

The Moon and the Bonfires

La Luna e i Falò

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Is a person with a conflicted or an absent sense of national solidarity, even an imagined one, almost a human without a name, without an identity? This is the case with Eel, the narrator of *The Moon and the Bonfires* (1950) by Italian novelist and poet Cesare Pavese (1908-1950).

The Moon and the Bonfires – La Luna e i Falò – is the last novel Pavese wrote and it is considered by critics as his masterpiece. In August of 1950, five months after its publication, and at age 42, Pavese committed suicide by overdosing on sleeping pills. His death occurred after his love affair with American actress and model, Constance Dowling, came to an end. Simone et al. explain about Pavese's life and end: "It is found that in his poems, his novels, and particularly his letters and diary the idea of suicide was present in his consciousness since adolescence" (183).

The Moon and the Bonfires takes place after the Second World War, and it delves into the tragedies of a torn postwar Italy as well as its author's broken heart. The novel is a semi-autobiographical Bildungsroman, plagued by the themes of exile and exclusion, while it also concerns itself with the lives of the urban middle and working classes. The protagonist dwells on the impossibility of belonging in his hometown and of an unfailing love affair.

Eel is the expatriate narrator, who wastes the entirety of the novel seeking to reconnect with his roots in his hometown in rural Italy, but his melancholic quest ends in failure. He is faceless, nameless, and reveals to the reader only his nickname; Eel. His desperate need to belong and his lack of self-identity are further emphasized by the fact that nobody really remembers him once he returns to Italy after spending decades in California. As a reader, I imagined Eel with a blurred box over his face throughout the narration of his story.

"It was strange how everything was different and still the same" (29), Eel says and his thoughts realistically reflect those of an expatriate. The landscape and the traditions remain the same, and the people forever come and go. Therefore, Eel feels either lost or trapped in his homeland.

Memories play an essential role in the novel; the past and the present are interlaced. The enigmatic narrator offers short scenes, hints and flashbacks, urging the reader to weave the bits and pieces of his life story together; it is up to the reader to connect the dots of his disjointed narrative. Pavese toys with memories and time as he tells Eel's story through a complex chronological order of events.

Eel is a depressed, detached narrator (possibly a representation of the author himself), while the elliptical plotline and cinematic technique showcase how much Pavese was influenced by the writings of Hemingway and Faulkner. In his Introduction, Rudman calls *The Moon and the Bonfires* "the most American novel ever written in a foreign language" (v). Pavese's skilfully disorienting writing reflects Italy's fractured state during and after WWII as well as the fractured mind of both the

author and his hero.

A macabre shadow is cast over the women of the novel (alluding to the author's misogynistic tendencies); especially, the character of Santina (or Santa). Eel has been enchanted by Santina since boyhood; he describes her as beautiful and untamed. When Eel asks about her, Nuto, his childhood friend, replies that she was "a bitch and a spy" (64). Eel and the reader discover her tragic fate in the final few pages.

During WWII, Santina works at the Fascist headquarters as she is determined to climb the economic and social ladder, but the community of Canelli condemns her for it. Her every move is scrutinized and endless gossip goes on about her. "They think that the only life for a girl is the life of a fool," Santina says, "I should kiss the hand that hits me. But I bite the hand that hits me" (150).

In the end, the partisans kill her and burn her on a bonfire to prevent men from lusting after her soulless body. The day of her death, Santina is wearing a white light summer dress, possibly indicating how deceptively angelic she was as a character, and alluding once again to how the author viewed the female species.

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