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# Construction of a Queer Identity in André Aciman's Call Me by Your Name and Neil Bartlett's Skin Lane

Rémy Duverger

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# Construction of a Queer Identity in André Aciman's *Call*

## *Me by Your Name* and Neil Bartlett's *Skin Lane*

W212AN5 – Travail Personnel de Recherche

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**Rémy DUVERGER**

M1 Recherche Études Anglophones

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Sous la direction de :

**Jean-Michel GANTEAU**

Professeur de littérature britannique

Directeur EA741-EMMA

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Département d'Études anglophones

UFR2 Langues et Cultures étrangères et régionales

UNIVERSITÉ PAUL-VALÉRY MONTPELLIER 3

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## INTRODUCTION

In the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and especially in the 1970/1980s, the outlook on gender and identity started to change considerably in Western democracies. People started to question the notions of sexuality, sexual orientation and gender identities, as LGBTQIA+ rights were evolving and being slowly and gradually acknowledged in some parts of the world. Gender and queer studies developed in the academic field, thanks to the work of Judith Butler and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick who laid the foundations of gender studies. Though this is a relatively new field, literature is already full of texts exploring those themes through multiple angles, be it new texts written in the light of gender theories or older texts that can be re-read with this new prism in mind.

This M1 thesis focused on two contemporary novels published in 2007: André Aciman's *Call Me by Your Name* and Neil Bartlett's *Skin Lane*. I am therefore approaching my subject with two novels published in the same year and dealing with love stories from a British point of view in the case of Bartlett's novel, and from an American point of view for Aciman's novel. In the case of *Skin Lane*, it is also relevant to keep in mind the author's background in theater as a playwright in order to better understand the structure of the novel, its construction and the dynamic of some key passages. Features characteristic of a climax in plays can be found in some of the chapters of *Skin Lane*.

*Call Me by Your Name* portrays Elio, a seventeen-year-old boy living in Italy with his mother and father. Like each previous summer, Elio's father welcomes a new assistant to help him in his research and this time, it is a young American named Oliver. Quickly, Elio starts to develop feelings for him, though he does not really understand this attraction or the nature of these feelings. All summer long, Elio and Oliver's secret relationship intensifies as they know both of them will have to return to a "normal" life at the end of it. Neil Bartlett's *Skin Lane*

depicts a man in his late forties discovering his (homo)sexuality, and who happens to start dreaming about the faceless naked body of a young man. In the meantime, he meets Ralph Scheiner — nicknamed “Beauty” — his boss’s nephew who recently joined the business he works at, and immediately feels something strange for this boy. Mr F's story quickly becomes a passionate, violent one-sided love story, as his obsession for Beauty keeps expanding.

Both *Call Me by Your Name* and *Skin Lane* are set in Europe in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Oliver is twenty-four years old and Elio is seventeen during the summer they meet (Aciman 21, 9). From the note Elio writes in Oliver’s copy of Stendhal’s *Armance*, we know that the plot is set “somewhere in Italy in the mid-eighties” (Aciman 105). *Skin Lane* starts with the description of Mr F, a man of “forty-six” living in London in 1967 (Bartlett 7-9). His story is told by an omniscient narrator, which reveals many details and creates suspense by foreshadowing elements of the plot, from Mr F’s point of view, and in some chapters, from Beauty’s point of view. In *Call Me by Your Name*, however, the story is narrated by Elio himself, with a retrospective vision of the events, in an auto-diegetic narration. In Aciman’s and Bartlett’s novels, Elio and Mr F submit to a powerful first real love story that profoundly marks and transforms them. The two types of narration in this corpus allow me to study this process of transformation from two perspectives: one giving access to the character’s thoughts as he himself puts them into words, the other one knowing what the character feels while keeping an external point of view on the process. The age gap between the characters and their loved ones has to be taken into account. Elio is seven years younger than Oliver while Mr F is significantly older than Beauty, who is only sixteen-years old (Bartlett 91). On the one hand, it is a young man falling in love with an older man in a mutual relationship and on the other hand, it is an older man falling in love with a much younger boy who does reciprocate his feelings. This brings along the acceptance of the relationship by the heroes’ environments, as it involves Elio’s and Mr F’s relationship with society, with others, friends, family and colleagues. But it

also means that they depend to some extent on the perception that society has of them and on what they allow society to see of them. Both Elio and Mr F hide their true selves along the novels, but this can also be interpreted as the fact that they do not know who and what their true selves are. *Call Me by Your Name* and *Skin Lane* depict the evolution and transformation of a character and his quest for self-discovery, self-knowledge and self-construction. The representation of emotions and what they bring to the characters are therefore a massive key-feature for the characters' identities, as they experience love, fear, anxiety, violence, distress, anger, pleasure and frustration.

Though apparently completely different at first, *Call Me by Your Name* and *Skin Lane* have more in common than it seems. Both Elio and Mr F, are confronted to a new experience that definitely changes them. This powerful love experience both violently disrupts the characters' identities and helps create new ones that better conform with their yet unknown and undiscovered truer self.

I use several axes to analyze my corpus and highlight different elements of the transformation of the characters. Criticism gathered from gender studies, trauma studies, the Bildungsroman, the myth of the androgyne, emotions and self-acceptation support my work. In regard to gender studies, Judith Butler's theory and concept of "performative gender" matches Elio's and Mr F's stories. When reading Elio's story in the light of this theory, it appears that the question of his own actions and the way he behaves in front of others is a recurrent concern which conditions his actions and manners while being around others, as he does not want his family and friends to understand what he feels for Oliver. In *Skin Lane*, Mr F is also a subject to Butler's theory, as he is always aware and alert to what others may think of him and of his behavior and scared to let his emotions be seen, especially as his obsession for Beauty and for the boy in the nightmare grows. Gregory R. Clarke uses Butler's "performative theory" to

explain what he calls Elio's "waiting" behavior in his relationship with Oliver. Clarke develops the chronotope of the boudoir, by studying how Elio's identity and gender is not a clear-cut one but rather a continuum depending on the character's position as he waits, or not, during the development of the relationship. This idea of a repetitive scheme and a constant gender in construction can be found in *Skin Lane* with Mr F's dream, in opposition with real life events where he does not allow himself the same behavior, for instance touching the boy's skin. In *Epistemology of the Closet*, Sedgwick defines sexuality, gender and the experience of sexuality. She opposes two models concerning sexuality: a continuum between heterosexuality and homosexuality, or a clear-cut category in which homosexuals and heterosexuals are two different categories excluded from one another. If Elio identifies more with the first model as being sometimes attracted to men and sometimes attracted to women, Mr F, however, is rather excluding himself from others and does not see himself as a part of the group. He ironically considers to have nothing to do with homosexuals.

The myth of the Androgyne, from Plato, is particularly useful to explain the obsessive quest for the loved one and the endless, repetitive process it involves. The core idea behind this text is the fact that the quest for the other is not achievable, leaving an incurable wound on the bodies. In both *Call Me by Your Name* and *Skin Lane*, this paradox of seeking what hurts the character is at the heart of the novel: either the dream driving Mr F crazy and the urge to finally find the face of the naked body, or the impossible and ephemeral relationship with Oliver that cannot survive outside of Elio's house. The characters' emotions and affects are extremely revealing of the different stages the characters are going through during the relationship, but are also significant of the pressure they endure from society. This is where Sara Ahmed's work comes helpful to study these emotions and how the characters are either included or excluded from the society that they live in. Elio develops guilt, anxiety and fear while his relationship with Oliver develops among other emotions. This highlights how the character accepts or not

his changing identity at different levels of the relationship but also how he still fears and rejects it, just as society may do. Mr F's personality is also subjected to this shifting acceptance, denial and reject. Anzieu's concept of the *Skin Ego* illustrates perfectly the physical barrier between the protagonists and the world, along with the creation of a new "skin".

The traumatic dimension of love, and especially of a first queer love, has to be taken into account and can directly be linked to the notion of the "wounded hero" Ganteau describes. Whitehead defines some key elements of trauma: haunting of the past, figure of the ghost, repetitions and fragmentation. In the case of *Skin Lane*, where trauma plays such an important role, we also find these elements with the recurring dream/nightmare and the obsession with finding the face of that pale figure hanging on in Mr F's bathroom, besides a relatively traumatic past with the loss of his mother, one of his brothers and even going to war himself. With Elio, in *Call Me by Your Name*, there is also this repetition of elements taking the form of an alternation between taking account of Oliver and ignoring him. Pearce goes even further and studies trauma in the context of a love relationship, showing that love is a traumatic experience and therefore undeniably transforms those who experience it. Trauma is also characteristic of a break from realism and reality. Combined with Pearce's idea of a "trauma of love", the relationships Elio and Mr F experience appear as another reality which cannot merge with the "real" world, and are therefore meant to be temporary. Romance, however, is the perfect genre (or mode) to develop such love stories since romance is meant for non-realistic stories. Romance is also privileged when it comes to express characters' affects.

We can finally study the corpus under the theme of a coming-of-age story. In *Season of Youth*, Buckley gives some characteristics of the Bildungsroman, a novel in which the main character is meant to change and get to know themselves better. This learning aspect of oneself echoes directly the idea of a social construction of someone's identity due to experience, events and meetings. *Call Me by Your Name* and *Skin Lane* both feature such a type of character



development. Indeed, Elio and Mr F questions their self-knowledges after meeting Oliver and Beauty, who both act as a trigger for this process.

With all these elements in mind, my thesis statement can be summarized in the following question: to what extent are Mr F's and Elio's identities reshaped and redefined through the experience of a first queer love story?

The aim of this study is to focus on the mechanisms behind the construction of the protagonists' gender identities (Elio in *Call Me by Your Name* and Mr F in *Skin Lane*) and how they come to accept and embrace (or not) who they are, i.e., not heterosexual men. The idea is to follow the process of this transformation, by studying Elio's and Mr F's relationships with their loved one, the society that they live in and most importantly, with themselves. At the beginning of each novel, we meet the main characters and are given elements to understand who they are at the time, before meeting the loved one. This loved one, indeed, who is Oliver for Elio and "Beauty" for Mr F, is the trigger of the transformation both Elio and Mr F are going to experience throughout the novels. The first part of this work is therefore dedicated to the study of the interaction with the loved one in the beginning of the relationship. In a second part, and following this encounter, I study how Elio and Mr F start questioning their feelings, and wondering if they are legitimate in the world that they live in. Behind a desperate, obsessive quest for the loved one and the beginning of a love story, the genre of the romance helps to determine the characters' affects and to understand how they deal with the inclusion in or the exclusion from society. The final part aims to examine the process of transformation and the first experience of love which are not without consequences for the 'heroes' of the novels under study, since they create a traumatic experience that will shape Mr F's and Elio's new identities when they come back to reality, as the romance vanishes.

## 1. ESTABLISHMENT OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE “HERO” AND THE LOVED ONE

In this first part, I focus on the relationship which progressively establishes itself between Mr F and “Beauty” on the one hand, and Elio and Oliver on the other hand. This encounter and the confrontations that follow are key-elements for the transformation of Mr F’s and Elio’s lives and act as a trigger for the characters’ development. This part aims at studying how their first encounters happen and to determine what they generate for Elio and Mr F. The first impressions they have on their loved ones are crucial because an attraction can be observed in both cases.

### 1.1. ENCOUNTERS AND FIRST PERCEPTION OF THE LOVED ONES

In both *Call Me by Your Name* and *Skin Lane*, the starting point of the transformation both Elio and Mr F experience is triggered by encountering their loved ones. For Elio, this encounter happens by meeting Oliver, right at the beginning of the novel. Elio’s story opens up with the very first sight he has of Oliver:

It is the first thing I remember about him, and I can hear it still today. *Later!*

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, billowy blue shirt, wide-open collar, sunglasses, straw hat, skin everywhere. (Aciman 3)

Elio meets Oliver at the beginning of the summer. Indeed, his father who is an eminent archeologist invites a new student every year to help him in his work in exchange for being helped for a future academic publication (Aciman 4). When Elio sees Oliver for the first time, even though he seems reticent in the first place, he immediately feels something special with him that did not happen with the previous guests invited for the previous summers at his parents’ house. From the first description of Oliver, Elio already signifies his physical desire, by mentioning Oliver's skin as a ubiquitous element. He also mentions Oliver’s catchphrase “later”

which crystalizes many features of *Call Me by Your Name*, depending on a future opportunity, a future action or a future conversation.

Yet, we quickly learn that Elio has already “met” Oliver, since he admits later to Oliver that he “made sure they picked [him]” (228). He also explains that it must be at this moment, when his parents were selecting the next summer guest, that his feelings for Oliver started, echoing the first pages of the book where Elio tries to remember when things started between them and making different assumptions on certain moments in the beginning of their relationship. The first pages of the novel are composed of paragraphs all starting with “maybe it was...” or a similar phrase referring to the moment Elio fell in love with Oliver (Aciman 3, 5-10).

Paradoxically, one of Elio's first ways to describe Oliver is calling him a “bore”, as he is just this year “summer’s houseguest” (Aciman 3). This highlights two essential elements of their relationship: the on-going love/hate motif characteristic of intense love stories and the temporally limited aspect of their relationship, as Oliver is meant to fly back to the U.S. at the end of the summer.

In the case of Mr F, in *Skin Lane*, it all starts with the dream the protagonist begins to have before even meeting Beauty, and which itself acts as a proleptic element for this encounter. For Mr F, therefore, it is essential to distinguish two different first encounters. Indeed, Beauty is not the only one who retains Mr F’s attention, since the body in his dream is responsible for a great deal of Mr F’s disruption and loss of control that will happen throughout the novel.

The narrative voice gives a description of the dream in the first pages of the novel (Bartlett 19-22). What Mr F sees is the naked body of a man, hanging down from the ceiling of his bathroom. The face, however, stays hidden from him, since Mr F simply cannot see it. But at first, he does not really acknowledge the dream, thinking it is just one of those bad dreams

as the narrative voice concludes “by dinnertime Mr F really had forgotten all about it” (Bartlett 23). To Mr F, it is just a regular nightmare, despite the vivid, horrific vision he experiences and the feeling of being trapped with no possible outcome (22). However, the dream does come back, and he quickly becomes aware of its repetition as “he’s starting to think that this way that the dream repeats itself so exactly is perhaps the most disturbing aspect of the whole business” (18). In fact, the dream repeats itself several times, each time being a new step in Mr F’s progressive exploration of it (22, 24, 83, 130, 224).

The second main encounter in Mr F’s narrative happens when Mr Scheiner, Mr F’s boss, decides it is time for his nephew to move from the secretary office to the furriers’ workroom to start learning the job (88-9). While Oliver is just another guest for the summer, Beauty and Mr F have the relationship of a boss and his apprentice, which immediately places Mr F as superior to Beauty, to some extent. This is even more amplified by the significant age gap between them and the numerous years of experience Mr F has as a talented furrier. Just as Elio, Mr F has quite a negative first impression on Beauty, thinking of him always “trying to find the nearest mirror” in addition with a blue jacket “far too flash for a work-day” (89).

The mode of narration chosen to depict the story is also crucial in the case of a love story, as it does not bring the same sensations to the readers and casts light from different angles. In *Call Me by Your Name*, Aciman chooses to have Elio narrate his own story, turning him into a homo-diegetic and intra-diegetic narrator, to use Genette’s terminology<sup>1</sup>. This auto-diegetic narrator reflects back on a part of his life, and we know therefore what Elio thought and felt in every moment narrated directly from him. With Mr F, readers are allowed to know what is happening in his head since the narrative voice telling the story is that of an extra-diegetic and

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<sup>1</sup> see Gérard Genette. *Figures III* (Paris: Seuil. 1972).

omniscient narrator. Using such a narrative voice also helps readers to understand and apprehend the events from Beauty's perspective in some fragments of the story. Aciman and Bartlett therefore use two opposite manners to tell the story of a character, which involves many differences in the way the character's emotions are described or perceived. While Elio remembers the events with its amount of doubts and questioning, the narrative voice in *Skin Lane* does not leave any wondering possible and offers the answer to possible questions that could rise, sometimes by foreshadowing elements that are yet to happen. For instance, during Mr F final confrontation with Beauty, the narrator warns the reader about the following scene: "Don't be frightened; don't flinch, or look away. I promise you there will be no blood. What happens is this." (Bartlett 301). The narrator's comment interrupts an intense scene at the very moment when Mr F screams and pounces onto Beauty's throat, a knife in his hand, increasing furthermore the tension of the scene.

In *Skin Lane* or in *Call Me by Your Name*, it is the repetition of the events that progressively builds a sudden interrogation. Oliver's massaging Elio's shoulder at the volleyball game is the first physical contact they have and that seems to bother Elio (Aciman 16). Mr F starts to dream and is first afraid of what he saw in this dream, but then, what seems to be a nightmare becomes a real obsession, while he keeps working with Beauty at Scheiner's. In both novels, there is a need to know more about that strange, unknown feeling that both of them are in the grips of.

## 1.2. BROKEN ROUTINES AND EMERGING DESIRE

After meeting Oliver and Beauty, something considerably changes in Elio's and Mr F's lives.

*Skin Lane* features the life of an ordinary man and his nightmare, which soon developed into an obsession that is amplified all along the novel and emphasized by the comments of an extra-diegetic and hetero-diegetic narrator who makes the reader reflect on what is really happening to this quiet character. To some extent, we are only spectators to what is happening to Mr F, just as he himself is. Mr F's progressive disruption of routine is enhanced textually by the use of many aposiopeses throughout the novel, i.e., sentences that stop abruptly without any sign of punctuation, giving readers a feeling of something missing, something unaccomplished. The first occurrence of a disrupted narration runs:

Once he was in bed, Mr F would close his eyes and be straight off to sleep in minutes. Or that was what he usually did, anyway. But

But on this particular evening, which is a Thursday evening, early in the freezing January of 1967, as our story now more or less officially commences, he does not go straight to sleep. (Bartlett 17)

This extract is followed a few lines below by the narrator's comment on the first apparition of Mr F's dream and written in the present perfect: "He has started to dream." (Bartlett, 18). As the reader is given the first description of Mr F's dream, and at the moment when the narrator is about to tell what Mr F sees in it that disturbs him that much, we can read:

The door swings open, and he walks in, and walks to the washbasin to get himself a drink of water, and then he looks up, squinting in the brightness of the light and sees, O God, he sees

Mr F sees, reflected there in the mirror over the washbasin, right there behind him, with its feet tied, its ankles lashed with a thick rope to the cast-iron brackets which hold up the lavatory cistern, a body.

A man's body.

Naked. (21)

As the nightmare concludes, the narrator finishes:

and his back slams against the bathroom door, slamming it shut, and he starts to slide down it, starts to go sliding down it as his feeble white hands scrabble uselessly for the door-handle behind his back, as he tries to close his eyes to shut out what he's seeing,

but can't believe he's seeing, but for some reason he can't, he can't shut them, they just won't close, and

Don't men sound funny when they scream? (22)

With this particular type of narration, the readers are under the impression of being mocked by the narrator, just as Mr F is being mocked by his dream. For his part, Elio cannot deny the strange feeling he feels for Oliver as he mentions: "I was thoroughly intimidated. The unapproachable sort." (Aciman 4). And this is precisely because Oliver seems inaccessible and because Elio is persuaded Oliver likes him back that he wants to get closer to him in any possible manner. This is also why Elio is taken aback by Oliver's first reactions, which "und[er] him] completely." (9).

Mr F's character is intrinsically linked to time, which clearly plays a notable part in his life on a daily basis, creating a well set-up routine. Edelstein calls him a "creature of habit" for this reason (2008), since the description made of Mr F in the first pages of the book leaves no other option than following a character boringly repeating the same things day after day, again and again. The intrusiveness of the dream is highlighted by Edelstein's following comment: "his routine broken only by the sudden onset of a series of full-bodied nightmares." (2008). A paradox appears here, since the very first pages of the book precisely describe an ordinary man who seems particularly stuck in a repetition and succession of the same days and of the same rituals and routine. Everything in Mr F's life is well adjusted in relation to time. For instance, he is never late to work and even takes some pride in it (Bartlett 9). However, as the dream becomes more and more present and starts to obsess him, Mr F also sees his routine gradually falling apart. Indeed, as the dream keeps repeating itself, he progressively starts to be disturbed by it, and almost comes to work late, something he has never done in his whole life (Bartlett 28). The importance of such a simple detail is highlighted later by the mad and unexpected

chase of a stranger to the other side of the city, as his obsession with finding the face of his dream is the only thing that matters to him at this time. He therefore does not hesitate to follow a stranger and ends up being late for work, which only infuriates him more when he realizes it. Both his frustration and determination can be heard in the narrative voice's comment: "this wild goose chase is going to make him badly late for work — but he doesn't stop, and he doesn't think" (113). In the meantime, Mr F develops a growing obsession for Beauty's neck, longing for his skin, and wondering how it may smell or feel when he would touch it or kiss it. That is something that Mr F is desperately seeking to know, without confessing it to himself. As he imagines what would a night with Beauty be, "Mr realises that he's forgotten to make his dinner." (185).

For Elio, the bounding of the relationship starts with him mimicking Oliver's behavior, by putting on and showing his Jewish necklace that he had previously kept hidden. Elio mentions this detail: "But it was the gold necklace and the Star of David with a golden mezuzah on his neck that told me here was something more compelling than anything I wanted from him, for it bound us" (Aciman 19). This is the moment when Elio definitely feels that something connects them both and that is this connection that Elio is looking for. At the same time, Elio's obsession for Oliver's body keeps growing, as his sexual desire for him keeps tormenting the young man. Elio mentions his desire for Oliver's skin (8), and his curiosity for Oliver's intimate parts (18), and even longing for his hand coming down his bathing suit (24). While Mr F's desire for Beauty's skin is not directly linked to a physical need of sexual intercourse, it is obvious that Elio's desire, as a seventeen-year-old, dwells on a physical and sexual need.

Two ideas can be retrieved from these elements: that the process of seduction has begun, as each protagonist wants to come closer to the desired one, but also that the characters' passivity shifts progressively in response to the triggering event of the meeting. As Ganteau



highlights, until then, Mr F was stuck in a position of “endless inaction” (2017 *Performing the Void*, §6), while he clearly has decided to do something about his recurrent dream, as the narrative voice claims about the details of the dream: “he now found himself making much more deliberate efforts to recall them.” (Bartlett 52). In *Call Me by Your Name*, the process of waiting is predominant in the development of Elio and Oliver’s relationship. As Clarke points out: “Elio often takes on a position from the side-lines; he remains at a distance from his beloved, carefully observing. Elio takes the entirety of Part One of the novel to ‘hang back’ and observe Oliver.” (21). Clarke continues: “Aciman thus portrays a young man’s desires, first characterising Elio as a withdrawn lover who waits and surveys the object of his passion before managing to achieve his desired outcomes.” (21). If this phase of waiting is essential to better understand Elio’s character, it also helps to build the romantic tension between the two lovers. Yet, even though Elio and Mr F are gradually becoming more active in the development of their relationships, those waiting phases remain only to emphasize the characters’ incapacities to get what they desire and when they desire it, creating an intense frustration.

From this point on, however, both Elio and Mr F are subjected to an uncontrollable need of being close with their loved ones, a need triggered by an intrinsic feeling.

### 1.3. THE IMPOSSIBLE QUEST FOR ONE’S OTHER-HALF

Even if they are not conscious of it, this unknown feeling is directly linked to the myth of the Androgyne, an ancient myth described by Plato in *The Symposium*, through Aristophanes’s voice. He explains that, in the beginning of times, the human kind was made of three categories: male, female and androgyne:

This sex itself has disappeared but its name, androgynous, survives. At that time the androgynous sex was distinct in form and name, having physical features from both the

male and the female, but only the name now exists, and that as a term of insult. (Plato 189e, 22)

But humans were described as arrogant and proud and they wanted to be at the same level as the gods. Zeus decided to punish them by slicing them in half (190c-d, 23). Aristophanes then explains that each part of the initial body wanted to unify with their other part to be one again. They wanted to be one so badly that they would die of hunger and inaction since they did not want to do anything without their other half. He summarizes the situation in the following terms:

So it is that ever since that far-off time, love of one person for another has been inborn in human beings, and its role is to restore us to our ancient state by trying to make unity out of duality and to heal our human condition. For each of us is a mere tally of a person, one of two sides of a filleted fish, one half of an original whole. We are all continually searching for our other half. (191d, 24)

Thus, each half from a severed male is looking for another male part; each female half from a severed female is looking for another female; and each half from a severed androgyne is looking for their opposite part.

To summarize, the main idea behind this myth is therefore that each individual is obsessively looking for their other half, because this other half has been ripped from them, leaving a missing part. The individual is then dependent on the other one, characterizing their vulnerability. There is a vital need to find that other part and to be one with it, without what, an individual is likely to be inactive and die.

In her article about the Androgyne, Catherine Clément summarizes the myth in the following terms: “each part of the primitive androgyne is looking for its complementary part:

that is what is called love”<sup>2</sup> (1, my translation). This highlights the idea of an original individual split in half and desperately looking for his or her other half which she links to the notion of love. Love is therefore nothing but a search for a missing part that every human being needs to be complete. Thus, she suggests that an individual that is not in love is not complete. Clément emphasizes another crucial part about the Androgyne, as a complete individual:

Androgyny refers back to immortality and, with a psychoanalytic approach, to a repression of procreation: the androgyne generates itself, since it has both sexual natures, which, outside of it, need an encounter to produce a new being<sup>3</sup> (1, my translation).

This leads us to the fact that an individual in love who has found his/her other half is capable of creating a new self, a new version of him/herself. From the myth of the Androgyne also comes the idea of an original bisexuality. Rey uses Charles Mopsik’ words to crystalize what defines the Androgyne, i.e. “*neutrum utrumque*, neither one or the other and both at the same time.”<sup>4</sup> (20, my translation, original emphasis). But the relationship with that other part is *in fine* a relationship with oneself. Indeed, for Rey, the love that results from this quest is both something that pushes oneself towards others and back to the Self:

the love that pushes us towards others lets appear a transcendence, that is to say a departure from oneself, a break of the Self. . . . The nostalgia of the other half, like every return journey, is a return to oneself.<sup>5</sup> (21, my translation)

Plato’s myth is reminiscent of Mr F’s obsession for the other, an obsession Elio experiences as well, mostly in the fact that he is craving for a gathering with Oliver. From time to time, Elio has this feeling towards Marzia, though it does not seem to be as powerful as it is

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<sup>2</sup> « chaque moitié de l'androgyne primitif cherche sa moitié complémentaire : c'est cela que les hommes appellent amour. » (Clément 1)

<sup>3</sup> « L'androgynie renvoie donc à l'immortalité et, en vertu d'une lecture psychanalytique, à un refoulement de la procréation : l'androgyne s'engendre lui-même, puisqu'il possède les deux caractères sexuels qui, hors de lui, demandent une rencontre pour produire un être nouveau. » (Clément 1)

<sup>4</sup> « *neutrum utrumque*, ni l'un ni l'autre et les deux en même temps » (Rey 20, original emphasis)

<sup>5</sup> « l'amour qui nous jette vers autrui manifeste une transcendance, c'est-à-dire une sortie de soi, une rupture du Même. . . . La nostalgie de l'autre moitié, comme tout voyage de retour, est un retour à soi. » (Rey 21)

with Oliver. The narrative voice lets the reader know that Mr F has never loved someone or even thought of it until the start of his dream (Bartlett 14, 17). On the contrary, Elio is engaged more or less in a relationship with Marzia, one of his friends. With Mr F, the myth of the Androgyne is illustrated by the unique other-half that he had not found and which can explain why he is a single man in his forties. For Elio, the mismatched and incomplete relationship he experiences with Marzia emphasizes the idea that human beings are forced to seek desperately that other-half that makes them complete.

Within the myth of the Androgyne are inscribed many reflections around gender and identity. Both Rey and Clément emphasize the idea that those questions persist in contemporary society, especially concerning the norms inside society and its heteronormative constraints (Rey 22; Clément 2). Thus, Rey wisely links Plato's myth to contemporary studies dealing with gender, and in particular with Judith Butler's work. As this first part showed, Elio and Mr F encountering Oliver and Beauty is synonymous with rising questions about what they desire and why, questions which gradually lead to questioning their identity and who they truly are while they are confronted with both the norms of the society they live in and the mixed and intense emotions they suddenly start to develop.

By living a romantic relationship, both Elio and Mr F inscribe themselves in another reality where their relationships can fully develop, hiding from society's pressure, which makes the characters undergo many emotions.

## 2. THE OTHERS: INCLUSION, EXCLUSION AND PEER-PRESSURE

In this second part, I aim to prove that because of the encounter with Beauty and Oliver, Mr F and Elio progressively start to dissociate from reality to go into a private, intimate sphere that surrounds them and their loved ones. The characters' affects have a primordial impact while they question their own gender identities.

### 2.1. HETERONORMATIVITY AND GENDER CRISIS

As the relationships develop, a tension between the norms imposed by society and what the protagonists desire increases. This creates a disruption between what they expect and what can actually be made within this romantic relationship. Indeed, they are torn between living a queer love story or fulfilling the heterosexual norms of society. But these heterosexual norms inflicted by society affect considerably Mr F's and Elio's relationships with others and themselves. In *Skin Lane*, indeed, the 1967 Sexual Offences Act implicitly mentioned, proves that homosexuality is still a crime at the time (204). In the case of Elio and Oliver, their confrontation to society is less abrupt since they are living away from main stream life in Elio's parents' house. The tension with society mainly comes from within the household and Elio's friends and family, since both Oliver and Elio know they have to conceal their love story. Yet, the dialogue Elio has with his father at the end of the novel proves that their relationship did not go completely unnoticed and could be guessed easily (Aciman 221-5). In the meantime, this conversation also proves that Elio's family was not necessarily reluctant to such a relationship, as his father also had a similar experience when he was younger, but had to conceal it nonetheless.

Judith Butler developed her own theory about gender and conceptualized it as being a performative act, defining gender as a social construction meant to be fulfilled and followed by individuals. She writes:

acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this on the surface of the body, through the play of signifying absences that suggest, but never reveal, the organizing principle of identity as a cause. Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are performative in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means. That the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality. This also suggests that if that reality is fabricated as an interior essence, that very interiority is an effect and function of a decidedly public and social discourse (173)

Moreover, Butler estimates that gender is overall an illusion meant to reproduce the heteronormative scheme of society: “acts and gestures, articulated and enacted desires create the illusion of an interior and organizing gender core, an illusion discursively maintained for the purposes of the regulation of sexuality within the obligatory frame of reproductive heterosexuality.” (173) She also explains that these performative acts are displayed through the body, which therefore becomes a boundary between someone’s identity and how they are perceived by the world: “the very notion of ‘the body,’ [is considered] not as a ready surface awaiting signification, but as a set of boundaries, individual and social, politically signified and maintained.” (44) Butler points out that masculinity and femininity are conceptualized to maintain a masculine domination in a heterosexual model:

That gender reality is created through sustained social performances means that the very notions of an essential sex and a true or abiding masculinity or femininity are also constituted as part of the strategy that conceals gender’s performative character and the performative possibilities for proliferating gender configurations outside the restricting frames of masculinist domination and compulsory heterosexuality. (180)

Schötz uses Butler’s theory to identify what a male identity is and the pressure it imposes on the subject. She highlights that someone’s identity is “considered a deliberate construction

which the individual is forced to work at daily without the prospect of ever arriving at a final, fixed result.” (Schötz 220-1). Thus, someone’s identity results in an endless process of construction and in the case of a masculine identity, a “fear of failure” towards what is expected from society “may cause the masculine individual to suffer from an identity crisis.” (221) This identity crisis is the core of Elio’s and Mr F’s transformations. As Elio reflects on Oliver’s possibly reciprocal feelings, he says: “I was still under the illusion that, barring what I’d read in books, inferred from rumors, and overheard in bawdy talk all over, no one my age had ever wanted to be both man and woman—with men and women. I had wanted other men my age before and had slept with women.” (Aciman 25) Here, Elio proves that he is questioning his sexuality and his desire when it comes to love and sexual relationships. Even without putting a word on it, he realizes that he does not feel like most of other young men, as he enjoys the company of both men and women. His relationship with Marzia counterbalances his relationship with Oliver, the first relationship he has with a man. This also highlights the fact that Elio’s experience of gender and identity must come from himself and not from outside, since he can barely get no model or representation. Both Elio and Mr F come to the conclusion that something is not right with them as Mr F wonders “What is *wrong* with me?” and Elio comments “I’m sick, aren’t I?” (Bartlett 243, original emphasis; Aciman 148).

The idea of a dual and performative gender is also developed by Clarke. He points out that Elio’s waiting in his relationship with Oliver is reminiscent of a female performative gender, as it is generally women who wait for their loved ones, especially in literary conventions: “Elio’s perpetual acts of waiting constitute gender performativity, extending Barthes’s definition of the ‘miraculously feminised’ one-who-waits through the application of Austin and Butler’s performativity theories.” (17) This highlights the idea that a man has to be

active in his relationship and be the one who makes the moves, while a woman is a passive object meant to be there for the man they love.

Such a heteronormative definition of society is directly confronted in *Skin Lane* and *Call Me by Your Name*, because of the protagonists' gender identities, which are precisely not heteronormative. Yet, Elio is perfectly aware of the existence of homosexual relationships, when a friend couple of his parents come to their house for dinner (124). Sedgwick's gender theory is based on "two contradictory *tropes of gender* through which same-sex desire could be understood" (87, original emphasis). On the one hand the "trope of inversion" which conceptualizes gender as "'a woman's soul trapped in a man's body' – and vice versa." (87). On the other hand, the "trope of gender separatism" establishes that "people of the same gender [who] have so much in common, should bound together also on the axis of sexual desire" (87). From this point of view, Mr F's gender identity can be understood as belonging to the first trope, since he does not assimilate with men and sometimes portrays "feminine" features, just like his hands, for instance, which are described as being: "large, but not at all rough or conventionally masculine" (Bartlett 8). On the contrary, Elio's gender identity tends to belong to the second trope in the sense that his relationship with Oliver is built on a need of bounding together, in addition with similarities, for instance, both of them being Jews and both of them having a love for arts.

These performed genders create separated spheres in the characters' lives. Clarke argues that "Elio and Oliver create a 'true space' between themselves, notably through the boudoir trope, where the two are able to achieve their performative identities safely and declare their love of one another" (13), his idea of a boudoir referring to the private spaces where Elio and Oliver meet, like Elio's bedroom, and which isolate them from the outside world. Butler's performative conception of gender is illustrated as well in *Skin Lane* by the two different sides



of Mr F's personality, when at work and at home: "Mr F's ability to be two people – one when he was on his own, one on Skin Lane – was remarkable" Bartlett writes (188). His numerous travels from home to work create a distinct atmosphere from a private to a public sphere while being the perfect occasion for him to read the newspaper. The narrator's comments on what Mr F reads, linked to the political debates happening in London at this time, reveal how Mr F unconsciously denies the nature of his love for Beauty, as he does not feel concerned by what is happening in his environment. The narrator comments: "He reads his newspaper every day, as most people do, but, like most people, he thinks the things described there are happening in somebody else's world, not his; that they are happening to other people, but not to him." (Bartlett 49). The narrator points out to Mr F's denial of identity in a ironical comment that hints to the idea he cannot escape this denied identity.

Overall, as the protagonists' transformations progress, they both start to separate from their actual contexts and progressively dive into their own realities in which their romantic love can be fulfilled.

## 2.2. THE ROMANCE IN SEPARATE REALITIES

*Skin Lane* and *Call Me by Your Name* can both be classified in the romance mode, as they both display a story in which the main focus is on the protagonists' love interests. In a romance, the hero pursues a quest leading him to overcome challenges (Fuchs 6). But the romance separates from the novel which focuses on realism and verisimilitude by displaying non ordinary events, magic, suspense and even theatricality (Ganteau 2008, 14-5). Theatricality is definitely well illustrated in Bartlett's *Skin Lane*, with many climactic scenes (discovering the dream for the first time, the lucid dream in the museum or the final confrontation between Mr F and Beauty). A romance can also be presented through an episodic structure, with a quest

that keeps being renewed (Ganteau 2008, 16). On the one hand, Mr F keeps longing for Beauty and desperately seeks answers about his dream of the naked body of a man. On the other hand, Elio is constantly looking for Oliver and trying to connect with him in any possible ways, either with music, a bike ride, or by paying attention to his swimsuits. Ganteau also points to the possible hyper-textuality of the text in some types of romances (2008, 60). Indeed, *Skin Lane* is written as a retelling of de Devilleneuve's *Beauty and the Beast*, hence the characters' names. Mr F's favorite story from childhood was this fairy tale (Bartlett 4-5) to which the narrator alludes several times throughout the novel. (31, 94, 80, 149, 300) We can read: "we might compare these seventeen 'sightings' of Mr F's . . . to the row of paintings with which the Beast, in one version of the story I've read, lines the Long Gallery of his fabulous palace" (80), and later: "In the middle pages of the story, which were the ones which Mr F always more or less ignored when his father read it to him as a child, there is an elaborate description of the gardens which the Beast has built around his magic castle" (149). In these extracts, the narrator progressively builds an analogy between Mr F and the Beast in the fairy tale, which emphasizes his transformation as he becomes and acts more and more like a pure beast while chasing Beauty and his love.

Pearce describes the process of being in love like an unavoidable transformation, since both individuals involved in the relationship come out of it as individuals different from those they used to be at the beginning. She summarizes this process in the following formula: " $x+y \rightarrow x'+y'$ " (2007, 1). She explains that the loved one has a clear effect in this process of transformation: "who we are is defined in part by the being we love, even though s/he is no longer what s/he was either." (1) Pearce points out to the definitive aspect of this process that makes the previous identity obsolete: "the subject can no longer go back to the self s/he was before the process of the transformation and loses him/herself in the process." (10-1). Elio's transformation, however, is less physical and relies more on his progressive questioning and

his growing longing to share moments with Oliver. An instance of this is the moment he is waiting for midnight, as he is to meet with Oliver then, and counts the hours before the wanted hour: “Every minute felt as though stretched on tenterhooks.” (123) and then: “Three hours to go.” (124).

Elio’s and Mr F’s romantic relationships are forced to be concealed from others. They develop differently in separate spaces created by the characters, forcing the relationship to be innovative and creative in its mode of expression. Secret messages are used many times in Elio and Oliver’s relationship to communicate, by touching each other’s foot under the table when around others, or by exchanging notes under their bedroom doors. For instance, Elio assimilates Oliver’s temper and behavior to the color of the bathing suit Oliver is wearing at the moment and therefore changes his interactions with him according to it:

He had, it took me a while to realize, four personalities depending on which bathing suit he was wearing. Knowing which to expect gave me the illusion of a slight advantage. Red: bold, set in his ways, very grown-up, almost gruff and ill-tempered—stay away. Yellow: sprightly, buoyant, funny, not without barbs—don’t give in too easily; might turn to red in no time. Green, which he seldom wore: acquiescent, eager to learn, eager to speak, sunny—why wasn’t he always like this? Blue: the afternoon he stepped into my room from the balcony, the day he massaged my shoulder, or when he picked up my glass and placed it right next to me. (Aciman 32-3)

In the case of Mr F, the relationship mostly develops around his own ideas and thoughts inside the dream that he revisits on purpose, while nothing really happens between him and Beauty until the final climactic scene at Scheiner’s. The only time Elio and Oliver feel free from social boundaries is during their trip to Rome, and when they find themselves in a public, yet unknown area in which no one knows them. They even feel free to kiss each other in the streets (Aciman 205). Rome acts as a parenthesis of freedom that finally lets the romantic tension between the two lovers explode, and puts an end to the closed and limited sphere of Elio’s room. Bose points out that this marks a disruption between Elio’s relationship with Marzia, opened to the public sphere all the time and his relationship with Oliver only public in specific areas: “Elio is open

to have intercourse with Marzia at the beach but he gets intimate with Oliver only in secluded corners like the Monet's Berm (Aciman 81); the only exception being the time they spent together in Rome – they kissed in open spaces disregarding the pedestrians” (Bose 162-3). Yet, this can only be a parenthesis as it also marks the end of summer and Oliver going back to the United States. This particular relation to time is also present for Mr F, when he is impatiently waiting for the moment to meet Beauty after they agreed to. The narrator says: “Mr F, you see, is realising that he has never lived in the present tense before”, and then qualifies him of “a beast pac[ing] its cage.” (274)

Thresholds are quite significant of the limits of Mr F's relationship, too, since every moment he has with Beauty happens in confined and closed spaces, whether it be the workshop at Scheiner's, or the dark corner inside St Michael's church, or even the closed area of the dream, which is itself set inside Mr F's closed bathroom, where so much happens in regard to Mr F's developing obsession around the naked body of the man. By showing how the protagonists always meet their loved ones in isolated places (inside the dream, at Scheiner's offices; at Monet's Berm (81), in Elio's room...), the narrators reinforce the idea that this is an idyllic love story that does not inscribe itself in reality. As Pearce highlights, going back to the example of Tristan and Iseult: “[their] love is defined by its very *impossibility* in the ‘real’ / social world” (2007, 15), meaning that love can face obstacles that prevent it from developing in the “real world”. This impossible reality is materialized in *Skin Lane* with the notion of time through the form of the ticking clock in Mr F's kitchen. Although it must be heard in his everyday life, it is however during the dream sessions that the clock is entirely noticed by him. It can be seen both as a representation of time passing by, but also as time being stuck on the same hour again and again, just as the clock always telling the same time on the facade of the train station (Bartlett 10, 282, 334). The ticking clock can also be heard during the final confrontation of Beauty and Mr F, in a succession of a growing ticking in his ears and silent

phases (299–300). As Ganteau underlines, the ticking of the clock is also associated with the dream, which leads Mr F to a confusion between reality and an “oneiric time” (2017 *Shifting Visibilities* 182). At this moment, Mr F cannot be quite sure of what is happening, if he is inside the dream or in the “actual” reality. As Bose highlights about Elio and Oliver’s romance, those created spaces enable the development of the romance as they offer a secured space. Yet, these temporary spaces inevitably generate anxiety for the characters who now fear to return in the real world:

The anxiety teeters in fear of trespassing beyond the given “natural” identity in the dominant culture, which in turn contests the specificity of identification and its stereotypes. Elio and Oliver’s romance is determined by the security of spaces they create—the “spots” (Aciman 210)—which are not tainted by the “taken for granted” (Jagose 102)<sup>6</sup>. However, the fairytale romance must end when the creation of these spaces debilitates in the face of lived reality after the summer holiday. Their romance in Italy manages to create a space of security but it also becomes a microcosm for a world where prejudices are not explicit but covert. Consequently, the creation of spaces ‘instigates’ anxiety in a predominantly heterosexist world, leading to the subjective actions of an anxious lover. (Bose 167)

Even though these relationships are not meant to survive outside their own realities, they do present the characteristics of a love story, and therefore rely a lot on the characters’ emotions.

### 2.3. OVERWHELMING EMOTIONS

The permanent tension the characters feel between the desire to please society and to fulfill their relationship is highlighted through the aesthetics of love and the characters’ affects. They come to feel various emotions from excitement, fear and shame to a feeling of loneliness, frustration and anger, sometimes verging on madness, especially in the case of Mr F, who progressively becomes a real “beast”, echoing the fairy tale rewritten in *Skin Lane*. Both Elio

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<sup>6</sup> see Annamarie Jagose. *Queer Theory: An Introduction* (New York University Press, 2010).

and Mr F have to learn to control their emotions, though it is not always possible for them. Indeed, Mr F does not manage to control himself as much as needed, which is manifested either by the obsessive need of touching Beauty's skin or by his need of keeping control of the situation when he clearly cannot stand the pressure any longer. This happens during a session with Beauty, when he teaches him how to prepare some kinds of pelts. As he wants to show him how to cut it, his nervousness, due to being around the boy, rises once more and makes him less careful only for a brief instant, which unfortunately costs him to cut his finger sharply and deeply (Bartlett 125–6). If it causes him to bleed quite impressively, it also makes Mr F lose his temper, as he suddenly becomes angry, mad and almost violent with his colleagues and mostly with Beauty. This attitude is definitely something his colleagues and himself are not used to, and especially not coming from Mr F. While talking about Oliver with his friend Vimini, Elio thinks to himself: "I had never been visited by such powerful contradictions before. This was agony, for something like rage was brimming over inside me." (Aciman 91) Elio is in-between two emotions, as he is both jealous Oliver is spending time with another man and interested by Vimini's comment on Oliver liking him. One way Elio has to deal with this lot of contradictory emotions is indeed to redirect part of it into others individuals. Another example of this jealousy can be found some pages later, when Marzia and Elio are making love and Elio is hoping Oliver will hear them: "Part of me hoped we'd bang against the wall, or that she'd be unable to smother a cry, and that all this might alert Oliver to what was happening on the other side of his wall. I imagined him napping and hearing my bedsprings and being upset." (123). This extract shows that even when making love with Marzia, Elio cannot but think of Oliver. At the same time, the previous sentence: "We made love in utter silence, neither of us closing our eyes" sums up the act in only a few words, highly contrasting with the first time Elio and Oliver have sex, which extends through many pages (128-34). Bose calls out Elio's "ambivalent" behavior as revealing of his anxiety: "Elio's incessant need to impede his actions

through the ambivalence of speech, wavering desires, and misconstrued ideas lays foundation for the subjectivity of action and, more acutely, his anxiety.” (Bose 161)

The feeling of frustration is characteristic of a romantic relationship and proves that something is missing for the individual. There is a lack impossible to fill up because the object of desire is inaccessible. This frustration keeps building up for Mr F, especially since he cannot figure out the face of the man’s body in his dream and, in the meantime, because he cannot physically touch Beauty but only stare at the hairline of his neck and his skin. We can read: “but then, as he stares at the hair curling over the nape of the boy’s neck, and at the exact way the individual vertebrae show through the skin just above his collar”, and down on the page:

he is suddenly able. . . to concentrate exclusively on the exact colour and texture, the density and lustre, of the dark hair curling on the back of the boy’s neck. . . .

He wants to touch it.

*The important thing is, touch.*

But he knows that that wouldn’t be a good idea.” (122, original emphasis)

Mr F is a frustrated character, as he cannot reach the body of men he is looking at. Another example of this happens while he is smoking outside the office and stares at other men: “Realising what he was doing, he threw down his half-smoked cigarette and stamped it out, aching with fury and frustration.” (Bartlett 201) These violent changes of uncontrollable emotions can be explained by the fact that Mr F was never told how to deal with emotions. Indeed, Mr F cannot remember his mother who died when he was very young and was raised by his father with his two brothers. He was always told not to show any emotions nor how to deal with them: “no one had ever taught him how to feel. Indeed, the only real lesson his father had ever taught him was that feelings should never be spoken of; his dead mother, for instance, was never mentioned, and there were no pictures of her in the house.” (Bartlett 46).

Ahmed points out that “emotions are associated with women” (3), echoing the characters’ gender identity crises. She places the feeling of shame as one of the main emotions in the relationship individuals have both with themselves and with others. She explains:

Shame can be described as an intense and painful sensation that is bound up with how the self feels about itself, a self-feeling that is felt by and on the body. . . . Certainly, when I feel shame, I have done something that I feel is bad . . . shame impresses upon the skin, as an intense feeling of the subject ‘being against itself’. Such a feeling of negation, which is taken on by the subject as a sign of its own failure, is usually experienced before another.” (103)

There is therefore a sensation of failure when feeling shame, and in particular, in the case of queer relationships “shame can also be experienced as *the affective cost of not following the scripts of normative existence*.” (Ahmed 107, original emphasis) This argument about queer relationships echoes Butler’s theory of a performative gender and the idea that the individual is playing an identity that does not always match its true form, which stays hidden. The narrator in *Skin Lane* reflects that “only secret things can be shameful” (Bartlett 242) This feeling of shame is precisely what haunts Elio and Mr F in their narratives. Mr F thinks to himself:

it was alright for everyone else in the world to look each other in the eye, put their hands over their breasts and make eyes in the mirror and let everyone in the room know exactly what they were thinking about, when he couldn’t manage it without starting to practically choke to death? And when they did it, there were no signs of shame at all so far as he could see; no blushing or blinking or shaking hands for them (Bartlett 242)

On the other hand, Elio makes a similar comment, highlighting his own struggle to decide what to do with Oliver, as he wants to be with him but fears the consequences:

But sleep would not come, and sure enough not one but two troubling thoughts, like paired specters materializing out of the fog of sleep, stood watch over me: desire and shame, the longing to throw open my window and, without thinking, run into his room stark-naked, and, on the other hand, my repeated inability to take the slightest risk to bring any of this about. There they were, the legacy of youth, the two mascots of my life, hunger and fear, watching over me, saying, *So many before you have taken the chance and been rewarded, why can’t you?* No answer. *So many have balked, so why must you?* No answer. And then it came, as ever deriding me: *If not later, Elio, when?* (107, original emphases)



Thus, *Call Me by Your Name* and *Skin Lane* both depict the story of a protagonist conflicted in his emotions and struggling between the norms of society and his own desire for the man he loves. All this questioning revolving about Elio's and Mr F's own identities and who they truly are eventually leads them to understand and to reconstruct themselves over a wounded and traumatized self.

### 3. INTROSPECTION THROUGH TRAUMATIC LOVE

The final part aims to prove that the reconstruction of a new queer identity is due to the experience of the love story that each character goes through. This traumatic experience results in creating a vulnerable and “wounded hero” (Ganteau & Onega 2018) that eventually understands himself and his queer identity better.

#### 3.1. THE TRAUMATIC EXPERIENCE OF LOVE

The hero, trapped in an impossible quest for love and inside an impossible reality, is deeply affected by the traumatic experience of the romantic relationship, creating a vulnerable and wounded self. As the mode of the romance can create a narrative detached from realism, it is undeniable that both Elio and Oliver are affected by trauma because of the “violence” of the relationship.

The characteristic elements of trauma are present in *Skin Lane* and *Call Me by Your Name*. In her book *Trauma Fiction*, Anne Whitehead gives the following definition about the characteristics of trauma: “[it] acts as a haunting or possessive influence which not only insistently and intrusively returns but is, moreover, experienced for the first time only in its belated repetition.” (Whitehead 5). In the case of *Skin Lane*, this definition directly echoes Mr F’s dream, which is almost a nightmare, and which plagues him by repeating itself all along the novel. Moreover, Mr F cannot remember his mother who died when he was very young. He was raised by his father along with his two older brothers and also experienced the unfortunate death of one of his brothers who went to war, before going himself to war and being the only survivor of his group, his nickname being the only reminder of such a tragic event. Yet, those events which can be identified as traumatic events in one’s life are barely mentioned or spoken of, as if Bartlett wanted to keep the reader’s attention away from these or rather direct it to

something else. *Skin Lane* mainly relies on this technique of “withheld information” (Bailey 2007), either in the narrative form or in the fact that both the reader and Mr F cannot conclude on what is happening to him, neither explain it. Mr F real name is also a marker of this withheld information. Indeed, Mr F is actually named Mr Freeman, “Mr F” being only a nickname coming from his experience of the war, pointing even more at the shattered character created by this traumatic event (Bartlett 39-40). His name ironically reminds the reader that Mr F is not a free man at all, but a trapped beast. The narrator also draws the reader’s attention on the possible effects of hidden elements, through Mr Scheiner’s comment on profit: “*But the hidden costs, do they consider? The **hidden** costs. That’s my point Mr F.*” (65, original emphases).

The whole novel conveys the impression of a silent trauma which only hides better the building tension, accumulating till the climactic scene between Beauty and Mr F. Indeed, as Ganteau and Onega notice, “when absent, [the] absence [of trauma] would be both the very symptom of its latency, its necessary inaccessibility, and the promise of a violent manifestation” (2013, 4). The dream does come back and forth throughout the novel, only returning more violently when Mr F thinks it has finally left him alone, barely remembering what happens in it, only to return “with a vengeance” (Bartlett 130). This dream, which Mr F secretly carries with him all along the narrative, undoubtedly tortures him and transforms him, till the climactic scene of the novel as the narrator comments: “It is a law of nature that a dream carried for too long inside you must, eventually, begin to rot” (278). As Ganteau points out, “when the traumatic breakthrough is essentially inaccessible, because radically unassimilated, the issue of realism is systematically at stake” (2017 *Performing the Void*, §3). As Whitehead writes, “the traumatic event is not fully acknowledged at the time that it occurs and only becomes an event at some later point of intense emotional crisis.” (6), meaning that this built tension will only explode during Mr F’s final confrontation with Beauty in what Ganteau calls a “negative epiphany” (2017 *Shifting Visibilities*, 180).

For Elio and Oliver, the flash forward in time at the end of the novel gives the reader a glimpse of them meeting again years after the summer mentioned in the first parts, only to show better how their love story survived through time. The frame postcard Oliver kept with him hung in his office is reminiscent of this impossible love that keeps living somewhere, even though both characters have “reasonably” moved on. At the beginning of Part 4, Elio discovers Oliver has left with the postcard leaving a blank on the wall: “Then I saw the unyellowed blank spot on the wall. Bless him. He had taken a framed, antique postcard of Monet’s *berm* dating back to 1905 or so.” (220) This postcard which depicts one of Monet’s paintings may appear quite insignificant for anyone while it is certainly valuable for Oliver as it reminds him of Elio, his relationship with him and Monet’s *berm*, where both characters kissed for the first time. A few pages later, when Elio meets again with Oliver years after, Oliver still has the postcard: “on the wall was a framed postcard of Monet’s *berm*. I recognized it immediately.” (236) It can be noticed that at this point in his life, Elio is more at ease with himself, when he reacts to Oliver’s discomfort over his proposition of having a drink: “I said a drink, not a fuck.” (236).

Both Elio and Oliver have moved on from their relationship, and yet, both of them remember how they felt towards each other. Some short sentences are introduced between parts of the dialogue like: “Silence.”, “Silence again.”, “An hour.” revealing the episodic aspect of their conversation, which revolves around remembering fragments of another life (238). Elio even refers to living a “parallel life” or a “coma” (240-1) and says “Seeing you here is like waking from a twenty-year coma.” This proves that both characters are not living the lives they wanted to or the ones they were supposed to, but had to conceal this first love story that profoundly marked them to live another life. Oliver even started a new life and got married (Aciman 230). Pearce points out this possibility of another love and of a repeatability of love:

Repetition, in other words, is the seemingly inexhaustible, yet infinitely exhausting, life-blood of romance, regardless of whether the story in question is bound for tragedy (where death is invoked to vouchsafe love’s non-repeatability) or a ‘happy ending’

(where past relationships, as well as new ones glimmering darkly on the horizon, are temporarily dazzled and silenced by an all consuming present). (2013, 71)

She also argues that such repeatability is even more traumatic: “love’s repeatability acknowledges that *there is no Other* and no means of transcending the ravenous, imploded ego; such a humiliating return-to-the-self is arguably, a far more brutal psychological reckoning than the traumas of first love and/or its loss.” (72) What Elio and Oliver lived together undeniably is one of the most important parts of their lives, and even though they had to go to a parallel life, some elements still echo this past relationship. The bubble of freedom and happiness that they had in Rome, for instance, still means a lot for both of them, as it remains one of their best feelings:

The first night is the one I remember best—perhaps because I fumbled so much. But also Rome. There is a spot on via Santa Maria dell’Anima that I revisit every time I’m in Rome. I’ll stare at it for a second, and suddenly it’ll all come back to me. I had just thrown up that night and on the way back to the bar you kissed me. People kept walking by but I didn’t care, nor did you. That kiss is still imprinted there, thank goodness. It’s all I have from you. This and your shirt.”

He remembered.

“And you,” I asked, “what moment?”

“Rome too. Singing together till dawn on Piazza Navona. (Aciman 239)

Mr F’s and Elio’s relationships are significant episodes in their lives bringing in their wake various consequences. Besides their psychological wounds, their bodies are not left without any marks and will keep forever the signs of these past relationships.

### 3.2. THE WOUNDED HERO AND THE SCARRED BODY

The experience of a traumatic love leaves its marks on the characters’ bodies, either physically or not. Mr F’s only visible wound is the one he does to himself with one of his knives while showing Beauty how to cut a pelt. The body of his dream does not show any physical mark, something that bothers Mr F as he is trying to understand the nature of this body. When

Mr F visits his dream again, but this time almost in a lucid state, to voluntarily slash the naked body and beat it with a belt to observe how it will bruise, cut open or if it will bleed, it causes the wound on his finger to reopen (Bartlett 136). These violent manifestations of physical wounds, drastically contrast with the fact that his body is quite surprisingly clean of any other physical wounds despite everything he has been through, as the narrator notices: “he was surprised not to see a mass of scars.” (Bartlett 232). The narrator then continues about the wounds with the following comment: “He tries telling himself at least he’s only got the one scar – and let’s face it, after all he’s been through, he should be covered. *Oh well*, he thinks, *they must all be on the inside.*” (Bartlett 273, original emphasis). This quick and almost meaningless sentence for Mr F is actually quite revealing of the evolution of the character up to that very moment. He has been marked considerably and permanently with wounds, deep inside him and has suffered from injuries coming from a psychological trauma. In a sense, this sentence summarizes Mr F’s trauma, being an invisible one on the inside. The narrator gives a hint about this invisible wound being a consequence of war: “People often think that men of Mr F’s particular age must be hiding some invisible wound, some secret damage that means they could never be quite the same man again after 1945” (Bartlett 43).

As Ganteau points out, Mr F is “an ordinary worker discovering the beast within himself, which provides an unmistakable metaphor of the interior foreign body of the trauma that Mr F is the unwitting bearer of.” (2017 *Shifting Visibilities*, 184). This self-discovery is particularly true with the passage in which Mr F follows a man in the street out of pure obsession, and which marks the beginning of “Mr F’s awakening” (Smart 2008). The term “awakening” echoes perfectly the permanent dream which rules the protagonist’s life and which will eventually cease when he has found the source of its torture and understood it comes from his unbearable love: “It was him. It was Beauty in the dream.” (Bartlett 144). But this obsessive quest for the other that both Elio and Mr F pursue is inscribed in the very definition of trauma.

Indeed, etymologically speaking, trauma means “wound” in the sense of something missing. This is exactly what Elio and Mr F are looking for, something, or in this case someone, they are missing. This missing love can be perceived in Mr F’s impossibility to pronounce the word “love” when facing Beauty:

Mr F knows what he is going to say — what he must say — and he braces himself to get the word out; that one word which he knows never can be, or should be, and never has been said to him. There is no one to hold him now, no one to reassure or talk him through this; no one to hold him gently by the shoulders and whisper in his ear *That’s it, I’ve got you; there we go; that’s better*. He must do this on his own. He knows that. “No one has ever —”  
*Here it comes...*

But the missing word is never spoken. (Bartlett 300-1, original emphasis)

Ganteau and Onega define the wounded hero as: “a new type of (physically and/or spiritually) wounded hero(ine) immersed in a paradoxical life quest that involves the embracing, rather than the overcoming, of suffering, alienation, and marginalisation as a form of self-definition.” (2018, 7-8). They also distinguish the wound from the scar, the latter being the result of a wound: “in other words, the scar is the trace that allows other people to recognize the other’s wound.” (10). The paradoxical aspect of the scar points out to the traumatic quest for love as it “nods in two directions at the same time – towards healing and towards pain – in a persisting tension” (10). Therefore, the wound, either physical or psychological, is an undeniable trace of the damaged body. Elio’s vulnerability appears through this notion of a damaged body, or a body that could be harmed by Oliver’s love. When he comes back to the kitchen, after having a nose bleed, Elio is scared that the housemaid Mafalda has figured his love for Oliver and comments: “But she was going to let me have my way in her kitchen without interfering, as if humoring someone who’d been hurt enough already. The bitch knew. She must have seen the foot. Her eyes followed me every step of the way as if ready to pounce on my knife before I slit my veins with it.” (Aciman 89). Even though Elio is not trying to kill himself,

this passage reveals that he feels damaged enough to potentially hurt himself. When Elio finds out Oliver has been dating another girl, Chiara, he imagines hurting himself out of jealousy: “Then it hit me that I could have killed myself instead, or hurt myself badly enough and let him know why I’d done it. If I hurt my face, I’d want him to look at me and wonder why, why might anyone do this to himself, until, years and years later — yes, Later! — he’d finally piece the puzzle together and beat his head against the wall.” (42). When Oliver has stopped talking to Elio after what happened at Monet’s berm, Elio writes to Oliver:

I tore out a sheet of paper from a school notebook.  
*Please don’t avoid me.*  
 Then I rewrote it:  
*Please don’t avoid me. It kills me.*  
 Which I rewrote:  
*Your silence is killing me.*  
 Way over the top.  
*Can’t stand thinking you hate me.*  
 Too plangent. No, make it less lachrymose, but keep the trite death speech.  
*I’d sooner die than know you hate me.*  
 At the last minute I came back to the original.  
*Can’t stand the silence. I need to speak to you.* (118-9)

This idea of being killed by Oliver’s love, or this absence of love, is recurrent in Elio’s relationship with Oliver, showing that Elio’s vulnerability does not inscribe itself on the body but rather inside the body, contrary to Mr F who has physical markers.

Shelley Rambo gives a contrastive definition of wounds and scars:

First, the scar is not an open wound, it is closed. Yet the wound is marked/remembered by the pattern it forms on the skin. The wound is not erased, but it is also not perpetually open. In trauma terminology, there is no repetition compulsion. Second, the site of the scar marks a boundary between person and society, individual body and the social body, psyche and matter. It marks a pivotal crossing between interior and exterior. Third, the scar is a creative site of witness and potential healing. It is also a social site. (Rambo 269, quoted in Ganteau and Onega 2018, 10)<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> See Shelley Rambo, “Refiguring Wounds in the Afterlife (of Trauma),” *Carnal Hermeneutics* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014).



She therefore sees scars and wounds as drawing a limit between the inside and the outside of the body, physiologically speaking, but also sociologically speaking. This argument can be linked with Anzieu's concept of the "Skin Ego" where the skin of an individual is conceptualized as a physical barrier between the inner self and the outer world. Furthermore, it involves a surface of exchange and of connection between the self and its environment:

By "Skin-ego" I am referring to a mental image used by the child's Ego during its early stages of development to represent itself as an Ego containing psychical contents, based on its experience of the surface of the body. This corresponds to the moment when the psychical Ego differentiates itself from the bodily Ego in operative terms but remains mixed up with it in figurative terms. (43)

Anzieu shows how the experience of the skin and on the surface of the body is determining in the construction of someone's experience with the self and the others. While Mr F's envelope progressively breaks open by his wounded finger, his impossibility of touching Beauty's skin crystallizes the impossible connection and exchange they can have. In *Call Me by Your Name*, physical contacts happen more often, from Oliver's very first touch of Elio's shoulder at the beginning of the novel, through their kiss at Monet's berm and to the moment they make love, while in contrast, they cannot touch each other in public.

In this particular case, when desire is mixed with pain, Anzieu explains: "These patients also suffer from narcissistic wounds, owing to weaknesses or flaws in their psychical wrapping: they have a diffuse feeling of malaise, of not living their own lives, of observing their mind or body from the outside, of being the spectator of something that both is and is not their own existence." (8). This is that feeling of not being in control of your life that Elio and Mr F have to overcome to finally understand themselves and figure their true identities.

### 3.3. LEARNING YOURSELF

The wounded hero has no choice but to come back to reality after almost destroying himself through the idealized romantic relationship. Elio is left shattered after Oliver has left, even talking about an “exhaustion” (Aciman 214). Mr F’s climactic scene with Beauty ends with a major life crisis and a breakdown, which is followed by the material destruction of his previous life, as he burns down to ashes Scheiner’s office (Bartlett 312). Overall, both Elio and Mr F have experienced what can be called a coming-of-age story. According to Buckley’s definition, who gives the general scheme of a *Bildungsroman*, an individual faces “constraints, social and intellectual, placed upon the free imagination”, a “hostile” environment “antagonistic to his ambitions” and which suggests “options not available to him in his present setting”. This forces him to leave the “repressive atmosphere of home” to begin his “real ‘education’” in a direct “experience of urban life” which “involves at least two love affairs or sexual encounters, one debasing, one exalting”. When the hero has finished his “initiation”, “he may then visit his old home, to demonstrate by his presence the degree of his success or the wisdom of his choice.” (17-8).

Elio’s and Mr F’s identities develop because of the romantic stories they have been through as they experience an awakening to their “true” self. If Elio is still quite young at the time he meets Oliver, it is interesting to see that Mr F experiences his awakening during his late forties, showing this can actually happen at any stage of one’s life. Several characters act like other triggers and or models to refer to during this transformation. For instance, in *Skin Lane*, the man in the museum who points out the skin details of St Thomas’s wound on the painting marks the beginning of Mr F’s obsession for skin and wounds (Bartlett 73-4). For Elio, his friend Vimini, who is suffering from leukemia, acts like a confidant. She is also the first one to talk about Elio liking Oliver (Aciman 91). Even Elio’s father comes to be a support of resilience

for Elio's sorrow, confessing he knew about their "beautiful friendship" and reassuring him (224). Overall, these secondary characters act as adjuvants to the hero's quest.

The whole experience of a first queer love is carried through an exploration of Elio's and Mr F's own sexualities and selves, trying to figure out who they are. This introspection takes place for instance during the peach scene in *Call Me by Your Name*, which allows Elio to explore his sexuality and question whether he would like the peach to be Oliver or Marzia: "All I wanted was for him or Marzia to pass by my balcony door and, through the half-drawn shutters, make out my naked body sprawled on the bed." He then adds: "If Oliver walked in on me now, I'd let him suck me as he had this morning. If Maria came, I'd let her help me finish the job." (146). This scene is also the occasion for him to wonder about his relation to himself and how he defines himself, looking for role models or characters that could have experienced such a love story in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*:

I scanned my mind for images from Ovid – wasn't there a character who had turned into a peach and, if there wasn't, couldn't I make up one on the spot, say, an ill-fated young man and young girl who in their peachy beauty had spurned an envious deity who had turned into a peach tree, and only now, after three thousand years, were being given what had been so unjustly taken away from them (147)

Elio's "intellectual" background – and the rich intertextuality of the novel – helps him a lot to understand his feelings, especially with the poetry book *Se Lamore*, which follows Elio and Oliver's story as the materialization of their romantic, and therefore unrealistic, love. His searching for himself is mentioned several times with references to literature: "We could talk about the sea, the Piave, or fragments of Heraclitus, such as 'Nature loves to hide' or 'I went in search of myself.'" (Aciman 74). The two fragments discussed are indeed significant of their relationship, as they are hiding from others' sight while experiencing something that will define their identities. When talking with his father about his relationship with Oliver, Elio reflects: "I was thinking, instead, of Emily Brontë's words: because 'he's more myself than I am.'" (223)

This statement echoes perfectly something at the heart of Elio and Oliver's relationship, and which gave the title to the novel. "Call me by your name and I'll call you by mine" is indeed Elio and Oliver's couple thing, but it also highlights the idea that each of them find themselves in the other one (Aciman 134).

Mr F even experiences a "rebirth". Behind the metaphor of burning down to ashes his workplace, and therefore the symbol of his previous life, there is also the idea of destroying what was hiding his confined identity. As the narrator explains, in another analogy with the fairy tale of *Beauty and the Beast*, "*instead of his flesh, in our story it is the walls of his imprisoning castle that must now dissolve.*" (Bartlett 310). This dissociation between Mr F's older identity and his new one had already been hinted at by the narrator after the confrontation with Beauty in the staircase at Scheiner's. At the end of this chapter, indeed, Mr F is described as being "half-dead" (249), and in the following chapter, Mr F is then referred to as "the man with the worn-out face" and "the man who heard the front door click shut behind him" (250). The narrator then comments: "The suit was identical – but this is surely not the same man who we met at the beginning of our story." (250). By using generic terms to refer to the protagonist, the narrator therefore insists on the differentiation of the "two" different Mr F.

Because Elio is narrating his own story, as an auto-diegetic narrator who tells about a past part of his life, he has the possibility to reflect on it retrospectively. This is crucial in realizing what the experience was about in the end, and to understand the mixed feelings that came to him on the different stages of his relationship with Oliver. Looking back on this relationship allows Elio to comment on what could not be explained at the time. When he first dreamt of Oliver, for instance, Elio says: "This is like coming home, like coming home after years away among Trojans and Lestrygonians, like coming home to a place where everyone is like you, where people know, they just know — coming home as when everything falls into

place and you suddenly realize that for seventeen years all you'd been doing was fiddling with the wrong combination" (Aciman 15). There is a clear understanding that he feels like himself, and not an altered version made to comply with others when being with Oliver. Towards the end of the novel, his feelings are even clear enough to understand he has feeling for other men. He concludes about one of the previous summer guests:

The mystery was resolved, as such things always are with me, in my sleep that night. It had never struck me until then. And yet it had been staring me in the face for two whole years. His name was Maynard. Early one afternoon, while he must have known everyone was resting, he had knocked at my window to see if I had black ink—he had run out, he said, and only used black ink, as he knew I did. He stepped in. I was wearing only a bathing suit and went to my desk and handed him the bottle. He stared at me, stood there for an awkward moment, and then took the bottle. That same evening he left the flask right outside my balcony door. Any other person would have knocked again and handed it back to me. I was fifteen then. But I wouldn't have said no. In the course of one of our conversations I had told him about my favorite spot in the hills. (221)

The final pages of *Skin Lane* take place after Mr F's death, and give the reader the opportunity to better understand the final confrontation of Beauty and Mr F at Scheiner's thanks to the letter addressed to Beauty and thus offering a final insight of Mr F's feelings for the boy. Mr F himself considers this letter as written by someone who is not him: "The notepaper was damp and badly stained, but he could still make out almost all of the words. When he first read them, he could barely remember writing them; the sentences sounded like somebody else's" (Bartlett 338). After re-reading it though, he decided to seal it and keep it, only for it to be found after his death. In his letter, Mr F finally manages to put words on what he is and on his love for Beauty, while acknowledging society is not necessarily on his side:

*I don't think you're ever going to write to me, are you, so I'll just have to make the first move myself. Trouble is, I don't know how to say it. I was reading the paper this week on the train, and it said that people like me are bound to have problems, and I think this is the biggest one of all for me really, this not knowing how to say things. The general gist of the paper seemed to be that its stupid, what I am, but I don't know that, do I? I don't know anything. . . .*

*PS I say I don't know anything but that's a lie. I know what you look like. (342, original emphasis)*

Overall, Bartlett and Aciman manage to create ordinary characters who eventually have to face a reality they were not ready to acknowledge yet and which considerably changed them. Through their obsessions and their quest for the loved ones, they actually undergo a self-questioning phase, searching for their true identity.

## CONCLUSION

As this study showed, the construction of a queer identity revolves around the three entities involved in a romantic relationship: the “hero”, the loved one, and the society that they live in. Both *Call Me by Your Name* and *Skin Lane* feature the story of a man who becomes acquainted with queer love for the first time, resulting in a (re)definition of who they are, or at least of who they think they are. The main idea of this study was to show that both Elio and Mr F, the protagonists of the novels, do not become “not-heterosexual-men” but reveal themselves to be so and understand they were hiding unconsciously their queer identities which progressively develop and affirm themselves through the narratives.

In order to do so, there has to be a trigger to this revelation, without which the hero would not be able to acknowledge his true identity. This trigger resides in the encounter with a character who will eventually become the loved one. As Mr F’s story proves, there may be proleptic elements of this forthcoming encounter, with the beginning of his dreaming. Even though both Elio and Mr F are resentful towards their loved ones at first sight, they however quickly develop an obsessive love for them, as desire emerges. At this point, the heroes start to break from their previous life to enter fully into the ideal world of the relationships.

This other world, which represents a better version of the society they live in, is the perfect landscape for the development of the relationships, as it enables the protagonists to escape from society’s heteronormative scheme. They are in the meantime inevitably confronted to a gender crisis because of the “performative gender”, as Butler defines it, which does not match their true self. As a consequence, Elio and Mr F undergo a lot of overwhelming emotions from a large specter, from love and passion to jealousy and anger, through frustration and

shame. These emotions are psychological markers of the transformation which love operates on individuals, as Pearce explains (2007 and 2013).

Beyond psychological markers, the heroes are also physically marked by the traumatic experience they go through. Love, indeed, can also be a traumatic experience, especially in the case of queer love which most of the time puts the individual at trial. This results in creating a “wounded hero” (Ganteau and Onega 2018) with a scarred body which is revealing of the contact with the loved one. As this unhealthy relationship comes to an end, both Elio and Mr F eventually understand what has happened to them, and can finally grasp what was “wrong” with them, or rather, what made them having a different experience than the one society expected from them.

What has previously been called a “gender crisis”, or more simply a “transformation” can overall be understood as being a self (re)discovery and a liberation brought by love and its challenges. Through the prism of a coming-of-age story, it is mostly the learning aspect of the self that distinguishes from other elements. In each novel, the hero is not the same one he was at the beginning of the narrative since he has grown from this episode of his life and will now have this metaphorical piece of luggage with him in the possible future occurrences of such events, changing his perception of it and knowing his worth, his value and his true identity.

Both *Call Me by Your Name* and *Skin Lane* are contemporary novels that depict a queer story sets in the 1970/1980s in European society. Queer love stories, and their outcomes, are indeed intimately linked to the time period and location they portrayed, in the case of realist fiction. In order to explore this theme, some authors do not hesitate to offer a retelling of classical texts. For instance, Madeline Miller’s work on mythological stories brings a new dimension to the development of queer love stories and the impact of such relationships by exploring Patroclus and Achilles’ romantic relationship in *The Song of Achilles* (2011).



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