



Emotional Attraction and Identity Transformation in the Novel *Me and Thee*: A Queer Theory Analysis

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Abstract: The representation of same-sex attraction in contemporary literature shows a shift from physical attraction toward more complex emotional attachment. However, previous queer studies mainly focus on performativity, sexuality, and identity construction, while the role of emotional attraction in identity transformation remains underexplored. This study aims to examine the transformation of the main character Thee's attraction in the novel *Me and Thee* (2024) by LaWila, from instant and dominance-based physical desire to emotional attraction developed through emotional closeness, a sense of security, and emotional connection with Peach. This study applies queer theory, which views sexual identity as fluid and socially constructed rather than fixed. Using qualitative textual analysis and close reading, the research explores how emotional and psychological experiences influence the transformation of Thee's understanding of attraction and identity. The findings reveal that emotional attraction plays a significant role in transforming the character's perception of relationships and intimacy, in which vulnerability, emotional closeness, and inner qualities gradually reconstruct his understanding of attraction and contribute to the formation of queer identity in the novel. Therefore, this study concludes that emotional intimacy functions as an important factor in the transformation of queer identity and relational dynamics in contemporary Thai literature.

Keywords: *attraction, emotional, identity, queer, relationship*

INTRODUCTION

In the development of contemporary Thai literature, the theme of same-sex attraction is increasingly appearing and discussed more openly. The increasing popularity of *Thai Boys' Love* (BL) narratives has also contributed to the wider representation of queer relationships in contemporary Thai media and literature. Setiawan, Nyarimun, and Amalia (2025) in their article titled "*The Power of Boys' Love: Thai BL as Queer Representation and Cultural Diplomacy*," argue that Thai BL functions as a form of queer representation and cultural

diplomacy, helping construct a progressive image of Thailand through popular culture. Meanwhile, Baudinette (2019), in his research *Lovesick, The Series: Adapting Japanese "Boys Love" to Thailand and the Creation of a New Genre of Queer Media* explains how Thai BL developed through cultural adaptation and eventually became a distinct genre of queer media in Thailand.

In the context of literature, same-sex attraction does not only refer to physical attraction or temporary relations, but can also develop into deeper emotional relationships

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involving closeness, attention, and commitment. The representation of same-sex relationships in Thai literature shows that attraction is not always built through physical contact alone, but also through the emotional and psychological qualities between the characters. Such relationships often show the dynamics of masculine and feminine roles, where one character is depicted as more dominant, protective, and strong, while the other is gentler, supportive, and emotional. These roles are not only determined by physical appearance, but also by the nature and emotional qualities possessed by each character. Some studies on same-sex relations show that gay relationships do not only rely on visual attraction, but also require attention, care, and emotional support so that the relationship can develop healthily. Blum (2024), in his article *What Gay Men Should Expect in a Relationship*, argues that meaningful relationships are built through a sense of security, mutual understanding, and the ability to accept each other. Thus, same-sex attraction can be understood as a complex and layered process, not just an instant, shallow, or purely physical experience.

Several previous studies have applied queer theory to examine identity and sexuality in literary works, but each has a different focus. For example, a study conducted by Aissathu Rohmah (2019) used Judith Butler's concept of queer to analyze the novel *Tabula Rasa* by Ratih Kumala. This study emphasized lesbian performativity shown through conversations, appearance, and sexual activities, so that identity is understood as a social construction that is not fixed. Queer discussion also appears in another study published in *Journal La Sociale* (2020) on the novel *Girl Meets Boy* by Ali Smith. Unlike Rohmah who focused on identity performativity, this study highlighted forms of resistance against heterosexual norms through lesbian relationships depicted as physically and sexually liberating. Thus, the focus is not only on identity construction, but also on how queer relations challenge dominant social norms. Meanwhile, a study by Susanto and Suryaman (2024) examined gender performativity in the novel *Relung-Relung Gelap Hati Sisi* by Mira W. This study showed that lesbian identity is not fixed and is continuously formed through awareness dialogues, feminine characterization, and sexual behavior.

Compared to the two previous studies, this analysis emphasized the psychological aspect of identity formation. While Rohmah (2019) effectively analyzes lesbian performativity through dialogue, appearance, and sexual behavior, the study published in *Journal La Sociale* (2020) explores resistance against heterosexual norms through sexual liberation and queer relationships, and Susanto and Suryaman (2024) emphasize the psychological dimensions of identity formation through gender performativity. Nevertheless, none of these studies specifically examine how emotional attraction emerges, develops, and functions as a primary catalyst for identity transformation. As a result, the developmental trajectory of emotional attraction and its contribution to the transformation of queer identity remain insufficiently explored.

Different from previous studies that mainly emphasize sexual identity and gender performativity, this study shifts the focus toward the role of emotional attraction in the transformation of queer identity. This study offers novelty by examining how attraction is not always centered on physical desire or sexual performativity, but can also develop through emotional closeness, vulnerability, a sense of security, and inner qualities between characters. Through this perspective, the study aims to examine how emotional attraction contributes to the transformation of the main character's understanding of attraction and queer identity in the novel *Me and Thee* (2024) by LaWila. In this context, identity transformation does not refer to a change in sexual orientation, but rather to the transformation of the character's understanding of attraction, intimacy, and emotional connection through emotional experiences.

This idea is reflected through the character of Thee, a mafia heir portrayed as masculine and dominant. Initially, Thee views attraction as something instant and physical, stating, "*There's nothing I want that I can't have*" (LaWila 2024). His attraction to Aran is superficial because it lacks emotional depth. In contrast, Peach's presence introduces a different experience. Their relationship develops slowly through emotional closeness and a sense of security, allowing Thee to better understand his feelings. This shift reflects how emotional attraction gradually transforms Thee's understanding of intimacy and his queer identity from a dominance-based masculine

persona to an emotionally grounded self-awareness.

To analyze this transformation, this study applies Queer Theory, a critical approach that challenges traditional understandings of gender identity and sexuality as fixed, natural, and binary. Queer theory views identity as fluid, contextual, and socially constructed through cultural and relational experiences.

The notion of sexuality as a social construction was first proposed by Michel Foucault in *The History of Sexuality* (1976). Foucault argued that sexuality cannot be understood merely as a biological fact, but rather as something shaped through power relations and social discourse within society. This perspective later became an important foundation for queer theory because it opened the understanding that sexual categories are products of historical and social processes rather than natural phenomena.

This perspective was further elaborated by Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble* (1990) through the concept of gender performativity. Butler asserted that “gender is not a fact, but a set of acts,” emphasizing that gender identity is produced through repeated social performances rather than natural essence. Thus, identity appears stable only because it is continuously performed and reproduced in everyday life.

Furthermore, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990) enriched queer perspectives by rejecting the understanding of sexual orientation as a rigid binary category. Sedgwick proposed the concept of a sexuality continuum, arguing that sexuality exists on a fluid spectrum rather than within fixed heterosexual or homosexual divisions.

These perspectives were later systematized by Annamarie Jagose in *Queer Theory: An Introduction* (1996), which defines queer as an effort to deconstruct and denaturalize heteronormative assumptions regarding gender and sexuality. In literary studies, queer theory enables relationships to be analyzed beyond physical desire by emphasizing emotional and affective experiences, including vulnerability, trust, emotional closeness, and a sense of security between characters.

Therefore, Queer Theory is highly relevant to this study because it provides a framework for understanding attraction and identity as fluid processes shaped through emotional and

relational experiences rather than fixed categories. Through this perspective, the transformation experienced by Thee can be analysed not as a change of sexual orientation, but as a gradual transformation in his understanding of attraction, intimacy, vulnerability, and emotional connection. While previous studies primarily focus on visible forms of sexual performativity, identity construction, and resistance to heteronormative norms, this study extends the discussion by positioning emotional attraction as the primary mechanism of identity transformation. This approach allows emotional attraction to be examined as a dynamic narrative force that gradually destabilizes hegemonic masculinity and reconstructs the character’s queer identity throughout the novel. Consequently, this study offers a more holistic and psychologically grounded perspective on queer transformation by emphasizing the role of emotional experiences, an aspect that has received limited attention in previous studies.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research design based on the framework proposed by John W. Creswell and J. David Creswell (2018). Qualitative research is appropriate for literary studies because it focuses on interpretation, meaning, and contextual understanding of a text. Within this qualitative framework, the study applies narrative analysis as the primary methodological approach. Narrative analysis is particularly suitable because the focus of this study is not merely on identifying queer themes, but on examining how emotional attraction gradually develops and contributes to the transformation of the main character’s understanding of attraction and identity throughout the narrative. Since identity transformation in Me and Thee unfolds through a sequence of experiences, interactions, and emotional developments, narrative analysis enables the researcher to trace these changes chronologically and to understand how each event contributes to the character’s evolving self-understanding.

Furthermore, narrative analysis complements Queer Theory by allowing the researcher to examine identity not as a fixed category but as a dynamic and evolving process. Through this approach, the concepts of

gender performativity, sexuality fluidity, and the denaturalization of attraction can be analysed within the progression of the story, revealing how emotional experiences gradually destabilize hegemonic masculinity and reshape Thee's understanding of attraction, intimacy, and queer identity. Thus, narrative analysis provides an appropriate framework for exploring the relationship between emotional attraction and identity transformation as represented in the novel.

Data Source

The primary data source of this study is the novel *Me and Thee* (2024) written by LaWila. This novel was purposefully selected as the object of study because it offers a distinctive representation of queer identity that departs from conventional tropes in contemporary BL (*Boys Love*) literature. Unlike many narratives that center queer attraction primarily on immediate physical desire or fixed romantic tropes, *Me and Thee* focuses on the internal and emotional transformation of a protagonist navigating a hyper-masculine and dominant environment. The narrative provides a rich textual basis for examining how an individual's understanding of attraction and identity can gradually be reshaped through emotional intimacy, vulnerability, trust, and a sense of security. Furthermore, the novel aligns closely with the objectives of this study because it foregrounds emotional attraction as a significant element in the development of relationships and identity transformation. Consequently, the data collected from this source consist of dialogues, inner monologues, and narrative descriptions related to emotional attraction, intimacy, vulnerability, and the transformation of identity experienced by the main character, Thee.

Research Instrument

The researcher served as the primary instrument in this study, as is common in qualitative research. The researcher was responsible for selecting, interpreting, categorizing, and analyzing the textual data in accordance with the research objectives and theoretical framework. Meanwhile, close reading, adapted from Barry Brummett's (2018) textual analysis approach, functioned as the primary analytical technique. Through close reading, the researcher examined dialogues, character interactions, emotional expressions, and narrative descriptions in detail to identify how emotional attraction and queer identity

transformation are represented throughout the novel.

To organize the analysis systematically, the selected textual evidence was documented and classified into analytical categories derived from the concepts of gender performativity, sexuality fluidity, and the denaturalization of attraction. Relevant quotations, narrative descriptions, and character interactions were grouped according to their relationship to emotional attraction and identity transformation. This documentation process enabled the researcher to trace the development of Thee's emotional experiences throughout the narrative and to examine how these experiences contributed to the transformation of his understanding of attraction, intimacy, and queer identity.

Data Collection

The data were collected through repeated readings of the novel in three stages. The first reading was conducted to understand the overall narrative structure and the development of Thee's relationships throughout the story. The second reading focused on identifying the contrast between Thee's superficial attraction toward Aran and his emotionally developed relationship with Peach. The third reading was conducted to select and classify relevant textual evidence, including dialogues, inner monologues, and narrative descriptions related to emotional attraction and identity transformation.

To enhance analytical transparency, the researcher applied thematic criteria when selecting the data. Evidence of emotional attraction was identified through expressions of emotional comfort, trust, affection, longing, emotional dependence, and the desire to maintain emotional closeness with another character. Indicators of intimacy included moments of emotional vulnerability, mutual support, emotional safety, and the development of personal connection beyond physical attraction. Meanwhile, evidence of identity transformation was identified through changes in Thee's perceptions, attitudes, emotional responses, and understanding of attraction, intimacy, and relationships throughout the narrative. The selected data were then classified into thematic categories based on the concepts of gender performativity, sexuality fluidity, and the denaturalization of attraction to facilitate the analysis of emotional attraction and identity transformation throughout the novel.

Data Analysis

After the data were collected and classified, the analysis was conducted in several stages. First, the selected textual evidence was coded according to its relevance to emotional attraction, intimacy, and identity transformation. Dialogues, inner monologues, and narrative descriptions that reflected emotional comfort, vulnerability, trust, emotional dependence, or changes in self-understanding were identified and grouped into preliminary categories.

Second, the coded data were categorized based on the concepts of gender performativity, sexuality fluidity, and the denaturalization of attraction. Textual evidence that demonstrated dominant masculine behavior, emotional restraint, or shifts in masculine performance was analyzed through Butler's concept of gender performativity. Evidence showing the gradual development of attraction beyond fixed sexual categories was interpreted using Sedgwick's concept of sexuality fluidity. Meanwhile, textual moments in which attraction emerged through emotional intimacy rather than physical appearance or sexual desire were examined through Jagose's concept of the denaturalization of attraction.

Finally, the categorized data were interpreted using narrative analysis to examine the chronological development of Thee's emotional experiences throughout the novel. This process enabled the researcher to trace how emotional attraction gradually destabilizes hegemonic masculinity and contributes to Thee's transformation in his understanding of attraction, intimacy, and queer identity. Through the integration of narrative analysis and Queer Theory, the study explores identity transformation as a dynamic process shaped by emotional and relational experiences rather than fixed categories.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Thee's Physical Attraction to Aran

The novel introduces Thee as a male protagonist who is portrayed as a successful CEO and the heir of a powerful mafia family. Throughout the story, he is characterized as dominant, confident, and accustomed to being in control of both his personal and professional life. These characteristics resonate with the associations often attached to his name, which

conveys a sense of authority, wisdom, and prestige. In contrast, Aran is introduced as a male model whose presence immediately captures Thee's attention. Unlike Thee, Aran represents a form of attraction that appears quickly and is largely based on outward appearance. His character evokes an image of something visually appealing and inviting, much like a forest that attracts attention at first sight yet remains observed from a distance. As a model, Aran is frequently associated with physical beauty and visual appeal, making him the first object of Thee's attraction in the novel.

Thee's initial attraction to Aran reflects an instant form of attraction rooted in physical desire and hegemonic masculinity. This pattern is illustrated during an early conversation when Peach asks Thee about his opinion of Aran. In response, Thee says: *"Close to my type. I wouldn't mind having sex with him. Interesting. Pretty face"* (LaWila, 2024, p. 28). This dialogue reveals that Thee's attraction is primarily based on physical appearance and sexual desire without emotional involvement. Aran is reduced to a "pretty face," positioning attraction as an objectifying and evaluative process. Thee's response reflects a masculine gaze in which he assumes the dominant position as the subject who judges and controls the object of attraction.

Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity helps explain this dynamic. Butler argues that gender identity is produced through repeated social performances rather than natural essence (Butler, 1990). In this context, Thee's dominant attitude and evaluative gaze function as repeated performances of hegemonic masculinity, reinforcing emotional detachment, control, and dominance within relationships. At this stage, attraction is still understood through physical desire and masculine control rather than emotional intimacy. This perspective also reflects what Jagose describes as a conventional understanding of attraction based primarily on physical appearance and sexual desire. Although this attraction remains superficial, it also indicates that Thee's desire does not operate within a strictly heteronormative framework. Sedgwick's concept of sexuality fluidity suggests that attraction cannot always be categorized through fixed binary distinctions between heterosexual and homosexual

identities (Sedgwick, 1990). In this context, Thee's interest in Aran demonstrates that his attraction is directed toward another man, even though it is still expressed through physical desire rather than emotional attachment.

This pattern becomes more visible in Thee's interaction with Aran in Chapter 8. During their interaction, Aran attempts to approach the relationship gradually, but Thee dismisses the importance of emotional closeness. He states: *"I don't need to talk to you. I'm just planning to court you," Theerakit said, leaning back in his chair and crossing his arms. Although his bewildered reaction was amusing, like a frightened little animal seeking shelter, his heart remained completely still.* (LaWila, 2024, p. 71). Thee's statement demonstrates his lack of interest in building emotional intimacy. While Aran prefers to know someone "step by step," Thee focuses only on pursuit and possession. More importantly, the narration explicitly states that "his heart remained completely still," emphasizing the absence of emotional attachment despite Aran's emotional openness. Butler's concept of gender performativity is also reflected in this interaction, as Thee continues to perform a masculine identity associated with control, confidence, and emotional restraint. Rather than responding to Aran's attempt to establish emotional closeness, he maintains a dominant position that prioritizes possession over connection.

Thee's rejection of vulnerability is further emphasized through his belief that emotional involvement could become a weakness. This perspective reflects hegemonic masculinity, which associates masculinity with emotional restraint, dominance, and self-control. As a result, attraction is understood merely as physical desire rather than emotional intimacy. This condition also supports Jagose's argument that queer theory challenges the assumption that attraction is naturally based on physical desire alone (Jagose, 1996). In Thee's case, attraction is still constructed through appearance, possession, and sexual interest, leaving little space for emotional connection or vulnerability.

Unlike previous studies that focus on performativity and sexual expression, the interaction between Thee and Aran highlights the emotional emptiness behind physical attraction. The relationship remains temporary and superficial because it lacks trust, vulnerability, and emotional safety. This

emotional absence becomes important as the foundation for Thee's later identity transformation in his relationship with Peach.

Based on this analysis, Thee's attraction to Aran can be characterized by several aspects. First, the attraction emerges instantly without emotional development. Second, it is primarily driven by physical appearance and sexual desire rather than emotional connection. Third, the relationship is shaped by dominance and control, positioning Aran as an object of pursuit rather than an equal emotional partner. Finally, Thee actively rejects vulnerability and emotional attachment, viewing them as signs of weakness. These characteristics establish the contrast between Thee's shallow attraction to Aran and the emotionally grounded relationship he later develops with Peach.

Emotional Attraction in Thee-Peach Relationship

Before examining the development of their relationship, it is important to understand the contrast between the two characters. Thee remains portrayed as a powerful mafia heir and successful CEO who is accustomed to maintaining control and emotional restraint. In contrast, Peach is introduced as a male photographer whose presence gradually brings a different dynamic into Thee's life. His name, associated with softness and gentleness, resonates with the sense of comfort and emotional security he consistently offers throughout the narrative. As a photographer, Peach is also presented as someone who observes and understands people beyond their outward appearance, making him an important figure in Thee's emotional journey.

Different from Thee's instant and physically driven attraction to Aran, his relationship with Peach develops gradually through emotional closeness, comfort, and vulnerability. The relationship is not built on physical desire alone, but on emotional experiences that slowly change the way Thee understands attraction and intimacy. This development reflects a shift from dominance-based attraction toward emotional attachment, which later becomes the foundation of Thee's identity transformation.

From their earliest interaction, Thee's attraction to Peach already shows a different pattern. In Chapter 2, after meeting Peach during a photography-related encounter, Thee realizes that his attention is no longer focused on the model he initially pursued, but on Peach

instead: *“But... something was strange. The image of that model lingered in his mind, refusing to fade. And yet, oddly enough, another thought had started creeping in a warm, steady voice, calm and constant like a gentle stream”* (LaWila, 2024, p. 19). This quotation indicates that Thee’s attraction to Peach does not emerge from physical desire, but from emotional comfort and calmness. Peach’s presence is described through soothing imagery such as “warm” and “gentle stream,” which contrasts strongly with Thee’s earlier attraction to Aran that centered on appearance and sexual desire. Thee even admits that Peach *“wasn’t even that remarkable”* (LaWila, 2024, p. 19) or conventionally attractive. This moment reflects the denaturalization of attraction because Thee’s feelings begin to develop beyond conventional physical standards and immediate sexual desire. Attraction is no longer constructed through physical appearance alone, but through emotional comfort and psychological connection. This finding supports Jagose’s argument that attraction should not be understood as a natural or fixed response based solely on physical appearance (Jagose, 1996). Instead, Thee’s growing interest in Peach demonstrates how attraction can be reconstructed through emotional experiences that challenge conventional assumptions about desire.

The emotional development between Thee and Peach also occurs gradually through repeated interactions and growing closeness. Unlike his approach toward Aran, which was immediate and superficial, Thee intentionally seeks Peach’s presence without expecting physical intimacy. This can be seen when Thee deliberately arranges a meeting just to see Peach: *“He had come here with the sole purpose of meeting that photographer. He had even instructed his secretary to make the reservation hastily just to ensure they could meet today”* (LaWila, 2024, p. 65). In this situation, Thee makes an unusual effort simply because he wants to meet Peach again, despite having no personal or business obligation to do so. This quotation demonstrates that Peach occupies an important emotional space in Thee’s mind. Thee’s effort to meet Peach reflects emotional interest rather than sexual pursuit. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s concept of sexuality fluidity is relevant here because it explains that attraction can develop gradually

through emotional and relational experiences rather than through immediate physical desire alone (Sedgwick, 1990). Rather than being motivated by Peach’s appearance, Thee is drawn to the emotional comfort he experiences in Peach’s presence. This demonstrates that attraction is becoming increasingly fluid and emotionally grounded.

Another important aspect of their relationship is the emergence of emotional safety. Throughout the novel, Thee is portrayed as a dominant mafia heir who rejects vulnerability and emotional dependence. However, Peach becomes someone who allows Thee to feel calm and emotionally secure. While spending time with Peach, Thee realizes that his presence gives him an unfamiliar sense of peace: *“Being near him had been oddly calming”* (LaWila, 2024, p. 19). For someone who constantly lives within tension, violence, and control, this feeling is unfamiliar. Thee also acknowledges that Peach’s personality *“had made him yield”* (LaWila, 2024, p. 19), suggesting that Peach influences him emotionally without force or dominance. This moment is important because it shows the gradual weakening of Thee’s hegemonic masculine behavior, which previously emphasized emotional restraint and control. This development reflects Annamarie Jagose’s concept of the denaturalization of attraction, which challenges the assumption that attraction is always physical or immediate. In Thee and Peach’s relationship, attraction develops through emotional comfort, trust, and psychological connection. At the same time, this moment suggests a gradual shift in Thee’s gender performativity. According to Butler (1990), gender is continuously produced through repeated acts and behaviors. Whereas Thee previously performed masculinity through emotional control and detachment, Peach’s presence encourages him to express emotional openness and dependence, indicating the beginning of a transformation in how masculinity is performed.

As the relationship develops further, Thee begins to show emotional care and protectiveness toward Peach. In Chapter 15, when Peach faces difficulties and receives threats from others, Thee openly states: *“Why wouldn’t I help you? You’re mine. No one messes with what’s mine”* (LaWila, 2024, p. 129). Although the statement still contains

possessive language, it no longer reflects dominance in a purely physical sense. Instead, it shows emotional commitment and concern. Thee's protectiveness toward Peach indicates that he no longer sees Peach merely as an object of attraction, but as someone emotionally valuable to him. This emotional attachment becomes even more visible when Thee promises: *"Even if the sky falls, I'll help you carry it"* (LaWila, 2024, p. 130). This statement symbolizes emotional loyalty and support, qualities absent in Thee's earlier relationship with Aran. In this context, Thee's behavior also reflects a gradual shift in gender performativity. His masculinity is no longer performed solely through dominance and emotional distance, but also through emotional care, protection, and vulnerability. Rather than abandoning masculinity altogether, Thee reconstructs it through emotional responsibility and care. This supports Butler's argument that gender identity is not fixed, but continuously reshaped through repeated social performances (Butler, 1990).

The relationship also gradually introduces emotional vulnerability into Thee's character. Previously, Thee viewed emotions as weaknesses that should be suppressed. However, when Peach becomes distant from him, Thee begins to feel emotional confusion and discomfort: *"He wasn't used to feeling this way. He didn't even understand what this was"* (LaWila, 2024, p. 153). This quotation is important because it shows that Thee becomes emotionally dependent on Peach's presence. Unlike his previous shallow relationships, Peach's absence creates confusion, restlessness, and emotional discomfort. This marks a significant shift in Thee's emotional behavior, as he slowly accepts vulnerability instead of rejecting it. The moment also demonstrates sexuality fluidity because Thee's emotional attachment develops naturally through emotional intimacy rather than through fixed assumptions about desire or identity.

Overall, the emotional development in Thee and Peach's relationship differs fundamentally from Thee's earlier attraction to Aran. The relationship develops gradually through emotional closeness, comfort, protection, and vulnerability rather than physical desire alone. Through Peach, Thee begins to experience emotional safety and emotional attachment for the first time. Therefore, this emotional relationship becomes the foundation for Thee's identity transformation, as it changes the way

he understands attraction, intimacy, and queer identity.

Emotional Attraction as the Trigger of Identity Transformation

The emotional relationship between Thee and Peach gradually becomes the main factor that transforms Thee's understanding of attraction, intimacy, and identity. Unlike his previous attraction to Aran, which was primarily physical and superficial, Thee's feelings toward Peach develop through emotional closeness, comfort, vulnerability, and care. Through this relationship, Thee begins to experience emotions that he had previously rejected as weaknesses. As a result, emotional attraction becomes the catalyst for his identity transformation.

A significant moment of this transformation appears in Chapter 21 when Thee realizes that his feelings for Peach are fundamentally different from his previous relationships. After spending more time with Peach and gradually developing emotional dependence on him, Thee begins to recognize the emotional peace that Peach brings into his life: *"But Peach... Peach made him feel at peace, a calming presence that enveloped his restless mind. With Peach, he felt safe, free to be his true self without fear of being betrayed or hurt"* (LaWila, 2024, p. 179). This quotation demonstrates that Peach provides emotional safety for Thee, allowing him to lower the emotional barriers that he had maintained throughout his life as a mafia heir. The phrase "free to be his true self" is especially important because it suggests that Thee no longer performs the rigid masculine control that previously defined his identity. Instead, emotional intimacy enables him to experience vulnerability and emotional openness. This moment reflects Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity because Thee gradually stops performing hegemonic masculinity through emotional restraint and dominance (Butler, 1990). Emotional attraction allows him to reconstruct his identity through vulnerability and emotional connection rather than control and detachment.

The novel further emphasizes this transformation by contrasting Thee's feelings toward Aran and Peach. While Aran eventually becomes "a faint, distant memory," Peach continues to occupy Thee's emotional consciousness: *"Peach wasn't conventionally beautiful, not like Aran. But something about*

him made Theerakit's heart twist in a way he couldn't explain" (LaWila, 2024, p. 181). This realization appears when Thee unconsciously compares his current feelings with his earlier attraction to Aran. This quotation clearly reflects the shift in Thee's attraction from physical appearance toward emotional attachment. Previously, Thee was attracted to Aran because of physical appeal and sexual desire. However, his feelings toward Peach emerge from emotional experiences and personal closeness rather than physical beauty. This moment reflects Jagose's concept of the denaturalization of attraction because attraction is no longer constructed through conventional standards of beauty or physical desire alone (Jagose, 1996). Instead, emotional intimacy becomes the central factor shaping Thee's feelings. Sedgwick's concept of sexuality fluidity is also relevant here because it demonstrates that attraction is not fixed within rigid categories but can gradually transform through emotional and relational experiences (Sedgwick, 1990).

Thee's transformation also becomes visible through his emotional reactions to rejection and vulnerability. When Peach prioritizes someone else over him and unintentionally distances himself, Thee experiences emotional pain and confusion: *"This was the first time Thee had been flat-out rejected. It hit him harder than expected"* (LaWila, 2024, p. 199). Unlike his earlier relationships, where emotional detachment remained dominant, Thee now becomes emotionally affected by Peach's choices and absence. This reaction indicates that the relationship has moved beyond physical attraction into emotional dependency and attachment. Thee's inability to understand his own emotional response further shows that he is entering an unfamiliar emotional space. This moment also reflects the collapse of his previous masculine performance. As someone who was previously emotionally detached and dominant, Thee now experiences emotional vulnerability and insecurity, which he had once associated with weakness. Therefore, this quotation further illustrates Butler's concept of gender performativity, as Thee begins to move away from the masculine identity he had continuously performed throughout the novel.

This emotional vulnerability becomes even clearer when Thee begins to care deeply about Peach's feelings and well-being. After realizing

that his actions may emotionally hurt Peach, Thee admits: *"He hated the thought of hurting the man in any way"* (LaWila, 2024, p. 207). This statement reflects a major transformation in Thee's character. Earlier in the novel, Thee viewed emotions as weaknesses and maintained control through emotional distance. However, through Peach, he gradually develops empathy, guilt, and emotional sensitivity. This shift reflects the gradual reconstruction of his identity because emotional attraction changes not only his understanding of relationships, but also his understanding of himself. In this context, emotional care replaces emotional detachment as the dominant aspect of his behavior.

The climax of this transformation appears when Thee finally accepts his feelings for Peach: *"It seemed... he liked Peach"* (LaWila, 2024, p. 220). This realization emerges after Thee repeatedly experiences emotional comfort, jealousy, fear of loss, and emotional attachment toward Peach. This moment symbolizes the culmination of Thee's emotional journey. Rather than explicitly labeling himself within a fixed sexual category, Thee simply acknowledges his emotional attachment toward Peach. This supports Sedgwick's argument that queer identity should not be understood through rigid binaries or labels but through fluid emotional and relational experiences (Sedgwick, 1990). Thee's transformation does not occur because he suddenly changes his sexuality, but because emotional intimacy gradually reshapes his understanding of attraction and identity. This moment also reinforces the concept of sexuality fluidity, as Thee's identity develops through emotional experience rather than predetermined sexual categories. At the same time, it reflects the denaturalization of attraction, since his feelings emerge not from physical appearance but from emotional closeness and shared experiences with Peach.

Therefore, Thee's identity transformation is not represented through explicit declarations of sexual identity, but through emotional development. He changes from emotionally distant and dominant into someone capable of vulnerability, care, empathy, and emotional attachment. Through Peach's presence, emotional attraction becomes the central force that transforms Thee's understanding of love, intimacy, and queer identity. The

transformation ultimately demonstrates how gender performativity, sexuality fluidity, and the denaturalization of attraction operate simultaneously throughout the narrative, shaping Thee's evolving understanding of himself and his relationship with Peach.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that emotional attraction plays a significant role in shaping relational dynamics and identity transformation in *Me and Thee* (2024) by LaWila. Through the character of Thee, the novel portrays a transformation from instant and physically driven attraction toward a deeper emotional connection built through trust, vulnerability, emotional safety, and inner qualities. At the beginning of the novel, Thee perceives attraction as something immediate, superficial, and closely related to dominance and physical desire, as reflected in his interaction with Aran. However, his relationship with Peach gradually changes his understanding of attraction and intimacy.

Using Queer Theory, particularly the concepts of gender performativity, sexuality fluidity, and the denaturalization of attraction proposed by Judith Butler, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and Annamarie Jagose, this study reveals that queer identity in the novel is not presented as a fixed label, but as a fluid process shaped through emotional and relational experiences. The findings show that Thee's identity transformation does not emerge from explicit sexual awareness, but develops gradually through emotional intimacy and vulnerability within his relationship with Peach. The transformation can be seen in the shift from a character who performs hegemonic masculinity through control, emotional detachment, and dominance into someone who is capable of emotional openness, care, empathy, and vulnerability.

Furthermore, this study demonstrates that attraction in queer relationships is not always centered on physical desire or sexual performativity. Instead, emotional closeness and psychological connection become important elements that transform the characters' understanding of love, care, and intimacy. Therefore, this study contributes to queer literary studies by emphasizing emotional attraction as an important factor in the transformation of queer identity and relational dynamics in contemporary Thai literature.

Finally, this study hopes to encourage readers to view queer relationships from a broader and more open-minded perspective. Through Thee's transformation, the novel illustrates that emotions such as love, trust, vulnerability, care, and the desire for emotional connection are universal human experiences regardless of sexual orientation. Rather than portraying queer identity through negative stereotypes, *Me and Thee* presents it as a complex emotional journey shaped by personal experiences, emotional intimacy, and meaningful relationships. Therefore, this study invites readers to move beyond preconceived assumptions about gay individuals and to understand queer relationships not merely through the lens of sexuality, but also through the emotional and psychological dimensions that characterize all human relationships.

In addition, this study contributes to broader discussions in queer literary studies by highlighting emotional attraction as an important element in understanding identity transformation. The findings suggest that emotional experiences can play a significant role in shaping queer identities and relationships, offering perspectives that extend beyond sexuality and gender performativity alone. Future studies may further explore emotional attraction in other queer literary works, compare its representation across different cultural contexts, or examine how emotional intimacy contributes to identity formation in various forms of contemporary media. Through these possibilities, future research can provide a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between emotional attraction, identity, and queer experiences.

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