**Introduction**

Pier Vittorio Tondelli was born in Correggio, Italy September 14, 1955. After finishing high school in his rural small town in 1974, he began studying at the University of Bologna in the DAMS[[1]](#footnote-0) faculty, focusing on literature and creative writing. He studied under popular writers of the time, and published his first book, a collection of short stories, shortly after his graduation from university. From there, he went on to publish four more texts before his death, some more successful than others, but all generally well received in Italy. This collection of short stories, titled *Altri Libertini*, shocked the general public because of its taboo topics like homosexuality and drug use, and the use of a very colloquial and spoken language. Though not approved of by everyone, it enjoyed a wide success, and is still well-known and referenced today.

Tondelli’s style changed greatly as he continued to develop as a writer, but he managed to retain the realistic quality of his writing that strongly characterized *Altri Libertini*; it seems as if someone is simply telling a story, or writing an entry in a diary. One of his greatest skills as a writer was to depict realistic experiences that communicated emotion to a variety of audiences. I believe that part of his appeal as an author arises from his choice of subject. In both *Altri Libertini[[2]](#footnote-1)* and *Pao Pao[[3]](#footnote-2)*, Tondelli uses as his protagonists young, alternative Italians that do drugs and listen to rock music, and that are honest about their sexualities. Before Tondelli published his first text, there had not yet been another author who had written about this upcoming generation of Italians, born in the 1950s. And so Tondelli established an audience.

The stories he began telling, though at times exaggerated or overly romantic, were relatable for a new generation of Italian readers. He presented gay men in ways that challenged traditional thoughts and views - they become round characters with developed identities, no longer flat stereotypes. Moreover, he portrayed gay men with sympathy that, as I discuss in chapter 1, was not a standard of the Italian literary tradition. He presented their stories from a new point of view, that of gay men themselves. They were no longer objects to simply be commented upon, or pieces of a plot, but they had become protagonists in their own right. Because of this, he was well received by the general queer population of Italy, and continues to be recognized today as an important part of Italian queer culture and history.

The next novel Tondelli wrote after publishing his first two literary works was *Rimini[[4]](#footnote-3)*. It was a departure from the subjects and styles he employed at the beginning of his career. It can be likened to the tradition of noir Italian literature that was popular with other writers of Tondelli’s generation and those that came after, like Carlo Lucarelli[[5]](#footnote-4). Despite its relatively small success, Tondelli didn’t lose his audience. He went on to begin his Under 25[[6]](#footnote-5) project working with young Italian writers, and then published his final novel *Camere Separate[[7]](#footnote-6)*. His final text is perhaps the one for which he is most well known, after *Altri Libertini*. Its protagonist, Leo, is remarkably similar in his station of life to Tondelli, and the book’s publication fell a short two years before the author’s untimely death in 1991.

Tondelli was also very active in other publications in the 1980s. So active that before his death *Un Weekend Postmoderno* was published - a collection of all of the essays and articles he had written for various publications throughout the 80s. He was engaged with many types of culture - film, music, literature, visual art. Though alive for only 36 years, he was responsible for a large literary output that was widely read. During his career, after his death, and even today, Tondelli is well known and discussed in Italy. In Correggio there is a *centro di documentazione[[8]](#footnote-7)* dedicated to him. Each year in December, a contest is held there for students who have written works on Tondelli, and it is a great resource for any academic attempting to do research on the author.

But if Tondelli is so widely known in Italy, why has such little critical work been done on him by non-native speakers, particularly in English-speaking countries? Of course, a large problem is accessibility. Only one of his texts has been translated into English, so anyone who wishes to do work on Tondelli must be able to read Italian. But of those American academics who do speak Italian, few have published critical work on the subject. However, I find that Tondelli holds importance in the field of 20th century Italian literature. Tondelli introduced new subject matters and a new style to contemporary Italian literature that have in some ways been forgotten in the face of his large popularity. Perhaps due to his well-known status, he has not been given much critical attention. But despite his popularity, I think he deserves this critical analysis.

In Italy, Tondelli is often viewed as a sort of gay icon. Because there are few authors who openly identified as gay and wrote so openly about the queer experience, he has become an important part of a tradition of gay literature in Italy. However, this isn’t exactly how he characterized himself. Instead, he viewed himself as simply an author who wrote about the queer experience. But of the critical work that has been done, much of it gives very little or no attention at all to Tondelli’s sexuality. Though it is certainly not the most important part of his writing, it is nonetheless something that influences his works and subjects.

My first goal in this work is to situate Tondelli in a larger context of Italian literature that references or depicts homosexuality in the 20th century. In the first chapter, I give a brief overview of *L’eroe negato* by Francesco Gnerre, and how Tondelli fits into this critical landscape. In the second chapter, I do my own analysis of Tondelli’s works, looking particularly at how Tondelli employs homosexuality as a way to communicate meaning in his works. For this chapter, I employ three works in particular: *Altri Libertini*, *Pao Pao*, and *Camere Separate[[9]](#footnote-8)*. It is in these texts that homosexuality plays an important role. The second chapter is divided into sections based upon different qualities and characteristics that Tondelli contrasts or compares with homosexuality. My aim is to do an analysis of Tondelli’s literature that strikes the balance between his sexuality and his artistry, to neither overvalue nor omit the role of homosexuality in his works.

My wish is not to have merely correctly intuited what Tondelli desired to impart to his readers, nor to totally dismantle critiques done by other writers. Instead, I hope to give a new view of Tondelli that has yet to be seen by English speaking audiences. Tondelli has cleverly and openly written about sexuality, and in a way that could influence and change the American literary tradition as well. He managed to depict humans and their emotions, in a way that redefined how homosexuality could be discussed and viewed, both within the field of literature and beyond it. Perhaps this small study will encourage others to turn a critical eye to Tondelli and other contemporary Italian authors, who come from a strong literary tradition and continue to innovate and create.

**Pier Vittorio Tondelli and Representation of Gay Characters in the Italian Literary Tradition**

Although Tondelli may be one of the most famous contemporary Italian authors to openly represent homosexual characters, he is certainly not the first. Italy has had a complicated relationship with homosexuality and its representation for many years. In some parts of Italy, particularly the South, it has been socially accepted to have sex with men, but only in certain contexts and playing certain roles, roles that allow men to retain their masculinity and heterosexual label. First, a heterosexual is never penetrated anally (commonly known as the role of “bottom”), but only penetrates another person (known as the role of “top”). If a man only acts in the role of top, he can easily avoid being labeled a homosexual; men who “bottom”, both in Italian and American culture, are frequently associated with femininity and submissiveness. Because the act of bottoming so closely resembles the traditional female role in heterosexual sex, a bottom is exclusively labeled as homosexual, whereas, from this perspective, a top can have sex with both men and women while retaining his straight status. Second, the sexual encounter would ideally occur between a married man (i.e. “straight”) and a male prostitute, who would be the bottom. In this case, if the “straight” man is paying his sexual partner for a service, and only penetrates the other, there is no great risk of losing the valuable label of “straight.”

Having sex with men in this manner is understood and accepted, though certainly not discussed openly around the dinner table, nor shared with one’s intimate partner. Although this seems to be a not entirely negative view of homosexuality, it led to the association of homosexuality (which, to be clear, in this context means only being penetrated by another man, and not having sex with men in general) with prostitution, secrecy, and a hidden dark side of society. Some authors, particularly heterosexual ones, relied heavily on this stereotype of homosexuality when representing it in their writings. In many cases, any homosexual character was exclusively a prostitute, and often nothing more than a background character. Some gay authors, Pier Paolo Pasolini for example, internalized this viewpoint of homosexuality, to the point that he portrays gay characters almost exclusively through a lense of prostitution, and relies on tropes of masculinity and femininity as characterization.

While a comprehensive catalog of all Italian literature referencing or featuring the homosexual experience would be nearly impossible to complete, Francesco Gnerre makes a noble effort in his book *L’eroe negato*. He organizes his text into five chapters, grouping texts and authors together based on how they represented homosexuality. The book spans almost fifty years of literary tradition: the earliest text discussed being published in 1933, the latest in 1980. Tondelli wasn’t included in the first edition, having just published his first book, *Altri Libertini*, the same year. Nonetheless, Gnerre details authors who came before Tondelli, and who defined literary traditions from which Tondelli would deviate during his career.

Gnerre’s first chapter discusses homosexuality as viewed from an outside perspective; how it is described and portrayed by straight authors. One of the most common themes in this chapter is the association of homosexuality with other conceptions of otherness. For example, Alberto Moravia’s conception of homosexuality and alterity rests upon pedophilia (Gnerre 19**)**. In his book *Agostino*, the protagonist Saro follows children around, always trying to prey on them. This connection between homosexuality and pedophilia is not uncommon even today, but Moravia takes it to an almost grotesque level, presenting his character in a totally negative light; he has no sympathetic qualities. In the same text, another character, Homs, represents another manifestation of otherness, being a young black boy. He too is described in a negative manner, and his femininity is used against him by the other boys. Moravia offers a stark idea of homosexuality: “o è il mostro che insidia e corrompe giovani adolescenti (Saro), o è il ragazzo femmineo, corrotto e ripugnante (Homs) (Gnerre 21).

Other authors, like Vasco Pratolini, take an even more moralistic view of homosexuality. In his novel *Il Quartiere*, he describes the lives of a group of young children in Florence. It is written in a choral style, balancing all of the voices equally, giving no voices precedence over others **(**Gnerre 27**)**. One day, one of the boys, Gino, reveals himself to be gay, and is rejected by all of the other characters, as if a sort of social death occurrs. He is viewed as a traitor, going against the grain of society, and he becomes an example of what can happen when someone infringes on the norm: “Quando i ragazzi del quartiere parlano di Gino, parlano sempre di corruzione (Gnerre 28**)**.” Interestingly, the word “homosexual” (*omosessuale*) does not appear in the text. Instead it is referred to as *corruzione*, *vizio*, even *perversione* (Gnerre 27**)**. Both Moravia and Pratolini were writing before the 1950s, and Italian societal views of homosexuality have changed since then. Nonetheless, these works still helped define homosexuality in culture and the literary world. Even if the general opinion regarding homosexuality had changed, such a change was possible only through an active deconstruction of the original thought[[10]](#footnote-9). And this original thought of homosexuality had been influenced and shaped by authors preceding Tondelli, like Pratolini and Moravia.

Giorgio Bassani, who was writing about 10 years after Moravia and Pratolini, managed to create some sympathy for the homosexual character, but still relies on the use of other negative associations as a way to characterize homosexuality (Gnerre 30). This sympathy takes the form of mutual connection - the friendship of two individuals, marginalized from society for different reasons. In *Gli occhiali d’oro*, the two protagonists both share otherness: one is Jewish, and the other is homosexual. Their connection and shared understanding of being an other allows for the Jewish narrator to sympathize with the gay character, Doctor Fadigati, when no one else will (Gnerre 32). We see this also in Tondelli, the connection of shared otherness[[11]](#footnote-10).

Paolo Mosca takes the idea of otherness a step further in his text *Il biondo*. The text is extremely sexually explicit, almost to the point of being pornographic. Again, the author rarely employs the word homosexual, instead relying on *assurdità*, *strano*, *incredible*, to show the uncommonness of the protagonist’s experience (Gnerre 40). Instead of comparing homosexuality to some other social identity, it seems as if Mosca isolates homosexuality, like it is some sort of unnatural quality, unable to be related to anything else. It exists apart, not able to be categorized or easily understood, as if a rarity in nature, appearing by magic or some other unknown force[[12]](#footnote-11).

Gnerre’s second category of authors deals with “L’omosessualità vista dall’interno” - or gay authors writing gay characters. While Tondelli would certainly not have belonged to the first group of writers, he doesn’t exactly find a home here either. Tondelli adamantly defended his title as only author, never a gay writer, or similar titles that would serve only to box his identity into a palatable, marketable item. The two gay authors that Gnerre chooses as examples are Pier Paolo Pasolini and Dario Bellezza. Pasolini is known worldwide for his provoking works that explicitly and frequently discussed and represented homosexuality; he is the world’s point of reference for Italian homosexuality. And while he is without doubt an important member of the literary and cinemagraphic landscape of Italian culture, strongly representing homosexuality, he submits to heterosexuality by adopting so quickly the gay stereotypes that appear in his art.

Pasolini relies heavily on two stereotypes: that of the young gay man as prostitute, and that of a feminine *frocio*, or faggot, that is searching to be loved and/or dominated by a much more masculine, heterosexual presenting man. While these are certainly the stories of some gay men in Italy, Pasolini’s popularity allowed for this particular (but not monolithic) lived experience of homosexuality to become a norm that hides a stereotype. And Pasolini, to some extent, internalized harmful stereotypes created by the dominance of heterosexuality, and these stereotypes framed his creative works. Published in 1955, Pasolini’s *Ragazzi di Vita* chronicles the lives of different characters, and Gnerre succinctly categorizes them: “[I] personaggi omosessuali sono di due tipi: da una parte c'è il “frocio” in cerca del “maschio,” e dall’altra c’è il “ragazzo di vita” disponibile a rapporti omosessuali per bisogno di soldi (Gnerre, 45).”

These *ragazzi di vita* play an important role in the ecosystem that is homosexual relationships in southern Italy. As I stated earlier, it is socially acceptable for “heterosexual” men to have sex with other men, as long as there is an exchange of money, and that the rules of penetration are followed. And, as often is the case with gay men, there are plenty of people willing to do what they need to do to simply get by. On one side of these interactions, there is genuine need. Some of these boys who prostitute themselves simply don’t have money, perhaps not even a home, so they willingly go to bed with these men. But the other side, the viewpoint of the self-proclaimed “heterosexual,” is using money only as a pretext to have a homosexual encounter.

This connection between homosexuality and prostitution is long-lived in Italy, and has not totally been erased. Today it is simply called being an escort or other names, and still serves the same purpose: to allow for men who live their daily lives as a heterosexual to satisfy another side (or the true side) of their desire. But in Tondelli, it appears rarely, and quickly, operating as a small plot point rather than a pretext for a novel, as it does with Pasolini.[[13]](#footnote-12)

The other author Gnerre discusses in the second chapter is Dario Bellezza, who was writing from a perspective similar to that of Pasolini - a gay man recounting the experiences of, and making art about, gay men. And he identified strongly with prescriptive stereotypes like Pasolini. In his novel *L’innocenza*, the link between homosexuality and prostitution is explored in a new way, as a discussion of lost innocence and of corruption (Gnerre 55). Although the argument that one does not choose their own sexuality is often used as a defense for the homosexual experience, Bellezza finds a certain choice in homosexuality, a choice of pleasure and corruption, “L’Inferno omosessuale,” as Gnerre puts it (54). There is a masochistic pleasure to be found in accepting one’s role in society, as a simple prostitute, just another depraved being. While for Bellezza, this might have been a way of processing his own queer experience, we do not find the same acceptance in Tondelli. There is still some masochistic pleasure experienced in relation to homosexuality, but it arises more from loneliness, isolation, and chosen otherness than an acceptance of stereotypical conceptions of homosexuality, and it is less intense.[[14]](#footnote-13)

Unfortunately, Gnerre only wrote of two openly gay authors who were depicting the homosexual experience in this chapter, who were conceptualizing homosexuality from their lived experiences. While homosexuality was written about by many authors, the majority of them were heterosexual (or closeted homosexuals). This served to maintain stereotypes of homosexuality, because homosexuality was portrayed almost exclusively by heterosexual men. These stereotypes were so strong that actual gay men were using these them in their own writing as characterization. Although an adoption of stereotyped behaviors can sometimes be empowering, for they can be part of self-determination, and at times a form of social marking[[15]](#footnote-14), they often reinforce the false notions behind the stereotypes. Often, prejudices and stereotypes have a negative connotation, and purposefully and intentionally adopting these characteristics, while for the individual may be beneficial, often contribute to the continued oppression of a group as an entity, in this case, queer folks.

But when all around you, there is only one view, it can be hard not to internalize it. And an important and powerful part of Italian culture that shaped the general attitude toward homosexuality is Catholicism. Even Tondelli, whose early texts refuted religion and spirituality, cannot entirely ignore the influence of religion in his life, and it returns as a more serious subject in his later novels.[[16]](#footnote-15) Gnerre does not fail to recognize the influence the church has had on Italy and its culture, and includes a chapter dedicated to it in his work. One of the most intriguing authors mentioned is Carlo Coccioli. He broached the subject of homosexuality and Catholicism, finding ways to have them exist together, rather than simply being diametric opposites (faith v. corruption), as has been insinuated by other authors. Starting in his early texts, he makes comparisons of homosexual love and faithfulness in religion, viewing them both as pure and all-encompassing (Gnerre 64).[[17]](#footnote-16) The presence of Catholicism in his writing remains present even throughout his later texts, markedly *Fabrizio Lupo*, published in Italy in 1978[[18]](#footnote-17), arguably his most famous book, in which he chronicles the gay love affair of two young men.[[19]](#footnote-18) Though he did not shy away from the subject of homosexuality in his career, he, like Tondelli, did not identify as a gay author, and he did not consider his sexuality the most important part of his own life, or his literature (Workman, 4).

What seems to be most controversial about this text is that Coccioli actively searches to find a way to reconcile homosexuality and Catholicism. It is not difficult to justify homosexuality and religion on a personal level[[20]](#footnote-19) - the difficulty arises when institutional thought, in this case from the Catholic church, gets involved (Gnerre 69). While the text overall has been criticized for being overly sentimental and dramatic, even by members of the LGBTQ movement, there is truth in it’s writing, and the troubled existence one can have in between two identities that do not coincide.[[21]](#footnote-20)

The other authors Gnerre uses in this section deal with similar themes - the intense and sometimes homoerotic love one can feel for Christ, a denial of one’s sexuality because of a catholic influence, and self-hate as a form of martyrdom in the face of religion (123**)**. In this chapter on Catholicism, Gnerre discusses ideas of brotherly love and connection, one of the only occasions in which an emotional relationship between men can go unquestioned. It is only in the context of religion that men can be affectionate and have relationships that extend beyond traditional expressions of masculinity.

Gnerre’s fourth chapter “Rappresentazione dell'omosessualità tra snobismo, estetismo e deformazione grottesca” delves into a much different side of homosexuality, one that is represented well by the lives of Dolce and Gabbana. Derek Duncan uses these two famous Italians as an example in the opening of his book on homosexuality in Italian culture. Duncan discusses their reluctance to accept the label of homosexuality, and how this reluctance perpetuates negative connotations of homosexuality. It suggests to others that homosexuality should not be celebrated, or that being discreet about one’s sexuality is prefered. Men like Domenico Dolce and Stefano Gabbana are allowed a certain privilege in living their homosexuality. Because of their status and money, they are allowed certain freedoms in their self expression, and a certain privacy and privilege that may protect them from some of the negative consequences of homosexuality (i.e. prostitution, rejection from family / social circles, being manipulated by or subject to prejudices, etc.).

The lived experience of Dolce and Gabbana is represented in literature in the texts of Alberto Arbasino, one of the major citations Gnerre makes in the fourth chapter. Arbasino’s protagonists are often members of the upper class - they travel extensively, wear designer clothing, and in essence live lives of the elite (Gnerre 109). These characters seem to go against all of the other representations of homosexuality that Gnerre discusses. They are not prostitutes, nor are they depraved sinners, but “intellettuali snob, molto colti e raffinati,” (Gnerre, 108).[[22]](#footnote-21) But while their lives may be both safer and more enjoyable than those of some homosexuals, they are not totally free of the repercussions of a gay life: “Ma la mancanza di tabù piccolo-borghesi non è un fatto di “fortuna”, bensì un privilegio di classe e di cultura; e《l’omosessualità spensierata e magari trionfalistica, soprattutto a livello popolare》è soltanto un mito decadente (Gnerre 115).”

Even if they are free of economic and, for the most part, social problems, it is impossible

to escape totally the social marginalization that is an inherent part of the homosexual experience. But what people like these characters, and Dolce and Gabbana, are able to do, is to forget about the more visible and pressing problems of one’s sexuality. But even if they don’t suffer the obvious problems of homosexuality (i.e. the stereotypically represented problems of homosexuality), they are still unable to avoid existing in the cultural byproducts of these issues, for often, as I stated earlier, homosexuality was almost exclusively represented by heterosexual men. And Gnerre succinctly describes this towards the end of the chapter: “l’emarginazione sessuale sia funzionale all’emarginazione sociale (117).”

The example of Arbasino is an extreme one - his characters can be viewed as outliers, exceptions to the rule. Another author cited in this chapter, Giuseppe Patroni Griffi, similarly writes of extremes regarding homosexuality. One of his early texts, *Ragazzo da Trastevere*, has as a major plot point the relationship to homosexuality I discussed at the beginning of this chapter - a loose conception of heterosexuality that allows for a certain level of deviance from societal norms, when acted upon in the correct manner (Gnerre 99). But instead of this playing out in experiences of prostitution, Griffi uses voyeurism and an intense aestheticism, describing the physical beauty of men who are watched while they have sex (Gnerre 100).[[23]](#footnote-22) This obsession with physical appearance carries over into some of his other novels, but in a much different form. In his novel *Scende giu per Toledo*, published in 1975, there is a trans character. While the presence of a trans character, specifically a trans woman, is certainly far from a voyeuristic appreciation of the male form, it still involves a focus on the body, and how that body is presented to the rest of the world. Griffi makes a lot of comparisons between the homosexual experience and that of a trans person, and given the context, these comparisons make sense (Gnerre 103).[[24]](#footnote-23) The setting is in Naples, where that loose definition of homosexuality was more present, so it makes sense that there is also a blurring of lines in the case of gender and its performance. Gnerre himself reduces the basic perspective of gender and sexuality in this text to a rather simple equation: “omosessuale = passivo[[25]](#footnote-24) = donna” (105).[[26]](#footnote-25)

Gnerre’s book progresses from the most frequently represented examples of homosexuality in literature, to those that are represented more rarely, and the fifth and final chapter certainly discusses these rarer examples. It deals with exceptions in 20th century Italian literature, and how these exceptional authors try to experience their homosexuality in a genuine, honest way. Although all of the authors mentioned in this chapter could be placed into one or more of the other sections of this book, they are grouped together because they share a sense of guilt and personal experience that is not lost on the reader, which renders these texts at times happy, but also sad and isolating. Giovanni Comisso writes of homosexuality through a lense of heterosexuality, in the end denying one’s own homosexuality in order to live a “full life” (i.e. having a family, a wife, a home, etc.) (Gnerre 129). Pasolini is cited again in this chapter, but only one of his texts *Amado Mio*, a small, unedited work. What Gnerre finds striking about this text is its open declarations of love, and genuine portrayal of true emotion. But I believe Sandro Penna and Umberto Saba are the two most interesting cases of the 4 cited in this chapter.

Penna uses love between boys, *fanciulli*, as a way to portray a homosexual experience that is free from any of the ideologies of his time in his book *Un po’ di febbre* (Gnerre 148).[[27]](#footnote-26) The love between these young boys that is still confusing and new shows that homosexual love is not that different from the love shared between two heterosexual individuals. But it is there that this magic love stops. Once one is no longer youthful, full of naivete, experiencing new things, the love becomes just another form of social corruption, in that it defies and threatens the social norm that is heterosexuality (Gnerre 149).

But it is Saba who I think truly manages to free himself from the constricting ideologies presented to him, and the story of his book is an interesting one. He wrote *Ernesto* in 1953, but was so afraid to publish his content that it was not published until 1975 (Gnerre 135). Like Comisso, his tale is played out through the life of an adolescent, the titular character. Ernesto, living in Trieste at the end of the 1800s, is “un personaggio un po’ fuori dalla storia e dalla società”; although he is portrayed as an innocent adolescent, he has a certain emotional maturity in his sense of self (one that seems to be lacking in the characters of Comisso)[[28]](#footnote-27), and certainly this attitude towards homosexuality would be hard to find at the turn of the 20th century (Gnerre 139).

Gnerre goes on to write that this “miracle” of a book is possible partially because “Ernesto è il frutto di una liberazione personale di Saba stesso” (139). Perhaps *Ernesto* is more personal than the other books cited in Gnerre’s text, but I think the same thing could be said about many of these authors. The act of writing about homosexuality from any sort of personal experience - be it youthful and somewhat positive, like Saba, dark and sexually charged like Pasolini, or plagued by Catholic guilt like Coccioli - is an act of personal liberation that, when created against the background of a homophobic culture, truly is miraculous.

Tondelli not only practiced these acts of writing from a point of personal experience, but actively encouraged others to do this as well. Later in his career, he began a project called Under 25, in which he aided young writers under the age of 25 in growing as artists, and working together to publish a small anthology[[29]](#footnote-28). A central point of this project is “la scrittura come espressione del proprio vissuto” (“Progetto Under 25”).

And this tenant is very evident in his own writings. Be it in his teachings or his own creations, the importance he places on *il vissuto* is seen. His realistic, almost diary-like texts carry a sense of reality that truly creates empathy between reader and character. And it is precisely this empathy, combined with the self-representation of homosexuality by Tondelli, that makes his literature an important step forward from the literary tradition Gnerre traced in his book, as well as the Italian literary tradition as a whole.

**A New Analysis of Tondelli - Homosexuality as a tool, not a trope**

*What does it mean to be gay in the novels of Tondelli?*

Pier Vittorio Tondelli was openly gay as a public figure, and in his texts he portrayed gay characters. But the way in which Tondelli employed homosexuality in his novels is a departure from the literary tradition I briefly outlined in the first chapter. Those authors relied on homosexuality as a trope that already had its own negative social connotations. This trope of homosexuality showed gay men as immoral, extremely sexualized, and isolated from society. But Tondelli avoids relying on this trope (or any other), and he does not use homosexuality as a singular characteristic. His characters are not reduced to a sole quality centered on their sexuality. While it is not possible that Tondelli escaped totally from the perils of homosexuality as a trope, he certainly stepped away.

The danger of portraying homosexuality in any form of media is that, to some extent, it will be interpreted in a predetermined way. When Tondelli was writing, this predetermined interpretation was framed by the trope I just explained - assuming homosexuality means immorality, and/or an insatiable sexual appetite. The point of view represented in media is often shaped by a general societal consciousness towards the object in question, and this societal consciousness can be different for different groups: men versus women, heterosexual versus homosexual, different generations, etc. In this case, using gay men as the object of attention, the societal consciousness at the time was one of either a general ignorance of gay men, or negative associations with homosexuality. Tondelli managed to abate this certain influence by both appealing to and representing a new generation: young Italians, particularly those born in the late 50s and early 60s. He wrote with his peers in mind, and with that, their generational consciousness.[[30]](#footnote-29) He took advantage of the difference in thought he shared with some of his *coetanei* to avoid the perils of interpretation.

Often, as I discussed earlier, a gay character in a novel becomes boxed in. Their personality and thoughts are almost completely defined by their homosexuality, and any other character development is framed by this primary characteristic. One of the most revolutionary things Tondelli does in his writing is to give his homosexual characters layers. While they may be homosexual, their sexuality is simply a small part of their lives, one of the many facets of their human experience. Usually, sexuality in the works of Tondelli does not deeply affect or change the plot of the story, but rather enhances it, or colors it a new shade.[[31]](#footnote-30)

Tondelli minimizes the singularity of homosexuality as a characteristic, and the importance placed upon it by authors that preceded him. It would be incorrect to say that he removed the importance totally - if sexuality had no importance to him, he wouldn’t have chosen to represent homosexual experiences in his books. I believe that this dampening of emphasis comes from something that the authors before him did as well - pairing homosexuality with other traits or identities.[[32]](#footnote-31) Tondelli makes connections between homosexuality and other identities that can sometimes be associated with otherness - transness (or at least gender fluidity), the artist, the vagabond - which allow the reader to notice both of the traits more, acting as a foil. By doing this, Tondelli expands the definition of homosexuality, giving it a variety of experiences and faces that serve to dismantle the monolithic view of homosexuality employed by the authors preceding him. No longer just immoral prostitutes and con-artists, the queer characters of Tondelli are students and writers, lovers and friends.

*Puff, Puff, Pass - Intersections of Drugs and Sexuality in Tondelli’s Works*

One of the most frequent themes in Tondelli’s books is drug use. It is present in all of his texts, ranging from heavier substances like heroin, to more socially accepted substances, like alcohol. Part of this comes from some of his influences; Tondelli very much identified with Jack Kerouac and his *On the Road*, as well as Allen Ginsberg and other authors of the beat generation (Buia 52). Just as Tondelli did with an Italian generation, Ginsberg, Kerouac, and the beatnik movement in general certainly had an influence on an American generation, and could be said to have appealed to a certain generational consciousness. These authors wrote of the experiences of young people growing up in a post-war society, of a subculture that was no longer hiding in the shadows. I believe that Tondelli did much of the same thing. He wrote of realistic lived experiences of a new generation of Italians, and did not shy away from the grittier details, drugs included.

Yet despite this influence, I believe that Tondelli intentionally creates a tie between homosexuality and drug use. Those who are rejected by family and friends, or even just society in general, can turn to drug use as a way to process emotions, or simply step away from reality. And so it is not strange that there are many queer folks who regularly use drugs. In Tondelli’s literature, this becomes more than just a cause and effect relationship, but instead one way of appealing to a generational experience (increased drug use) to create sympathy for gay characters. Their tie is one of shared otherness, a similarity in lived experience, despite differing circumstances.

But not all drugs are equal in Tondelli’s texts. My definition of drugs is wide-reaching, including also alcohol, but Tondelli’s was certainly different. As Buia points out, “È necessario distinguere...le droghe pesanti (barbiturici, eroina, anfetamine, acido) da quelle leggere (erba, hascisc, [alcool])... (52).”[[33]](#footnote-32) The lighter drugs, cannabis and alcohol, were so widely used that they would fall more under a generational reference that Tondelli repeatedly makes. But those harder ones, particularly heroin, become hallmarks of otherness in a more extreme context, and the troubles that go along with such drugs often befall the homosexual characters.

In “Post Ristoro,” the first story in the collection of stories that is *Altri Libertini*, there is clearly some relationship between the narrator/protagonist’s homosexuality and his heroin use. Giusy, the main character, is a heroin dealer, and the majority of the story recounts his interactions with his usual customers while he waits to get more inventory. Finally, at the end, after hours of waiting and dealing with pesky addicts who need their fix, Giusy meets his dealer to pick up what he’s been waiting for, but it is different from the exchange that one would expect. There is more than a simple trading of money for goods. Instead, Giusy “si volte, si getta sotto. Stringe gli occhi. *E ora fetente d’un mafioso onnipotente fa pure quel cazzo che vuoi! Eccomi a te!* (author’s emphasis) (20)”. This interaction has several interpretations. On one level, it may simply be an accompaniment to an exchange of money, perhaps for a lower price. Or it could be simply a consensual sexual interaction between two adults. But, the interpretation that I find most convincing, particularly because the sexual encounter happens after Giusy shoots up, is that the use of such heavy drugs causes Giusy to lose his inhibitions entirely, which allows him to find a masochistic pleasure in submitting to someone on which he is economically reliant.

This very short scene is not much different than some of the descriptions I provided in the first chapter: in an abandoned, isolated place, two people wordlessly engage in a sexual interaction after an exchange of goods. Although this trope is rather exhausted in Italian literature, Tondelli uses it anyway, despite his advocating against gay stereotypes. But the focus of this scene isn’t really the sexual encounter at all. Before and after the encounter, the focus in the text is heroin and its illicit use. Tondelli cleverly uses this view on homosexuality - that it is simply a form of prostitution - and discredits it by mentioning it in a way that seems almost insignificant.[[34]](#footnote-33) Although Giusy is gay, or at least engages in homosexual sex, his primary identity is as a small scale drug dealer, and a drug-addict himself. Certainly, part of the reason for his circumstances could grow from the fact that he is gay. Out of some necessity, Giusy has sex with his dealer, but it seems to be so normal for him, unquestioned, that it loses significance in its habitual nature[[35]](#footnote-34).

But Tondelli so quickly glosses over the scene. While it is certainly an intense moment, it lasts little in respect to the rest of the story. And this is the cleverness of Tondelli. To employ such a common trope, and realistically, but placing upon it such little importance that it could quickly be forgotten. It becomes a small piece of the larger picture of Giusy - who lives at the train station, who both uses and sells drugs, and is even somewhat of a friend to the other outcasts that hang out with him. What used to completely define a character has now simply become minutia, a part of his everyday experience.

The other story in *Altri Libertini* that features drug use as a prominent theme and plot point is “Viaggio.” This story chronicles the adventures of a pair of friends from Reggio-Emilia who travel throughout Europe in their early twenties, which had become popular with young Europeans at the time. Like all of Tondelli’s writings, there is an abundance of cannabis, hash, and alcohol in “Viaggio,” and these become so banalized that it is as if the characters are no longer even engaging in any illegal activities. But also present is heroin. In this case we see the other side of the coin: not the dealer, but only the user. And, to a certain extent, even heroin is viewed as banal, just another drug to experiment with, “Gigi comincia cosi coi buchi[[36]](#footnote-35), ad Amsterdam non si farà altro, ma la robe è buona (Tondelli 58).”

Anthony Spadaro also finds Tondelli’s descriptions of heroin to be somewhat strange. In his text on Tondelli, he writes “L’uso dell’eroina è anzi troppo romanticamente difeso, pur nel suo senso di gioco con la vita. Essa tuttavia non è segno di un gioco che è espressione di una paura della morte, ma di una paura della vita (26).” An interesting claim that I am inclined to agree with. What is intended as simply a zest for life, a desire to experience things, is actually a fear of facing reality. When one’s reality involves a denial of oneself, or denial by those around you, it is easier to get high and forget about the world. While homosexuality is certainly the motivation for some to begin using, I think it is more often a fear of getting old. Particularly in *Altri Libertini*, there seems to be a fear of the future, of growing older in a world that doesn’t feel like home, and this world is changing rapidly, in often unexpected ways. Beyond this fear of an unknown future, there is also fear of a lack of change of the present situation. The future may not offer a reprieve from the homophobic present, and this lack of belonging and acceptance may be retained in the future. These characters experience emotional pain and isolation on a daily basis, and so heavy drug use, and its risk of death, become an escape, a reprieve from the weight of reality, and the fear of an unknown future.

Although Tondelli refers relatively often to heroin in *Altri Libertini*, it appears few times in his other texts. I believe part of this is is caused by the fact that *Altri Libertini* is Tondelli’s first book, and the influence of the beat generation is very strong; he has not yet totally discovered his own voice. At times, *Altri Libertini* reads as an Italian version of some of Kerouac or Ginsberg, with a focus on sensation and wildness and escape.

The other interesting appearance of heroin worth mentioning is in *Camere Separate*. This text is non-linear, floating between timelines. The protagonist, Leo, reflects on his life after the death of his partner, trying to make some sense of his past. One of these flashbacks is to a night in which he decides to buy some heroin for a stranger who asked for his help. The experience is described as follows: “[Q]uel particolare fatto non era stato nient’altro che il superamento traumatico, violentissimo, della barriera che lo teneva racchiuso nella sua adolescenza, nei suoi miti, nelle sue illusioni (942).” When Leo finally arrives at the house of the dealer, he is too afraid to enter, but eventually finds the courage to go in, and sees that “almeno la metà di loro era completamente strafatta. L’odore dell’hascisc era forte...ma c’era troppa stagnola accartocciata in giro per non capire che quelli si erano fatti qualcos’altro in vena (946).”

Leo, still a prudent adolescent in this moment, does not do any heroin, but drinks a strange substance offered to him to calm him down. What he does not know until after the experience is that whatever he drank, “quell’intruglio verdastro,” is some sort of psychedelic substance (947). The strange night that ensues is that crossing over from adolescence to adulthood, “il superamento traumatico.” But what is most interesting about this event is the very different attitude towards heroin that is presented. Instead of a general acceptance of heroin and harder drugs, or a romanticization as Spadaro concluded, there is a much more cautious view of drugs - instead of the seductive pleasures of substances presented in *Altri Libertini*, we have a character who attempts to avoid drugs if at all possible, wary of their unknown effects. After all, Leo really only does the psychedelic by accident.

This is a big change from *Altri Libertini*. But *Camere Separate* was published almost a decade after *AL*, and Tondelli obviously had somewhat shifted in his thoughts towards harder drugs.[[37]](#footnote-36) I think part of this shift was Tondelli finding his own voice. Instead of relying on the works and thoughts of authors he admired, he had developed his own thoughts and opinions. *Camere Separate* is sometimes read as a somewhat autobiographical text, which serves to only reinforce this idea of self-growth and reflection on past writings.[[38]](#footnote-37)

What was an escape in “Posto Ristoro,” a tool used to cope with the reality in which one finds themselves, has become something that is feared. Leo doesn’t even seem to be intrigued - his experience is characterized primarily by fear. In this case, Leo’s drug use is entirely separate from his sexuality. What matters here is that Leo is passing, as he said, traumatically, from his naive adolescence to a knowledgeable adult. It changes him, and causes him to see things, and himself, differently: “Leo seppe che la sua prima giovinezza era finita...Non era più un ragazzo...Aveva viaggiato fino alle soglie dell’abisso per tornarsene completamente sconfitto, senza più certezze, senza risposte... (953).”

This spontaneous experience causes him to understand what it is to grow and to change, to see the world for what it is, which is not always a happy, nor safe place. And the sensation that this experience engenders is compared to one much later in his life, watching his young partner die. In this case that Tondelli presents to us, the connection between sexuality and drug use is much more subtle. This connection lies more so in the reactions and feelings they both inspire in *Camere Separate*, while in “Posto Ristoro” the relationship is much more explicit. “[Leo è] stanco, è senza forze, lo aspetta una notte buia, solitaria…” watching his partner slowly die, and is left once again defeated, and he leaves behind naivete for a more hardened view on life (942).

This connection between drugs and homosexuality is emotional, driven by feelings of abandonment and isolation. For Leo, using drugs is not about getting high, nor making a living as it is for Giusy. It is important also to distinguish between the drugs employed in these examples, as Buia has taught us to do. Giusy deals and uses heroin - a drug that is intense, powerful, and usually leads to addiction. But Leo’s experience is with a psychedelic, something that lasts hours and that is highly influenced by one’s environment. It encourages self reflection and exploration, while heroin leads to isolation, drowsiness, hiding from the world.

Like heroin, the connection between sexuality and drugs in “Posto Ristoro” is lived quickly and intensely, and then it is over. It’s a flash of intensity, but then quickly passes to something else. But Leo’s experience is much different. Like his “trip” on psychedelics, Leo takes a journey with his partner Thomas, that causes him to grow and change, but also feel pain, feel challenged, and feel afraid. And the end of both his psychedelic trip and his relationship with Thomas is some sort of death. Leo loses his innocence, his feeling of being adolescent after having taken drugs - a small part of him dies[[39]](#footnote-38). And so it is with the death of his partner - a different small part of him dies, the part of him that was defined by Thomas and their relationship.

I would argue that part of what makes Leo’s journey with Thomas important and meaningful is his being homosexual. His relationship with Thomas is possible only if they both identify as homosexual. And his sexuality is also tied to his pain. Firstly, it seems that Thomas’s illness itself is somehow tied to his sexuality. It seems to be suggested that he was afflicted by AIDS, which, in the 1980s, was still viewed as a disease only affecting gay men. Secondly, it is because of their homosexuality that Leo does not get to properly mourn the passing of his partner: “Il padre [di Thomas] rientra. Leo capisce che deve andarsene. Thomas è restituito, nel momento finale, alla famiglia...Non c’è posto per lui in questa ricomposizione parentale (940).” If Leo were a heterosexual character, the story would be much different. Of course, the death of a partner is difficult and tragic in any context, but it is worsened here by the isolation and denial of the relationship. Leo’s sexuality operates analogously to his electing to put himself in a situation where he will be presented with drugs: they both are what instigate these life changing experiences (this psychedelic trip, and his relationship with Thomas). And the death of his partner is analogous to the death of his ego, to his personal defeat: they both represent a death of a part of himself, leaving him with a hole that needs to be filled. Here the connection between sexuality and drugs occurs in different times, in different situations, and in broader strokes, but still, the connection is there.

Using drugs to characterize homosexuality allows Tondelli to explore themes related to homosexuality on another plane. Instead of having discussions about otherness and a fear of living one’s own life through a lense of sexuality, he includes other experiences that rework and redefine what it can mean to be gay. This allows him to make statements about how one may experience their own sexuality without making blanket generalizations about all gay people. He shows us that some may turn to drugs as a way to process and understand their sexuality, or perhaps even a necessity as a result of social repercussions of being gay in a homophobic society, as seems to be the case for Giusy.

But he also shows us that drug use can be independent of homosexuality. In Leo’s singular drug experience, the act of using drugs in itself was totally independent of his being gay, and instead symbolized more so a coming of age and an understanding of life. But what Tondelli does not deny is that drugs and sexualiaty interact, and that they are layers of the same being. Whether they be deeply tied together, or separate parts of an individual, homosexuality and drug use both change an individual and influence one’s life.

*Loneliness and Abandonment - Otherness and Relationships*

Though less of an identity and more an experience, the sensation of loneliness is associated with homosexuality in Tondelli’s novels. Loneliness is one of the major plot points of *Camere Separate*. Part of Leo’s emotional journey throughout the book is understanding his loneliness after the death of his partner Thomas. But even before Thomas’s death, Leo had experienced loneliness in terms of his sexuality: “Né lui né Thomas avevano modi femminili. Né l’uno né l’altro rientravano nei luoghi comuni sull’omosessualità. Non erano teatrali, non erano sgargianti, non facevano chiasso, non erano volgari, non parlavano continuamente di sesso. Erano indefinibili e questa creava maggior imbarazzo (963).” He felt himself an outsider among outsiders. This example shows that loneliness can be experienced in several directions. In the novels discussed in the first chapter, we see loneliness only as a result of rejection from the majority of society, as a negative result of being homosexual. But Tondelli, through his controversial and challenging works, shows us that other instances also exist: loneliness in a romantic sense, feeling isolated from all of society, isolation from one’s family.

It is also on a level of familial relationships that Leo experiences isolation. Upon returning to his hometown, he finds that he can no longer relate to his past in the same way, and that he feels lonely where he should feel at home:

Da bambino la nonna portava Leo davanti a questa chiesetta prendendolo in braccio per mostrargli l’altare che stava dentro, il quadro raffigurante la Madonna, i vasi di fiori. Per molti c'è un albero che scandisce il divenire, l’accrescimento, l’avanzare degli anni. Molti ricordano che quell’abete alto una ventina di metri è stato piantato dal padre quando erano piccoli. E anche Leo ricorda di aver interrato quei pioppi, ora altissimi … Ma vedendo quel filare di pioppi non prova nessuna emozione. Quando invece passa davanti al piccolo tempio sulla strada lui si ricorda di quando era piccolo, di quando si doveva arrampicare sulla grata di ferro per vedere dentro. Ora può scorgerne l’interno gettando semplicemente una occhiata. È cresciuto. E il tempio è diventato più piccolo, più raccolto, dai contorni più netti. Forse è anche più solo. Ma rimane per lui l'unica di misura del tempo (1005). [[40]](#footnote-39)

This excerpt is in some ways reflective of feelings shared by queer people with respect to their families. Often there are negative associations, or a lack of identification, with one’s childhood or adolescence - what for some causes sensations of home and positive memories can cause sensations of sadness or depression for queer folks. But for Leo, it’s a bit different. These sensations that he feels are not inherent to his queer experience, and instead of totally negative feelings, he feels apathy. He has removed himself from this childhood and his past to the extent that he feels nothing towards it. Totally isolated, feeling neither anger, nor joy.[[41]](#footnote-40) He does not identify with his family, nor with his small hometown. And so, it is easier to simply remove it, to view it without emotionality.

This is a common occurrence for queer folks. It can be much easier to simply abandon one’s family, to move on entirely, than to deal with the pain and anger one might feel after being rejected by one’s family. But Leo’s isolation from his family is not explicitly related to his sexuality. In fact, it is he that rejected his family. Thinking himself beyond Correggio, destined for more than just provincial life, he pushes his family away, creating a barrier of isolation around himself. As he did in his relationship with Thomas, he found pride in his loneliness, in relying on nothing besides himself and his art, thus causing him to rupture his relationship with his family.

I find it significant that inside the *chiesetta* there is a painting of the Madonna, the mother of Jesus. And there is also mention of a *padre* - a religious meaning in this context. There are these two explicit references to family members, be them religious in nature, that don’t elicit any emotion in Leo. There is no more magic in stretching to see what is in that small stone structure. It has become commonplace and banal. His memories of childhood are not particularly happy ones, instead causing him to detach and avoid (or perhaps not even feel at all) any emotional response to these reminders. But what is not gone is the memory itself, seeing as its description is rather vivid in the text.

Moreover, this *chiesetta*, particularly the reference to its size, also represents Leo’s relationship with his family. When he was a child it was large, bigger than him. It seemed to carry such weight and importance. But as he grew, the church shrank. It became just a small monument of little importance apart from childhood nostalgia. And the woman who took him there, his grandmother, is also gone. His relationship with his family has shrunk to insignificance. He mentions that he uses this monument to measure time - perhaps his family operates similarly, serving only as a way to measure time and distance.

He eventually returns to Correggio, after the death of Thomas, thinking that perhaps it will help him grieve his dead partner. But he finds that his reflections on his past have not changed, and that he feels only a vague interest in his family. He does not see his family as disturbing, or immoral, or really anything besides tired. They represent tradition for him, a tradition that does not warm and welcome him, but bores him with its seemingly meaningless reasonings and tired rituals.

Yet the result is still the same for someone rejected by their family and someone who steps away - a lack of familial connection, of a sense of home. And it is here again that we see the skill of Tondelli. He takes a commonality of the homosexual experience - isolation from one’s own family - and gives it a different context. He does not deny that these things are part of the life of a queer person, for he includes them in his works. But they do not define his sexual experience, nor are they defined by his identity. Leo’s sexuality is defined by pain and loneliness, but stemming from the death of his partner, rather than the expectations dictated by the authors writing before Tondelli. Instead of homosexuality causing isolation due to societal rejection, connections to prostitution, or heavy drug use, as was commonplace in the authors Gnerre cites, Tondelli humanizes homosexuality. Leo is lonely because a loved one dies, not because of some pre-decided societal condition tied to his sexuality. We are reminded that Leo is an “other,” that he lacks a home, but one aspect of this alterity is of his own choice. He is not a victim, nor a passive character. It was he who chose this life, to move away from his hometown and rarely return. Leo expresses agency in choosing his life, as opposed to other representations of homosexuals before Tondelli that had been more often passive or acted upon by others. Tondelli takes this painful experience familiar to many and rewrites it. Again, he expands the canonical definition of homosexuality.

An experience of loneliness is explored also in *Pao Pao.*[[42]](#footnote-41) Throughout the tale, the narrator/protagonist struggles to feel at home and at peace with his friends. The social dynamics are constantly changing, with new people arriving, and others returning home. The story begins with a retelling of the past; the narrator describes the last time seeing one of his companions, Renzo. It all begins with an ending. We learn early on that the narrator is telling us his story, but for whom? For himself? For the other characters in the text? Though it is certainly a way to share one’s life with the world, writing one’s memoir can be a rather lonely activity. And thus, the telling of *Pao Pao* is, to some extent, a product of loneliness.

As the story continues, going further back in time, the narrator travels to his new home for the next 12 months, he begins to accept his fate - to serve in the military for a year, taking orders, doing tasks, counting down the seconds until it is finished. He recognizes that this period is an opportunity for growth, to mature. Yet he is alone, and afraid of what is to come, and to some extent, he has accepted his fate. He already recognizes that once he leaves, he is alone. Despite the goodbyes and the tears, he is still alone, and those things do not offer much comfort in the face of loneliness. He has already learned how to be independent from loneliness, despite having not yet commenced his new experience. He no longer needs goodbyes and tears, because he has learned to need only himself. We only know that he decided to leave town inconspicuously, perhaps as a way to avoid the pain loneliness and leaving can bring.

But in this case, the loneliness acts simply as a backdrop for the action that is to come, rather than as a major point of development, as in *Camere Separate*. Part of the significance of *Pao Pao* lies in that Tondelli takes an event that should be lonely and isolating - serving one’s draft sentence for the state[[43]](#footnote-42)- and represents a more positive side of it - the mixing of Italians from different backgrounds with different histories[[44]](#footnote-43), to create new and unlikely social groups that strangely arise from a shared sexuality. In their loneliness, these young men find connection and a reprise from the isolation of performative masculinity. Certainly, *Pao Pao* is not the most realistic of texts. It is unlikely that a group of young, homosexual men would find each other in such a traditionally masculine (heterosexual) environment. In reality, it is unlikely that young men would feel comfortable being open about their homosexuality with each other, and the military mostly inspires connection based on masculinity and discipline, rather than empathy and friendship.

And the beauty of *Pao Pao* lies also here. Be it somewhat fantastic, Tondelli’s story allows us to feel love and connection in the face of isolation and control. The main story carries us through the ups and downs of young men struggling to define themselves and how they relate to others - and once you add sex, it surely does not get any easier. But still, there is the joy of a community found, of love shared, of experiences had. For most of the story, there is not the apathy and sadness of Leo as in *Camere Separate* - loneliness works less as a plot piece here, and more so as a way to frame a larger discussion of the topic. Instead, we see these men engage in such pure love, in pure connection and “brotherhood.” One’s hometown is no longer important, it no longer matters what dialect you speak, for these men have made a genuine connection, sharing a time and a space.

But when that time and space are no longer shared, when they have all done their duty and return back home, is the happiness still there? When there is no shared stomping ground, and none of them can call Rome home any longer, does the physical connection last? Unfortunately, no. As the narrator tells us, there is a last day that he sees these friends, a last time that their paths cross. Afterwards, just as before, he is alone. Yet he continues to carry an emotional connection with these men, through describing them and retelling their stories, “[e] gli altri che continuo fortunosamente a incontrare a mille miglia di distanza mentre sto scrivendo questa storia…(333).” Though he might never see his comrades again, he is able to access their memory, which allows him to at least reflect and relive those connections, and perhaps keep at bay the loneliness. What is fleeting is the experience, but the memory lives on.

Not unlike Leo, the narrator of *Pao Pao* combats his loneliness through storytelling. It is through recounting our own histories that we give our lives meaning, that we understand the lessons we have learned so that we may communicate them to others. Storytelling is often a vital part of marginalized communities, for it can serve as a way to share experiences, despite being excluded from or misrepresented in media. For queer folks, adolescence and young adulthood can be extremely isolating. There may be no one to share their experience with, no one who will understand. To combat these emotional distances, Tondelli uses storytelling, creating connections that extend beyond an individual.

Meaning is found moreover in the reliving of one’s past through art. The act of sharing creates a connection that wouldn’t exist otherwise, and it can create connections that form communities. That is exactly what Tondelli is doing, here in *Pao Pao*, and in his other works as well. Our narrator recounts to us what has happened as a way to stay connected to the memories he has. He shares with the readers his personal experiences, which allow them to bridge the gap created by the otherness of homosexuality. Through reliving the experiences of someone else, the reader is able to see the narrator’s multifaceted identity, to understand the narrator in ways beyond his sexuality. This understanding allows for empathy between reader and character, through seeing parts of oneself reflected in someone else.

Here loneliness is less described, and instead acted against. It becomes the motivation for creation, both of art and connection via reflection and memory. Both of these gay men find some reprieve in the recounting of their stories. In the case of Leo, it is a reprieve from the loneliness he is experiencing in the present. His retelling of his relationship with Thomas, and his memories of childhood, allow him to attempt to find new meaning in his life, outside of his past experiences. For the narrator of *Pao Pao*, the act of storytelling gives him the ability to retain his connection to those in his past, to not let them fade away. Though they treat different subject matters, it seems that on some level both *Pao Pao* and *Camere Separate* engage with memory. In the case of Leo, it is memory that causes his loneliness. He must first relive this pain to rid himself of it, to understand, and thus the act of storytelling becomes a way to process his grief and isolation. But in *Pao Pao*, memory serves as a way to relive happy moments and prevent them from being lost.

Leo’s experience of loneliness on a familial level is less a direct result of his sexuality, and more a result of his feelings of difference from and indifference toward his family. He is educated, literary, and international, therefore he goes beyond his small hometown of Correggio and his provincial family, moving far from Italy to live around Europe. But still his sexuality interacts with these feelings of isolation and difference not directly caused by his sexuality - his loneliness is augmented with the sickness and death of his partner. He is isolated by choice from his family, and by force from his partner. He has no more home. So though Tondelli shows us that loneliness is not inherent to the queer experience, it can certainly be a part of it. And in *Pao Pao*, loneliness is combated with homosexuality. The young men completing their military service create a community that unites in some ways around a shared sexuality, but also other shared characteristics: similar age, being away from home, a certain rebellious streak[[45]](#footnote-44). And being a part of this community, they are able to keep at bay the loneliness - the reality was not the expectation. These queer relationships create connections and foster bonds. Tondelli shows us another time that one’s existence is not predetermined by one’s sexual preference. He gives us a view of sexuality that is liberating and ever-expanding, that does not exclude the experiences of any, nor dictate how queerness can or should be lived.

*The Artist and Homosexuality - interactions between profession and sexuality*

I find the link that Tondelli makes between being an artist and being homosexual is most present in his later literature.[[46]](#footnote-45) It is particularly in Leo from *Camere Separate* that we see this. Leo most strongly identifies as an author, more so than anything else: partner, gay man, son, etc. Though a lot of what characterizes the connection between being an artist and homosexuality is shared by the connection between homosexuality and loneliness, I believe a distinction is necessary.

Leo is a successful artist. He has apartments in several cities around the world and a global mobility afforded to few. He has written several books, and has earned enough money to never write again. Leo has reached a level of fame (and income) that few authors reach. It could easily be said that he has already had a satisfying career. There is no economic need to continue to write. But to be an artist is a response to a call to action, an unignorable desire that afflicted Tondelli too, and that he was unafraid to represent in his own writings. Even *Pao Pao* can be said to support the claim that Tondelli references an artist’s duty to create in his works. If we just consider the storytelling aspect that I mentioned earlier of *Pao Pao*, it is evident that the importance of art and writing is present even there, where the subject is much less explicitly connected to art and creation.

In other cases Tondelli is even more explicit. Leo himself is an artist, afflicted like Tondelli by an unshakeable desire.[[47]](#footnote-46) On one side, it is possible for one to achieve great fame, even on an international level, being a writer or an artist. And this is certainly the case for Tondelli, as well as for Leo, who has homes furnished with magnificent art and expensive furniture[[48]](#footnote-47). At parties he is interviewed, asked about his current literary production. But Leo finds that these things do not bring happiness.

Though he cannot imagine himself doing anything else, and he does find some meaning in it as a vocation, there is still something missing in his life - writing has not satisfied his every need. He cannot call himself happy being simply a writer, but at the same time cannot imagine his own identity beyond being an author. What he needs is another person, something outside himself, to help him expand his identity. Leo had accepted willingly the solitary nature of being a writer, of being a spectator, but he did not realize or feel his loneliness at first. It continued until he was stuck, unable to write more, no longer fulfilled by his previous successes. It is at this point that he meets Thomas, and begins to define parts of his life in a new way. This is the first point of intersection between being an artist and homosexuality - the realization that neither a career nor sexuality (or perhaps love?) can offer complete meaning to an individual.

Though *Camere Separate* is not written in a linear way, it is still possible to trace the developments of Leo and his sense of self, and the changes he goes through spurred by his relationship with Thomas, as well as the changes he experiences after Thomas’s death. At first, Leo finds Thomas extremely enchanting, and this relationship allows Leo to expand his identity. And while he reframes his identity with Thomas he does not write; he seems to lose track of this part of himself while searching for another part. But he eventually becomes dissatisfied with Thomas, just as with his writing. And it is at this point that Thomas begins to get sick, and Leo loses also this part of his identity. Reeling from this experience, he turns to writing as a way to anchor himself, to process these events, but finds himself empty of words.

And the part of *Camere Separate* told in the present is a response to this lack of stability in his reality- Leo travels around the world, searching for a new home, a new life in the wake of the death of his partner, and his words, his ability to communicate himself to the world. His lack of ability to write and his sense of emptiness after the death of Thomas are inseparable. He must first find his identity with himself to begin writing, and then he can process his grief over Thomas.

And in Leo’s quest for a new life, a connection is made between homosexuality and being an artist through storytelling. In one sense, there is the literal storytelling that Leo does - recounting events he shared with Thomas, and other parts of his life. These allow him to grieve the death of his partner, in recapitulating both the difficult and beautiful moments they shared together. But in another sense there is a less direct connection to storytelling. An important part of his grieving process is creating new memories. He is both reconciling with his past through retelling, but also constructing new stories to tell during his travels, reminding himself that he is continuing on despite the death of his partner.

And this act of spectating can also be used to describe the queer experience. At times, it feels impossible to live one’s life, feeling capable of only watching others. At times, out of fear - it is still dangerous in parts of the world to be openly homosexual. When one genuinely fears for their safety simply being themselves, it can be much easier (and safer) to lay low, to watch instead of do. Other times, it may be inspired by the loneliness that I described above. When there is no one with whom to share one’s own experience, it can feel as if it is only possible to watch. But, no matter the instigating factor, there is this connection of watching, waiting, and stepping back, between homosexuality and a queer existence.

This example, though not as present as some of the other traits that I discuss in this chapter, is connected to Tondelli’s own life. And, as I wrote in the first chapter, he strongly advocated for writing from one’s lived experience. The seemingly biographical nature of some of the emotions felt by Leo lend them a poignancy that makes this example worth mentioning. Though all these comparisons and interactions between homosexuality and other aspects of an individual's personality and experience are plausible and convincing, it is the connection between Leo and Tondelli that first made me see this pattern of drawing from lived experiences.

But this strong, somewhat autobiographical connection, occurs this pointedly towards the end of Tondelli’s career. Perhaps he had found himself like Leo, at the height of a successful career but without anyone near, no longer finding his solitary storytelling satisfying. Whatever his motivation for creating this character, he crafts Leo with such honesty that can come only from lived experience. And Tondelli’s own sentiments towards the connections between his sexuality and his occupation are reflected here.[[49]](#footnote-48) In Leo we have a developed character who, through the retelling of his own life, changes in new ways, and shares the things that have brought him to where he is. We learn old lessons and discover new ones.

Another time, Tondelli gives us a real character, with realistic experiences (partially his own lived ones, it seems), which gives us a sympathetic and more nuanced view of homosexuality. Through Leo we are able to see and understand the particularities of a queer existence, the ones related to sexuality (like one’s partner dying of AIDS), and those that are independent of it (like Leo’s inability to identify with his family). In *Camere Separate* Leo searches meaning that is both discovered and lost through his sexuality. His hollowness is tempered by meeting Thomas, a man he loves. But he is returned to this state after Thomas’s death. Since the meaning he felt from Thomas was, like all things, temporal, he must search for it in other ways. And this meaning is realized in his being an artist. He translates the meaning into something more eternal. His memories of Thomas become solidified in his having told them, given them body to be shared with others.

*Camere Separate* offers a double perspective of storytelling. On one side, as an audience, we are allowed a view into someone’s life, we can share in the experience - we are actively involved in receiving Leo’s story. But we also see the other side, the value storytelling holds for the one who shares. We are able to hear Leo’s story, but also see why it helps him and how it aids him in his healing process. Leo is no longer the only one who knows of his love who is dying, who has died. Instead, he can share him, can give him a place in his memory. And this memory communicates another lived experience of sexuality, another experience to add to the canon of possibile experiences. As receivers of Leo’s story, we are able to experience a queer love although it is over. Thanks to Leo’s *impegno* of creating, the definition of queer is once again expanded.

*The Vagabond - Queer Wanderers and the Great Escape*

The influence of Kerouac and the beat generation is most present in Tondelli’s use of travel in his texts. Several of his characters, not unlike Kerouac, go on the road. They travel with no destination in mind, having as a goal only movement, a change of scenery. The goal is to act without reflecting, speak without thinking, to simply live. This necessity of movement reflects on homosexuality much differently than the tie between storytelling and sexuality made above. Instead of being inspired to stay quiet and reserved, to watch instead of do, here homosexuality inspires movement, escape, and wandering.

These characters move to avoid or escape the reality in which they find themselves. Instead of simply accepting the reality presented, they run, searching one that better suits them. And it is just this that happens in “Viaggio”[[50]](#footnote-49) in *Altri Libertini[[51]](#footnote-50)*, which I referenced earlier. The story begins with the narrator driving aimlessly through Emilia-Romagna, avoiding a frustrating interaction he must have. Sometimes to run away is the only option, “lasciare che le storie riempiano la testa che così poi si riposa (49).” Escape offers a simple reprieve, and the chance to watch and reflect. It allows for time to stop for a moment, for all of the things that make the current situation unfaceable to lose their hold.

And “Viaggio” continues in this manner. The scene driving through the countryside is the frame story for the flashback that occupies most of the tale. The narrator tells of the other travels he has done, escapes much farther than a drive on Via Emilia[[52]](#footnote-51). The narrator and his friend, Gigi, are in Brussels, working odd jobs, living with people from other countries, doing their best to let this dream continue. Once the money runs out in Brussels, they make their way to Amsterdam. Their trip is almost surreal - the city is dirty, they have no money, yet they continue, doing drugs and meeting people in public places. Anything is better than to return to reality, that in this case means returning to Italy. It is better to keep the ruse going as long as you can, until the money runs out and the hunger is too much.

In “Viaggio” the connection between homosexuality and the need for escape is one of cause and effect rather than of analogy. It is homosexuality that inspires the incessant need to escape from one’s current situation. Escape makes it so one can at least ignore the reality, in this case the perils of a queer existence, for some time, even if it doesn’t and cannot disappear entirely. And the reality does not disappear in this case: the travel described in “Viaggio” occurs during the summer, when students, like the two main characters (Gigi and the narrator) would return back home during the break from classes. This is the reality that our narrator fears, much like Leo in *Camere Separate*: that of returning to provincial Italy, returning to the realm of the family, where often personal expression and one’s own personality can be threatened or even denied due to expectations from others.

Thus they travel. But reality can be forgotten only for so long, and thus our two characters return to Italy to recommence their classes at the University of Bologna[[53]](#footnote-52). Yet even here, reality can be undesirable - though Bologna is certainly no small provincial town, not all of its residents share the same accepting ideology. The sometimes difficult realities of gay life are depicted here. While riding the bus,

“un vecchio s’avvicina e mi spinge col gomito che mi fa un male boia, perché prende il didietro del fegato che è ingrossato e inceppato e dice catarroso “Spurcacioun”[[54]](#footnote-53) e passa per uscire. Dilo [the narrator’s partner] che ha sentito e mi vede piegato e tutto storto, s’incazza e riesce ad afferrarlo per il cappotto tenendolo metà su e metà giù dall’autobus...e gli dice del bastardo e alla fine lo calcia e lo butta giù, ma intanto uno sui trentacinque corre dal fondo dell’autobus verso di noi e grida di lasciare stare quel vecchio, brutti culi, e io m’azzuffo con questo qui e prendo un cazzotto alla bocca dello stomaco che non gliela faccio più a respirare...salto in mezzo a un gruppetto di gente che non capisce bene quello che sta succedendo, ma quando vedono il vecchio che si lamenta allora ci guardano e in un paio ci inseguono gridando che siamo ladri e il vecchio scatarra che è vero e che lo abbiamo scippato (70-71).”

This experience leaves the narrator shaken, but his partner, Dilo, steadies him. But it does not change the fact that they are not only scorned by the members of their city, but when they try to defend themselves, they are tormented and pushed even further into the margins. But what makes this harsh reality livable is the presence of Dilo, someone there to recognize and share the narrator’s experience, as well as shield him from some of the pain that comes from this life: “E Dilo mi prende la mano tra le sue e sussurra “Lo so che la vita da finocchi è difficile, ma non permetteremo a nessuno di torturarci, non lo permetteremo ok (71)?”

Now, with the reassurance of his lover, the need for escape is weaker. Although this reality of persecution and hatred remains unchanged, the narrator realizes he can escape it, or at least temper the pain it causes, through love and connection. But once again, the reprieve is temporary. This relationship, based on a mutual desire to escape the world, doesn’t withstand the tests of reality. As a result, the protagonist must once again turn to travel, pushed even further into an unpleasant reality, feeling not only the pain of being queer, but this time coupled with the pain of a broken relationship. Thus he goes to stay with a friend in Milano, to escape Bologna that is now plagued with memories and pain.

Both of these stimuli are related to his sexuality. At first, he is trying simply to escape facing his sexuality. It is easier to live a life where he can be anonymous, where he can simply be an Italian traveling, rather than being queer in a heterosexual environment. In Amsterdam his queerness is subjugated to his nationality. There, when meeting people, he can hide behind this face, that of being a foreigner, which can make living his homosexuality easier.

But back in Italy, what urges him to escape is slightly different, but again related to his sexuality. He has found a way to make his reality livable, and when it is taken away, the reality seems worse:”Via un giorno dietro l’altro dal calendario a muro, tutti foglietti che si perdono per la cucina e stanno lì tra i piedi a ricordarmi ogni momento che Dilo non torna (77).” Another time he is pushed to leave, to hide, to define himself in a new way that allows him to find his reality bearable. But at the end we are reminded that these are simply reflections, that the narrator has continued beyond these experiences. Though they were painful in the moment, he survived them, and these experiences allowed him to continue to grow. Though his response to uncomfortable stimuli is still similar - to move, to wander - the stimuli has also changed.

Perhaps he has found a better way to live his sexuality, no longer letting it control his life. But it is not clear either way, because, as usual, homosexuality is only a piece of the story. Instead the significance is in the fact that he has learned to control his responses to these stimuli. Instead of changing cities, or even countries, he drives, knowing he will return, going only so far before turning back. And the stimuli around have changed as well. Though we cannot be certain about the relationship between the protagonist and his sexuality, we can see what has caused this impulse to escape is different. He is dreading a conversation with his friend, and for this he pushes away, instead of once again being pushed by his sexuality.

The other major case of traveling interacting with sexuality occurs in *Camere Separate*, with Leo. As I discussed before, Leo travels as a way to reconnect with himself, and grieve the death of Thomas. He searches something, anything that will keep him grounded. His motivation is different than the narrator of “Viaggio”, who searches to escape. Leo has nowhere to escape from, because he has no home. What was his home, Thomas, is now gone. So Leo travels to find himself. But it is not an easy task. Each place he goes only elicits memories, but does not provide him the sensation that he is looking for, that of having arrived at home.

In *Camere Separate*, it is his homosexuality, his love for another man, that causes him to stay in place. Before he meets Thomas, he is simply wandering about his life, reflecting on past relationships, and feeling uninspired towards his work. But his relationship with Thomas provides him a sense of belonging, found through his queer experience. It gives him a home and helps to shape his identity. But this emotional “home” is lost with the death of Thomas, and so Leo goes searching for it. He has learned the beauty of feeling loved and connected, and desires it again.

Though both of these men travel for different reasons, their departures are tied to their queer experiences. Leo searches for what was found and lost, the narrator of “Viaggio” searches for that which he does not have - a reality in which he feels comfortable, a place where he can be unwaveringly himself. Tondelli shows us that sometimes it can be difficult to stay in one place when living a queer experience. If one does not feel as if they have a place to return to, or a place to even start from in the case of Leo, there is no reason to stay anywhere. It is better to go, having as a goal that ever elusive peace of mind, that sense of safety that one can have when a home is had. And in the case of “Viaggio,” it seems to be possible to find - though the narrator has attempted escape another time, he has a home to return to, a place that, despite its difficulties, is a place that is better than a life of traveling.

Unfortunately, it doesn’t seem that Leo has the same ending as the narrator of “Viaggio,” and does not reach a new home as he had had before:

“Nonostante siano trascorsi tanti anni, o solo un’ora, ricorderà il suo amore e rivedrà gli occhi di Thomas come li ha visti quell’ultima volta. Allora saprà, con una determinazione anche commossa e disperata, che non c’è più da fare. Si avvierà alle sue cure, cambierà letti negli ospedali, ma saprà sempre, in qualsiasi ora, che tutto sarà inutile, che per lui…e la sua metaphysical bug, la sua scrittura...anche per tutti loro è giunto il momento di dirsi addio (1105-06)”

Although he may not have the same pleasure of having a home as the narrator of “Viaggio,” there is still some sort of contentment that has come over him. Though he may never find a home, he knows that one day it will lose it’s sting, and he will feel calmness once again.

For both of these characters, some sort of peace was reached. Though they may have been pushed to leave because of their queer identities, they manage to use these experiences as a way to grow, and reach some sort of point of acceptance of their own sexuality and situations. Tondelli shows us first that sometimes, one must escape. That the queer experience can be too heavy to carry alone, and so it’s better just to throw it to the wind and move on. But he also shows us that it is possible to find a home, to find peace with oneself. We see that one day, it is possible to have that peace of mind, the ability to be openly and unapologetically yourself.

*A New Generation with New Definitions*

Part of what gave Tondelli appeal early in his career was the representation of a new group of young Italians in his literature. These young Italians born in the late 50s and 60s like Tondelli were finishing university and entering the sphere of adulthood, and this transition is represented in his oeuvre. Though certainly not all young Italians were living like the characters of Tondelli, a group of people making up an alternative culture did. They were using drugs, having sex, and consuming culture from all around the world. Many shared a fascination with the United States and its art and cultural production, which can be seen in the references in Tondelli’s literature. Through all of this, this new generation was attempting to understand a new world, capable of the atrocities of world wars and terrorist attacks, occurring both abroad and at home.

Tondelli was not bound by conventions that came before him, and even pushed against them, particularly regarding subject matter. He honestly and positively portrayed these alternative youths living their reality, choosing not to depict them as a morally depraved generation as older authors might have, but instead from the perspective of a peer. He was unafraid to present some of their negative experiences, like navigating the troubles of adulthood, and searching to form an identity. Tondelli gave voice to aspects of this identity that had yet to be heard. This aspect of his work is particularly powerful in *Altri Libertini*. As I stated in chapter 1, Tondelli thought it important to write from lived experiences, and this is evident in his collection of stories. He could not have lived all of these experiences, but it seems as if he has spoken to these people about their lives, and found a way to realistically portray them.

One of the major keys to this generational appeal of *Altri Libertini* is its language. Tondelli employed a very colloquial language that can be hard to strictly define, seeing as it can change from region to region, or even city to city.[[55]](#footnote-54) But this is the language that was spoken between Tondelli and his peers, the language that was used to describe these lived experiences among themselves. And this helped reshape the definition of literature. It did not have to be someone writing to an educated audience, employing strict grammar and a very studied vocabulary. It could also be stories that you heard from your friends, told in a the shared language you spoke, a language of cultural references, idioms, and slang.

The use of a street vernacular helps create this generational consciousness, along with references to both American and Italian pop culture[[56]](#footnote-55), but its value comes from what Tondelli can use it for. It becomes a way for Tondelli to communicate new ideas or other, lesser known pieces of alternative culture, like the queer experience in “Viaggio,” or the nightly experience of a drug dealer in “Posto Ristoro.” By using settings recognizable to Italians, like rural towns and university cities, and utilizing a language that is used every day, he is able to give his texts a sense of genuineness and familiarity that makes it easier for Italian readers to connect to.

In appealing to this generational awareness through this new style in *Altri Libertini*, Tondelli is able also to influence it. Perhaps not all of his peers felt so sympathetically towards queer people. Or maybe they had never thought about the life of a drug dealer. But because there is already a ground work of recognizable language and culture, Tondelli is able to bridge the gap somewhat between queer and straight, to form new connections for a new generation. And for his colleagues that already felt some sympathy towards queer folks, or were queer themselves, the familiarity of the texts is only reinforced in seeing stories that reflect their realities.

There is also power in this idea of a generational identity in that it allows for homosexuality to become a secondary identity once again. Though these young queer people may be different than their heterosexual peers, they can connect as a group over other shared experiences and shared culture. Homosexuality does not have to be isolating, but instead just another facet of one’s identity, an opportunity for difference to be recognized and celebrated, rather than hated and misconstrued. This is the case in *Altri Libertini* again, seeing as the characters are men and women, gay and straight, having as common ground between them being consumers and appreciators of popular culture.

Tondelli works to create a generational identity in *Pao Pao* as well, though it occurs less on a cultural level. Instead, because the group of main characters is homosexual, the differences they overcome are tied to their regions of origin. They have different appearances and speak different dialects, and stick to who they know at the beginning. But as they realize they are sharing this experience together, the importance of these differences fades, allowing them to find a common ground as young men doing their duty to their country (though they certainly do not take this duty overly seriously).

These young men become solidified as a group of individuals, and represent this new generation of young Italians, serving their military duty in a world after the Vietnam war. They are a generation of young men who, although perhaps not loudly, are fighting against traditional ideas of masculinity and the military. They enjoy themselves often and without worry, they are not aggressive nor are they searching for military conflict. Instead, they serve their duty as they must, but only as a way to continue back with their normal lives. *Pao Pao* makes it clear that this new generation of Italians has removed importance from war and military strength. Instead, they find pleasure in conversation and each other’s company.

Due to its purpose - the invasion and destruction (and occasionally protection) of a state, the military is often plagued by hyper-masculinity. In the military, young men are taught skills and given coping mechanisms that often lead to feelings of isolation, and an overvaluing of independence. They are instructed to keep going and compartmentalize feelings instead of pausing and expressing them, or sharing their emotional burdens amongst each other. But Tondelli rejects this typical notion. In *Pao Pao*, these men communicate about their feelings, and do not succumb to the false myth that says that independence is the way to happiness. Instead, they engage with one another as a small community, enjoying the cultivation of relationships with one another.

*Camere Separate* marks a shift from this generational consciousness, but it is not gone entirely. It does not have the same importance as in *Altri Libertini*, but there is still the frequent citing of popular culture (that is a hallmark of Tondelli). But, as I discussed earlier in this chapter, *Camere Separate* focuses on one man and his search for a new identity and dealing with the grief he feels after his partner’s death, so making strong appeals to a generational consciousness would be neither useful nor relevant in this context.[[57]](#footnote-56)

The presence of a generational consciousness in these texts allowed for Tondelli to have such a large following in Italy. He depicted this new generation in topical ways, using pieces of cultural knowledge - music, literature, slang, specific locations - that were widely shared by certain groups. This allowed for Tondelli to impart his own thoughts about the culture of the time, and to leave upon it his own influence. This new generation no longer viewed homosexuality, or sexuality in general, as a taboo topic. The times were changing, new voices were making themselves heard. Though this consciousness might not interact with sexuality like the traits I described above, it certainly played a role in its representation in Tondelli’s literature, as well as in the general changing of thought towards homosexuality at this time.

Although Tondelli was hesitant to identify as a gay author, it is impossible to separate his sexuality from his writings. It undoubtedly affected the way he navigated the world and how he saw the things around him. And this is important to take into consideration when doing an analysis. Though sexuality plays a small role in his texts, it is still an important role that adds to the meaning as a whole. It creates a more varied picture, with more *sfumature* to characterize the world.

**Conclusion**

Italian homosexuality viewed outside of Italy is often characterized by few examples, like Pier Paolo Pasolini, or Dolce & Gabbana. Although these examples have value and are part of the Italian queer experience, they are hardly indicative of the entirety of the experiences of queer people in Italy. In no way do I want to diminish the importance an author like Pasolini has had on both literature and popular culture in Italy, for it is certainly important and valuable. But it would be better to view it within a larger context that contains many authors besides him, like Tondelli, in order to give a more varied, and therefore more inclusive, view of homosexuality in Italy.

Tondelli unfortunately has not yet managed to infiltrate American consciousness. Italian homosexuality is still defined by authors who came before him. Of course, part of this lack of knowledge about Tondelli arises from the inaccessibility of his texts. Until his texts are able to be read by an English-speaking audience, it seems out of place to question why he is relatively unknown by English speakers. But I believe the problem is more than this. There is a tendency to continue to study texts already established as classic, or well known in academic circles. And, although Tondelli is certainly a recognizable name in Italy, he is still recent enough as an author to be included in a general category of contemporary work. He has not yet received enough critical attention to allow him to move beyond being simply a contemporary author to the category of great Italian writers, like Pasolini or Umberto Eco.

Part of Tondelli’s mastery is his ability to balance the literary with the popular. He had studied literature, and certainly references it in his texts. But he was also able to appeal to readers on a popular level, not simply to academics. Yet it seems that this has not worked to his advantage. Instead, his popularity has caused for him to remain just another piece of popular culture. He has become victim to academia’s self-importance; due to his wide scale appeal, he must be something of kitsch, unworthy of study. Because he has not yet been declared an object worthy of critical study by American academics, he has received little critical attention outside of Italy. And as long as he continues to receive little to no critical attention, it is unlikely that his status will change.

But Tondelli managed to bravely challenge the literary tradition that preceded him. He did not worry about reception or the attention of critics. He found more value in the telling of the story, and in writing to an of audience of his peers rather than appealing to the tastes of critics. Tondelli is able to acknowledge the tradition that he followed without replicating it. Though he is no stranger to the academic and critical views of literature, he also manages to understand their shortcomings. These perspectives can be used to understand Tondelli’s writings, but using a reader’s perspective can elucidate other parts of Tondelli’s texts, like the slang and pop culture references of *Altri Libertini*.

Beyond this change of focus from citics to readers, Tondelli also managed to construct dynamic characters that reflected modern queer experiences and redefined canonical definitions of queerness. He showed through his characters the multitude of different experiences a queer individual can have. Certainly, it is still only a specific part of the queer community being represented - white, gay, Italian men - but these stories that Tondelli recounts do not contain the flat stereotypes that Gnerre described in his text. Instead, he compares and contrasts sexuality with other parts of the human experience. The complexity of queer identities is represented in Tondelli - its layers and idiosyncrasies, its numerous possibilities.

Tondelli actively redefines homosexuality through his texts. He portrays modern experiences of homosexuality that questioned current notions and stereotypes. Instead of tired tropes of prostitution or moral depravity, Tondelli creates realistic queer characters: Leo, who searches for meaning after the death of a partner; the young men of *Pao Pao* who find community among each other despite their circumstances; and the youth of *Altri Libertini* who are simply trying to survive the transition into adulthood. The verisimilitude of these characters fosters empathy between the reader and the text, and this is part of their impact. They redefine queerness first by presenting new queer experiences not oft represented in literature, and second, through a portrayal that reflects a queer reality.

Despite his innovations, Tondelli has yet to enter the canon of great western literature. With this paper, I hope to have made an analysis of Tondelli that speaks to his great skill as an author, and that neither over nor under value the role of homosexuality in his texts. Tondelli wrote for a new generation of readers, a generation that would greatly change global society, and his texts are a part of this change. He challenged stereotypes in Italy, but also managed to display homosexuality in ways that resonate across cultural and political boundaries. For these reasons, it is only right that he is known as an important author in both Italian and Western literary traditions.

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1. DAMS stands for *Discipline Arte Musica e Spettacolo*. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. *Altri Libertini* was published in Italy in 1980, and went on to be translated into numerous other European languages (excluding English). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. *Pao Pao* is the second book published by Tondelli, in 1982. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
4. *Rimini* was published in 1985 in Italy. It is not his most popular novel, but it was an experiment in style for Tondelli. It is the story of a journalist who spends a summer in Rimini, Italy (a very popular vacation spot during the 1980’s, located in Emilia-Romagna), and while there, gets embroiled in several mysterious occurrences. It is told in multiple voices, instead of Tondelli’s usual singular narrator/protagonist. Although it is an interesting piece stylistically for Tondelli, it doesn’t interact very much with the topics I discuss here, so I have not included it in this paper. For more information and analysis, see *Noti ai Testi* in Bompiani’s compilation of Tondelli’s works, and Elena Buia’s text, *Verso Casa*. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
5. Carola Lucarelli was born five years after Tondelli in 1960, and originates from Emilia-Romagna as well. Like Tondelli, he writes frequently of his home region and the cities there, and also attended the University of Bologna. He is mostly known for his noir novels. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
6. Under 25 was a project Tondelli undertook later in his career to work with young aspiring writers in Italy, particularly his home region. I mention it again at the end of the first chapter. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
7. *Camere Separate* is the final novel Tondelli published before his death, in 1989. It is also the only text that has been translated into English. The English title, published and distributed by a British publishing house, is *Separate Rooms* and was published in 1992. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
8. *Centro di documentazione* would translate as archive in English. Here there is a collection of critical texts written about the author, as well as many primary resources in which he is quoted or mentioned, including interviews he had done. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
9. Though all of Tondelli’s texts have been published in different editions by different publishing houses, I chose the Bompiani compilation as my major resource firstly because of the ease of having all the texts in one, and secondly, because it includes notes to the texts in the back, as well as some of his more obscure writings. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
10. Authors like Tondelli had to work against the preconceived notions of homosexuality in their literatures, and it is this work, the intentional redefining and restructuring of literary and social norms, that helped to change the more general opinion. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
11. In *Pao Pao*, the gay cadets who make up the characters of the story all seem to find each other, via different, and at times unexpected, lines of communication. It is partially in this way that they find camaraderie, despite being from all over Italy, with different experiences. It can also be found in *Altri Libertini*, particularly in the story *Mimi e Istrioni*. The four characters spurned by the majority of the small town they find themselves in, hold even tighter together, bound by the shared experience of being othered. But when they return, having each spent a summer away from being outsiders, they find the connection is no longer as strong, the friendship weakened. They had become accepted by society, and therefore had lost the one thing that kept them all together. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
12. Although Tondelli is more explicit about the presence of homosexual characters in his texts, he too does not rely heavily on the use of the word homosexual to characterize his characters, instead focusing on what makes them individuals, who also happen to be gay. This is seen in *Camere Separate*, where there is not a strong identification with the label “homosexual.” [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
13. One example is in “Posto Ristoro”, from *Altri Libertini*. I discuss it more thoroughly in the following chapter. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
14. This concept is explored more thoroughly in my discussion of *Camere Separate.* [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
15. For a discussion on social marking, particularly in terms of gender, see Talia Mae Betcher’s article “Trans Women and the Meaning of Woman.” [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
16. See discussion of *Altri Libertini* and *Camere Separate*, respectively. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
17. The view of homosexuality as some sort of pure relationship between men is a subject I broach briefly in my discussion of *Pao Pao*. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
18. The book was published over two decades earlier in France and Mexico, where it enjoyed particular success. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
19. http://www.glbtqarchive.com/literature/coccioli\_c\_L.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
20. An interesting example of this, although not Italian literature, can be found in *Les Météores* by Michel Tournier, a French novel in which a group of monks find ways, be them unconventional, to reconcile their sexuality with their religion, and conveniently do not belong to the catholic church. This text also treats the subject of love for Jesus Christ as a form of homosexual, or at least brotherly, love. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
21. This theme is very present in both *Altri Libertini* and *Camere Separate*, and I discuss it in the second chapter. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
22. While it would be difficult to classify Tondelli as a “snob”, he certainly was an intellectual, and some of his characters even seem to fit some of these descriptions. It is present in *Camere Separate* and its protagonist who thinks to live apart from the majority of gay culture. It is perhaps even more present in Tondelli’s novel *Rimini*, which I do not discuss heavily in this paper. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
23. Tondelli doesn’t employ any voyeurism in his texts, but there is some focus on the body, particularly an ideal one, in *Pao pao*. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
24. None of Tondelli’s protagonists are trans folks, but he does include several characters whose genders are at least ambiguous, or fall somewhere on a spectrum of transness, particularly in “Mimi e Istrioni”and “Senso Contrario.” [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
25. To be clear, as a second language speaker, I am not entirely sure what the use of the word *passivo* means exactly in this case. It is used in the Italian gay community to signify a “bottom” (gay man who enjoys being penetrated). But *passivo* has different meanings in a more general context that could also be applicable here. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
26. In many societies with different histories, homosexuality has been linked to womanhood. Often, homosexual men (particularly those that enjoy being penetrated) have been viewed as extremely feminine, or even just as women. What I do not want to do is to liken too much the experiences of gay men and trans folks, because they share more differences than they do likenesses. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
27. While Penna manages to avoid employing stereotypes explicitly or often in his text, the simple use of young boys, these *fanciulli*, to communicate his ideas is, in itself, a bit of a stereotype: homosexuality has frequently been associated with pedophilia, and this perspective could be applied to his novel. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
28. Tondelli avoids using adolescents in his novels, but some of his characters could be said to share this mature naivete of Ernesto, particularly Thomas in *Camere Separate* and the many young adults of *Altri Libertini*. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
29. Tondelli published three different anthologies with 3 different groups of young writers, one in 1986, 1987, and 1990. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
30. Elena Buia, in her text *Verso Casa,* senses the relatable nature of the texts of Tondelli as well: “la vita dello scrittore di Correggio non risulta molto intaccata [dentro sue storie] e predomina la voglia di raccontare comportamenti tipici di alcuni settori della cultura giovanile italiana o europea.” She goes on to call this tendency “discorso generazionale” and “epopea collettiva” (108). [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
31. Some critics took a reading of Tondelli such as this a bit too far - they wrote that *Camere Separate* would have been the same if the characters had been a heterosexual couple. While I think that homosexuality is not the primary characteristic of the protagonists, it certainly has an important role, and a heterosexual relationship would certainly not have been received in the same way. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
32. Most often, as I wrote in chapter one, homosexuality was tied to prostitution and pedophilia, but Tondelli mostly rejects these connections. An example of where he doesn’t can be found in “Posto Ristoro” in *Altri Libertini*. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
33. I personally included alcohol in the list provided by Buia because although it may not be viewed as a drug by either Buia or Tondelli, it is used in Tondelli’s books as a way to remove oneself from the present moment or alter one’s perception of reality, which I would say constitutes drug use. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
34. It’s possible that this sexual encounter has other meanings particularly when viewed in terms of drugs and prostitution. But, even with this interpretation, I find that the character’s attitude towards the situation is almost uninterested, neither present in the moment, nor reflecting afterwards, which leads me to believe that the sex is unimportant to Giusy, just another part of his day. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
35. Though all sex workers have sex in some sort of habitual manner, here I intend habitual to refer to the sexual relationship with this specific person. Sex workers may have regular customers, or may also have a changing customer base, whereas Giusy has a different relationship with his sexual partner. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
36. *I buchi* here refers to doing heroin, and, more specifically, refers to the holes that one makes and become visible over time with heroin use, often known as “tracks” in English. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
37. At no point is there a large change in Tondelli’s thoughts towards the lighter drugs. Cannabis is used widely and without remorse in all of his texts. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
38. For a more autobiographical reading of Tondelli’s works, see Elena Buia’s *Verso Casa*, particularly her discussion of *Camere Separate*. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
39. “[Leo era] la stessa persona, ma portava in sé la traccia sanguinante di un aborto, di un Leo che si era bruciato (954).” [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
40. One of the arguments that supports the reading of *Camere Separate* in a somewhat autobiographical sense is that Leo and Tondelli share a hometown in Correggio, in Emilia-Romagna. This particular quote is striking because *la chiesetta* of which Tondelli writes actually does exist, and is well known in Correggio. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
41. This apathetic view of one’s hometown is present also in the opening of “Viaggio”, and even somewhat refers to the same place: “su e giù dalla via Emilia” (49). [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
42. *Pao Pao* is Tondelli’s second novel, published in 1982. It chronicles the experience of a young man who goes to Rome to fulfill his draft duty. While there, he encounters many other young men, a large number of which are gay. Thus, Tondelli uses a military setting as a way to explore homosexuality and relationships between men. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
43. Though no longer in practice, at the time of *Pao Pao*’s publication, young men were legally required to fulfill a 12 month draft in some part of Italy. Seeing as it was something many young men shared, this too could be part of what formed the “generational consciousness” that I descrived earlier. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
44. Another interesting aspect of *Pao Pao* is its very Italian identity. *Altri Libertini* takes place mostly in and around Reggio-Emilia, but in *Pao Pao* all of Italy is represented, and there seems to be a connection found in their differences. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
45. Many times throughout the novel, the narrator, and his friends, slip out when they shouldn’t, or find someone to cover their absence, and they are not strangers to heavy bouts of drinking and the more than occasional use of cannabis. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
46. I would strongly argue that art plays a role in all of Tondelli’s works, both in terms of creation and critique, but for my purposes of describing the connection between artistic vocations and homosexuality, I mostly discuss art’s role in *Camere Separate*. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
47. Leo is often interpreted by critics to be strongly autobiographical, and it can be understood why; beyond sharing a hometown, Leo and his creator also share the same career, the same fear of abandonment, and, quite obviously, a sexuality. Though the autobiographical nature of the text is sometimes disputed by critics, it is impossible to deny entirely that there are some likenesses between Tondelli and his character. Elena Buia goes as far as to refer to the protagonist of *Camere Separate* as Leo-Tondelli in her analysis of the text. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
48. It is this aspect of *Camere Separate* that reminds me of *l’omosessualità snobistica* that Gnerre mentions in his text. Leo is certainly a man of specific tastes, and is unafraid to spend money on things the characters of *Altri Libertini* would certainly find frivolous or unnecessary. This shows us that, despite his rejection of traditional tropes of homosexuality, it is impossible to totally escape the grip of stereotypes. Sometimes, an individual can simply live their life honestly and unknowingly or unintentionally reflect stereotypes. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
49. In several interviews, Tondelli spoke of his desire to be known not as a gay writer, but as simply a writer. He felt that being placed into such a small category limited both his audience and his value as a writer. For him, his books were not about homosexuality, and I support that claim in this chapter. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
50. *Viaggio* translates into English as “trip” or “travel”. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
51. In *Altri Libertini* there is another story that describes travel and escape, “Autobahn.” It depicts a young man who searches to go north, escaping from Italy, traveling with only enough money for gas and his motorbike. The description here is much more frenzied and intense. It describes only the act of travel itself, rather than what may cause it, as in “Viaggio”. Although it certainly would fall under this section, it does not interact with sexuality in the way that “Viaggio” does, so I have not included analysis on this text here. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
52. Via Emilia is a major road running through Emilia Romagna, that was one of the first and longest completed roads in the history of the Italian peninsula. Emilia Romagna is also the region in which Correggio is found, Tondelli’s hometown. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
53. Tondelli himself attended the University of Bologna, and it is well known both in Italy and around Europe for being one of the oldest European universities. Because of its large student population, Bologna has an atmosphere much more accepting than that of some of the smaller towns that populate Emilia-Romagna, the region in which Bologna is found. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
54. *Spurcacioun* refers to someone of low morals, and often is used as a slur against people who are viewed as overly erotic or overly sexual. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
55. Slang and colloquialisms can be difficult to translate into other languages. This could be part of the reason Tondelli’s texts have yet to be published into English. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
56. In *Altri Libertini*, the fifth story and the story for which the collection is named, there is a pages long description of an apartment of one of the characters, and it features primarily references to books, music, films, and other cultural paraphernalia popular at the time. In the Bompiani edition I cite here, this example can be found on pages 111-113. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
57. It could certainly be argued that *Rimini* also has a certain appeal to a generational consciousness. The coast in and around Rimini was a very popular summer spot in the 80s well known in Emilia Romagna and beyond. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)