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*Call Me by Your Name: The Beauty of an Unchained Love*

Everyone at some point in their lives undergoes a stage of finding their own unique identity. This stage is unavoidable and natural, as it is the byproduct of the transformation of becoming an adult from an adolescent. During this stage which most people would call puberty, disorientation and confusion could occur, especially when one undergoes a process of defining one's sexual identity. The process of figuring out one's sexual identity has always been a delicate and a controversial subject, for there were invisibly set boundaries of what was considered to be "normal" in this society. Then who fell in the category of "abnormality?" People who were unwillingly categorized into "abnormality" were mostly sexual minorities such as gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgenders. Sexual minorities were not accepted in a "normal" society until recently, and even this acceptance is still subjectively varied by person. Even though they have not caused any harm to the society, people viewed them negatively just because they did not fit in the society with the majority of the heterosexual population. Because there is such categorization, bigotry towards social minorities started to emerge, and this bigotry started to disrupt the natural process of exploring one's sexual identity. Consequently, being confused with one's sexual identity and being afraid of not being accepted in the society could potentially cause extensive devastation to an individual undergoing the process of defining who he is. A film directed by Luca Guadagnino, *Call Me by Your Name* implicitly criticizes this set standards and categorizations of social normality by highlighting the protagonist, Elio's, process of discovering

and defining his own sexual identity. The film, while it may seem like a typical love story between the two main protagonists, Elio and Oliver, puts more emphasis on depicting Elio's transition from an adolescent into adulthood with the underlying process of self-discovery, self-exploration, sexual desire, and the experiences of pain and vulnerability. From this process Elio gains the ability to be honest with himself and have the freedom to love, liberating himself from the pressures of the societal norms and bigotry that was commonly held towards the homosexual population in the 1980s. **Therefore, through several cinematic techniques, semiotics of the apricot, synecdoche, and the allegory of the importance of experiences, *Call Me by Your Name* explores several stages of self-defining process of an adolescent entering adulthood, which ultimately leads to a candid remark on the purity and freedom of love in an era when homosexual relationship was not accepted as a societal norm and bigotries prohibited homosexuality.**

**Initially, certain cinematic techniques in the film convey comprehensive character development of Elio from the moment he meets Oliver to falling in love with him, which depicts certain elements of Elio's journey of self-discovery: vulnerability, confusion, and pain.** While the film is mostly told from the perspective of an outsider, it sometimes portrays the narrative exclusively from Elio's point of view, signifying the importance of Elio's perspective of the developing relationship between Elio and Oliver. For instance, the film begins when Elio gets the first impression of Oliver by looking down from the window. This scene is filmed through the utilization of the tilting shot. As a result of this perspective, Oliver cannot see Elio, but only Elio can see Oliver. While looking down, Elio delivers his first impression of Oliver as an intruder. The term "intruder" implies that Oliver is a physically different kind of person. He is older, taller, and bigger than Elio, and since Oliver is a foreigner from America who is

temporarily visiting Elio's house, Elio feels uncertainty about this arbitrary person "invading" his personal space. Ironically, Elio says it in a playful and childish tone, as if he is used to having such "intruders" at his house. This scene gives a glimpse of a popular personality exhibited from an adolescent undergoing the process of self-discovery and emotional imbalance: the coexistence of curiosity and vulnerability. Elio is curious about Oliver, and he wants to get to know him better. However, Elio is refraining himself because he is afraid that if he shows much of himself towards Oliver, he will be left vulnerable and could receive damage inflicted by him. Therefore, Elio approaches Oliver cautiously and attempts to distance himself from Oliver. His first impression of Oliver is followed by confusion which is also another common characteristic of puberty. Elio goes through two relationships with partners of different sex and gets confused between the two relationships. Is Elio in love with Marcia or Oliver? From the visuals, it is hard to distinguish which person Elio loves more. However, from the sound effect, it becomes evident that his desire gears more towards Oliver. As he honestly depicts his emotions towards Oliver, Elio is starting to understand his sexual identity and desires. By confining the sound effect from Elio's perspective, it amplifies Elio's emotions toward Oliver: whenever Elio is excited or nervous seeing Oliver, he portrays it through different styles and arrangement of music. When Elio feels melancholy knowing that he cannot stay with Oliver forever, subtle and delicate music dominates the scene, portraying the fragile state of Elio. When Elio feels strong passion or agitation, loud and firm music hits the background, conveying the notion of boldness and determination from Elio. In other words, sound effects allow Elio to be honest with his feelings which he uses as a guide to define his sexual identity and to confirm the notion that he is genuinely interested in Oliver, which does not occur when Elio is in a relationship with Marica. The confusion and disorientation of Elio's journey to finding his sexual identity get somewhat

cleared by Elio's representation of his emotions through music. If the sound effect is the catalyst of Elio establishing his sexual identity, the longingness he feels before and after the terminal relationship with Oliver is depicted through different cinematic techniques such as lighting, inverted colors, and a single long-take shot. After Elio confesses his love, he waits for Oliver on the road not knowing whether Oliver likes him back or not. During the time that seems like forever, Elio's anxiety and nervousness are portrayed through the backlit shot. Only the silhouette of Elio is exhibited, and since the contour of his face is all that the audiences can observe, one cannot strictly define his facial expression but only to assume the uncertainty and anxiety Elio feels at the moment. During their last trip before Oliver permanently leaves for America, Elio reminisces all of the memories he has made with Oliver. However, the image of recollection is portrayed through inverted colors, creating the scene to be horrific and shocking. This transition of color represents Elio's inner turmoil and pain before their relationship terminates. Elio knows that Oliver has to leave; nevertheless, he is still scared to let him go. After Oliver leaves, Elio copes through the emptiness and pain, allowing him to grow up into a more mature state. However, Elio breaks down after Oliver calls him that he is marrying someone in America. Without words, Elio sits in front of the fireplace and expresses his devastation in a three-minute, long-take shot that lasts until the credit rolls up. The camera centers him and blurs out the background. However, the background is not entirely blurred out and busy movement to prepare for the Jewish holiday, Hanukkah, behind Elio is noticeable. This scene implies two meanings. The facial expression of Elio explicitly depicts the devastation and pain of losing his Oliver. However, the implicit meaning, which lies in the blurred background, represents reality and that the world still moves on which Elio has to accept during the process of growing into adulthood. Reality does not have sympathy, and while it is heartbreaking to lose his

first love, the film presents the pain as the last challenge that Elio needs to overcome to finish his journey of maturity and self-discovery.

**Furthermore, in *Call Me by Your Name*, apricot is a symbol, index, and an icon. It is used to reveal Elio's sexual desire and self-exploration in the process of defining his sexual identity. Besides, apricot is the medium that connects Elio and Oliver's beautiful relationship that will eventually come to an end.** Oliver and Elio's father discuss the epistemology of the term, "apricot." Elio's father, professor Perlman, originates the term from the words of Arabic. However, Oliver corrects him by mentioning that the term "apricot" actually originated from a Greek word that means "premature" or "precocious." This definition highlights Elio's premature personality and foreshadows the different stages of self-discovery he will go through during the process of being in an intimate relationship with Oliver. Moreover, the apricot symbolizes homosexuality and love in traditional Chinese folklore. It is not a coincidence that the film contains several scenes with the two male protagonists, Elio and Oliver, by the apricot tree. Through the introduction of the "fruit," the connection between Elio and Oliver becomes tangible. In essence, the "apricot" is an icon that breaks down the walls between Elio and Oliver and connects them. Oliver helps Elio pick apricots in the midst of discussing Heidegger and his true emotions. Elio and Oliver also climb the apricot tree to express their love discreetly. Moreover, by eating the apricot that Elio utilized as a medium for his sexual exploration, Oliver shows his affection and desire for Elio. Therefore, the literary symbol and the icon of "apricot" represent the overall intimate homosexual relationship that Elio and Oliver have throughout the film. However, the most critical value of apricot lies in its purity and the fact that it is a seasonal fruit. Alone in the attic, Elio explores his sexual desires through the medium, apricot. Since an apricot is what connects Elio and Oliver, when Elio looks at the apricot while

lying in bed, he thinks of Oliver and uses the apricot to reveal his own sexual desires. Elio is ashamed by his actions when Oliver tries to eat the apricot and makes an effort to stop him. The guilt of self-exploration and being ashamed by the act of self-discovery introduce the notion that Elio is pure and innocent. The apricot is not only the medium of Elio's act of self-discovery, but it also represents the purity and innocence of Elio's personality, which makes the apricot an index in this context. However, apricot is a seasonal fruit, which means that there will not be any apricots left after the summer passes. This fact indicates the sad truth that the relationship between Oliver and Elio will eventually come to an end once the summer passes. Oliver leaves Elio after his temporary visit, and Elio gradually forgets Oliver as the time passes and the apricots gradually disappear from Elio's backyard.

**Moreover, the hands of Elio and Oliver act a synecdoche which amplifies the subtly and delicacy of the "pure" relationship between Oliver and Elio, emphasizing the power of "pure" homosexual love that was thought to be unacceptable in the society during the time of the 1980s.** After going through the complex process of self-identification, Elio assures that he loves Oliver and decides to make a confession. During the scene which Elio confesses his love for Oliver, only hands of Oliver and Elio meet in the frame. While the facial expressions of the two protagonists do not appear in this important scene of the film, only showing the hands of the two protagonists subtly touching each other is enough to illustrate the accumulated feeling of love that they had towards each other. When the hands of Oliver and Elio collide, the repressed emotion of love between the two characters amplifies exponentially and reveals the sexual tension without actually displaying the sexual intercourse between the two characters. In other words, the hands of the two protagonists represent the whole spectrum of love they are having towards each other, and even the slightest touch of their hands creates an explosion of emotional

responses that hit both of the protagonists and the audiences like a tsunami. Furthermore, this scene is an accurate representation of what "pure" love is. Hands of Elio and Oliver acting as a synecdoche is the only thing that appears in the frame. Nothing is obscuring them from touching each other. Only the bare skin or their hands meet with one another to expose the vulnerability of their love. These are all signs of "pure" love. A love that has no intervention from an outsider and that only emphasizes the vulnerability and delicacy of its nature is a form of "pure" love. Knowing that their relationship has to end at some point, Elio and Oliver have an intimate relationship that does not allow any intervention from anybody. They try to keep their relationship to themselves because of the perception of homosexuality in society and the uncertainty of their love. However, to illustrate the intensity of their love, Oliver tells Elio to, "Call me by your name and I will call you by mine" (1:27:15-1:27:30). Elio and Oliver call each other with their own names to remember each other even after their relationship ceases at some point. By calling each other with their own names, they are not allowing anyone but only themselves to interrupt their relationship. In other words, they remain in their own world, a bubble that holds both of them but is bound to break at any moment. Calling each other by their names signifies that what Elio and Oliver had between them was not just mere friendship. They had "pure" love between them that was delicate and fragile, and this vulnerable love along with the synecdoche of the hands of the two protagonists, signify the resistance of the typical negative perception towards homosexuality that dominated the 1980s.

**Finally, in a scene where Oliver leaves and Elio has a conversation with his father, professor Perlman, Elio's father, delivers a monologue that helps confused Elio define his identity after Oliver leaves, and emphasizes the notion that he can love whomever he likes and feel however he likes. Also, through his allegory, professor Pearlman directly criticizes**

**the prevailing notion of how people perceived homosexual love in the 1980s.** When the scene begins, Elio is framed in the mirror that is put up on the wall over the couch where his father is looking at him. Elio displayed in the mirror conveys his fragile state. He is portrayed as if he is bound to break like a delicate mirror after Oliver leaves. However, his father reinforces that glass for him as he understands what Elio goes through and supports him in his journey to find his sexual identity. Professor Pearlman labels the relationship Elio and Oliver had as “friendship” and states that the friendship Elio and Oliver had was a beautiful one. Professor Pearlman then tells Elio to keep the feelings Elio had for Oliver forever, for the mind and body are given once in his lifetime, and it is a waste to forget all of the cherished emotions and experiences. By advising Elio to remember every memory that he had with Oliver, professor Pearlman encourages Elio and truly understands the degree of emotional turmoil Elio is going through as a parent. Furthermore, Elio’s father encourages Elio to love whomever he likes without worrying about how others would perceive him. That monologue is an allegory that not only represents how a father cares his son, but also makes a remark on an unusually liberal father who does not impose any restrictions on whom his son loves. Professor Pearlman truly supports his son's happiness. He even states that he also almost had a similar relationship with another man, but he could not do it because of his father’s opposition. Therefore, the representation of an “unusually” liberal father represents an opposition of general social perception towards homosexuality in the 1980s. The 1980s was when the HIV started to emerge. As a result, bigotries emanated that homosexuality was the cause of the spread of the HIV. Therefore, people who were in a homosexual relationship were avoided and outcasted from society. Because homosexuality was considered to be a social minority, such bigotry only enhanced the misconceptions towards homosexuals. Ultimately, professor Pearlman's monologue criticizes how society labels love as



"friendship" when it does not acknowledge homosexual love as a "true form of love." Moreover, the monologue counters the prevailing bigotry through an introduction of a loving and supporting father with his rational reasonings of why what his son feels is his own business, regardless of the sex of his son's partner. Moreover, professor Pearlman states that "nature has cunning ways to find our weakest spots." (1:59:32-2:02:32) This quote is a direct criticism of the prevailing stereotypes towards homosexuality in the 1980s. Because people tend to dismiss social minorities that does not conform to the societal norm, people tend to find their weakest spots and blame them for anything, creating a misconception that damages the social minorities. While respecting his son's freedom and liberty to love anyone whom he desires, professor Pearlman still warns Elio of the radicals who are always making an effort to enhance the misconceptions of homosexuals. However, the support that Elio receives from his father marks drastic difference with the situation Oliver faces. When Oliver goes back to America, he is forced to marry his fiancée even though he loves Elio. This monologue is an allegory of a life lesson professor Pearlman gives to Elio. It is a lesson not to waste our lives, but to have the freedom to do anything that we desire while acknowledging and challenging the society that defines who we can and cannot be.

In conclusion, *Call Me by Your Name* is not merely about a film that deals with an emotional first love nor homosexual love, but it is a film which states that there is no limit to whomever one can love, and no one can define that love. Through the eyes of an adolescent undergoing puberty to find his true identity, the film delivers "pure love" and how powerful it is. With confusion and disorientation, Elio gradually figures out who he is and whom he loves. Unfortunately, Elio's first love only leaves him bruises and scars. While this film emphasizes the process of finding oneself and the importance of having the liberty to love anyone, it also

criticizes the underlying perspective that society holds towards sexual minorities. Social minorities have been repressed in society because they do not conform to or follow the majority of the population. Resistance to such repression created bigotry and misconception. *Call Me by Your Name* does not explicitly attack the misconceptions major people hold towards homosexuality. However, with the focus on the progress of love between Elio and Oliver and the pain that follows their "pure love," the film implicitly criticizes such bigotries as the reason why relationships like Elio and Oliver could not occur in the 1980s. As a child growing up, understanding his sexual orientation is vital to living a fulfilling and satisfying life. No one can be happy if they are forced not to accept who they are and forcefully conform to designated societal norms. Therefore, this film is a valuable lesson to all people to accept who they are and be free to love anyone that they desire, for the freedom to love is the key to a guaranteed happiness.

Works Cited

*Call Me by Your Name*. Directed by Luca Guadagnino, performances by Armie Hammer, Timothee Chalamet, Michael Stuhlbarg, and Amria Casar, Sony Pictures Classics, 2018.