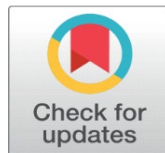


EXPLORING SEXUALITY IN MY POLICEMAN AND CALL ME BY YOUR NAME: A STUDY OF IDENTITY, REPRESENTATION AND DESIRE

Adheena Chandra ¹, Dr. Aiswarya Lakshmi M. ²

¹ Integrated MA English Language & Literature, Amrita School of Arts, Humanities & Commerce, Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham, Kochi, Kerala, India

² Associate Professor, Department of English Amrita School of Arts, Humanities & Commerce, Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham, Kochi Campus, Kerala, India



Received 29 March 2025

Accepted 21 April 2025

Published 25 April 2025

DOI [10.29121/granthaalayah.v13.i4.ISMER.2025.6079](https://doi.org/10.29121/granthaalayah.v13.i4.ISMER.2025.6079)

Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Copyright: © 2025 The Author(s). This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

With the license CC-BY, authors retain the copyright, allowing anyone to download, reuse, re-print, modify, distribute, and/or copy their contribution. The work must be properly attributed to its author.



ABSTRACT

This paper examines the complex portrayal of sexuality in *Call Me by Your Name* (2017) and *My Policeman* (2022), highlighting the ways in which identity, desire, and societal norms influence the lives of the main characters. These two cinematic explanations of sexuality delve into how identity, desire, and societal expectations shape the experiences of main characters as they struggle to express their lives through love, repression, and the search for authenticity. Set against distinct historical and cultural perspectives—specifically 1980s Italy and 1950s England, both films explore the personal decisions that queer characters make while navigating the emotional depths of love, repression, and their ongoing journey towards authenticity. In examining these two narratives within their context, this study explores the ways in which gender roles are defined or reinforced, how queer desire is either articulated or silenced, and how these characters manoeuvre through restricted social situations. In the end, however, the overall messages of the films are quite similar: they uncover the inner conflict of recognizing or denying one's own truth and the emotional strain of concealing one's desires from the world.

Keywords: Call Me by Your Name, My Policeman, Sexuality, Queer Identity, Desire, Representation, Repression, Identity, Cinematic Portrayal

1. INTRODUCTION

In the last few decades, cinema has become an increasingly powerful tool for exploring gender and sexuality, particularly through stories about queer people. Some movies that stand out in this regard are *Call Me by Your Name* (2017) directed by Luca Guadagnino, and *My Policeman* (2022), directed by Michael Grandage. Both films feature complex depictions of the emotional complexities of queer individuals (both gay couples) in love, identity, and repression—and, as the director Michael Grandage observes, the “same-sex” relationships found on screen are imbued with

a markedly different socioeconomic and cultural context, from rural Italy (the 1980s) to the increasingly conservative England of the 1950s.

Call Me by Your Name tell the story of a young Elio Perlman, an early teen attracted to Oliver, a visiting graduate student from the USA, and goes on a whirlwind but heartbreaking summer date with Oliver. Taking place in northern Italy, the movie shows the explosive excitement of one's first love, the confusion of self-discovery, and the tenderly sweet beauty of longing. Whereas, *My Policeman* follows Tom Burgess, a closeted policeman torn between his love for Patrick, a museum curator, and his socially acceptable marriage to Marion. The movie moves between the brutal 1950s and the peaceful 1990s and tells the emotional cost of living a life dictated by fear and tradition.

It is also well-known that both movies are also fuelled with queer themes such as desire for equality, gender identity, and the fight to maintain one's own identity in an insecure world. It seems that both stories have their own quirks and perspectives on life, but nevertheless, both are about exploring their sexuality and love, finding a balance between authenticity and the weight of society's pressures on them, and how the relationship between these two factors affects their interactions with others.

In terms of gender, the two films challenge conventional ideas of masculinity, contrasting Oliver's initial emotional "restraint" with Elio's "broad front"—a perspective that complex an exploration of male expression that conflicts with prevalent notions of masculinity. Tom's emotional sternness and distance distinguish him as a man moulded by societal and cultural repression and Patrick represents a more expressive and artistic version of masculinity. Female characters also play a crucial role in highlighting and complicating their gender roles—Marion serves as a significant contrast in this regard—embodying a blend of complicity and limitation within heteronormative framework.

This paper examines the aspects of sexuality in both *Call Me by Your Name* (2017) and *My Policeman* (2022). The study employs a conceptual phenomenological approach to investigate how identity and desire are depicted, influenced and silenced in both the film. This examination aims to illustrate that although the two films differ in tone and setting, they align in their examination of the human price of repression and the persistent need for connection and authenticity.

2. IDENTITY: QUEER SELFHOOD AND INTERNAL CONFLICT

In both *Call Me by Your Name* and *My Policeman*, at the core of the narrative lies an investigation of queer identity, shaped and circumscribed by vastly different social, cultural, and historical frameworks. The characters- namely, Elio and Tom experience dilemma as they battle with their sexuality and their sense of self, yet their journeys are very different from one another due to the differing levels of societal pressure and self-determination available to them. Through these characters, the films present a pathetic consideration of how identity is not just discovered but also accepted within certain contexts.

In *Call Me by Your Name*, Elio's queer self-realization is a quiet intensity. He is seventeen and at that stage in life characterized by distress, confusion and sexual awakening. His encounter with Oliver, a handsome student who's working as an intern for Elio's father, serves as the force for a greater understanding of his desires and himself. The film does this with great delicacy, employing moments of silence, persistent gazes, and the unspoken tension between protagonists to express Elio's

inner turmoil. What starts as adolescent curiosity slowly leads into a deep emotional and physical connection, and later, a self-identity.

What stands out in Elio's experience is the relative freedom of his surroundings. Even though the film is a 1983 production, and therefore occurred in an era before queer identities were openly discussed, Elio's family—specifically, his father—are an arena of reserved acceptance. It is with a poignant speech at the tail-end of the movie that Elio's father subtly admits to seeing the beauty and the pain in his son's love affair with Oliver and bestows empathy without judgment. This quiet but powerful moment highlights the significance of family support in the identity formation process. Though Elio continues to endure heartbreak and bewilderment, his experience is set as one of growth and emotional truth, not shame or denial.

My Policeman, on the other hand, offers a bleaker vision of queer identity, informed by a highly repressive culture. Set mostly in England in the 1950s, the film is about Tom Burgess, a young police officer who embarks on a secret love affair with Patrick, all while dating and marrying Marion, a schoolteacher. Unlike Elio, Tom doesn't have the freedom—or safety—to express himself openly as he is a closeted homosexual in a homophobic era when homosexuality is not just socially unacceptable but illegal as well, and therefore he must compartmentalize his life and lie about himself. His decision to wed Marion is not only a facade, but also a manifestation of his internalized confusion and fear.

Tom's identity is split between social expectation and personal reality. He enacts masculinity in ways that comply with his sexual time—through his work, his body, and his old-fashioned courtship of Marion. But beneath this facade is a man divided between the desire he is not allowed to feel and the life he is supposed to lead. The film's dual chronology—complicating youthful Tom with his older, emotionally repressed version of himself—underscores the long-term impact of this suppression of identity. Even years afterward, Tom is still emotionally repressed, carrying the burdens of his youth choices and limitations.

The comparison of Tom to Patrick also underscores the range of queer identity. Patrick, while just as bound by the time, is more open and vulnerable in his embrace of identity. As a thinker and an artist, he embodies a gentler, more emotive form of masculinity, and his affection for Tom is heartfelt and uncompromising. Patrick's diary, employed as a narrative tool in the film, serves as an expression of the identity that Tom never let himself fully inhabit. It is through this work that Marion and the reader realize the emotional richness and tragedy of the love which could not be expressed openly.

Both films highlight how the social context is important in determining identity. Elio's Italy is not judgment-free, but it is infinitely more permissive than Tom's England, where institutional and legal homophobia set the terms of private and public life. Elio's identity evolves naturally through self-discovery and feeling, whereas Tom's is distorted by fear, secrecy, and duty. The contrast between them is striking—while Elio, though heartbroken, emerges from the experience with clarity and lasting memories; Tom is left burdened with regret and a life unlived.

Despite these differences, both Elio and Oliver traverse the tenuous line between desire and identity, and both endure the psychological toll of not being able to fully live in their truth. Elio's anguish is fleeting but intense, moulded by his first love. Tom's suffering is long and hidden, conditioned by decades of denial. In both these instances, their identity is not merely a question of self-awareness, but it is in fact a negotiation with the world at large—one that is very much influenced and shaped by cultural expectations, legal frameworks, and social relationships.

In the end, both *Call Me by Your Name* and *My Policeman* offer identity as a flexible and changing experience which is shaped by context as well as individuality. Through Elio and Tom, the movies question what it is to know oneself and brings out how hard it is to accept oneself in a world that doesn't accept you. Their life teaches us that queer identity is not just about whom one loves, but about the strength it requires to live one's truth—whether in moments of intimate vulnerability or in decades of silence.

3. DESIRE: LONGING, INTIMACY, AND SILENCE

In both *Call Me by Your Name* and *My Policeman*, desire takes the emotional centre in multitudes. Sometimes it is tender sometimes painful and mostly repressed. In both movies, queer desire is represented not just through bodily intimacy but also through moments of silence, glances, and emotional distance. These visual choices highlight how longing is conditioned by the social structures that surround it. The strength of desire in these narratives is not necessarily gratified; rather, it smoulders in the background, tending to become stronger in repression than in consummation.

In *Call Me by Your Name*, Elio and Oliver's relationship is known for slow-burning tension. Their connection starts with ambiguity, shyness, and emotional distance, and it slowly unravelled making them stronger as the characters circle one another in the same spaces. Desire is expressed subtly, it is through touches held a fraction too long, through uncertain glances and endless silences. Guadagnino's approach relies heavily on non-verbal narrative, which allows desire to ferment in the unspoken spaces between words. Such a contained technique generates a feeling of intimacy that is intensely private and emotionally raw.

One of the most memorable scenes in the film—the "peach scene"—is an intense metaphor for Elio's unbridled passion. It is a moment of sexual discovery and vulnerability that conveys the intensity, deep-seated confusion, and epitome of teenage desire. Far from reducing the act to something merely erotic, the scene is an introspective metaphor for Elio's profound emotional and carnal desire for intimacy. The eventual consummation of their affair is as much an emotional surrender as a sexual one, highlighting the way desire, for Elio, is entangled with the fear of loss and the thrill of discovery.

My Policeman, on the other hand, contrast this by depicting a portrait of desire that is more subdued, contained, and ultimately much more tragic. There's no doubt Tom is attracted to Patrick, yet he hides that temptation behind masks of social performance and inner anguish and turmoil. Their trysts are few and secretebbed in a darkened back room or made discreetly by some subtle caress. There's passion, but there's also fear hanging in the balance. In contrast to Elio and Oliver, whose passion is permitted to develop in comparative security, Tom and Patrick live in a world where visibility is risky.

Tom's marriage with Marion demonstrates the emotional gap created by unsatisfied desire. Though his connection with Patrick is close and emotionally deep, with Marion he is awkward, distant, and robotic. Marion becomes a silent witness to Tom's emotional absence, and as time passes, she comes to see that the passion in their marriage is insincere and forced. This emotional distance is not so much about sexuality, but about sincerity—Tom is unable to desire openly because he is unable to live honestly.

Patrick's diary, found later in the movie, serves as a conduit for the longing he was never able to freely express. As his words are shared with us, the viewer gets to

see an expression of love and longing that could never truly be. His writing speaks of a silenced closeness, one that overflows with longing and sadness. Art thus becomes resistance—a means of maintaining reality when it would be required elsewhere.

Both movies emphasize the emotional cost of unfulfilled or suppressed desire. In *Call Me by Your Name*, desire is painful and joyful but ultimately accepted. In *My Policeman*, desire is a burden that is repressed and grieved. Through the experiences of their characters, both movies make it clear that queer desire is frequently constructed as much by the world outside as by inner feeling. Whether portrayed in a lingering stare, a forbidden caress, or even through written admission, longing in these movies showcases the profound human longing for attachment—and the price of being kept from it. Desire is at the affective centre of both *Call Me by Your Name* and *My Policeman*, in the form of either sweet or painful, and often suppressed. These are filmmaking decisions that emphasize how longing is constructed based on the social limitations that bind it. Desire in these tales is not necessarily satisfied; rather, it simmers under the surface, at times becoming more intense in being repressed than in being realized.

4. REPRESENTATION: QUEERNESS IN CINEMATIC NARRATIVE

How queerness is figured in *Call Me by Your Name* and *My Policeman* extends far beyond plot—it's inherent within the films' visual style, emotional tone, and narrative architecture. Both directors use cinematic language to fashion the audience's experience of queer love and repression, creating close emotional worlds that either contain or restrict the characters' inner lives. These visual decisions not only determine how queerness is presented but also reproduce larger cultural narratives surrounding identity, visibility, and emotional authenticity.

In *Call Me by Your Name*, visual narrative serves a critical purpose in establishing a sense of liberation. The movie is filled with warm, natural light, and rich scenery. The rural northern Italian summer setting feels surreal and enchanting, mirroring Elio's inner awakening. Nature is a refuge for queer desire, concealed but resonant, accessible yet unsaid. The camerawork of Elio and Oliver navigating through orchards, swimming in rivers, and reclining in sun-filled rooms is a creation of a world where their connection can gradually unfold away from the brutality of judgment.

In direct contrast, *My Policeman* is shot in cold, monotonous colours and claustrophobic spaces that visually reflect the emotional suppression that the characters undergo. The film spends much of its time indoors—in small apartments, dark offices, and emotionally barren domestic environments. The camerawork prioritizes stillness and control, with tightly composed shots that reflect the characters' inability to escape societal norms. The difference in spatial freedom between the two films is revealing: while *Call Me by Your Name* provides room and movement, *My Policeman* confines its characters to immobility and silence.

Voice and silence also enhance the emotional contrast between the two stories. In *Call Me by Your Name*, the words spoken by Elio's father towards the end gives voice to what remains unspoken in queer coming-of-age tales. It provides affirmation, compassion, and a precious instance of frank discussion of same-sex love. *My Policeman* is contrasted with Tom's habitual silence and affective passivity. He rarely reveals his emotions, and his sexuality goes largely unsaid for most of his life. The absence of words regarding his homosexuality is a kind of emotional

censorship, demonstrating how repression in society can be internalized and self-perpetuating.

Gender roles and character dynamics also inform the films' portrayals of queerness. Marion, in *My Policeman*, is a victim of her husband's secret identity and a passive enforcer of heteronormativity. Her character represents the emotional pressure of compulsory heterosexuality—stuck in a marriage cemented through lies. Oliver's masculinity in *Call Me by Your Name* is complicated: he is assured, athletic, and initially emotionally reserved—a portrait of a heterosexual man but slowly shows vulnerability. Tom, by contrast, performs traditional masculinity to maintain a façade of normalcy, suppressing his true desires in the process.

In the end, both movies display how queerness may be felt—or suppressed—through film decisions. While *My Policeman* showcases a muted, agonized rendition of queer passion formed by way of historical restraint, *Call Me by Your Name* draws a tender, idealized vision of same-sex intimacy, and both reflect how representation encompasses not just being visible, but how one can be visible.

5. CONCLUSION

The investigation of gender and sexuality in *Call Me by Your Name* and *My Policeman* uncovers the intensely personal and frequently agonizing truths of queer identity, desire, and representation. Although the two films contrast in tone, setting, and historical moment, both present richly detailed portraits of people negotiating the intricacies of selfhood and love in worlds that either support or suppress authenticity.

Elio and Tom are two completely different yet intertwined queer experiences. Elio's process is one of self-discovery, inquiry, and emotional exposure, playing out in a context in which, while not quite open-ended, there is room for exploration and development. His life demonstrates how identity is not just formed by individual want but also by the encouragement of those around him. At the same time Tom's journey is one of denial, fear, and of emotional stagnation. Lived in a time where homosexuality was illegal and ostracized, his identity is fragmented and concealed, and his life is characterized by emotional distance and unattained yearning. The tension between the characters highlights the force of time, space, and social organizations in fashioning queer selfhood.

Desire in both films is strong and moving, but it comes in various forms. Desire in *Call Me by Your Name* comes in physical closeness, in mutual silences, and in the raw vulnerability of first love. Even when the relationship dissolves, Elio's desire is acknowledged and remembered truthfully. *My Policeman*, on the other hand, constructs desire as precarious, something that needs to be concealed. Tom and Patrick's love exists in shadows alone, and the emotional cost of this secrecy ripples throughout their lives for decades. The failure to live openly, to say desire out loud, becomes a sort of silent tragedy that pervades the tone of the film.

Visually and narratively, both films make conscious efforts based on their themes. *Call Me by Your Name* employs light, space, and nature to promote intimacy and openness, while *My Policeman* trusts in tight spaces, monotone colour schemes, and affective reserve to demonstrate repression. In addition, both movies question gender expectations and societal norms, employing characters such as Marion and Oliver to underscore the way expectations of old constrict, complicate, and even twist queer life.

When exploring identity, desire, and representation, *Call Me by Your Name* and *My Policeman* are doing more than chronicle love affairs—they offer emotional

topographies informed by history, culture, and terror. Their characters are deeply human, trapped between how they feel and what the world lets them become. Both films provide a rich critique of the queer experience—both then and now—that reminds audiences of the continued necessity of empathy, exposure, and the ability to live and love openly without fear.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

REFERENCES

- Acclaimed Films. (2022). *My Policeman*: A film based on the novel by Bethan Roberts. Retrieved from [Amazon Prime Video or relevant distributor website].
- Aciman, A. (2007). *Call Me by Your Name*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Butler, J. (1990). *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge.
- Grandage, M. (Director). (2022). *My Policeman* [Film]. Amazon Studios; Independent Film Company.
- Guadagnino, L. (Director). (2017). *Call Me by Your Name* [Film]. Frenesy Film Company; La Cinéfacture; RT Features.
- Ivory, J. (Screenwriter). (2017). *Call Me by Your Name* [Screenplay]. Based on the novel by André Aciman.
- Roberts, B. (2012). *My Policeman*. Chatto & Windus.
- Sedgwick, E. K. (1990). *Epistemology of the Closet*. University of California Press