Performing Italian Identity: Through the Plays Gemini and A View from the Bridge

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Performing Italian Identity: Through the Plays Gemini

and A View from the Bridge

Angela Dicarolo Moser

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

Performing Italian Identity: Through the Plays Gemini and A View from the Bridge

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“Italian Identity” is the set of values and beliefs performed daily, that are markers of what it is to be “Italian,” whether those carrying those beliefs live in Italy or not. The latter point became evident in the United States following the vast wave of Italian immigration during the late-19th and early-20th centuries. Italian identity has been greatly influenced by Catholicism and its centering of values and beliefs on the family, heavily defined Italian life in America. One principal mode for constructing and disseminating these values and beliefs among Italian Americans was through the theatre. This thesis provides a close reading of two plays, Gemini (1976) and A View from the Bridge (1955) to demonstrate how, well into the twentieth century, theatre continued both to reflect and reify an Italian identity among Italian Americans. The discussion will focus on Italian Identity in terms of gender roles and expectations, Godfatherhood, and the twin values of Honor and Respect.

Keywords: Catholicism, Godfatherhood, honor, respect
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Introduction

The attempt to point out what principles define best the “Italian identity“ has been the focus of my studies. By “Italian identity“ I mean the habits, norms, and values that are accepted and absorbed by Italian-Americans—and by non-Americans too, for that matter. Theatrical plays have been a great cultural gathering of information, to identify this Italian identity so dear to me (an Italian-born woman who moved to the United States of America to study and who continues to reside here with her husband and young children). These plays captured and presented for audiences performative aspects of Italian life. A considerable influence in shaping the Italian identity has been Catholicism and the power it has had on defining the Italian family—in terms of gender roles and expectations, Godfatherhood, and the twin values of Honor and Respect. The Italian identity has traveled far and wide and has found, among other places, a home on the American continent, where its finest expression has been through theatrical performances. This paper will provide a close reading of two plays, to demonstrate how these plays contributed to construction Italian identity, through various performative rituals of family daily life, religious observance, and other material practices.

The journey of identity started with migration. The plague of poverty caused by a long first world war generated what is known as the Italian diaspora (large scale emigration of Italians from Italy). Many Italians left their native land in “the early years of the Great Migration (1880–1920) through the late twentieth century” (Belmonte 1999, 6). Many would leave searching for work, ”throughout the first quarter of the 20th century, immigration statistics revealed a steady flow of new immigrant arrivals” (Aleandri 1999, 8). The rich cultural history in drama offered the tools to explore the newly found immigrant condition: “the Italian-American experience furnished the subject matter for original plays written by Italian immigrant playwrights” (Aleandri 1999, 8). The shock of living in an unfamiliar country could be attenuated by re-creating the feel of small rural communities, typical in the south of Italy, where they could speak their language, engage in collective religious celebrations, and delight in familiar operas and stage performances. Belmonte (1999, 14) explains, “In collective rites and celebrations, both penitential and carnivalesque, the individual immigrant was vouchsafed the gift of identity.” Celebrating beloved saints and participating in traditional celebrations that could be performed from memory created, for immigrants, the feeling that they were back in the paese (village/small community), where they could let go of tensions, insecurities, and melancholy by evoking their cultural heritage. According to Belmonte (1999, 15), “Here is a world where history is recorded and expressed not so much in libraries and museums as in dialect and slang, in folk music and architecture, in gestures, in food, in etiquettes, in magical rites and incarnations.” This environment created a safe haven in a new land. According to Tedesco (1999, 379), “Theatre provided a cultural comfort zone for the alienated immigrants.”

Il Circolo Filodrammatico Italo-Americano was one of the earliest and most prolific amateur theater companies in New York City. The company performed mostly to benefit the Italian community in New York and to raise money for social causes (Aleandri 1999, 15). A typical Italian band and audience could be expected at every theater presentation. One of the company’s earliest programs was Giovanni Verga’s drama Cavalleria Rusticana, followed by the children’s sketch Cuor di Fanciulli! (Aleandri1999, 15). These shows would have most likely have been performed in Italy as well, “the
audiences, composed of the displaced men and women of Italy, were hungry for entertainment, recognition, a support system, and social intercourse (Aleandri 1999, 7). Born from the desire to create a feeling of home, Il Circolo Filodrammatico fostered unity among the Italian communities and paved the way for many other amateur companies, and eventually for professional theater. Over time, the reproduction of loved classics, operas, and commedia dell’arte evolved into a theater, in New York, that mirrored the life, mannerisms, struggles, and family dynamics of Italian-American immigrants. Theater became a mean to map out the Italian way of expressing life.

When speaking about the expression of a culture, language is usually the first marker that comes to mind. That said, language will not be a significant part of this paper. Often language is considered the most important marker of cultural identity. For the first generation of Italian immigrants, creating Italian-speaking communities in the New World was the first step in creating a sense of solidarity, necessary for survival in a completely different environment. Keeping the language fluent was soul soothing. However, as important as language is as a identity marker, it is also the first marker of identity to disappear. As second and third generations of children grow up in the new land, the mother tongue is replaced and sometimes forgotten. It is too reductive to associate cultural identity only with the language spoken, as identity is more complex and profound than just the spoken language.

Some key elements that reveal how an Italian body performs identity on stage, revolve around family relationships, and how gender roles have unfolded over time. In this paper, family is defined by the complex relationships that are created through marriage that often reach out to extended family, and godparents. Although many cultures emphasize the importance of the family, for Italians, the rural lifestyle in the deep Italian south has had a powerful impact in defining what a family circle is and who can participate in it. This family circle is also the birthplace of values such as onore e rispetto (honor and respect) and notions of gender roles and virtue, which were greatly influenced by Catholicism, still a predominant part of Italian culture.

Two plays, Gemini, by Albert Innaurato, and A View from the Bridge, by Arthur Miller, can be used as tools to identify and explain the transition from Italian to Italian-American culture in the late 19th century in Eastern United States. A close reading of these two plays reveals how the insider (Innaurato) and the outsider (Miller) see the Italian-American identity evolving in New York. Innaurato and Miller have both captured and represented Italian-American identity on stage through the performative experiences of daily life, that become markers of what it means to be Italian. This paper will focus on what similarities the insider and outsider perspective bring to the table, in the hope the understanding of what it means to be Italian is grasped better. The two perspectives raise some questions on perhaps what is different, what is lost in the outside perspective that the insider holds on to. Those interesting questions have the potential of being developed in another paper in order to have the space necessary to be properly unfolded.

Innaurato represents the insider perspective of Italian identity in the theater world. He employs an ethnocentric approach in giving life to his characters in Gemini. Born into an Italian-American working-class family in South Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Innaurato used his work to explore his own ethnic roots. Gemini, set in the familiar neighborhood Innaurato grew up in in the late 1970s, is a testament to the struggles faced by second- and third-generation Italian immigrants, as they try to find
their place in society. According to Belmonte (1999, 14), “The pain of these internal contradictions for second- and third-generation Italian Americans can be more severe and debilitating than all of the contempt and prejudice that the first generation encountered on a foreign shore.”

Innaurato’s own struggle to discover his identity is presented on stage through the character of young Francis, who is trying to figure out where his Italian identity begins and where his American identity takes over. Trying to balance two ethnic identities often leads to the realization “that one is a stranger in two lands” (Belmonte, 1999, 14). As Francis struggles to understand how much of that Italian heritage he carries inside. The protagonists of Gemini must choose daily which values and traditions to observe in their home and which they will let fade away. This fading away—this stripping away of one’s “Italian-ness”—means further assimilation in the New World, a condition that Fran, Francis’s father, is rejecting while Francis is trying to accept. Interestingly, Gemini is written in English, with only scattered words, common expressions, and phrases in Italian as the leftover heritage of a language the second and third generation of immigrants are beginning to forget.

Arthur Miller’s propensity for writing family dramas and his personal skepticism about opportunities for immigrants to be fully integrated in communities led him to write A View from the Bridge, a drama about an Italian-American family. Miller represents the outside perspective that looks inside the Italian community to analyze and it. Though he does not have an Italian heritage, Miller has a certain familiarity with Italian immigrant communities because he lived close to one, Red Hook. In his autobiography Timebends, Miller explains that Red Hook is an Italian-American neighborhood on the Brooklyn waterfront. The children who grew up in this community spoke several Italian dialects. As more Italians migrate to the area looking for work, an illegal organization of job distribution developed, making it difficult for immigrants to get jobs. Miller explains, “Most of [these immigrants] were of Italian descent, many of them born in the old country and completely dependent on the favor of their leaders for jobs. “As I realized after a trip to southern Italy and Sicily the next year, the hiring system of the Brooklyn and Manhattan waterfronts had been imported from the Sicilian countryside” (Miller 1987, 147).

Vincent Longhi, a friend of Miller’s who was a lawyer and an Italian immigrant himself, decided to join the American Labor Union to promote the “establishment of a hiring hall where the men would register and get their jobs first come, first served, no favorites” (Miller 1987, 149). With the hope of gathering more votes for the Labor Union and raising more money, Longhi planned a trip to Italy to visit the immigrants’ families and bring back word of their well-being. Miller joined Longhi on this long trip, witnessing life in Italy firsthand and getting to know Italian traditions and values, the same values he saw in the neighborhood of Red Hook.

Miller’s decision to get involved in organizing the longshoremen’s union was an important one; “out of it would come a play, A View from the Bridge” (Miller 1987, 149). Miller’s perspective and insights into the Italian-American community are an important addition for understanding Italian identity. His characters in A View from the Bridge were born through observing and studying the living repertoire of Italian bodies presented to him in Red Hook. The embodied practices he observed in Red Hook, such as the mannerisms, the singing, the cooking, and the orality, are important cultural knowledge. Just like a living museum, Red Hook gave Miller the opportunity to connect with and
experience a culture and an identity foreign to him. As Magelssen has said, “It is the very presence, visibility, and constructed identity of the body that makes living history living” (Magelssen, 20). The process of observing behaviors and then putting them on stage testifies to the audience that the author has become “the guarantor of authentic witness to events of the past” (Magelssen, 22). Because he has walked in the shoes of some of the Italian men of the time, Miller can bring to light in his play some of the performative behaviors he has observed, a lasting testament of the Italian-American experience. He observed, for instance, the strong family bonds, reinforced by unbreakable loyalty and respect. He also witnessed the evolution of nepotism in America and the struggle faced by later generations of Italian-Americans who had to decide whether they would follow in the traditional cultural footsteps or change the path.

Gemini and A View from the Bridge are both incredible testaments of how theater can reflect cultural identity and all of its influences. While Innaurato relates the struggles of assimilation in a new country, Miller depicts what it means to betray one’s family and bring dishonor to its name. For Italian-Americans, family is the nucleus of life. It is inside a family that relationships are cultivated and strengthened. Both plays delineate the importance of family, marriage, godparenthood, and guests. Both plays help the audience understand the unique Italian-ness in the values and mannerisms displayed.

**The Order of the Italian Family**

According to an 1880 United States census, “Primarily southern Italian peasants immigrated to the United States; nearly 85 percent of all Italians who journeyed to America were from Mezzogiorno (areas south and east of Rome)” (Bona 1999, 63). The characters in Gemini and A View from the Bridge are no exception. The Geminiani family, in Gemini, is from Calabria, the region that resembles the toe of the Italian boot. Eddie and Beatrice, in A View from the Bridge, are originally from Sicily, the biggest Italian island, just south of the region of Calabria and only about forty minutes away. As first-generation Italian-American immigrants, Eddie and Beatrice, called Bea, have very specific cultural traditions that focus on the importance of family relationships.

Bona (1999, 63) explains, “According to historians of southern Italian culture, the family in the Mezzogiorno was the only institution that afforded comfort and could be trusted.” The importance of the relationships between family members arose from the need to be more efficient in the fields and in other family businesses but also out of necessity. According to Bona (1999, 63), the “reasons for such strong emphasis on l’ordine della famiglia (the order of family) stem from the geography of southern Italy and the historical pattern of invasion by a constant influx of foreigners. Beset by changing governments and natural disasters, the southern Italian had little else to depend on but the family and the close comparaggio o comparatico (godparentage) in their small villages.” This tenuous environment solidified family relationships and reinforced the importance of loyalty and trust. Extending that loyalty and trust to others, such as distant relatives or friends, was a precious gift that could never be betrayed or underestimated. In a world where the outside society was the enemy, family was the only army who could withstand it. The family, then, became a powerful circle based on loyalty and trust.

For Catholic Italians, families start with the union of two individuals through marriage. Marriage is a rite of passage, one of the seven sacraments in the Catholic Church. Performed from the very beginning of life, starting with the sacrament of baptism, the sacraments are meant to help men and
women grow closer to God and solidify their devotion to him. They are profoundly performative rites, celebrated with festivities hard to forget. The marriage sacrament is a special rite performed by a priest in front of witnesses (O’Collins, 2005, 2); it joins not only a man and woman but man, woman, and God in a blessed union. For Catholics, divorce should not be considered an option. For many years, divorced people could lose the privilege of partaking of the Eucharist during Mass. While not quite an excommunication from the Church, not partaking of the Eucharist signified a lack of complete fellowship in the Church. Fortunately, the Church no longer denies the Eucharist to divorced members and extends love and compassion toward those who experience this heartbreaking dissolution of marriage.

Although legally a marriage is dissolved upon the death of a spouse, widowhood in the Catholic Church is seen as an opportunity to extend the sacred marriage vows by keeping one’s marital obligations alive. Pope Pio XII was a firm believer that death was not the end of a marriage and that in widowhood these sacred marriage vows could be fulfilled (Casti Connubii 1930, 1) For Catholics, the will of God is for widows to maintain the holiness conferred upon them by marriage and be an example of devotion for other faithful members. The way this faithfulness is manifested to the outside world is through a performative behavior. Most commonly black clothing, occasionally a veil for the face and a contrite, suffering soul. These simple traits clearly tell the outside world that the loss of a spouse is being mourned in the proper way.

The characters in Gemini grapple with the societal expectations for divorced people and widows and illustrate how religious values have shaped the behavior of American-Italian people. It is clear from the beginning of the play that Fran and Lucille have been together for awhile. Both married previously, Lucille is a widow, and Fran was abandoned by his wife soon after their son was born, leaving him to raise their son alone. Fran and Lucille both express a certain reverence for their previous spouses, or for the marriage rite performed before God. Their attitudes and actions in the play show their respect for the sacred sacrament of marriage, even though their actions do not reflect the same devotion.

Fran still seems to have feelings for his wife who left him, and because his marriage was never annulled, he cannot enter into a new legal relationship, Lucille should not engage in a new relationship as well. Fran and Lucille are each other last choice and they both seem to know it.

BUNNY. You still like your wife?
FRAN. Sure, I married her, didn’t I? We went together two years and were pretty happy until Francis came along. She wasn’t the same after that. Oh well, she’s gone. And now there’s Lucille—at least she bakes good fiadone. And she’s good people, even if she schives too much. I mean, what kind of choice I got? (58)

Not much of a choice at all. There is a silent expectation that Fran and Lucille will continue living a chaste life, Lucille showing devoted respect to her deceased companion, and Fran either remaining single or receiving an annulment from the Church.

To Fran and Lucille, this expectation seems to be too hard to live up to, which is why they end up together. They both know they are not each other’s first choice, but in a way, they are the only available choice. Because they both had previous marriages, they understand each other’s situation; they both want to be with someone and create the semblance of a family. For Lucille, though, her widowhood
makes her feel undesirable, not just because the Church expects her to keep her vows to her late husband but also because other men may perceive her as “damaged goods.” She has already been with a man, even though she was in a lawful marriage:

JUDITH. Why are you interested in his father? (Fran)
LUCILLE. I ain’t got much of a choice. I’m not pretty. I’m a widow. Nobody wants a widow. It’s like bein’ an old sheet. I might be clean and kept nice but people can’t help noticin’ it’s been used. (44–45)

Lucille’s sentiment is embedded in a culture intertwined with religion. Throughout the play, Lucille is clearly a devoted Catholic, or at least she is trying to be. She wants to fit into that Church community that gives her a feeling of belonging. She is trying to obtain approval that might never come because she falls short—she is dating someone, instead of maintaining the image of the contrite, faithful widow still devoted to her late husband.

As is shown in Lucille’s situation, religious expectations are often mingled with societal expectations, leading to extensive pressure on individuals, especially immigrants who want to belong somewhere. The Catholic Church and its doctrines have surely shaped the cultural environment of Italian families for many years, so much so that some behaviors have become signifiers of Italian bodies, even on stage.

Godfatherhood

The godfather and godmother are important figures in Italian culture. Families extend trust to relatives and friends who become so involved in the family’s life that they are indiscernible from those who are blood related. As part of a family circle, godfathers and godmothers must maintain the loyalty and trust expected from them. As a matter of fact, their first duty is obedience—obedience to the father of the family, to the household name, and to the interests of the family.

This kind of bonding, typically associated with Italian culture, has become widely known to the rest of the world through movies, particularly in the representation of gangs, with their commitment to loyalty and secrecy. The Mafia organization is a well-known example, born from the tight family circle who must face an unfair and hostile world. It is impossible to mention cinema without a reference to the role that filmmakers such as Francis Ford Coppola, Brian de Palma, and Martin Scorsese have had in portraying Italian heritage on screen and correcting misinterpretations about Italian identity. When it comes to speaking about the values, such as loyalty, honor, and respect, associated with Mafioso organizations, “Coppola takes the emblem of the invisible hand from the Sicilian puppet theater, a form of representation linked to Italy’s feudal past. And thereby hangs a tale of tradition and modernization that will inform the Italian American quest for self-representation through, and against, its own status as subculture that reproduces itself through traditions-archetypes and codes” (D’acierno 1999a, 565).

Godparenthood consists of a series of obligations that do not constitute a legal contract but nonetheless make up a binding agreement, violation of which is often paid with one’s life. Catholicism has had a major role in defining godparenthood. Godparents are expected to be present in the life of the children they are responsible for, including participating in milestone events and all future sacraments that will be performed during their godchildren’s lives: “Likewise, birth, marriage, and death are social occasions in Italian American life. These events assemble and unite a large group of kinfolk, co-
godparents, friends, and neighbors around both the individual in transition and the symbolic, gustatory, and aesthetic accessories to that transition” (D’acierno 1999, b 566). This relationship with godparents is present in both Gemini and A View from the Bridge and is key to understanding some behavioral codes that define Italian-American bodies.

In A View from the Bridge, we learn early on that living with Eddie and Bea is Catherine (Katie), the daughter of Bea’s sister. While it is unclear when Catherine was placed in her aunt and uncle’s custody, Eddie and Bea took Catherine in and have raised her as if she were their own child. Eddie is a godfather figure who has provided a roof over her head, fed her, and made sure she got an education. It is clear that Eddie and Bea made a solemn promise to take care of Catherine and have done so to the best of their ability:

EDDIE. Katie, I promised your mother on her death bed. I’m responsible for you. (8)

In return, Katie pays her respects to Eddie and treats him like a father as a sign of gratitude. Katie’s obedience shows not only that she has accepted Eddie as a father figure but also that she has bound her loyalty to his household.

The relationship starts to sour when Katie decides to marry someone Eddie does not approve of. Eddie is furious that Beatrice and Katie are not showing the respect and obedience he feels he deserves as the head of the home, a respect that should be shown through performative behavior. Katie should never have the last word in a discussion. She should accept whatever final decision is made by Eddie, and leave his presence.

EDDIE. I want my respect, Beatrice, and you know what I’m talkin’ about. (53)

Eddie wants obedience. He wants his word to be the last spoken, his decisions observed. Because of this need for respect and obedience, Eddie will ultimately lose his whole family.

The strong bonds of family relations that describe Italian-American bodies are also illustrated by Eddie and Bea opening their home to Bea’s distant cousins, whom they have never met. When family asks for help, help is not denied. This practice is a basic tenet of family relationships and is the reason immigrants have survived in their new homes. It is the assurance that being part of the same family means helping each other in every circumstance.

Bea’s cousins, Marco and Rodolfo, leave Italy and come to America looking for jobs so they can send money back home to their families, who have been devasted by poverty. Marco and Rodolfo do not have legal documents allowing them to enter the country but trust that the immigration office won’t find out—the officials rarely know when an immigrant doesn’t have the proper papers unless someone tells on them. Eddie and Bea are taking a risk by letting the men stay in their home, but it is the least they can do for family:

EDDIE. It’s an honor, Bea. I mean it. I was just thinkin’ before, comin’ home, suppose my father didn’t come to this country, and I was starvin’ like them over there. . . . And I had people in America could keep me a couple of months? The man would be honored to lend me a place to sleep. (11)

Family is the strongest bond on earth, and Italian-Americans are especially proud of and attached to their families, as demonstrated by Eddie and Bea’s willingness to house two undocumented immigrants. This family bond is part of a deeply rooted code of loyalty that is not based simply on the
expectation that the favor will be returned but on the belief that if a family sticks together, they can overcome anything.

**Guests**

For Italian-Americans, offering food is the ultimate gesture to welcome friends and neighbors to the family. According to Melpezzi and Clements (1999 b, 112), “[Eating a meal together] is the central institution in Italian American life, a virtual sacrament since it symbolized the sense of being a part of that central institution. Communion around the dinner table is the ultimate sealer of friendships. Sitting at the dinner table is also a performative act. Guests are served the best meals the host can make. They are invited to be fully satisfied with the meals and to partake, as they are indeed part of the family. There is always food in abundance:

FRAN. Well, I hope everybody’s gotta appetite, ’cause there’s enough to feed the Chinee army and ain’t no room to keep it either. (33)

The serving and welcoming of guests has deep roots in Italy. It has been a tradition for centuries and uniquely identifies Italian-American bodies: “The sacramental character extended to the offering of bread and wine to guests, an act that offered them a place at the family table, . . . remained a focal point for Italian American life for several generations after immigration (Malpezzi and Clements 1999 b, 112).

In a View from the Bridge, the offering of food is the peace offering used to bond two estranged family members: Bea and her cousins. Eddie and Bea have never met Marco and Rodolpho, but they know the two men need help—a place to stay and jobs so they can send money home to their families. When Marco and Rodolpho arrive at Eddie and Bea’s home a little earlier than anticipated, Bea panics and immediately exclaims, “I just . . . I can’t believe it! I didn’t even buy a new table cloth; I was gonna wash the walls. . . . I was gonna wax the floors. . . . I don’t have nothin’ to eat for them!” (9). Bea obviously feels underprepared to receive guests. To receive a guest is also a ceremonial and therefore performative act. At first, her desire to be a good host, almost seems excessive. Washing walls, buying new tablecloths, and preparing food seems unnecessary for relatives they have never even met before. In Italian culture, though, this behavior has deep roots.

During the highest point of humanism, the diplomat Baldassare Castiglione wrote a guidebook for aristocrats called Il Cortegiano (1528), a sort of behavioral manual that helped young, wealthy intellectuals know what disciplines to study, how to gain a cultural education, and how to behave at social events. These directives, intended to make a cortegiano artful and skilled, soon expanded and trickled down to the lower classes. Only a few years after the publication of Il Cortegiano, another important book was printed: Il Galateo (1558) by Giovanni Della Casa. Written in gentle terms without pedantry, this short treatise was a compendium of moral and social rules that ranged from how to be a good citizen to how to behave at the dinner table. Della Casa believed that beauty, grace, and proportions were not a prerogative only of nature but could also be exemplified in human behavior. He believed that all people should display good manners, even those of the lower social classes (Liliana, 2018, 2). Italians aspired to live Della Casa’s codes and rules, and consequently so did Italian-Americans who brought these codes and rules with them to the New World.
Bea might not be aware that her concern for the proper preparation of her home is founded in a rich cultural tradition. To be a good host and create a cozy atmosphere in the home when receiving guests is expected behavior; it signifies that the family has an elevated cultural background. Food is also an important part of creating a welcoming environment. Feeding guests is an act of kindness and hospitality. When the guests arrive, it is customary to serve warm food at the dinner table, particularly bread, a staple in Italian households. Sitting down at the table together is the ultimate form of communion. Even for just a moment, everyone at the table is an equal part of the family.

When Marco and Rodolpho arrive at Eddie and Bea’s home, it is Eddie’s responsibility, as the patriarch of the home, to invite the guests to take their place at the dinner table:

EDDIE. Katie, give them supper, eh? Come here, sit down. I’ll get you some soup. (19)

If supper is not needed, because the guests have already eaten, coffee or wine are offered. By tradition, coffee—another staple in Italian culture—can be consumed after every meal and is offered in the mornings, afternoons, and evenings: “Coffee culture is Italian culture—a testament of the people coming together and enjoying the little things in life” (Kovick 2021). Serving coffee is an act of kindness and inclusion. The characters in A View from the Bridge have incorporated this element of Italian culture, as well as some of the notions presented in Il Galateo, into their everyday lives. The characters’ actions and attitudes are profoundly Italian, observed in real life by Miller and portrayed on stage. The audience can observe how culture is assimilated through an etiquette that is passed on from generation to generation.

**Honor and Respect**

The strong relationships developed within Italian families, including with distant relatives, friends, and guests, developed over time into entrenched codes of behavior. For a family to protect themselves from a discriminatory outside world, honor and respect within the family were necessary. In the context of Italian families, honor and respect are intended to be observed exactly. The family’s main objective is to ensure that the family name is respected and trusted. Defending the family name from defamation, disloyalty, and disobedience is a lifelong mission for family members, one worthy of protecting with one’s life.

One of the primary ways a family’s honors its name is by ensuring the women of the family are chaste and respectable. According to Belmonte, “Southern Italian men had always defended [women’s] honor through the concept of female inviolability. As long as the women of the natal group had vergogna (shame), the men retained their onore (honor as self-respect, and the respect and fear of other men). Indeed the word rispetto (respect) still has deep emotional resonances in Italian-American life” (Belmonte 1993, 16). Once a woman has entered a family circle by marriage, she becomes inviolable. This means not only that she belongs to her husband, and that no other man should lay eyes on her, but also that she must be spared from vulgar language and any other disgraceful behavior so she can remain pure. When any kind of disrespect is displayed toward a woman, or any member of the family, toughness is necessary to rectify the actions. Belmonte (1993, 11) explains, “The respect-as-fear accorded the ruthless baronial strongman remains. The way to straighten up problems is to use brute force. It is the result of the connective social tissues that have failed southern Italy. It is the result of foreign invasion, usurpation and unfairness. . . . Things must be regulated by the law of the strongest.
The rule of manly honor (known to Sicilians as omerta) effectively seals this closed world off from the probing curiosity of all outsiders.”

Respect and family honor become the main focus at the end of A View to the Bridge. The seemingly placid lives of Eddie and Bea are turned upside down when Marco and Rodolpho come to stay with them and Rodolpho starts courting Bea’s niece, Catherine. Eddie cannot accept this relationship. Having his Catherine leave him for someone he does not like vexes Eddie and upsets the balance that has kept his family unified. The first problem arises when Bea, does not share Eddie’s loathing for Rodolpho, which Eddie thinks is a form of disobedience:

EDDIE. A wife is supposed to believe the husband. If I tell you that guy ain’t right don’t tell me he is right. (53) . . . I want my respect. Didn’t you ever hear of that? From my wife? (61)

Bea simply cannot find anything wrong with Rodolpho. Rodolpho is respectful toward Catherine, he is Italian, and he has a job. Although Bea has always stood by Eddie’s side, this time she is conflicted. She senses jealousy in Eddie’s behavior and because of that, she feels she cannot support Eddie in not accepting Rodolpho.

Because of this rift, Eddie feels threatened in his role as head of the family. He believes he should be the one making decisions for the whole family, including who Catherine dates, and that role is being pulled out from under his feet. The respect he demands around the house makes him feel important, a respect he otherwise does not get outside his home. Eddie insists that he deserves respect, or a better word: obedience.

BEATRICE. So I moved them out, what more do you want? You got your house now, you got your respect. (61)

Perhaps Eddie had developed sexual feelings for Catherine, which could never be fulfilled. Having another man in the picture shatters the concept of female inviolability, and Eddie realizes his authority is an illusion. As Eddie’s emotions get out of control, he makes an unforgivable mistake. He calls the immigration service and reports Marco and Rodolpho as illegal immigrants. Eddie has betrayed his own family, breaking that circle of trust and respect that should be inviolable.

Once honor and respect are broken, things can only be made right at the price of life. Both Eddie and Marco know there is no other way in Italian culture. There is a behavioral code that must be followed in situations of betrayal. Eddie needs to defend his name and respond to the community’s accusations that he is a rat who betrayed his own family:

EDDIE. I want my name! . . . You can run tell him, kid, that he’s gonna give it back to me in front of this neighborhood, or we have it out. (63)

Marco also needs to defend his name and rectify the indignation of having his family’s well-being ruined. Marco came to America to find work to help his family back in Italy. He left behind a wife and three kids. Immigration finding him out will not only cost him his job but will also mean that his family will suffer. That is an outrage that cannot be left unpunished:

MARCO. He killed my children! That one stole the food from my children! (59) . . . In my country he would be dead now. He would not live this long. (60)

Marco’s conversation with a lawyer clearly demonstrates the cultural idea that a set of values, even if not written in contract, are to be respected by all family members:
The law? All the law is not in a book. He degraded my brother. My blood. He robbed my children, he mocks my work. I work to come here! (60)

While the rules of family conduct are not law, they matter, and there are consequences when they are broken. There are not many options to repair this rift. Eddie would have to admit that his resentment pushed him to betray his family, but that would mean taking on the shame of never again being worthy of his family’s trust. Eddie cannot fathom that outcome, so the only resolution is almost a form of a duel. At the end of the play, Eddie and Marco face each other, both knowing what is coming. Marco stabs Eddie, who dies on the street in Bea’s arms. In Marco’s eyes, justice has been restored at the expense of Eddie’s life. It was a necessary step. The Italian-American family cannot live with shame upon their name.

In the play Gemini, honor and respect are only touched upon but still speak loudly about the system of values Italian-Americans hold dear. The concept of female inviolability is manifested in Fran’s attention to and care for Lucille. While Fran and Lucille are not married and do not live together, their dating relationship creates a strong family bond. Lucille is deeply involved in the life of Fran’s family; she is present at every family meal and at significant events in Fran’s life. Fran and Lucille’s relationship is based on a profound level of trust, which is reinforced by rituals and habits. For instance, Fran picks Lucille up for dinner every night, even when she is living just around the corner from him. This gesture is a sign of respect, showing that Lucille is with him and he is with her:

F R A N. I’m going to get Lucille.

F R A N C I S. She lives around the corner, why can’t she come over herself?

F R A N. Don’t get smart and show some respect. (23)

Family rituals such as these are consistent with the beliefs Italian-Americans hold dear. Fran’s and Lucille’s Italian-American heritage gives them identity and codifies their behaviors.

**Virtue and Chastity**

As mentioned previously, virtue is an essential value for Italian-American families. Virtue is deeply connected with the values of honor and respect and is particularly tied to women’s conduct in the family circle. “Female inviolability” defines whether a woman is virtuous and chaste. Women are expected to be a type of Virgin Mary, the pure, beautiful vessel that carried the Son of God. Although the concept is not explicitly stated in any biblical record, the Catholic Church believes in the verginita’ perpetua (perpetual virginity) of Mary, the belief that Mary maintained her virginity throughout her life. Never consummating her marriage with Joseph assured her a level of sanctity worthy of the presence of the Father and the Son as constant companions in her life. Based on this belief, the Catholic Church suggests that all women should exemplify this level of sanctity throughout their lives, insinuates that women are more than human and that normal sexual impulses before marriage do not exist. Women are expected to live chaste lives, but they are also human. Frowning upon the idea of intimacy with a lawful husband, as in the Virgin Mary’s case, sets women up for absolute failure.
Italian society has mirrored this uneasiness with women’s sexuality by never making mention of it, which has contributed to biased gender roles in Italian families. Traditionally, Italian women were mostly confined to the home, where they could maintain their chastity.

In A View from the Bridge, Eddie, as the patriarch of the home, takes it upon himself to help the women in his life follow the virginal role model of Mary. Eddie cares that his wife and niece are seen as donne serie, respectful women who are devoted to their home and do not fall victim to the world’s frivolities. A woman’s most important role was caring for her family. Bona explains, “Experts on Italian culture describe the woman’s role as embodying the ideal of serieta’ in her dedication to securing and nurturing family members.” (Bona 63)

In one scene, Catherine, Eddie’s niece, has bought a new skirt. This new outfit is part of a big announcement Catherine is about to make. The skirt, though, is a little too short for Eddie’s taste, and he does not hesitate to let her know how he feels:

EDDIE. I think it’s too short, ain’t it?

CATHERINE. Eddie, it’s the style now. (8)

This new style does not line up with the image of a donna seria, a woman who would always ensure her husband or father looked respectable in society. A woman’s poor conduct ultimately brings dishonor to the men in her family, whether husband or father. When Eddie says “Catherine, I don’t want to be a pest, but I’m tellin’ you you’re walkin’ wavey” (8), he is actually saying that Catherine’s way of walking reflects poorly on Eddie, and that is his biggest concern. Catherine is ultimately Eddie’s responsibility—he is raising her, and she must bring honor to their family name.

Eddie loves Catherine. He thinks he wants what is best for her, but ultimately he refuses to see her as a capable being able to make her own choices. To Eddie, women can either be the “bad” girls who sell their body for money, who display no resemblance to Mary, or good wives and mothers who know their place. Eddie believes that Catherine is a good girl who is too young to know what proper behavior is. Catherine needs Eddie to help her navigate the dangerous world:

EDDIE. Catherine, do me a favor, will you? You’re getting to be a big girl now, you gotta keep yourself more, you can’t be so friendly, kid. (8)

Eddie feels he is directly responsible for Catherine’s behavior, at least until she becomes the problem of a husband.

Catherine’s big news is that she got a job offer. Obviously, she cannot accept the job without Eddie’s approval. Gaining the approval of a father or husband is one of the unspoken rules of a patriarchal Italian home. For many Italian-immigrant women, working outside the home was necessary in order to survive. Bona (1999, 63) explains, “[A woman] was required by economic necessity to send her children into a strange public world outside the home: the factory and the American school.” Eddie’s family could benefit from sending Cathrine, his only daughter, to work to get some extra income. Eddie tells Catherine, “You can’t take no job. Why didn’t you ask me before you take a job?” (11) Eddie’s possessive and controlling behavior is the outward expression of a culture that wants to see women as self-sacrificing, asexual objects. Women’s place is in the home, where they are untouchable. Inside the home, they are expected to be perfect hosts and to take care of all the housework, especially preparing and serving meals:
EDDIE. Katie, give them supper, heh? Get some coffee. (11)
A man’s most precious possession is a woman who can keep a clean house, cook meals, and raise children.

The women in Gemini offer the audience another compelling perspective on the power of gender roles. Bunny, the eccentric neighbor of the Geminiani family, is the contradiction of all the values embodied by the Virgin Mary. Bunny is not married, sleeps around with married men, has a drinking and substance abuse problem, and is incapable of taking care of her brilliant autistic son. She doesn’t care about society’s opinion and has simply stopped trying to be something different than what people have made her to be. Bunny’s behavior in public makes her an undesirable partner. She had an affair with Fran Geminiani, “but her total lack of modesty is not for him (Fran), being too far from the Italian-American feminine ideal” (Ahearn, 116). Even after the affair ends, Bunny and her son remain involved in the life of the Geminiani, forming a sort of dysfunctional family. Fran is now dating Lucille Pompi, or so it appears, something that still confuses Fran’s son, who finds their secretive behavior odd, and does not understand why two adults cannot flaunt their relationship when not married. What his son doesn’t understand is that for his father, keeping his relationship with Lucille secret makes him feel like he’s a better father, since he is performing the societal expectations and setting the correct examples; “In the Italian-American hierarchy of values, if you don’t consecrate a relationship in a marriage, you don’t flaunt its existence—not equally important, do you deny yourself the relationship” (Timpanelli 1999,118). Lucille has an important quality in the eyes of Fran—she is a true Italian woman who, although she isn’t always successful in keeping all of the feminine standards, tries hard to fit in. She dresses modestly and tries to respect her marital vows to her late husband. She tries hard to be the moral compass of the family, even if her persistent swearing often betrays her.

Lucille is repulsed by Bunny’s behavior and continually tells Bunny what a disgrace she is: You need to stop smoking,” or “You ain’t going to heaven!” or “Ain’t ladylike to go in there.”(pg 42-43) Lucille’s version of the world is very black and white, good and bad, right and wrong, and Bunny doesn’t fit that image. Lucille holds on tight to the virtue she has inherited from her Italian culture without ever questioning it. It is her heritage, and she desperately desires to fit in. The Church community gives her her identity, an identity that perhaps was at one point lost after she emigrated to America. Lucille never questions whether her behavior is becoming too judgmental or even intolerant toward others. She is still trying to come to terms with her Italian-ness and the values she carried with her to America. She is proud of her roots. She knows where she comes from. She knows that most Italians are Catholics, and that gives her a community to go to. In trying to fit in with this community, Lucille accepts that virginal role model she was likely raised with. To display her virtue, she must put herself on a higher pedestal than the women around her, by pointing out their flaws and their behavior that is inconsistent with the good moral guidelines Catholicism teaches. Bunny, though, doesn’t have Italian roots and was not even raised Catholic. That doesn’t stop Lucille, however, from trying to dispense her unsolicited advice to Bunny because that is the only thing that gives her the illusion of fitting a standard:

LUCILLE. Well, good Catholics have self-control. (30)
Good Catholic women have self-control over their bodies, their thoughts, their actions, and their suffering, just as the mother of Jesus exemplified throughout her life. Lucille, though, has nothing under control in her life.

While there are many examples of virtuous righteous men in the Catholic religion—men who have upheld standards of purity, sacrifice, devotion, and obedience—virtue has a different meaning for men than it does for women. Men’s virtue is mostly connected to women’s chastity. Moral transgressions have different weight for men and women. Bunny’s affair is a fitting example of this discrepancy. When Bunny is caught in bed with another woman’s husband, Bunny is the one who is attacked first. The wife opens the bedroom door, sees her husband in bed with another woman, and immediately attacks Bunny. The husband remains in bed, half asleep, disinterested in the events:

BUNNY. That bitch, Mary O’Donnel, attacked me. I was lyin’ there, mindin’ my own business, and she walks in, drops the groceries, screams, then throws herself on top of me. (15).

The cheating husband in this episode regains interest in the situation only after Bunny tells him she has broken his wife’s arm. Because of the incumbent medical situation, he decides to finally take part in the scenerio he caused by having an affair with Bunny. Bunny though is the one attacked first. The enraged wife jumps on Bunny first. A reflection of maybe who she thinks is responsible of the adultery. Maybe a reflection of who she thinks should have been better because a woman.

**Gender Roles**

In the Italian culture, gender roles are the result of the intermingling of cultural and religious standards. Catholicism seems to be an ever-present backdrop in the lives of Italian-American families; it is an important part of their Italian identity. In addition to offering spiritual guidance to the faithful, Catholicism has also dictated social norms, influenced the way marriage is viewed, and consolidated strong relationships among relatives. Catholicism is a key identifier of Italian-American bodies.

Social norms are accepted behavioral codes by both men and women. These social norms give people identity and purpose. Italian women and men were incredibly hard-working people. Both contributed to the economic and spiritual well-being of their family by working to provide. As discussed, women worked mostly within the home. “A woman . . . provides her family with a regular supply of freshly baked bread. A traditional male responsibility involved assuring that homemade wine was available to accompany every meal” (Malpezzi and Clements 1999 b, 110). For women, making bread was an art, mastered through experience and patience: “Proportioning ingredients was a matter of experience, since the baker relied upon her sense of the dough’s texture and appearance rather than upon precise measurements” (Malpezzi and Clements 1999 b, 110). Italian women continued to bake bread for the family even after moving to the United States. Malpezzi and Clements (1999 b, 110) explain that “particularly in small towns and rural areas, Italian women often had their husbands build outdoor ovens. Baking bread was a long process, which contributed to women being confined mostly to their home.

Men primarily worked outside the home and also had the privilege of enjoying a social life outside of the home. Men often met friends at the local caffè to socialize, drink coffee, and reenergize before going back to work. In fact, according to Belmonte, “Daily and lively conversation with other males in the local caffè’ [was] one of the defining signs of manhood” (Belmonte 1999, 8). . Men could
also freely visit the piazza on their own or with other male friends. Women, on the other hand, would rarely be found alone in the piazza—it was not appropriate, and they would likely not have time to go to the piazza because of their responsibilities in the home and with their children.

A women’s main purpose was to raise children and provide a good example for them. Children were important in a family because they were extra hands to help with work. The capacity to bear children was a woman’s most desirable attribute. Malpezzi and Clementi (1999 b, 86) state, “To be childless is a terrible humiliation to an Italian woman. Children are the highest aspiration of [a woman’s] life.” Many rites, often purely superstitious, were performed to ensure a woman’s fertility, most common was to pray to St Anna (mother of Mary) to grant the righteous desire of progenies. Expectant parents commonly hoped their first-born would be a son, as demonstrated by the common phrase used to congratulate a pregnant woman: “Auguri e figli maschi” (Congratulations and good wishes for a son).

The role of women in the Italian family and in society is deeply influenced by Catholicism, specifically by the adoration of the Madonna. Madonna literally means mea domina (my woman). The mother of Jesus, in a sense, is a mother to everyone, the perfect compassionate intermediary for all people to reach the supreme God of all creation. She is available to all that ask for her help. According to Breuner (1999, 68), “Maria [Mary] offers a model to all women in their daily lives, the model of self-sacrifice and virtue.” All devoted Catholic women should desire and master these qualities. Women were expected to put their own desires last and “to contribute to the physical well-being of [their] husband[s] and children, . . . upholding the cultural, culinary and spiritual traditions of the family” (Bona 1999, 63). A hard job that would include that every woman rids of any personal desire “perhaps even self-effacement, but severe impoverishment and political disempowerment which left her little choice” (Bona 1999, 63).

In A View from the Bridge, Lucille and Bunny are both struggling to find their place in society. For each of them, their children are their greatest accomplishment and pride, giving them a sense of belonging:

LUCILLE. I have a son at Yale and my daughter is a dental technician, she works at the Graduate Hospital. (12)

BUNNY. This is my son Herschel. He’s a genius. He’s got an IQ of 187 or 172, depending on which test you use. (9)

When all else fails to give these women a sense of accomplishment and identity, they can rely on their children to define them and give meaning to their lives.

Interestingly, Fran is not defined by his son’s accomplishments—Francis is also a student at an Ivy League school—but by his own job. Nothing brings more satisfaction to an Italian father than to see his son with a job, to be the provider of his own family, the one everyone depends on. It does not matter to Fran that Francis’s Harvard education will allow him to get a better job; studying is not working and therefore does not have the same value. This way of thinking exposes the deep limitations of the lower working class and the treatment they endured as immigrants:

FRAN. I’m his dad. I didn’t know Igor had friends. He just sits around all day, no job, nothin’. (11)
Fran’s concerns about his son lead him to see him as an archetypal Igor. Someone who lives in a limbo, consumed by the lack of closure and the incapacity of fully committing to something and moving forward in life.

Italian religion and culture also play an important part in defining sexual orientation. Although sexual orientation is not the same as gender roles, the two are connected in the expectations placed upon men and women and the gender roles they are forced to assume. Francis is slowly coming to the realization that he is gay. Fran, Lucille, and even Bunny have all suspected it but have never dared to have that hard conversation. The topic is taboo, especially in an Italian family where sexuality and gender roles have been defined for a long time. Catholicism has already provided the appropriate roles, and homosexuality is not part of them. The Church offers no guidelines for families who face this situation. Because of this uncertainty, Lucille draws her own conclusions about the source of Francis’s sexual orientation: his environment must be the culprit:

LUCILLE. Yale puts out a lot of queers along with the doctors and the lawyers. But Donny’s got a girl friend, and though I think she’s a pig, I guess it proves he’s got some interest in the girls. But Francis? Well, Fran and me had a long talk. He’s afraid for Francis. Well, I think Francis is. (45)

The most unsettling part of Francis’s sexual orientation is the fact that he no longer fits in the traditional Italian culture or the gender roles it has outlined. It is quite normal for a father to feel ashamed and worried about a son that does not have a place in society anymore and whose behavior is referred to as sinful and shameful. Society’s, and Catholicism’s, expectation is that Fran will be just like his father, a hard-working man who finds a good woman and provides for his family. Fran and Lucille experience a sense of loss, knowing that Francis can never meet these expectations:

LUCILLE. It’s hard on a man to have a queer for a son. I mean, I guess Fran would rather he was queer than humpbacked or dead, still it’s hard. (45)

Harder still is not knowing how society will receive a gay man, and not knowing if the Church, the source of comfort for devoted Italians, will accept Francis. A man is supposed to be the head of the home, the provider and protector of the women in his house.

FRAN. It’s the hardest thing for a father to ask his son. Don’ know why it should be, I know guys who . . . like . . . other guys who are regular, you know, in every other way. But you know, it’s his life now, he’s gonna pay the consequences for whatever he does . . . but still I hope. (45)

For Italians, the Catholic community is their identity, especially for Italians who emigrated to the United States, leaving the motherland behind. These immigrants had to acquire a new identity as Italian-Americans, making an effort to fit into a society so different from the one they knew at home. Being Catholic, though, didn’t change, whether in Italy or the United States. Like a compass, Catholic values gave immigrants direction and helped them feel part of a community that shares the same ideals, whether or not those ideals are actually followed. The problem with Francis’s homosexuality lies in the possible loss of this compass, this community that has helped his father feel at home. This is what scares Fran and Lucille. They are already outcasts—devoted to the Church in words but not keeping the moral code expected of them. Francis’s sexual orientation threatens the family’s place in the community. They’ll soon be like Bunny, living a messy existence, filled with judgment, loneliness, depression, and maybe even suicide.
Conclusion

Theater has contributed to the preservation of the Italian identity, an identity performed through family relationships, religious observance and material practices. The plays Gemini and A View from the Bridge provide significant examples of identity formation, both in terms of an insider perspective (Innaurato) and an outsider perspective (Miller). Both plays show how Italian identity is commonly performed in everyday situations, such as family gatherings, dating, hosting foreigners, father-son/daughter relationship, and coming to terms with sexual identity.

Theater has been essential not only for authors such as Innaurato, who have explored their own identity through this medium, but also for the Italian-American audience to witness the dynamics through which Italian identity is expressed. Innaurato’s representation of religious traditions and gender roles, and how they have influenced behavior and family relationships, is a powerful documentation of the struggle for identity in immigrant communities. For Italians and Italian-Americans alike, families are the nucleus that ensures culture and values remain unchanged.

Though not an Italian-American, Miller has greatly contributed to defining Italian cultural identity by describing deeply rooted Italian performative behaviors so they are not forgotten. Through his representation, Miller depicted the evolution of family relationships and their ultimate downfall. Miller has also represented how traditional Italian values and gender roles continue to exist in immigrant families and shows what happens when those values clash with new ones.

The Italian-American identity is best portrayed through the order of the family, daily life and gender roles expression. As seen, an Italian-American body is also deeply connected to the values of Catholicism, which have influenced not only the spiritual part of life but also every aspect of daily interactions in the community. These plays depict that family is truly the most important support system in a hostile world and the strength necessary to survive hardships. Theater has brought these elements to life and has allowed audiences to visualize what constitutes an Italian identity on stage. Throught the performative medium of theatre the everyday performance of Italian identity was presented in front of an audience.
References


