the mountains and its forests; an extremely natural environment. According to the theory, this natural landscape can be used as a way to naturalise same-sex relationships, as they are often perceived as something *unnatural*. In this scene the sexual acts are used to illustrate the normality of homoeroticism by combining it with an environment that is generally perceived

²⁷ Madeline Miller. *The Song of Achilles*. (London: Bloomsbury, 2011): 94.

²⁸ Similar scenes evading explicitness can be found on the following pages: 172, 248, 249.

as something natural.²⁹ These ‘queer environments’ are those “in which the boundaries between “nature” and “culture” are shown to be arbitrary, dialectical [and] mutually constitutive.”³⁰ By locating this erotic scene between Patroclus and Achilles in the mountains and green environment, it can be argued that Miller aimed to naturalise their actions, challenging the norms that denaturalise same-sex relations.

However, when considering Hall’s idea of literature that it aims to empower and celebrate queer identity, this scene falls slightly flat; except for the presence of two men in this excerpt, the scene could have just as easily been a description of heterosexual eroticism. Miller thus refrains from setting homoeroticism specifically apart from heteroerotics. However, this scene must not be dismissed as a nonessential component of the narrative, as it is the start of a 352-pages long story that celebrates the profound love two men have for each other. And on top of that, the celebration of homosexual love is in no way restricted to involving a straightforward portrayal of its accompanying sexual intercourse.

Despite Miller’s restraint in this area, she compensates by conveying the intense desire Patroclus feels for his lover. This is not merely a sexual desire, but a desire for his love and an adoration of his body; his utter devotion to Achilles as a (half-)human being:

He was marvel, shaft after shaft flying from him, spears that he wrenched easily from broken bodies on the ground to toss at new targets. Again and again I saw his wrist twist, exposing its pale underside, those flute-like bones. Thrusting elegantly forward [...] I could not even see the ugliness of the deaths any more, the brains the shattered bones that later I would later wash from my skin and hair. All I saw was his beauty, his singing limbs, the quick flickering of his feet.³¹

This devotion and the extent to which he worships Achilles and his body, makes all other things seem insignificant to him. Even the horrors of a battlefield full of blood and gruesome deaths

²⁹ Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson. “*Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire*”, (Indiana University Pres, 2010): 38.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 288.

³¹ Madeline Miller. *The Song of Achilles*. (London: Bloomsbury, 2011): 227.

is meaningless for Patroclus; he can only see what he loves and will love forever: Achilles. By incorporating this utmost adoration of the male body, Miller in this sense *does* capture a crucial part of homoeroticism in this narrative: the desire of the body.³² By displaying the mutual love of two men and for each other's bodies she disrupts heteronormativity and the idea that natural desire should be based on a man and a woman. The idea of the disruption of norms as Blackburn et al. introduced it, is present here in the shape of disorganisation of the notion that only heterosexual desire is usual and ordinary.

On top of that, this fragment is a perfect example of the tradition of sexual displacement on the battlefield and the glorification of the male body according to the theories of both Cole and Das. As Cole states on the use of poetry in during World War I: “[its] urgent language about male intimacy presents a complex set of personal, social, and institutional conflicts, where the homosexual body is linked with other forms of masculine vulnerability and protest...”³³ In this tradition, the male body thus serves as a displacement of other intimacies and presents a focal point for the gaze of others. This use of language carries on in the excerpt above: in the midst of battle, Patroclus is transfixed by Achilles' body, which to him represents a high level of intimacy with both Achilles as a person and his body in itself. By presenting Patroclus' fascination in this way, Miller continues the tradition of displacement in World War I in her own way: by using her words to convey the adoration of the male body on the battlefield, she depicts how this can displace certain sexual desires. This is strengthened by her use of language through phrases such as ‘shaft after shaft’, ‘saw his wrist twist’, and ‘thrusting elegantly forward’. The phallic suggestiveness in these words acknowledges the sexual desires that Patroclus associates with Achilles' actions on the battlefield, and thus with the horrors of war.

³² Similar scenes depicting this adoration can be found on the following pages: 25, 47, 158, 172.

³³ Sarah Cole. “Modernism, Male Intimacy, and the Great War.” *ELH* 68, no. 2 (2001): 472.

Miller also raises the possibility of heterosexual intercourse in *The Song of Achilles*, only to have it promptly rejected by the characters. This pertains a point in the novel in which Achilles is forced to marry Deidameia, princess of Scyros, in order to escape from the war in which he inevitably has to fight. Both Achilles and Patroclus have sex with her; the former because he is forced to by his mother, and the latter out of pity.

Achilles' sexual encounter with Deidameia is described after Patroclus finds out about their arranged marriage and immediately rejected by Achilles as anything but pleasant: "‘Forgive me,’ he said again. ‘I did not want it. It was not you. I did not — I did not like it.’"³⁴ He declares this to Patroclus, and hereby proves his love and loyalty to Patroclus and their (sexual) relationship; dismissing the sex he was forced to have as something unattractive. Not only does this advocate for the normality of homosexual relations for Achilles; it also disrupts norms by explicitly repudiating heterosexual intercourse.

However, Patroclus' experience in the same situation is moderately different and less excluding in nature:

I will not say I was not aroused. A slow climbing tension moved through me. It was a strange, drowsy feeling, so different from my sharp, sure desires for Achilles. She seemed hurt by this, my heavy-lidded repose. *More Indifference*. And so I let myself move, made sounds of pleasure, pressed my chest against hers as if in passion, flattening her soft small breasts beneath me.³⁵

Though Patroclus' actions here are predominantly driven by pity, and not by any form of lust, he *does* exhibit a slight feeling of enjoyment. Unlike Achilles, he is not indifferent to the sexual relationship with the woman; he observes and appreciates her body and femininity, but it is simply no match for his extreme feelings towards Achilles and his male body. This love for Achilles' male physicality can be identified in Patroclus' actions in the excerpt, as he is

³⁴ Madeline Miller. *The Song of Achilles*. (London: Bloomsbury, 2011): 127.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 140.

flattening her breast. This manoeuvre may suggest that Patroclus attempts to alter Deidameia's physical appearance to resemble that of a man.

The variety of approach in a similar situation creates an opposition between the two men: whereas Achilles is completely apathetic to women sexually, Patroclus does not dismiss the things he feels when looking at women. He does not refrain from looking at Deidameia's body: "The skin that slipped against my fingers was warm and delicate, so fragile I was almost afraid I would tear it with my touch. My other hand reached up to stroke her cheek, to trace the softness beneath her eyes."³⁶ Though he has certain interest — which is mainly driven by a curiosity of the unknown — it becomes clear that it is not anything he desires.³⁷

By giving Patroclus and Achilles different characteristics in terms of their sexuality and desires, Miller widens the possibilities of forms of homosexuality and hereby stimulates the notion of fluid and limitless sexual identity. However, it is important to note here that there is also the notion of love that plays an important role in this scene and sex in the narrative in general. It could be that it is not a case of gender and sexual attraction when Patroclus dismisses the sex that he has with Deidameia, but one of love and dedication. He is namely so utterly devoted that he could simply never enjoy sexual actions with anyone that is not Achilles, instead of women in general. Either way, both Achilles and Patroclus present their own form of sexual identity, and in this way enhance the spectrum of sexuality in both the book and the relations it represents.

³⁶ Madeline Miller. *The Song of Achilles*. (London: Bloomsbury, 2011): 139.

³⁷ This holds similarities with his relation with Briseis; illustrations of this situation can be found on: 253-256.

2.2 *Familial Relations*

The role of family in *The Song of Achilles* is a complex case. Similar to the large majority of other Greek myths and legends that pertains to the stories of the gods, this narrative is filled with betrayal, adultery, and intricate familial ties. Patroclus' mother is immediately dismissed in the beginning as an insignificant bride who was seen as dumb and naïve by both her family and her husband. She plays no part in Patroclus' life and therefore is not representative as someone with whom he shares a familial bond that could reflect on his actions. Yet, there seems to be an indirect presence of her blessing and love in Achilles and Patroclus' relationship: his mother's lyre is given to Achilles and presents a string of happy moments in their time together. Even though she is absent, her memory is with them.³⁸

However, his father, Menoitius, is a strong figure at the beginning of Patroclus' life, and was someone he looked up to and aimed to please. Despite his attempts to live up to his father's expectations, it is not enough. Menoitius yearns for a family that he can be proud of and rejects his son: "My own father watches with envy. His wife is stupid and his son too slow to race in even the youngest group. He turns to me. 'That is what a son should be.'"³⁹ That refers here to the idea of a son that is strong, fast, and heroic; something Menoitius does not consider his son to be. He does not recognise Patroclus as a worthy son he can be proud of. Menoitius feels the only thing that can save him is for his son to marry into a good family. It becomes clear at that point, that marriage is to him — and most other families — not something that presupposes a loving bond. When Patroclus is nine, he attempts to present him as a suitor for king Tyndareus' daughter, stating that they would "do well to have her in our family".⁴⁰ Although he never states that Patroclus cannot fall in love with a man, it is well implied that it would be an enormous disgrace for the family if he would. This concern of disgrace becomes

³⁸ Scenes concerning the lyre can be found on: 31, 47, 80, 92, 143.

³⁹ Madeline Miller. *The Song of Achilles*. (London: Bloomsbury, 2011): 3.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 5.

reality when Patroclus is banned to Phthia for accidentally killing a son from a powerful family. With this Patroclus' last familial tie is forever cut and he becomes an orphan at ten.

Achilles' family is much more present in the narrative. His father is loving and cares for his son. His mother Thetis, on the other hand, is a hovering presence who has a forceful grip on Achilles and Patroclus' relationship throughout the entire story. She is a sea-nymph and a goddess, and does not deem Patroclus worthy of her demi-god son:

My feet knocked against each other as she lifted me from the earth. 'I have seen,' she hissed. The sound of waves breaking on stone. I could not speak. She held me by the throat. 'He is leaving.' Her eyes were black now, dark as sea-wet rocks, and as jagged. 'I should have sent him long ago. Do not try to follow.'⁴¹

When stating that she has 'seen', she refers to a kiss between the two men. Though she does not say it explicitly, her actions symbolise her hatred for Patroclus and the fact that Achilles loves him. Her attempts to warn them to stay away from each other fail each time. Her abhorrence of the relationship does trigger acceptance and approval from others. Chiron, who serves as a father figure for both Achilles and Patroclus, appears to be the only familial character that deliberately disrupts norms by accepting the love instead of opposing it: "[Thetis] is also young and has the prejudices of her kind. I am older and flatter myself that I can read a man more clearly. I have no objection to Patroclus as your companion."⁴² As Patroclus was dismissed by his own father, it is particularly valuable for him to be accepted for his sexuality by someone that has partially taken on the role of a father figure; giving him a sense of familial acceptance. The other influential familial figures — Menoitius, Thetis, and Achilles' father Peleus — comply with the norms by contesting the disruption or turning a blind eye to what they do not wish to see.

⁴¹ Madeline Miller. *The Song of Achilles*. (London: Bloomsbury, 2011): 61.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 75.

The end of Patroclus' story serves as a turning point in this familial opposition of the disruption. After Patroclus' death, Achilles' is no longer secretive or evasive about his love for him, and merely wishes to die and join Patroclus in the afterlife. His dying wish is to be burned and to have his ashes mingled with his lover, so that they could be buried together for eternity.⁴³ Out of grief for her son, Thetis has lost her willpower to oppose his wish and does not challenge it. Achilles' son Pyrrhus, however, demands his father to be buried in a tomb carrying only Achilles' name; dooming Patroclus from descending to the underworld to find his lover and final peace. After haunting Thetis with his memories of Achilles, Patroclus finally convinces her of their true love; the memories proving to her that his son had found happiness with Patroclus. It is then that she ultimately gives her blessing to their relationship by carving Patroclus' name in the tomb and allowing him to be together with her son even in death:

Her arms are crossed over her chest, as if to hold some thought of herself. I have told her all. I have spared nothing, of any of us [...] 'I have done it,' she says. At first I do not understand. But then I see the tomb, and the marks she has made on the stone. A C H I L L E S, it reads. And beside it, P A T R O - C L U S. 'Go,' she says. 'He is waiting for you.'⁴⁴

By granting them this favour she represents the peace a familial blessing can offer and its importance; it is the ultimate form of acceptance. Hereby, Miller demonstrates what Blackburn et al. describe as the disruption of norms: Thetis finally challenges these norms by accepting her son's wishes and making the sacrifice of loving him for who he was. Miller thus makes a powerful statement by concluding the novel with an indication of the significance of familial acceptance: it is a crucial part of finding true peace.

⁴³ A clear example of this decisiveness can be found on: 333.

⁴⁴ Madeline Miller. *The Song of Achilles*. (London: Bloomsbury, 2011): 351, 352.

Chapter 3: Call Me by Your Name

3.1 Sexual Relations

Unlike Miller, André Aciman uses no euphemisms whatsoever in his depictions of sexual fantasies and encounters. He depicts all sexually charged scenes without holding back and describes every significant detail in the scene. Consequently, the parts in the book that pertain to sexual actions are much more vivid and graphic; giving much more attention to sexuality and physicality. As the narrative is written from Elio's perspective, these sexual actions and accompanying thoughts are predominantly about him and *his* feelings and fantasies relating to Oliver:

This was the closest thing I would ever come to saying, Stay. Just stay with me. Let your hand travel wherever it wishes, take my suit off, take me, I won't make a noise, won't tell a soul, I'm hard and you know it, and if you won't, I'll take that hand of yours and slip it into my suit now and let you put as many fingers as you want inside me.⁴⁵

Throughout the book it becomes clear that Elio has an extreme fascination with sex, and in particular sex with Oliver. He is continually preoccupied with thoughts in which he imagines sexual encounters between them; how it would feel, what they would say.⁴⁶ Although Elio has never had sex, he has a colourful imagination of what it would be like. By incorporating an abundance of corresponding scenes, Aciman normalises the sexualisation of the male body by another man, and hereby contests the norm of men only being sexualised by women.

Yet, this situation is similar to that of Achilles and Patroclus, which leads to the question whether Elio is focussed on sex with men in general or only with Oliver. When thinking about male sex it is always with Oliver, which means it could also be a case of love

⁴⁵ André Aciman. *Call Me by Your Name*. (London: Atlantic Books, 2007): 24.

⁴⁶ Scenes depicting these fantasies can be found on: 14, 35, 67, 68, 87, 95, 107.

and personal attraction rather than attraction to a certain gender.⁴⁷ However, Elio's thoughts are also extremely fixated on the male body, indicating that Elio does have a strong interest in the physical aspects of men and thus feel a certain attraction to men in general.

In addition to this, Aciman depicts the struggle that accompanies these sexual thoughts; the struggle that derives from the idea that norms are supposed to be respected instead of disrupted. This obsession with sex namely proves to be connected to Elio's search for identity. He is extremely conflicted about what he feels for Oliver, since it does not conform to the standard due to their gender. Because of this inner conflict he seeks confirmation of these homosexual feelings, and hopes to find this in sex with the one man that he adores:

And yet another part of me knew that if he showed up tonight and I disliked the start of whatever was in store for me, I'd still go through with it all the way, because better to find out once and for all than to spend the rest of the summer, or my life perhaps, arguing with my own body [...] I want to know your body, I want to know how you feel, I want to know you, and through you, me.⁴⁸

This excerpt shows how significant it is for Elio to establish his identity by finding out what his desires mean. This follows up on Jackson's theory of the interconnectedness of identity and sexual desire, and how they should traverse the standard set by society. By wishing to know himself 'through' Oliver, he indirectly depicts how he will find himself — in terms of sexual identity — through the actual act of sex. He feels that when he knows Oliver completely, he will also know who he is himself: the ultimate quest towards self-knowledge and ultimately self-acceptance as well.

Elio occasionally enjoys looking and thinking about women, and even has sex with one: Marzia. Even though it becomes clear that this is merely a temporary fix, and nothing compared

⁴⁷ Which also raises the possibility of pansexuality. Further explanation of this term can be found in Christopher K. Belous and Melissa L. Bauman's "What's in a Name? Exploring Pansexuality Online," *Journal of Bisexuality* 17, no. 1 (March 2016): pp. 58-72.

⁴⁸ André Aciman. *Call Me by Your Name*. (London: Atlantic Books, 2007): 124.

to what he wants from Oliver,⁴⁹ he still finds a lot of enjoyment in the female body: “Now, as I made my way home, I loved her smell on my body, on my hands. I would do nothing to wash it away. I’d keep it on me till we met in the evening.”⁵⁰ The delight he finds in Marzia also presents another element in the book concerning the struggle of sexual identity. Elio namely finds himself fantasising of women and men together, and ideally, the two becoming one. He occasionally blurs the lines between male and female, or even the lines between humans:

[...] for a second, it seemed there was absolutely no difference in age between us, just two men kissing, and even this seemed to dissolve, as I began to feel we were not even two men, just two beings. I loved the egalitarianism of the moment. I loved feeling younger and older, human to human, man to man, Jew to Jew.⁵¹

As it is depicted here, Elio dreams of worlds in which he is no longer defined by his sexuality, gender, or desires. He simply wants to love and feel, and not be restricted by any form of categorisation. This perfectly illustrates the earlier-discussed notion of sexuality having no boundaries; adhering to Hall’s theory, the one-dimensionality of queer sexuality disappears completely. Aciman achieves this through highlighting the dissolution of age, gender, and even entity; everything that remains is ‘two beings’, bound by absolutely nothing.

Another scene that fully captures this fluidity is by far also the most (in)famous part of the book:

The peach was soft and firm, and when I finally succeeded in tearing it apart with my cock, I saw that its reddened core reminded me not only of just an anus but of a vagina, so that holding each half in either hand firmly against my cock, I began to rub myself, thinking of no one and of everyone, including the poor peach, which had no idea what was being done to it except that it had to play along and probably in the end took some pleasure in the act as well [...]⁵²

⁴⁹ Which is very comparable to Patroclus’ sexual encounter with Deidameia: both Elio and Patroclus find enjoyment but also feel that something is lacking.

⁵⁰ André Aciman. *Call Me by Your Name*. (London: Atlantic Books, 2007): 118.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 132.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 146-147.

This scene is vital to the entire story, and also builds further upon Elio's thoughts in which he imagines not a single man and a single woman, but the two combined together in one body. Illustrating the nature of the queer experience, this part in the narrative challenges the essentialisation that exists in the idea of sexuality. By thinking of 'no one and of everyone', Elio surpasses this essentialisation and dismisses the border between men and women entirely. Similar to Patroclus, but to a much larger extent, Elio widens the spectrum of sexuality greatly.

This scene also exemplifies what Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson's describe in their theory of *Queer Ecologies*. In their study, they discuss lesbian and homosexual poetry that depicts homoeroticism, and how they challenge the naturalisation of heterosexuality by connecting queer sexuality to the natural landscape.⁵³ When considering the scene above, one could say that Aciman (unconsciously) does the same. By combining the homoeroticism with the literal fruits of nature, it can be argued that it naturalises the essence of the sexual action. By connecting something that is commonly perceived as pure and innate to something that is widely regarded as unnatural, it advocates for the normality of these 'unnatural' actions; expressing that "the crime against nature is enforced heterosexuality, not erotic same-sex desire."⁵⁴

⁵³ Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson. "*Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire*", (Indiana University Press, 2010): 37.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 28.

3.2 *Familial Relations*

Elio finds support in familial structures, but they simultaneously burden him. He is immensely overshadowed by the intensity, intelligence, and extravagance of his mother and father. Though he knows their goodness and willingness to help him wherever they can, he is also intimidated in such a way that he fears speaking up. Despite his great knowledge he is not used to being asked his views on things: “Nobody in our household ever asked my opinion on anything. If he hadn’t figured out why, he would soon enough – it was only a matter of time before he fell in with everyone’s view that I was the baby of the family.”⁵⁵ Oliver is the only one who sees past this, which is also one of the reasons why Elio feels comfortable with showing him who he truly is.

Another element in the narrative that expresses his fear of speaking up about his feelings and desires, is the fear of his parents’ intrusiveness and immense will to fix everything for him:

[...] forever prying to unearth the mysterious, telltale signs of heartbreak which, in their clumsy, intrusive, devoted way, both would instantly wish to heal, as if I were a soldier who had strayed into their garden and needed his wound immediately stanching or else he’ll die. You can always talk to me. When I was your age once, my father used to say. The things you feel and think only you have felt, believe me, I’ve lived and suffered through all of them [...]⁵⁶

This excerpt perfectly represents the paradoxical feeling Elio finds himself trapped in. Despite knowing his parents’ best intentions when it comes to helping him both in general and in his love life, he fears that these intentions will lead to overprotectiveness and unnecessary overbearing on their part. However, he underestimates in particular his father’s understanding of what he is going through.

⁵⁵ André Aciman, *Call Me by Your Name*. (London: Atlantic Books, 2007): 29.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 57-58.

It is only later in the story that Elio realises this level of comprehension that his father has. Though he might not fully grasp what is going on in Elio's life, he tries his best to convey his support and acceptance without prying or forcing him to speak about things he does not want to; demonstrating that his son's fear of being overprotected and overindulged might be unnecessary. Elio anticipates that he might disrupt the norms his family has towards sexuality, while his father in particular is ready to accept and embrace this disruption. It is only towards the end of the story that Elio seems to realise this:

I also hoped, though, that he'd seize the opportunity to the unstated *Yes, and so?* in my answer and chide me, as he so often did, for being harsh or indifferent [...] But I had guessed wrong. "You're too smart not to know how rare, how special, what you two had was." [...] "What lies ahead is going to be very difficult," he started to say, altering his voice. His tone said: *We don't have to speak about it, but let's not pretend we don't know what I'm saying.*⁵⁷

By insinuating that he knows of the conflict that is playing out within his son's thoughts, he shows Elio that his assumptions of his father's reaction are different from what he had anticipated and is surprised to be proven wrong. Though he is dumbstruck, he allows his father to speak, showing his willingness to finally have his battle out in the open.

With this, Aciman depicts the importance of a certain level of acceptance and understanding people must feel in order to be able to speak up about their sexuality that differs from what is deemed normal. Drawing from Hall's theory, this scene demonstrates how the book continues to legitimate the empowerment of sexual identity and its acceptance by presenting familial acceptance as something that is self-evident. The scene even takes this level of understanding a step further in the part that follows:

You had a beautiful friendship. Maybe even more than a 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 no such parent. In your place, if there is pain, nurse it, and if there is a flame,

⁵⁷ André Aciman, *Call Me by Your Name*. (London: Atlantic Books, 2007): 223-224.

don't snuff it out, don't be brutal with it [...] I will have been a terrible father if, one day, you'd want to speak to me and felt that the door was shut or not sufficiently open.⁵⁸

In this passage, his father even acknowledges the fact that he perceives most parents will react negatively to similar situations and distances himself from them by insinuating that he identifies these parents as failing parents. Blackburn et al. state in their research that one not only “disrupts sexual norms through desire, but [...] also disrupts these norms through action”.⁵⁹ Elio's father shows here how family and other familial ties can indeed disrupt sexual norms through action; challenging the norm by making a stand. Through this, he aids Elio in finding his true self, and even stimulates him in accepting who he is through whom he desires.

⁵⁸ André Aciman, *Call Me by Your Name*. (London: Atlantic Books, 2007): 225.

⁵⁹ Mollie V. Blackburn, Caroline T. Clark, and Emily A. Nemeth. “Examining Queer Elements and Ideologies in LGBT-Themed Literature.” *Journal of Literacy Research* 47, no. 1 (February 17, 2015): 30.

Conclusion

Comparing the two narratives, it is clear that they bear a meaningful amount of similarities. Both *Call Me by Your Name* and *The Song of Achilles* are novels that focus strongly on the homosexual relationships that they describe; conveying the powerful love the main characters feel for their loved ones. This adoration is depicted through the immense fascination of the male body that Patroclus and Elio share: they both fill their thoughts with admiring fantasies about their lovers' physical characteristics. In the case of *Call Me by Your Name*, however, these fantasies — and the actual sexual encounters — are much more graphic and explicit. Aciman does not shy away from erotic vocabulary and describing the actions in large detail. He thus normalises the sexualisation of the male body by other men; disrupting the norms in sexual desire. However, this approach is not the only way to achieve this. Miller replaces Aciman's colourful words with nuanced and restrained phrases in which she delicately describes any sexual fantasies and encounters. While doing this she still manages to express the sexual desire that the characters feel. An example of this form of portrayal can be found in the scenes in which she displaces sexuality with a detailed and suggestive description of the men on the battlefield, and thereupon links back to the tradition of sexual displacement in World War I poetry. Her level of constraint in her descriptions thus does not dismiss her role in normalising homosexual desire. Both novels strive to disrupt existing sexual norms by defying them in their own way.

When it comes to the notion of familial support there is an inconsistency in the stories. First off, this is due to the fact that *Call Me by Your Name* introduces a much more present family that also plays an important role in the rest of the book. On top of that, these familial ties turn out to be a strong support system, which is in sharp contrast with *The Song of Achilles*. Though both Elio and Patroclus search for familial support throughout the narrative, the way in which they find it is not at all similar. Elio finds comfort in his father's understanding and

support in the final moments of the story, realising that his fear of his family's negative reaction to his sexuality is not justified. His father directly addresses the faults he sees in families that do not form a support system when it comes to children confessing their sexual desires. By addressing the issue in this manner, he explicitly defies the existing standards when it comes to familial acceptance and establishes that from that point on, he will do his utmost to be what Elio needs in terms of support and acceptance. Patroclus has no significant family figures that are a possible supportive family tie except for Chiron, who is only present in a few young years of Patroclus and Achilles' life. Patroclus finds acceptance in the ending of his story, which is similar to Elio. The expression and execution of this acceptance, however, is very different from how Elio encounters it. Instead of it finding its way to Patroclus, he has to beg for it; praying to Thetis to ask her to grant him his relief by accepting the romantic and sexual bond between him and Achilles.

This struggle and yearning for acceptance form the most important aspect of how sexuality is depicted in relation to identity in both novels. Through the interconnectedness of these concepts, the characters aim to find themselves. In particular in *Call Me by Your Name*, Elio seeks to understand his identity through understanding whom he loves. Both stories depict the immense struggle that accompanies this quest for self-understanding and self-acceptation, especially if you deviate from the socially accepted norm. They highlight the cohesion between sexuality and identity, and how this drives the search to one's self. In queer studies terms like freedom, fluidity and limitlessness are often repeated and emphasised in their importance, as can be seen in Hall's *Queer Theories* (2005). The positive connotation these words trigger; however, can be deceiving. When considering the stories of Elio and Patroclus, one can observe that finding one's queer identity is not as free and boundless as it seems and should not be underestimated. The pursuit of this comprehension of the self is full of doubts, regrets, and other hardships that accompany reaching this sense of freedom; which proves to be hard-won.

The observations of this research also have implications for the field of queer literature as a whole. *Call Me by Your Name* and *The Song of Achilles* prove to be two very insightful novels when it comes to the notion of gay identities of men. By examining the familial and sexual relations in both books, quite some significant results were found in how these two factors represent homosexual identity. These findings — especially the immense struggle to find and accept one's identity — represent a significant part of the essence of the two novels and how they represent homosexual relations in contemporary literature. However, it is important to note that this study merely observed these two books and only male-centred gay identities, and can therefore not make assumptions about representations in the entire field of modern queer literature. Nevertheless, these two novels pave the way of any further observations from similar angles. Both *Call Me by Your Name* and *The Song of Achilles* allow for interesting findings in the queer themes, such as the struggle for identity, the reaching for acceptance, and the importance of familial support.

It is therefore profoundly worthwhile to continue exploring these motives within similar contemporary novels that also represent themes that tie in with this study in the representation of gay identities. In addition, further research could possibly examine novels that depict *female* gay relationships, in order to broaden the understanding of modern queer representation as a whole. It is especially interesting to specifically continue the research into the depiction of the quest the main characters go through, in order to gain better insight into its implications for the broader field. This pertains to the quest to reach a sense of freedom in identity; freeing oneself from any doubts by finding out who you are through who you desire. There is thus a huge space within the research that can be filled with more case studies, in order to ultimately present a very clear and well-informed conclusion when it comes to how queer identities are represented nowadays and how this connects to the queer struggle of self-acceptance. As Blackburn et al. advocate in their research article: “engaging with queer literature provides opportunities to

exist and thrive in the realm of the queer, a space where multiple ideologies and conflicting ideologies around sexuality and gender can [...] be considered, examined, embraced, or rejected...”⁶⁰. This urge to continue the thorough engagement with queer literature and its implications in the field of queer literary theory as a whole, strengthens the argument that additional research in modern-day queer literature will provide more understanding and perspective when it comes to contemporary representation of homosexual desire and its complications.

When looking into the future of these studies, it is important to acknowledge the following argument of McCallum, Tuhkanen, and Andreadis: “[...] queer novels have never been “just” about sex and sexuality. Their representation of sexuality has been varied and complex, and they cannot be seen as constructing a uniform and consensual position on queer sexual behaviour and politics.”⁶¹ In other words, the complexity and the wide scope of sexuality must never be forgotten; each struggle and each representation is an individual and unique phenomenon, and should therefore ensure that findings should never overrepresent the concept in itself. Sexuality is not limited or bound in any way, just as its research should never be bound to any distinctive findings.

⁶⁰ Mollie V. Blackburn, Caroline T. Clark, and Emily A. Nemeth. “Examining Queer Elements and Ideologies in LGBT-Themed Literature.” *Journal of Literacy Research* 47, no. 1 (February 17, 2015): 345.

⁶¹ E. L. McCallum, Mikko Tuhkanen, and Harriette Andreadis. *The Cambridge History of Gay and Lesbian Literature*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016): 627.

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