

Masculine Identity in *Arturo's Island* by Elsa Morante

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Abstract

This thesis analyzes the ways in which Arturo, the main character of Elsa Morante's *Arturo's Island* (1957), develops his masculine identity and how this identity is shaped through-out the novel. The first chapter focusses on masculinities studies and introduces relevant concepts for the analyses of the novel. Chapters two to four offer interpretative analyses of the novel framed by concepts from masculinity studies. Central themes within my thesis are the father-son relationship, the individual's search for an identity and the theme of desire and loss.

All in all, my analysis shows that Arturo's masculine identity is mainly developed through the protagonist's relationships with others. His identity is at first strongly defined by an idealized father-figure. However, the father's influence gradually decreases, after the arrival of a stepmother who brings disruption both within the father-son relationship as well as to Arturo's sense of self as a masculine subject. She replaces the father's role and becomes crucial in shaping the protagonist's masculine identity. The last part of the analysis explores the disintegration of the father-figure as an ideal and its implications for the protagonist's trust in his father, as well as for his identity as a masculine subject. It furthermore discusses the ways in which the protagonist comes to reach an awareness of the "death" of his ideal and how this leads to his realization that his own sense of self as a masculine subject was that of child who is no more and must now enter adulthood.

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Introduction

And you'll never know the law
That I, like so many, have learned-
And that has broken my heart:

Outside Limbo there is no Elysium (*For Remo N.*).

The quoted excerpt belongs to a poem dedicated to a certain “Remo N.” and features as the motto of Elsa Morante’s novel *Arturo’s Island*, which was written in 1957. The poem’s last line, “outside Limbo there is no Elysium” is generally considered by critics to contain the central message of the novel and is often interpreted as pointing to the disillusionment of growing up and the loss of childhood beliefs (Cornish 89). In my view, however, these lines stand for the protagonist’s eventual awareness of the illusory nature of his childhood fantasies, that is to say, he realizes that outside his beloved island there is no paradise inhabited by heroes with his father as its absolute ruler. Thus, as he discovers this painful truth, he also becomes aware of the loss of his childhood identity. This thesis explores the main character’s development and the ways in which his identity as a masculine subject is acquired and shaped through-out the novel. My research question is: how is the protagonist’s masculine identity in *Arturo’s island* shaped through-out the novel?

The first chapter presents the theoretical framework that informs my interpretative efforts, introducing relevant concepts within the field of masculinities studies. It mainly discusses arguments brought forward by sociologists from the field of masculinity studies, such as Stephen Whitehead, Raewyn Connell, Michael Kimmel, Jeff Hearn and Michael Messner. The second chapter focusses on the relationship between Arturo and his father and explores,

primarily through the method of close reading, how and to what extent he shapes Arturo's notion of masculinity, as well as his masculine identity. Furthermore, it addresses Arturo's habit of reading literature and examines how it further influences his notion of masculinity. It also discusses the role played by desire in Arturo's search for his own identity. The concept of "man as lone hero," that is to say, the idea of a man constantly engaging in travelling and exploring, and the mythologizing of Wilhelm as brought forward by his son Arturo, are centralized in this chapter. Moreover, the relation between masculine ontology and desire is discussed as well. The third chapter pays attention to the relational aspect of masculinity and focusses on the interaction between Arturo and his stepmother. More specifically, it discusses the ways in which this interaction affects the bond between father and son and shapes the protagonist's masculine identity. In this chapter, definitions of masculinity as relationally constructed are applied to the narrative and the role played by women within the concept of "man as lone hero" is explored. The fourth chapter considers the disintegration of the father-figure as an ideal and examines the impact of this disintegration on the protagonist's masculine identity. In this chapter the concept of "basic trust" is discussed in relation to ontological security and the protagonist's masculine identity.

Chapter One

Masculinities

As Michael Kimmel and Tristan Bridges point out in their introduction to the subject of masculinity, masculinities studies is an interdisciplinary field which is concerned with the social constructions of what it means to “be a man” (Kimmel and Bridges Oxfordbibliographies.com). It emerged in the last decades of the 20th century and was inspired by feminist movements. According to Kimmel and Bridges, masculinities studies is primarily concerned with the diversity of identities, behaviors and meanings that occupy the label “masculine.” They define masculinity thus as the range of behaviors, social roles, and relations of men within a given society as well as the meanings attributed to men. (Kimmel and Bridges Oxfordbibliographies.com).

In *Men and Masculinities* Stephen Whitehead traces the development of masculinities studies and identifies three main “waves.” For the purpose of this thesis, I exclusively focus on the second and third wave of masculinities studies, as its concepts are useful to analyze the impact of the protagonist’s relationship with his father and stepmother on the development of his masculine identity. According to Whitehead, the second wave of masculinities studies focused primarily on the relation between power and gender and the way this affects notions of masculinity (Whitehead 42). Sociologists from this period have generated a broader understanding of gender power relations and the way masculinity is shaped by this relation. (42). Present-day studies of masculinities on the other hand, look to the work of Freud, Carl Jung and feminist psychoanalysis in order to explain masculinities as a result of identity work (42). Scholars in this branch of masculinity studies view the formation of masculine identities as a conflictual process that can take multiple directions and in which gender plays an important role. (Connell 33).

Moreover, Sociologists who study the relation between gender and power understand masculinities as socially constructed and as being explicitly gendered (Connell, Hearn and Kimmel 3). In their view, masculinities are in fact constructed within specific institutional settings such as the workplace or the media (8). Gender for them represents both a structure of relationships within these institutions and a property of individual identity (8). Whitehead belongs to this group of scholars, and for the following interpretative chapters I have chosen to adopt his characterization of masculinity as it is particularly applicable to discuss the ways in which Arturo's masculine identity develops. In his view, masculinity is the discursive framework that man inhabits and from which he engages the social (215). Thus, as a presence, masculinity can only be made real through discursive expression and by engaging in the cultural practices that suggest manhood. This implies, according to the author, that it remains always momentary, relational and open to disruption (216). In *Masculinities* Connell elaborates on the relation between gender and masculinity. She argues that masculinity is performed and can be located in the system of gender relations that regulates human interaction, as it specifically concerns those acts and behaviors that determine gender practice. (71-72)

Connell's arguments regarding gender practice can be linked to arguments brought forward by Michele Adams and Scott Coltrane in their chapter "Boys and Men in Families: the Domestic Production of Gender, Power and Privilege." In this chapter, they argue that since masculinity is socially constructed, its definition varies over time, and thus, different ideals of masculinity are promoted through-out history (231). One of these ideals is the "ideology of separate spheres" which emerged during the Victorian era and saw men and women as part of different social worlds. According to this divide, men's role was to contribute to the economic structure of society by being part of the paid labor force, whereas women's role was to raise the children and perform domestic chores. (Bose, 267). As a

consequence of this social division, ideals about men and women began to emerge that saw men as active and independent, and women as the opposite (Adams and Coltrane 231).

According to Adams and Coltrane, this divide is still present in society and structures our understandings of what it means to “be” either ideally masculine or feminine (232). In my interpretative chapters, I will show how this traditional male ideal can be traced in the narrative and how it influences the development of Arturo’s masculine identity.

In *Men and Masculinities*, Stephen Whitehead further explores ideal representations of masculinity and men’s lives. According to him in fact, in film and books men’s public lives are often presented as mysterious and this leads to their mythologization (117-18). In the author’s view, this mythical aspect is clearly captured in the representation of “man as lone hero,” which portrays men as adventurers/explorers/conquerors, imprisoned in “a cycle of departure and return,” where they constantly expose themselves to new challenges (Whitehead 118). Their endeavors are furthermore often seen as “heroic projects”, and men are portrayed as having a drive to overcome challenges that, in Whitehead’s view, is related to existential uncertainty and self-doubt (Whitehead 118).

The author stresses however, that women play a crucial role within the concept of “man as lone hero.” According to him, they allow men on the one hand to exercise their heroic projects by providing them with the space and means necessary, but on the other hand they are often portrayed as potential “destroyers” who force male characters to fulfill their duty (Whitehead 119).

In his book, Whitehead further explores the origins of men’s existential uncertainties that, in his view, stand at the basis of their need to leave home (118). He links these existential doubts to arguments regarding masculine ontology and “the desire to be a man” (210, 212). Drawing on the work of Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Lacan, Pierre Félix Guattari and Michel Foucault, Whitehead defines masculine ontology as “the pursuit of being and

becoming masculine by the masculine subject". According to Whitehead, the subject experiences incessant existential uncertainty as a consequence of the subject's awareness that life is unpredictable and fragile (211). However, these doubts can never be eliminated, only lessened during the subject's search for ontological security. Whitehead clarifies about this that the masculine subject is not innately male but can only become this by positioning itself in the discourses that suggest masculinity. As he participates in this process, which Whitehead understands as a search, his ontological insecurity lessens (212). According to the author, this search is mostly driven by desire. While referring to Deleuze and Guattari, Whitehead defines desire as an activity that takes place in the unconscious and indicates the subject's need to be in the social world (213). According to the author, this desire can only be fulfilled during the subject's interaction in the social world. In order to clarify the last argument, Whitehead introduces Lacan's concept of the "dialectic of recognition" (214). He explains that, according to this concept, individuals can only obtain a sense of self as coherent identities in the gaze of others, how others respond to them, and in the way individuals think they are perceived by others (214). Thus, Whitehead continues, interaction with others is needed in order for a subject to construct his own sense of self as a masculine subject (216).

In the following chapters I apply the concept of "man as lone hero," as well as the discussed notions concerning masculinity, masculine ideals, masculine ontology and desire to the analysis and interpretation of the narrative. In doing so, I focus in particular on the protagonist's relationship with his father and examine to what extent he shapes Arturo's notion of masculinity.

Chapter Two

Masculine Identity and Father-Son Relationship

This chapter focusses primarily on Arturo's relationship with his father, Wilhelm Gerace, and shows to what extent this relationship influences Arturo's notion of masculinity. Firstly, I discuss the portrayal of Wilhelm Gerace, as seen through the eyes of his son Arturo.

Secondly, I examine to what extent Wilhelm influences Arturo's first perceptions of the world and show how this affects his reading experience. Moreover, I examine the notions Arturo derives from his readings. Thirdly, I explore the notion of desire in general and the role it plays in the interaction between father and son in particular.

Throughout the novel, Arturo is the only narrator and focalizer. As readers we are taken by him on a trip down memory lane, to the years of his childhood and adolescence on the island of Procida. The centre of interest, however, is not Arturo but his father, as seen through the eyes of his son. This is clear from the first pages, where Arturo tells us: "my childhood is like a happy land, and he is the absolute ruler!" (Morante 20). We are then told about the reasons why, in Arturo's childhood perspective, his father is superior to all others: "The primary reason for his supremacy over all others lay in his difference, which was his greatest mystery" (Morante 21).

As the narrative proceeds, we learn that Wilhelm is often away, leaving his son in the conviction that he embarks on heroic and adventurous journeys (Morante 30). Although Wilhelm never tells his son about his life outside Procida, Arturo idealizes his deeds and imagines his father conquering "the Poles or Persia" or that "he had waiting for him, beyond the sea, companies of gallant men under his command" (Morante 30). Clearly, the way Wilhelm is represented through his young son's perspective, corresponds to that of the "man as lone hero," as described by Stephen Whitehead in *Men and Masculinities*. In Arturo's fantasies his father embodies in fact the archetype of a man who is "trapped in a cycle of

departure and return as he exposes himself to new challenges” (Whitehead 118). Also, Wilhelm’s life outside Procida, remains a mystery to Arturo (Morante 30) Leading a life pervaded by mysteriousness and secrecy is part of being a “lone hero” as well (Whitehead 118). Wilhelm’s silence concerning his journeys create the same effect of mysteriousness, as we are told: “He never said a word about his life outside the island; and my imagination pined for that mysterious, fascinating existence...” (Morante 30). This mysteriousness, as Sharon Wood points out in her article, clearly contributes to the growth of Arturo’s fascination for the character of his father, as well as to his mythologization (320). According to the *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* the latter refers to the creation of stories and ideas which are generally believed but are untrue. In this thesis, mythologization will be understood as the process of glorification of every aspect of Wilhelm, as brought forward by Arturo through the generation of ideas and beliefs that are fundamentally untrue.

Although Wilhelm is indecipherable to his son however, he is also described as “the image of certainty” (Morante 24), in the sense that he functions as his primary frame of reference when it comes to his first understandings of society. The adult Arturo points to this aspect when he tells us: “everything he said or did was the verdict of a universal law from which I deduced the first commandments of my life” (Morante 24). From these lines it becomes clear that everything Wilhelm does, is almost seen as an absolute truth by Arturo. In “The Morphology of Desire in *L’isola di Arturo*,” Cristina della Coletta writes about the relationship between father and son in Morante’s novel and argues that, within this relationship, Wilhelm can almost be seen as a God and Arturo as his faithful disciple (139). His influence and presence are in fact crucial for the development of Arturo’s “Absolute Certainties.” These certainties are a list of laws which Arturo designs and that he considers a “Code of Absolute Truth” (Morante 25). Significantly, we learn that they were partly inspired by “the person of my father” and that, one of those laws is “the authority of the

father is sacred!” (Morante 25-26). From these lines it becomes evident that, as Della Coletta also points out, Arturo’s moral world is strongly defined and dictated by the person of his father (134). Another law listed by the narrator that becomes interesting when considering the influence Wilhelm exerts on the design of these “certainties” is: “True manly greatness consists in the courage to act, in disdain for danger, and in valour displayed in combat” (Morante 25). These behavioral guidelines clearly refer to a traditional male ideal as discussed by Michele Adams and Scott Coltrane in their chapter “Boys and Men in Families: The Domestic Production of Gender, Power and Privilege,” in which men are seen as active, independent subjects who must prove themselves by exerting (physical) power (231, 237). Under influence of the conceptions Arturo has built around the character of his father (what I earlier referred to as “mythologization”), he clearly internalizes a traditional masculine ideal and includes it in what Adams and Coltrane define as a “gender schema”: a perceptual lens which predisposes a person to view the world in terms of opposites, namely as masculine or feminine (235). Arturo confirms this when he reveals that “these boyhood certainties of mine ... where the substance of the only possible reality for me!” (Morante 26). He furthermore clarifies that, for his younger self, women inhabited another realm for which he had no interest, because “all the great actions that enthralled me in books were carried out by men, never by women. Adventure, war and glory were men’s privileges. Women, instead, were love; (Morante 41). These lines suggest that, partly because of the books he reads, the young Arturo tends to view the world in terms of opposites, thus revealing the binary nature of his gender schema.

Thus clearly, not only his father, but also the books he reads, provide Arturo with the material with which he can construct his perceptions and analyze the world. More specifically, as was already hinted above, through literature Arturo internalizes notions about what it means to “be a man” and what it means to “be a woman”. Based on the books he

reads, which belong mostly to the adventure, thriller and classical genre, Arturo considers “adventure, love and glory”, as men’s privileges and concludes that heroes exist, since he can see proof of this in his father. About women he reads that they represent love and royal beauty but does not believe it, since no woman in Procida corresponds to this description (Morante 42). Thus, he concludes that “they had no hope of growing up to become a handsome, great hero. Their only hope was to become the wife of a hero: to serve him, to wear his name like a coat of arms, to be his undivided property, respected by all” (Morante 43). These lines evidently show that from literature, Arturo extracts ideas that lead him to divide men and women in separate categories, in a hierarchical order: men are the privileged category, women are less valued and seen as instrumental to the realization of men.

Significantly, Wilhelm strongly affects the way Arturo chooses and experiences his readings. The narrator informs us of Wilhelm’s influence in this regard: “The books I liked most, needless to say, were those which celebrated, with real or imagined examples, my ideal of human greatness, whose living incarnation I recognized in my father (Morante 29). Clearly, this quote shows how Arturo’s literary preferences are strongly guided by the ideal he has created of his father. In her article Della Coletta discusses the influence of literature on the protagonist. She argues that it is through the heroes Arturo reads about in his books, that his desires concerning reality emerge. According to her in fact, “it is through these texts that Arturo transfigures both his model and the objects of his desire” (139). Building on this argument, she considers Wilhelm a model which his son Arturo constructs through literary imitation, rather than an a priori “divine” figure (139). Thus, following Della Coletta’s argument, Wilhelm does not only influence his son’s literary preferences, but is also constructed and defined by them.

The protagonist’s relationship with his father is also characterized by an element of desire, namely Arturo’s desire to prove himself and be recognized as a man by Wilhelm.

Repeatedly, the narrator recounts how he felt inferior to his father because of his age and how he tried to win his esteem by engaging in “pointless acts of bravado” (Morante 29). He tells us for instance: “I could consider myself only, in essence, an inferior, a boy; and meanwhile, as if drawn in by the insidious pull of a mirage, I ran wild...in every kind of childish exploit...but such bold acts, naturally, could not suffice, in my judgment, to promote me to the envied rank (maturity) or free me from an inner and supreme doubt of myself” (Morante 26-27). The sense of doubt expressed in these lines can be linked to Stephen Whitehead’s arguments concerning masculine ontology and “the desire to be a man.” Drawing on the work of Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Lacan, Pierre Félix Guattari and Michel Foucault, Whitehead describes masculine ontology as “the pursuit of being and becoming masculine by the masculine subject” (210). Whitehead argues that the masculine subject constantly experiences various existential uncertainties and doubts. According to him, these uncertainties stem from the subject’s recognition that life is unpredictable and fragile. However, he argues that these uncertainties cannot be removed, only lessened (211). This sense of threat and existential anxiety is also experienced by Arturo, who writes: “All reality appeared to me clear and distinct: only the abstruse stain of death muddied it; ... And I waited, as for a sign of marvelous maturity, for that unique muddiness – death - to dissolve into the clarity of reality, like smoke into transparent air (Morante 26). So, even as a boy, he feels that his being is threatened by something unpredictable and beyond grasp: death. The thought of death creates anxiety and obfuscates the clarity of Arturo’s reality, because he is unable to understand it, but simultaneously senses that it makes life fragile. Still, as a young boy he thinks that this anxiety will dissolve as he reaches maturity, which, following Whitehead’s argument will never occur.

In his view in fact, existential anxieties can only be lessened by the individual’s search for ontological security, which can be seen as a tool for managing the disorder of day-

to-day life (211). This search, Whitehead argues, is mostly driven by desire. While referring to Deleuze and Guattari, Whitehead describes desire as an unconscious activity that indicates the subject's need to be in the social world (213). This desire, Whitehead argues, can only be fulfilled through the subject's immersion and interaction in the social world (214). Important herein in Whitehead's view, is Lacan's concept of the "dialectic of recognition" (214).

Central to this concept, Whitehead explains, is the idea that we can only obtain some sense of ourselves in the gaze of others, how others respond to us, and in our perceptions of how we think others see us (214). Consequently, Whitehead explains that according to this theory, the subject can never know oneself as a man or as a masculine subject, other than through the gaze of other individuals (Whitehead, 216). This quest for a "sense of self" is also undertaken by Arturo, who tries to obtain it through the gaze and recognition of his father. This becomes apparent in the chapter "The story of Algerian Dagger," which describes how, one day, Wilhelm loses his wristwatch in the sea and Arturo sets out to find it. Gradually, the importance of finding it becomes almost an existential quest:

The search had assumed a strange sense of fatality, the time already passed seemed immeasurable, and its end was like a milestone of my fate! I wandered, through those varied and fantastic depths, outside of human realms, burning, minute by minute, with that unapparelled hope: of shining, like a prodigy, in the eyes of Him!
(Morante 32)

From this excerpt, it becomes clear that Arturo views his quest as determinant for his own destiny. In light of the above explained arguments, Arturo's desire to be recognized as a man by his father can be interpreted as an existential longing to find his own identity and obtain a coherent sense of self. For the fulfilment of this longing his father is crucial. But the importance Arturo attaches in finding his father's watch, reveals that Wilhelm's gaze has more than one function: it serves to explore, find, assert, establish and maintain Arturo's

masculine identity. The fact that such a central role is ascribed to Wilhelm, who embodies the mysterious hero, is worth considering: the masculine values he internalizes are (apparently) those of a man who always wants to travel, face new challenges and prove himself. Thus, Arturo's development and desires are affected by this, as becomes evident when we read that the protagonist's greatest longing is to become his father's travel companion and stand as an equal beside him (Morante 37).

To sum up, this chapter has addressed the nature of the protagonist's relationship with his father. Firstly, it discussed Arturo's idealized portrayal of his father, which corresponds in multiple aspects, to the representation of "man as lone hero." Secondly, this chapter has analyzed how, within the father-son relationship, Wilhelm defines Arturo's first moral precepts and notions of ideal male behavior. Thirdly, it has shown how Wilhelm influences his son's reading experiences, but also how these experiences help his son Arturo to define the figure of his father. Moreover, it has addressed some of the notions Arturo derives from his readings. The last section of this chapter than analysed the role played by desire in the relationship between father and son. The analysis has shown that Arturo's desire to be recognized as a man by his father can be viewed as a search in which he tries to obtain a sense of self and his own identity. The next chapter takes up the question of identity once more, but then concentrates on Nunziata as a female character. More specifically, it will examine how and to what extent Arturo's masculine identity is shaped and impacted by his interactions with his stepmother.

Chapter Three

Masculine Identity and Stepmother-Relationship

This chapter centers primarily on Arturo's relationship with his stepmother, Nunziata, and how it impacts both his masculine identity and the relationship he has with his father. Firstly, I discuss the role Nunziata plays in the construction and development of Arturo's masculine identity. Secondly, I analyze the kind of disruption she brings about in the relationship between father and son. Lastly, I address the different kinds of roles Nunziata comes to play for Arturo and how this leads to a new fulcrum within Arturo's reality, as well as to a new defining element of his masculine identity.

Through the presence of Nunziata, Arturo is able to express his masculinity and further develop his identity. In *Masculinities*, Raewyn Connell argues that masculinity can only arise in a system of gender relations (71). According to her, gender regulates the way individuals interact with each other, and when we refer to either masculinity or femininity, we are specifically referring to those behaviors that determine gender practice (72). When he is with Nunziata, Arturo makes several statements about ideal masculine behavior, such as: "the day every man has a brave, honorable heart, like a true king, all hatred will be thrown into the sea" or that in order to reach the "greatness of kings, men should not care about death" (Morante 110,112). He also manifests his gender through an overt demonstration of his physical accomplishments. At some point we in fact read how Arturo is seized by "an impatient desire to perform bold acts" and before the eyes of his stepmother "took a rapid run up to the wall opposite the window grate" and after having gripped one of the window bars "hoisted himself up" (Morante 112). These interactions allow Arturo to perform gender practice and thus, express his identity as a masculine subject. In this sense, Nunziata now fulfills the function that was previously fulfilled by Wilhelm. The second chapter discussed Jacques Lacan's concept "dialectic of recognition" and the idea that the subject can only

obtain a sense of self in the gaze of others, their responses and in the way a subject thinks it is viewed by others. (Whitehead 214). The previous chapter has shown that Arturo tries to obtain a “sense of self” through the gaze and recognition of his father. Now Nunziata serves to establish and further develop Arturo’s masculine identity, meaning that she becomes the person from which Arturo desires recognition. In *Man and Masculinities*, Stephen Whitehead writes about the construction of a masculine identity that masculinity can only “be made real through discursive expression” and through the subject’s engagement “in the cultural practices that suggest manhood” (215). Nunziata allows Arturo to engage in these practices and thus, construct his masculinity.

At the same time, however, this places Nunziata in a more powerful position (compared to Wilhelm) and Arturo in a more vulnerable one. This change in power structures does have consequences, as Nunziata also brings disruption within Arturo’s life. Most importantly, she disrupts Arturo’s supreme law: “the authority of the father is sacred!” (Morante 25). With the arrival of Nunziata, Wilhelm’s supreme authority is in fact slowly eroded and Arturo’s adoration for him lessens. This is visible after one of Wilhelm’s longest misogynist speeches against mothers, which he gives as a reaction to Nunziata’s remarks opposing his imminent departure: “who can save you from a mother?...Ah it’s hell to be loved by one who loves neither happiness nor life nor herself but only you!...She would like to keep you a prisoner forever, as when she was pregnant. And when you escape, she tries to entrap you from a distance, to give her form to the entire universe” (138). These quotes show how Wilhelm considers mothers as hostile opposers of men’s liberty to travel and explore. In *Men and Masculinities* Whitehead addresses the role played by women within the archetype of “man as lone hero”: the concept that indicates that a man constantly engages in traveling and exploring. According to him, women are both seen as nurturers and destroyers (119). Their role is in fact to provide men with the means and space necessary to realize their

projects. At the same time, this implies that men are emotionally and physically attached to women and this is often seen by men as destructive (Whitehead 119). Here Whitehead gives the example of a man who does not have the liberty to choose his heroic project but is expected to go to war in order to “protect” his woman (119). In the excerpt just quoted, something similar takes place: Wilhelm experiences the love of mothers as destructive, because (in his view) it imprisons him within the domestic quarters. Significantly, this is the first instance in which Arturo strongly doubts his father’s argumentation, and thus, his authority: “Although I was silent about my doubts, I felt somewhat dismayed... (in fact, the reason cited by our chief to demonstrate the wrongs of mothers were, at least in large part, precisely the same for which I, instead, had always resented being an orphan!) The idea of a person who loved only Arturo Gerace...it was an idea that did not at all offend my taste” (Morante 138-38). This is a significant moment within Arturo’s identity formation because it is the first time that one of his father’s statements contradicts one of the absolute certainties Arturo believes in, namely “no affection in life equals a mother” (139). As an orphan in fact, he strongly longs for a mother’s love and idealizes it to the extreme (139). That his father, a character who represents “the image of certainty” and has always defined Arturo’s conception of reality, expresses severe objections against mothers, problematizes his authority and causes fractures within the protagonist’s blind faith in him. Thus, Nunziata’s presence exposes the blind spots within Arturo’s long-held beliefs and in this way, causes disruption in the father-son relationship, as Arturo begins to doubt the validity of his father’s authority.

Arturo’s masculine identity is furthermore also impacted by the different roles Nunziata comes to play in his life. As the novel proceeds, Arturo becomes more and more aware of his own sexuality, and this further alters both his relationship with his father as well as his perception of self. Moreover, Nunziata acquires multiple identities for the protagonist.

First, she becomes an object of hatred for having stolen his father's attention from him (Morante 156). Subsequently, after a stepbrother is born, he desires her maternal love and makes parallels between her and his deceased mother (169). It is during this period that he begins to develop a kind of adoration that he previously showed only towards his father, as we read how "her enlarged figure seemed to me encircled by sovereignty and repose" and "the white color of her skin... appeared a sign of ancient and proprietary nobility" (Morante 172). This adoration only increases, as Nunziata becomes the object of Arturo's sexual desires. This state of affairs thrusts the adolescent Arturo in a state of disorientation and emotional upheaval. Regarding the impact Nunziata has on the protagonist, Cristina della Coletta writes: "Nunziata embodies, for Arturo, the impossible target of his desire, a combined mother and bride. In her hybrid identity, she forces Arturo's metaphysical system to falter, anticipating thus the crash of his idol from an increasingly precarious altar" (141). His lust for Nunziata in fact, puts the protagonist before a dilemma that causes Arturo to feel great existential anxiety, as his desire entails going against his father, an ideal that has defined his conception of masculinity as well as his whole reality all along. However, he cannot prevent his father from becoming a rival as he admits, after a moment of realization, what he wants from his stepmother: "not friendship, not motherhood, but love..." (Morante 273). From this point on, Nunziata becomes his "guiding star" as the narrator tells us: "everything that I hadn't been able to explain before now appeared to me explained. I saw again, then, all those months passed as a mad, directionless crossing, through storms, chaos, and disorientation, until the Polar Star had appeared, to orient me. There, she was that, my Polar Star: she, Nunz., my first love!" (Morante 274). These lines indicate how Nunziata replaces Wilhelm's role: she, instead of him, becomes the center of Arturo's metaphysical system, as well as a defining feature of his (adolescent) masculine identity.

To conclude, this chapter has analyzed Nunziata's role in the construction and development of Arturo's masculine identity as well as the disruption she brings about in the relationship between father and son. Furthermore, it discussed the identities Nunziata acquires for Arturo and how this leads to existential anxieties as well as to a new centre within Arturo's metaphysical system, with Nunziata as its fulcrum and defining feature of his masculine identity. The next chapter looks more in depth at the disintegration of Wilhelm as an ideal and explores the impact of this disintegration on the protagonist's masculine identity.

Chapter Four

Disintegration of an Ideal

This chapter explores the final disintegration of Wilhelm Gerace as an ideal and analyzes the impact of this on Arturo's masculine identity. The second chapter addressed the process of mythologization of Wilhelm as initiated by his son Arturo. In the second chapter also, I defined mythologization as the process of glorification of every aspect of Wilhelm as brought forward by Arturo through the generation of ideas and beliefs that are fundamentally untrue.

As has been explored in the third chapter, Wilhelm's supreme authority is slowly eroded by the presence of Nunziata, Arturo's stepmother. Wilhelm's authority, however, suffers severe damage when Arturo discovers Wilhelm's love affair with a convict called Tonino Stella. In the chapter entitled "The Terra Murata" Arturo follows his father to the citadel that harbors the island's prison. There, he discovers that his father sings desperately before the window of a cell, in the hope that the convict will answer his love verses (Morante 303-04). The convict, however, does not respond to Wilhelm but shouts after a while "Get out, parody!" (Morante 307). Arturo witnesses this scene, and after having looked up the definition of "parody", which reads: "imitation of the behavior of another, in which what in others is serious becomes ridiculous or comic, or grotesque" (Morante 307), he realizes that his father is no hero, but a lonely, rejected homosexual who begs to be loved (307). In this sense, he discovers that Wilhelm is not untouchable, but finds himself in a dependent position. About the implications of this final revelation, Sharon Wood writes that Wilhelm is "deposed from his throne," since Arturo's childish awe for him is replaced by compassion when he learns that Wilhelm is not "the stuff of legend" but an unhappy homosexual at the mercy of his lovers (320).

The discovery of his father's homosexuality in itself, has far reaching consequences for Arturo's sense of self as well. First, it makes Arturo deeply jealous of Stella, as he views

the kind of attention his father bestows upon him (329). Secondly, as was already hinted above, it makes him realize that his father is “kept in servitude” (Morante 329) by Stella, as Wilhelm desperately yearns for his love and tries in every way to secure his fidelity, even by promising him financial reward (324). This leads Arturo to feel disappointed by his father, as he is now able to discern the contradictory nature of his principles. In one of his speeches against women, Wilhelm in fact declared how true love “has no purpose and no reason and submits to no power outside human grace” (140). In this quote, Wilhelm describes “true love” as free of constraints and power structures, in contrast to women’s love which he describes as limiting and enslaving (140). After the arrival of Stella however, Arturo realizes that his father is enslaved by the same kind of love he finds women guilty of. Thus, as Della Coletta points out in her article, he discovers that “Wilhelm’s homosexuality is a curse just like other homo- or heterosexual longing... simply because it denies divine independence” (149). For Arturo’s sense of self, the realization that his father is the opposite of an independent individual, is damaging, for his identity as a masculine being was originally based on the idea of a father whose life was defined by freedom (29) and whose judgments therefore, were like “a verdict of a universal law” for young Arturo (24). In a sense thus, through his father’s involvement with Stella, he begins to discover the inauthenticity of the man who has served as his model concerning masculine ideals, and with that, the inauthenticity of his own sense of self as a masculine subject.

Further revelations that affect Arturo’s masculine identity occur during a meeting between Arturo and Tonino Stella, after Arturo discovers that Wilhelm has helped him to escape from prison and hides him at their home. Here Arturo has a crucial conversation with him, as Stella’s statements further expose the false foundations of Arturo’s long-held beliefs about his father. Stella tells Arturo for example how his father never travels too far from Procida as “he’s the sheltered type who’s never been weaned from his mother’s breast, and

never will be” (327). Arturo listens to him incredulous and overwhelmed by anger (328). This is a significant moment, because he discovers that his father does not embody the archetype of “man as lone hero”: he does not engage in constant traveling and exploration in order to gain knowledge and obtain freedom, as was always imagined by Arturo (126). This painful discovery further damages the authority Arturo attributed to his father and exposes again the inauthenticity of Wilhelm as an ideal. After this conversation, Arturo’s trust in his father is severely damaged and this has consequences for his sense of self as well.

In her book *Trust in Modern Societies*, Barbara A. Misztal discusses the functions of trust and its connection to ontological security, as defined by the sociologist Anthony Giddens. She indicates how, according to Giddens, the capacity to trust others is central to an individual’s ontological security and thus, for the development of someone’s ego identity (Misztal 91). Drawing upon Giddens, Misztal clarifies that ontological security, which she views as the most important psychological need, is founded on trust relationships (91). This capacity to trust, which Giddens names “basic trust,” is first developed within the family and centers on parents. If basic trust is not developed in infancy however, Misztal points out that individuals may experience constant existential anxiety and lose confidence in the continuity and stableness of their self- identity. In my view, the earlier mentioned realizations damage Arturo’s basic trust in his father, and this results in insecurity concerning his own sense of self as a masculine subject. This existential insecurity can be discerned in Arturo’s thoughts, as we read:

the strange image of clay, as murky and fluid as lava, that in my mind inexplicably represented the young convict was transformed, by a foul spell, into the person of my father, softening and being molded into a shapeless, changing, and fantastic statue. And this indecipherable metamorphosis had the occult value of

certain dreams that when we wake up appear meaningless but while we're dreaming seem like evil oracles (Morante, 293).

These lines show how Arturo's perception of his father has undergone a dramatic shift: from "the image of certainty," Wilhelm is now associated with clay, a malleable substance, always subject to change. Significantly, also, his person conflates with the character of a convict, indicating that Arturo has some difficulty in distinguishing them. This reflection indicates how Arturo is confused about the true identity of his father, and reveals that, in his mind, he clearly senses the inauthentic nature of the ideal he has always believed in. This makes him anxious and insecure, as he becomes unconsciously aware of the "death" of his myth and its implications: "...I was unnerved by the bizarre suspicion that I could distinguish, suddenly, in the chorus, the voice of my father, unreal, like that of a fetish or a dead man. He was wandering there, in funerary pomp, with his white emaciated face" (294). This vision, which Arturo has as he passes by the prison, shows Arturo's final awareness of his father's death as an ideal. This awareness is then followed by the protagonist's realization that, with the death of his ideal, the masculine notions Wilhelm embodied have died, and thus, also his masculine sense of self as a child. As he is about to leave Procida in fact, the protagonist recognizes that his father's idealization was "a childish thing" (366) and belonged to the realm of his "waning childhood" (369), thus revealing that his own sense of self based on the image of his father, was in itself a child's identity that died with him.

To sum up, this chapter has analyzed Wilhelm's final disintegration as an ideal and the implications this has for the protagonist's masculine identity. Firstly, it has examined the impact of Arturo's discovery concerning his father's homosexuality on his sense of self as a masculine subject. Then, it has looked at the damage this causes to Arturo's trust in his father and how this affects his masculine identity as well. Finally, it addressed Arturo's awareness

of both the death of his father as an ideal as well as his realization that, with him, his masculine identity as a child has died too.

Conclusion

To conclude, this thesis has analyzed the ways in which the protagonist's masculine identity is shaped through-out the novel. All in all, it has shown that the protagonist's masculine identity is at first strongly influenced by an idealized father-figure. Then, it demonstrated how this influence gradually lessens as a stepmother becomes crucial in shaping Arturo's masculine identity. Lastly, it discussed the disintegration of Wilhelm as an ideal and showed how this leads Arturo to become aware of the illusory nature of this ideal, as well as to his realization that his masculine identity belonged to his childhood and disintegrated with him.

Thus, this thesis has generally shown that Arturo's masculine identity as a young boy is primarily shaped by his relationships with other individuals, namely the protagonist's father, stepmother and to a lesser extent, the convict with whom he has a brief confrontation. As he interacts with these characters, his sense of self as a masculine subject is constructed and shaped, evolves and is eventually disrupted. In future readings of *Arturo's Island*, the notion of mythologization could be further explored, as it deserves more conceptual and interpretative attention. Also, it could be interesting to centralize the concept of desire and explore in more depth the role it plays in shaping as well as disrupting the protagonist's sense of self.

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