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Homophobia, heteronormativity and melancholia: A psychoanalytic essay on the film *All of Us Strangers*

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the impact of homophobia, internalised homophobia and heteronormativity on the psychic lives of some gay men, as depicted in the film “All of Us Strangers”. Themes of Oedipal rejection, alienation, melancholia, mourning and loss are explored.

KEYWORDS

Homosexuality;
homophobia; melancholia

When it comes to psychoanalytic considerations of homosexuality, psychoanalytic writings have, for the most part, tended to focus on childhood attachment and Oedipal development. This is not surprising, given that psychoanalysis is also a theory of psychological development. However, the role of homophobia and heteronormativity in understanding the development of homosexual subjectivities has been less attended to. In the past, psychoanalysis has tended to pursue a more conservative path, with psychoanalytic theories tending to formulate homosexuality as a pathology: a perversion or abnormal character development, with little, if any, consideration given to the role of homophobia, prejudice and oppression in understanding the distress of homosexual patients written about (see Lewes 2009). Contemporary psychoanalysis has acknowledged this problematic history, even made its apologies for the role played by psychoanalysis in the past pathologisation of homosexuality (see the appendix in Hertzmann and Newbigin 2023). Despite this, the impact of homophobia and heteronormativity on the psychic life of gay men has received relatively little in-depth attention. Homophobia and heteronormativity are distinct social forces, referring respectively to the negative attitudes held towards homosexuality and the social assumptions that hold heterosexuality as the norm (the distinctions between the two will be discussed in more detail as the paper progresses). Research suggests that homophobia and heteronormativity remain pervasive issues that continue to structure and shape the lives of many sexual minorities (Semlyen and Rohleder 2023). Psychoanalytic theory provides us with a rich resource for understanding the insidiously traumatic impact of homophobia and hostility, and the marginalising effects of

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heteronormativity on gay men's psychic life in greater depth, and can have something to say about the necessity to challenge homophobic and heteronormative views.

I hope to make some contribution to this in this paper, by exploring the impact of social and familial homophobia and heteronormativity, in its past forms and contemporary expressions, and the potential experience of alienation and melancholia in the lives of gay men, with an analysis of the film *All of Us Strangers*. My focus in this paper is on gay men, primarily because this is the focus of the film, but also because research suggests that homophobia is more intensely directed towards gay men than to lesbian women (Herek 2007; Herek and Capitanio 1999). There are particular aspects of homophobia and notions of masculinity that pertain to gay men that I want to focus on in this paper, and that are portrayed so powerfully in this film.

In my analysis of the film, and in my discussion of the themes at play, I am partly informed by my own professional experience, firstly as an academic and researcher interested in the area of sexuality and marginalised identities, and as a clinical psychologist and psychoanalytic psychotherapist, who, over the past 20 years, has worked with a number of gay men of varying ages in my private practice as well as public mental health settings. The themes depicted in this film resonate to varying degrees with the sorts of issues these patients bring to the consulting room. At times in the paper, I will use the term “homosexuals”, as it is often used in the psychoanalytic literature, but it is important to note that this is not a label that is typically used by gay men to describe themselves, with many considering it the language of diagnosis. Many prefer the term “gay”, while many others, particularly the younger generation, prefer the term “queer”. The matter of labels and their different symbolic meanings is a point taken up in the film.

All of Us Strangers

The trauma of homophobia, the marginalising effects of heteronormativity for gay men, and the subsequent sense of alienation from self and others, are powerfully portrayed in the acclaimed 2023 movie *All of Us Strangers*, written and directed by Andrew Haigh. The movie script is based on the novel *Strangers* written by Taichi Yamada (published in 1987). The novel tells the story of a 47-year-old man (heterosexual), who meets a couple who bear a close resemblance to his dead parents. He forms a relationship with them, only to later realise that they are ghosts who are sapping away his life force.

This ghost story is transformed by Haigh into a haunting movie which centres around the story of Adam (played by the actor Andrew Scott), a gay man in his late 40s, who lives a lonely life in his small apartment in a newly built high-rise apartment block on the edges of London. The opening scene is of him alone in his apartment, eating left-over take-away meals for one, and working on something on his laptop. In another early scene he stands at the window, looking out at the night, with the aliveness and lights of central London a distant landscape. It is quiet in the apartment, but we know how loud and alive the centre of London is. The theme of alienation and melancholia dominates the narrative and the emotional and visual atmosphere of the film from the start. The fire alarm suddenly rings, and Adam evacuates the building, the only one who does. There is no fire, and he seems to be the only one in the building. He looks up at the lights of the only other inhabited apartment in the building and sees a person at the window looking out at him. Later that night, there is a knock at the door. It is this only other resident, Harry, a younger gay man

in his late 20s (played by the actor Paul Mescal). Harry is carrying a bottle of whisky and, flirtatiously, suggests they keep each other company in this lonely building on this strange night. Adam seems intrigued, and clearly finds Harry attractive, but is afraid to let Harry in, closing the door on him.

The film tells the story of Adam's yearning for an intimate, loving relationship with Harry, but his struggles with fear about "letting him in". A fascinating aspect of the movie (from a psychoanalytic point of view) is the movie's depiction of Adam's childhood Oedipal relationships with his parents, now dead, and the process of mourning their loss. We soon learn that Adam's parents died in a car accident one night during the Christmas season in 1987, when Adam was 11 years old. We are told that Adam is working on a film script about his relationship with his parents. He looks through old photographs and items from his childhood with nostalgia, while listening to music from his album collection of 1980s "queer" music, British pop bands such as Erasure, Pet Shop Boys, and more symbolically, Frankie Goes to Hollywood (more about this later). We get a sense of a mourning that has not been processed all this time, leaving instead a suffocating, prolonged melancholia (Freud 1917).

The day after the fire alarm, Adam goes to his old childhood home, looking at the building as it is today, comparing it to an old 1980s photograph of it that he holds in his hand. Later that day, as the sun is setting, he is walking through a park, where he sees a young man looking at him. The young man gestures to him to come over; an invitation for a sexual hook-up, it seems. Adam follows this man as he walks through the park, and to a nearby convenience store where he buys whiskey and cigarettes. He seems to recognise this man as someone familiar. When the young man comes out of the shop, he invites Adam to follow him. "Where?", Adam asks. "Home", the young man replies. We see Adam follow this man back to his childhood home that we saw before, and we learn that this young man is actually his dead father (played by the actor Jamie Bell). His dead mother (played by Claire Foy) is also home. We hear her voice come from inside the house: "Is it him?" she asks his father, as if expecting him. Both are ghosts frozen at the age they were when they died. Middle-aged Adam meeting his dead parents the age they were when he was 11. Did he resurrect the ghosts of his dead parents after his visit to the house earlier? Or was he seduced back home by them?

The story of the movie moves between the present day as Adam and Harry start to spend more time together, and Adam's reminiscences of the past as told through his imagined encounter with the ghosts of his parents. After each visit with his parents, Adam returns to his flat and to Harry. The two stories unfold slowly back and forth: the potential relationship between Adam and Harry, and Adam (the child within the adult man), his Oedipal dynamics, and his struggle to separate and mourn the loss of his parents. Soaking through these ordinary Oedipal dynamics is the damaging impact of homophobia and heteronormativity. The depicted story is insightful, moving and complex, grappling with some of the specific dynamics of a "proto-gay boy" – a term used by Corbett (1996) to refer to the boy growing up to be an adult gay man.

Same-sex desire and Oedipal rejection

I will not outline the pathologising formulations of homosexuality and the Oedipus complex posed by psychoanalytic writers in the past, as these are now well

documented and well known (see Lewes 2009). Freud, however, in some of his writings, was clear in his view that homosexuality was not a psychopathology. Freud (1905) developed a much clearer formulation of the Oedipus complex for the heterosexual boy and girl, the “positive” Oedipus complex, and did at times problematically view the Oedipus complex of the homosexual male and female, the “negative” Oedipus complex, within a heteronormative framework, understanding homosexuality as something of a defensive resolution to castration anxiety. However, in other places, Freud was also more radical in his thinking about human sexuality and psychosexual development, positing an innate psychic bisexuality, a sexual drive that is not orientated to a specific object, and the existence of the “complete” Oedipus complex (Freud 1923), comprising the simultaneous existence of the positive and negative Oedipus complexes, which contemporary theorists have come to emphasise (Heenan-Wolff 2011; Luepnitz 2021). Freud thus seemed to view homosexuality and heterosexuality (and bisexuality, for that matter) as involving equally a combination of constitutional and environmental factors. Freud seemed to recognise the possibility of identifications with both genders and the existence of both same-sex and cross-sex desires. Freud gave us the theoretical framework for an understanding of the fluidity of sexuality and gender identifications and orientations (Van Haute and Westerink 2021), which for many years post Freud was cast aside by the taking up of a more conservative, narrower stance.

The Oedipal scenes in *All of Us Strangers* portray what can be interpreted as Adam’s libidinal desires for both his mother and his father. In one early scene, we see each of them lovingly give child/adult Adam a kiss on the lips. Adam expresses a longing for each parent to “stay with him”. He recalls fondly moments of closeness with his mother as well as his father. His love for each and fear of reprisals from them are evident. Britton (1989) pointed out the triangular dynamics involving the mother–child relationship, the father–child relationship, and the parental couple relationship that the child is excluded from.¹ At the end of the first visit, after his parents say goodbye to him outside, his parents turn around and walk back inside the house, his father with his arm around his wife. His father looks back at Adam – the look perhaps conveying to Adam “I am with her; not with you” (or “she’s mine, not yours”).

Developing the relational aspects of the Oedipus situation further, Davies (2015) and Lingardi and Carone (2019) argue for a model of “Oedipal complexity” where the child’s psychosexual development is not pre-determined by the parents’ gender and sexual orientation, and involves pre-Oedipal and Oedipal factors, including the parents’ own Oedipal dynamics. There exist multiple heteroerotic and homoerotic Oedipal constellations. In the film we are given glimpses of Adam’s parents’ own Oedipal wishes and conflicts. For example, in his second visit home, while Adam is alone with the ghost of his mother, she tells him to take his wet clothes off, so she can put them to dry (it had been raining when he walked there). His mother observes his adult masculine body as he stands there in his underwear. “Look at you. You were just a boy. But now you’re not”, she says. There is something simultaneously melancholic and erotic about this. She comments on his hairless chest: “I thought you would be hairier, like your dad. I like a hairy chest myself”. As he

¹Such triangular dynamics can also be observed in same-sex parent families (Eitan-Persico 2024).

undresses, she comments on how he reminds her of her own father, as she remembers him when she was a little girl. In his mother's mind there is a clear heterosexual Oedipal constellation.

In Oedipal complexity, there is the existence of primary and secondary Oedipal configurations. For boys with a homosexual orientation, erotic fantasies towards the parental object of the same sex will dominate, with heteroerotic fantasies being secondary. The primacy of same-sex desire for gay men has been previously observed (e.g. Goldsmith 1995, 2001). In the case of Adam, his primary object of Oedipal desire seems clearly to be his father. He gazes at him more. More explicitly, in the third visit home, where Adam is alone with his father, a song from The Ink Spots² plays in the background. The lead singer, Billy Kenny, sings "I have only one desire; and that one desire is you [...] I just want to be the one you love".

Drawing on clinical experience, Isay (1986, 2010) and Rose (2007) have observed how for some gay men, they have experienced an early Oedipal rejection from their fathers, who turn away from the homoerotic desires of their sons. Rather than outdated formulations of homosexuality being "caused" by a male child having over-involved bonds with their mothers, and a distant or absent father figure, Isay considers how fathers potentially *become* distant because of their fear and anxiety about their gay son's emerging sexuality. This perceived Oedipal rejection from the father is implied in the scene when Adam is talking to his dead father about his experience growing up. Adam tells his father that he was bullied at school. His father remembers hearing Adam cry at night in his bedroom. "Why didn't you come into my room if you heard me crying?", Adam asks. His father replies, "Why didn't you tell me what was happening at school?" ("Why didn't you let me in"?). His father admits that if he had been a boy at the same school as Adam, he would have homophobically bullied him too. Adam replies, "I think I always probably thought that anyway. It's probably why I never told you what was happening to me". We get a sense of the fear, shame and loneliness felt by 11-year-old Adam, feeling like he is not able to turn to his parents for help and understanding, likely fearing their rejection.

As Isay (1986, 2010) and Rose (2007) observe, the Oedipal rejection from the father, the primary object of the gay boy's desire, may lead to difficulties among some gay men in establishing and maintaining intimacy in their relationships, as the object of desire is also equated with a rejecting one. The homoerotic desire of the proto-gay boy is not mirrored in the heterosexual Oedipal constellation of the straight father. Target (2007) notes that there is a degree of lack of mirroring and turning away by parents of their child's sexuality. But for some proto-gay boys, this rejection may be particularly hostile when accompanied by the parents' homophobia. Adam's conversations with his dead parents revolve around himself as an adult gay man, and his parents' reaction to this, partly as reflecting their attitudes frozen in time in 1987, and, perhaps what it would have been, were they to have lived to know their son as gay. What the movie depicts of Adam is the presence of a homophobic past and internalised homophobia in the present.

²The Ink Spots are a 1930–40s American vocal group. The song that plays is titled "I Don't Want to Set the World on Fire" (released in 1941).

The ghosts of homophobia

Everyday encounters with homophobic attitudes exist in school playgrounds and in broader society. In the film, we are transported back to the United Kingdom of the 1980s, to Adam's childhood, thick with homophobic attitudes and messages. It is the era of Section 28 in the UK; legislation brought in, in 1988, by the Thatcher-led government that prohibited the "promotion" of homosexuality in schools and other public services. School bullying about being a "sissy", "faggot" or "poofter" is a constant feature. There is also the homophobic panic fuelled by AIDS, the "gay plague" and all its metaphors of sin and punishment (Sontag 1991). Frankie Goes to Hollywood's first single, "Relax", was banned by the BBC for being obscene and depicting a "dangerous" sexuality.

The term "homophobia" was introduced by the American psychologist George Weinberg (1972), in his book focussing on the "healthy homosexual" (a challenge to the formulation of the "unhealthy homosexual" that seemed so dominant at the time). He introduced the term to describe the irrational fear that some heterosexual people have towards gay men (his book focused on men), formulating "homophobia" as the disease that required treatment (rather than "the homosexual"). The term "homophobia" is typically used to refer to the negative attitudes and hatred directed towards gay, lesbian and bisexual individuals. The term often tends to be used with the assumption that it describes something homogeneous. The work of the psychoanalyst Elizabeth Young-Bruehl (1998) has provided an important contribution towards considering the prevalence of various forms of homophobias. Writing about prejudice, she distinguishes three different forms, each of which can be expressed in homophobia: obsessional, hysterical and narcissistic prejudices. Obsessional homophobia revolves around notions of contamination of "civil" society by the corruptive deviancy of a "gay agenda". Gay men are perceived as a "dirty" threat to the very values of family and society. In hysterical homophobia, the homophobe's disavowed anxieties about sex, the sexual body and its excretions are projected and located in gay men who are then perceived as practising a disgusting and shameful sexuality. Linked to Freud's notion of psychic bisexuality, gay men are viewed as a threat to heterosexual men for acting out the homoerotic desires that are disavowed in them. This is referred to by Judith Butler (1997) in their³ argument that the "foreclosure of homosexual desire" is a necessary foundation of a certain form of heterosexuality (23). Finally, narcissistic forms of homophobia are concerned with the preservation and maintenance of boundaries between "masculinity" and "femininity", with gay men and lesbian women seen as disrupting the masculine-feminine divide, and in particular masculine gender identity (see Rohleder 2023 for a review). Gay men are regularly equated with passivity and femininity, and so are often perceived through a lens of loss: the loss of masculinity and phallic power (Corbett 2001). In reality, gay men (as do everyone) contain within them elements of both these binary identifications. We identify with aspects of both parents (when we have a mother and father within us). As Corbett (1993, 1996) notes, gay men may interchange between masculine and feminine identifications and activity and passivity in their relationships.

In the movie, and the era of Adam's 1980s childhood, these different forms of homophobia prevail, the obsessional forms of homophobia around a "gay agenda" and the

³Judith Butler now identifies as non-binary and uses "they/them" pronouns.

promotion of homosexuality (although not referred to in the movie, we know this is the era of "Section 28") and the oppositions held towards gay marriage, the hysterical homophobia of a dangerous sexuality, and the consequent "gay plague", and the narcissistic homophobia of the effeminate gay boy, the "sissy". Adam, like many gay men his age, grew up in a violent gale of homophobic messages.

Children of minoritised groups (racialised minorities, for example) who experience prejudice and hate may be helped with some of these experiences by their parents, having experienced this themselves. However, most gay men grow up with heterosexual parents, perhaps unable to understand their proto-gay son's experience, or being anxious about their son's sexuality. Adam's parents seem to have been anxious about his sexuality. His mother frequently refers to how "sensitive" he always was. The movie dialogue also seems littered with his parents asking him if he is OK – "Are you OK?" they often ask, concerned, but perhaps also anxiously worried that "something is wrong" with their "sensitive" son. In the movie, Adam seems to have an unexplained fever. There are echoes here, perhaps, of the "gay plague", or old references to homosexuality as illness.

For some proto-gay boys, more so for boys of Adam's generation and older, home and the relationship with parents may be fraught with fears of, and experiences of, homophobic hostility and rejection and the withdrawal of love. We learn of the homophobic views of Adam's parents. In the first meeting with his dead parents, Adam's father describes the first emotional outpourings of their reunion as "poofy stuff", wanting to get down to a celebratory drink and chat. We learn later more of his father's homophobia (discussed above), and his repeated demand to his son "not to cross [his] legs like a woman".

In the second visit home, where Adam is with his mother only, his mother makes flapjacks for him, his favourite childhood treat. As she prepares the tea, she asks if he has a girlfriend (the typical heteronormative question asked of all adolescent boys and young men). Adam tells her he is gay. She seems shocked, saying "you do not look gay". This is perhaps a reference to the equation of homosexuality with femininity in her mind. When he asks her if she had ever thought it a possibility that he might be gay, she replies "what parent wants to think *that* about their child? No parent I know!". Adam is visibly hurt and angry, making attacking comments in response. Adam's mother, feeling rejected, perhaps as the expected Oedipal object of desire, pours her tea down the sink, and loses her appetite for the flapjacks: "take these with you, if you want. I won't be eating them". Both are feeling attacked and rejected.

We know from Winnicott (1965) that the response of the parents to the child's needs, and, in this case, their emerging sexuality, is important for facilitating an integrated and authentic sense of self. For the male child who will grow up to be gay, they may have the experience of their parents' anxieties and possible disapproval of their sexuality, learning that their sexuality is unsanctioned. The proto-gay boy's homoerotic fantasies and the perception of this desire being outlawed underlie his experience of feeling different and perceiving himself as being different, and that something is wrong with him. Before coming out, the majority of gay adolescents live life "in the closet", attempting to suppress their same-sex desire out of fear and shame, until such time as this suppression cannot be maintained, and homosexuality is acknowledged and accepted. These parental and societal homophobic messages are internalised and incorporated into the self. Messages suggesting that "there is something wrong with you" turn into a self-representation that "there is something wrong with me", resulting in feelings of self-loathing

and shame (Malyon 1982). Gay men may defend against this through manic activity (Rohleder 2020). After the visit with his father, Adam wants to go out clubbing with Harry – a manic escape from the shame and guilt, to the excitement and euphoria of dance and drugs. Everything is OK for a moment, and here Adam fantasises a future domestic life with Harry. Everything is going to be OK. But it seems it can only be a dream. The high wears off, and ultimately the manic defence does not work, and we see Adam disorientated, with Harry appearing like a phantom in different places in the crowded club. We get a visual metaphor of Adam internally screaming in agony in the middle of the dance floor.

This internalised homophobia and shame may become a problematic obstacle in some same-sex relationships (Hertzmann 2011; Moss 2002), where the feeling of “there is something wrong with me” becomes “there is something wrong with you, and with us”. As Moss (2002) so eloquently states: “One hates oneself for wanting what one wants, and therefore for being what one is” (30). Object love is transformed into object hate. A sense of alienation might set in, as the gay child/man becomes a stranger to themselves and others, as is so powerfully depicted in the movie. Adam has internalised the hostile views of his parents. After all, his parents’ homophobic hostility is expressed in the conversations he has with their ghosts – his internalised parental objects. He seems to have been haunted by them for most of his life. In the conversation he has with his father about being bullied for being “a girl”, Adam says how his father’s comment about crossing his legs “like a woman”, remained internalised as a repeated hostile thought. We can imagine Adam berating himself each time he crossed his legs. His transformation of object love into object hate is also symbolically depicted in the revelation of how hostile, murderous, Adam’s initial rejection of Harry at his door turned out to be.

Separation and loss, rather than rejection and shame

Hans Loewald (1979) made an important contribution to our understanding of the Oedipus complex, emphasising the Oedipus complex as involving the necessary separation and growing independence of the child from their parents. Libidinal-dependent bonds with the parents need to be diminished as the developing adolescent and young adult takes on more responsibility for themselves. Through a process of the internalisation of parental representations there is a gradual shift from the parents onto the external world, as new objects can be found, influenced by these representations. For some gay men, however, such internalisations may include homophobic content. In the movie, Adam seems to struggle to establish and maintain an intimate relationship of his own, given his existing homophobic parental internalisations.

Adam’s work with his dead parents is similar to the work of psychoanalysis and psychoanalytic psychotherapy: working through the pain and trauma of the past, digging through feelings and experiences of hate and to gradually access a bit more love, and learning to take the risk of gradually letting someone in without being gripped by paralysing fear of potential rejection. Adam is able to work through his anger and feelings of rejection from his parents, to mourn their loss, and restore more loving parental objects within himself.

In the second half of the movie, Adam has a dream in which he, the middle-aged man, dressed in boy’s pyjamas (the child within the man), is at home with his parents one night

on the lead-up to Christmas, the night when his parents apparently had died in a car crash all those years ago. In the dream, Adam is trying to prevent them from going out, knowing what is going to happen. In the night, he goes to their bedroom and gets into their bed, coming between them as a parental couple. Perhaps this is a fantasised attempt to prevent them leaving him and reverse the fatal abandonment by them. While lying in his parents' bed he talks to his mother, and they apologise to each other. Perhaps he is trying to relieve himself of guilt for his aggressive feelings (his murderous fantasies), and she in acknowledgement that she was "hardly mother of the year". She wants to know what happened to him after their early, violent death. The dream ends with the flashing lights of emergency vehicles reflecting in the room (a reference to his parents' fatal accident). Adam wakes up disturbed by the dream, but something seems to begin to shift for him. The dream symbolises his attempt at repairing his damaged internalised parental objects.

Following the dream, we get the sense of Adam's parents starting to make their departure back to the grave. The ghosts that he is haunted by are gradually turning into ancestors (Steiner 2023). In the final scenes with his parents, they ask him about Harry. "Are you in love with him?" his mother asks, and he laughs slightly incredulously. He looks at his father, who is facing away from him, a symbolic depiction of his Oedipal same-sex desire, and fear of his father's rejection. "Why is that so strange?", she asks at his laugh. His parental objects have changed, no longer as homophobic. But Adam is unsure, grappling with his own internalised homophobia. He says he has never been in love before and does not know what "this" (gesturing to his heart, his feelings) is. "Well, he certainly seems to care about you", his father says. His parental objects are more accepting, more encouraging. But with that comes the time to finally mourn. Adam needs to let the ghosts go. His parents take him to his favourite restaurant to say their goodbyes. He is sitting opposite them at a table. Rather than being between them in the bed, wanting each for himself, he now faces them as the parental couple, who have their own intimate relationship, with their own conflicts and limitations. They have come to accept his sexuality, and he has accepted it himself. He has internalised a loving parental couple; whole objects which he can now separate from and mourn. Separation and loss, rather than rejection and shame. He seems ready to let Harry in now, and goes to the apartment block to find him.

Heteronormativity and drifting to the edge

As a younger gay man, Harry represents the younger generation, who grew up post-Section 28 in the UK, and after many gay rights had been won. Harry is of the generation that also grew up post the devastating trauma of HIV and AIDS, prior to the arrival of effective treatment. AIDS formed a powerful threatening backdrop to the sexual lives of gay men of Adam's age and older, not for gay men of Harry's age. Gay men of Adam's generation that I see in my clinical practice regularly mention the ghostly spectre of AIDS, and the role it played in developing an anxiety about sex and fantasies of sin and punishment in relation to their sexuality.

Harry supposedly grew up in better times than Adam. Reference is frequently made by Adam in his talks with the ghosts of his dead parents about how "things are different now"; how much things have changed. This reflects a denial on his part of the lasting

impact of homophobia and his life of loneliness and alienation. It also suggests that for gay men like Harry, things are now “OK”.

It is suggested that Harry did not seem to experience the sort of explicit social and parental homophobia that Adam did. Harry implies that he was bullied for being “a fat kid”, not for being gay. He seemed to perceive this as something of a protection – “If you’re a fat kid no-one asks why you don’t have a girlfriend”, he says. Although apparently lonely, Harry seems more confident than Adam, more available and responsive to Adam’s vulnerability and trauma. However, we also learn that he too feels distant from his parents and his family. He tells Adam that he doesn’t see his father very much. Although they are accepting of his sexuality, he says, he describes having “drifted to the edge” of the family. While the movie depicts Adam and Harry starting to see more of each other, and start a sexual relationship, and a development of intimacy, he also starts to drift to the edge of the movie, as Adam’s story takes central place. We come to discover just how far on the lonely edge Harry is. And it is heart-breaking.

Harry’s “drift to the edge” depicts the insidious and alienating impact of heteronormativity and heterosexism, as the proto-gay boy comes to develop a painful sense that he is somehow different to those around him, not fitting into the heterosexual “script”. Harry tells Adam how he “always felt like a stranger in my own family”. He goes on to say how “coming out just puts a name to that difference that has always been there”.

Gay men and lesbian women tend to grow up in a world where heterosexuality and assumptions of heterosexuality are embedded in the various structures and institutions of society – family, religion, culture, social as well as economic. A typical example described in the movie is the regular question posed to boys/men about whether they have a girlfriend. When talking about friends, Adam tells Harry that his (straight) friends have had children and moved out of London for more space, and to be closer to grandparents. Adam describes this as places he would not consider moving to, as it feels as if there is “nothing” there for him. In a later scene when Harry speaks about “drifting to the edge” of his family, he described how his straight siblings, married with kids, have “got that spot in the centre”. We might consider whether people like Adam and Harry are pushed to “the edge” of heterosexual society, or whether they position themselves there. I would say probably a bit of both.

In the scene where adult Adam comes out to his dead mother, and she learns that gay men can marry and have children too, she seems flabbergasted, wondering “why?”. She asks Adam if he wants to get married and have children, and he replies, “I don’t know. It wasn’t a possibility for such a long time. It didn’t seem worth the effort to want it”. This brings to mind Cheng’s (2000) concept of “melancholic suspension”. Writing about race inequality, Cheng argues that oppression positions some racialised individuals in an impossible space, psychically as well as socially, as occupying an imposed inferior identity and striving to attain an ideal identity (“whiteness”) that is simultaneously foreclosed to them. This has an effect of diminishing the self, and there is a “melancholic suspension” where grief cannot be properly expressed, and mourning cannot really occur. In a heteronormative and heterosexist society, the same can be said about gay men and lesbian women.

Harry reminds us that homophobia and heteronormativity are not just the ghosts of some past. Homophobia and heteronormativity is also now. Today. Every day. Things may be much better. Many rights might have been gained in many countries around

the world, but as Harry says near the end of the film, “it is not OK, though, is it?”. Reported homophobic hate crimes in the UK (where the movie is set) have increased in recent years (UK Home Office 2021), and many sexual minorities may fear verbal or physical abuse. Research has consistently shown higher rates of mental health problems, such as depression, anxiety and suicidality, among sexual minorities when compared to their heterosexual counterparts, which has been attributed to the impact of homophobia and living as a minoritised individual (Semlyen and Rohleder 2023). Many gay and lesbian same-sex couples readily report how anxious and fearful they can be about holding hands with their partners in public, a simple act of affection commonly observed among straight couples (Rohleder, Ryan-Flood, and Walsh 2023). In our analysis of a small sample of gay men’s narratives about holding hands with their partners in public (Rohleder and Walsh forthcoming), we identify what we refer to as the “psychosocial dilemmas” that our participants grapple with, where their experience of public displays of affection are accompanied by a complex interplay between the social dimensions of risk and internalised homophobia and resulting psychological inhibitions, which the participants cannot easily resolve. Some participants struggled to work out whether only they prevent themselves holding hands with their partner out of shame, or whether they are prevented from doing so by the hostile gaze of society. The two, of course, are intertwined. While there was a wish to hold hands with their partner, without fear and anxiety, this seemed risky and somehow perceived as prohibited – the simple ideal of a loving couple that seemed foreclosed to them.

In one poignant scene, Adam’s dead mother looks at him and asks, “are you OK?”. Not anxious this time, but rather really wanting to know. “No”, he says, “I am not OK”. One of Frankie Goes to Hollywood’s most well-known songs, *The Power of Love*, plays at various points as a background soundtrack. The message is that it is love that makes it OK. This may sound like an overly sentimental and clichéd message in the movie, and in some ways it is. But psychoanalysts know that it is love, actual or perceived, which always made it OK for a child growing up. When it was there, of course.

Adam’s mother says to Adam, after being told that he is gay: “they say it’s a very lonely kind of life”. This is a claim often made, certainly in the past, and it is a fear that many gay men may carry. It is certainly what is depicted in the experiences of Adam and Harry. But we need to ask ourselves, why is this comment made? Underlying this, is another sort of homophobic prejudice that *love* is not, cannot be, a feature of gay men’s relationships. In the psychoanalysis of old, gay men’s relationships were often regarded as *not* real relationships, but rather formed of narcissistic object choices. A gay relationship, it seemed, cannot involve genuine love and mutuality. It seems difficult for some people to imagine that a man can *love* another man. Adam and Harry cannot seem to imagine it for themselves. Partly because object love may be transformed into object hate (Moss 2002), but also because love in a same-sex relationship may seem foreclosed to them. In an interesting sociological study conducted by Doan, Miller, and Loehr (2015) in the USA, the American heterosexual men and women who participated in their study tended to view gay male couples as less loving than lesbian couples, who were perceived as being as equally loving as straight couples. The authors hypothesised that this reflects what has been termed a “feminised” view of love, where love and feelings of tenderness are identified with femininity and an attribute of women, more so than men. For gay men, often stereotyped as being “too feminine” and “sensitive”, they are nevertheless

seemingly potentially regarded as having less loving and tender feelings, as a man – something of an impossible conundrum. I have worked with a number of gay men for whom there might exist a “split” between sex and intimacy. Gay sex is not necessarily what is experienced with shame or anxiety; rather, intimacy and love are. Historically, perhaps it is not so much sex between men that has been feared and condemned – in ancient times, certain sexual acts between men were sanctioned (Halperin 1990) – rather, it is intimacy and love between men that is regarded as more problematic. As Oscar Wilde stated, it is “the *love* that dare not speak its name”.

Concluding thoughts: The melancholia of gay men

The sense of alienation and melancholia pervades the atmosphere of the movie. In this paper I have examined this against the influence of homophobia and internalised homophobia. This is compounded by Oedipal loss and Oedipal rejection faced by many proto-gay boys as their parents seem to turn away from their homoerotic desires, or are anxious or blatantly hostile to it. Such hostile parental figures continue to haunt. I think Cheng’s concept of “melancholic suspension” provides an important additional layer to consider when it comes to understanding the psychic life of some gay men. Some gay men may experience themselves as condemned to a life at the margins, often times accused of lacking the qualities that a heteronormative society value as ideal, while at the same time potentially foreclosing access to such ideals. Many rights have been granted in many parts of the world, including gay marriage rights and adoption rights, but not everywhere. Even then, such rights came after an exhausting campaign, involving many vociferous debates about the rights and wrongs of gay marriage. A pervasive message may dominate that “you are not one of us”. Gay love is not the same as straight love, it seems. So, one is left grieving for what one does not have, and is not able to have. In his first visit to his parents, Adam is seen watching his parents dance with each other; a loving couple. Not just a loving parental couple that he feels Oedipally excluded from, but an ideal of a loving couple that seems foreclosed to him. He has been left grieving that which he feels he can never have, was not permitted to have.

Homophobia and heteronormativity can be insidious and corrosive, tearing away at the sense of self, with resulting alienation and grief for that which cannot be had – a place at the centre, and a loving, intimate couple. Prejudice renders the subjectivity of the “other” unseen, a phantom. This is effectively portrayed in the various ghostly apparitions in the movie. Aside from the ghosts of Adam’s parents, Adam and Harry are at times seen as reflections in mirrors or windows. The ghostly presence of the child Adam is similarly filmed as reflections.

The film does not make things OK for the audience. However, it is not altogether pessimistic. Adam’s therapeutic process with his dead parents suggests the potential that psychoanalysis and psychoanalytic psychotherapy have to offer to work through internalised homophobia and mourn the losses suffered. However, this can only be helpful if the impacts of homophobia and heteronormativity are properly understood and taken seriously. It also offers us a picture of what things could be like for the proto-gay boy if he has parents who validate and are accepting of their son’s sexuality.

The story of Adam and Harry is not the story of all gay people. Being gay doesn’t mean you are necessarily destined to have a lonely and depressed life. This depends on external

and internal factors, the parents one had and the degree of hostility that one grew up in, as well as on one's character. But given the research that suggests a proportionally higher prevalence of mental health problems and homelessness among LGBT people, it is a story that is relevant to many. For many gay people, love can be so hard to find, to know, to let in, and to give to someone else, when there has been, and still is, so much hate around, and where various messages seem to say that love is not really for you.

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Patient anonymisation

Potentially personally identifying information presented in this article that relates directly or indirectly to an individual, or individuals, has been changed to disguise and safeguard the confidentiality, privacy and data protection rights of those concerned, in accordance with the journal's anonymisation policy.

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