

# Nostalgia in John Fante's "Home Sweet Home"

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**ABSTRACT:** "Home Sweet Home", which was published in 1932, is one of John Fante's most significant short stories. In terms of plot and character development it reveals the great awareness that underlies the author's artistic approach. Besides presenting the prominent features of his literary exploration, "Home Sweet Home" clearly anticipates the characteristic themes of Fante's novels. His explicitly nostalgic representation of his Italian roots (Torricella Peligna, in Abruzzo) can be distinctly noticed in the relationship between Jimmy, the protagonist, and his fiery father. As a young writer, Jimmy views his father as a model of excess and masculinity as well as an anti-model from whom he wants to detach himself in order to follow his own path away from the narrow prospects of his family. Tellingly, the story is narrated by Jimmy in the future tense because, by dramatizing his expectations of a euphoric return home, Fante succeeds in evoking the nostalgic relationship that a narrator of Italian origins maintains with his social roots and traditional culture.

**KEYWORDS:** "Home Sweet Home", John Fante, nostalgia, Italian tradition, literary vocation.

1. When we take into consideration Fante's narrative works, we cannot help noticing that one of the main themes of his literary imagination is that of cultural identity. This aspect of Fante's fiction is like a *fil rouge* which, at the same time, characterizes his world-view and his way of construing stories. In this connection, "Home Sweet Home"<sup>1</sup> appears to emblematically

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1. "Home Sweet Home" was printed in the issue of *The American Mercury* dated November 1932 (Vol. 27, Number 107, pp. 271-277). Founded and edited by Henry Louis Mencken, the literary magazine had in those years a circulation of one

encapsulate the inherent problematics of Fante's fiction, in terms of the sociocultural dimension intrinsic to his artistic vision. The title already anticipates Fante's typical ambivalence with respect to his origins. Of course, the expression "Home Sweet Home", in this specific case, can only have an ironic valency from the moment that the use of such a cliché, besides not being at all original, refers to an idyllic conception of the nuclear family – which is not what exactly emerges in the story itself. For, as shall be seen, the "sweetness" of the home is contrasted with the bitterness of the human relationships within the domestic environment. In other words, from the moment Fante chooses a title which, on a popular level, is a trite image of the America of those years<sup>2</sup>, he seems to be deliberately misleading his reader.

"Home Sweet Home" dramatizes the way in which John Fante's alter ego was treated by his family, after the publication of his first story. Hence a sequence of contradictions in the daily life of a young writer living between two worlds, both distant and near. In fact, "Home Sweet Home" which was the second story to be published in *American Mercury*, came into being as a consequence of the first one, "Altar Boy."<sup>3</sup>

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hundred thousand copies and for John Fante it represented an injection of trust and an unimaginable opportunity. A few months earlier, the great critic and influential figure of the American letters had already accepted and published Fante's first story "Altar Boy" (August 1932, Vol. 26, Number 104, pp. 395-409).

2. As is well known, since the beginning of the twentieth century, the expression "Home Sweet Home" was repeatedly used to give titles to silent films and also many short films in the United States. The origin of the phrase can be traced to the American actor, playwright and poet John Howard Payne (1791-1852) who, in 1822, wrote the song "Home! Sweet Home!" which immediately became popular in the United States, the United Kingdom and throughout the English-speaking world. During the American Civil War (1861-1865) the song became very famous to the point that in 1862 Abraham Lincoln asked the Italian opera singer, Adelina Patti, to interpret it for him.
3. On Fante's debut literary success see Stephen Cooper, *Full of Life: A Biography of John Fante*, New York, North Point Press, 2000: "Hard upon Mencken's acceptance of 'Altar Boy', Fante received a letter from the publisher of *The American Mercury*, Alfred A.

This explains the temporal structure of "Home Sweet Home". As we shall see, the story is narrated in the first person<sup>4</sup> and always in the future tense by Jimmy who is on his way home to enjoy his moment of success as an author of short stories. The narrative voice is therefore characterized by this initial moment of fame which contrasts with the anonymity of his humble origins. It is precisely because of this unquestionable autobiographical evidence, already present in "Altar Boy", that the story can be considered a significant point of departure for a study of Fante's works. In spite of the minimalist development of its story-line, "Home Sweet Home" provides a precise interpretative orientation for anyone interested in analysing Fante's macrotext. In fact, the opening paragraph sees the first-person narrator imagining his return to the warmth and affection of his family:

I am singing now for soon I shall be home. There will be a great welcome for me. There will be spaghetti and wine and salami. My mother will spread a great table piled high with the delicacies of my boyhood. It will all be for me. The love of my mother will come over the table, and my brothers and my sister will be happy to see me among them again, for I am to them the big brother who never errs, and they will be a little envious of the welcome that is poured upon me, and how they will laugh at the things I

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Knopf, inquiring if the young author had 'a book in process or in mind', and, if so, requesting the first opportunity to read or discuss it. John could only have been buoyed further when the August 1932 issue of *The American Mercury* appeared, with his name topping the list of that month's contributors on the magazine's handsome green cover. The confessional nature of Fante's writing was clear in this first national publication. At the most obvious level of subject matter, the story dealt with a number of ironically 'sinful' episodes in the life of a young Catholic boy and the confessions that subsequently were necessary. Adding further to the confessional implications of "Altar Boy" was the fact that the narrator-protagonist's name was John, as if Fante was writing directly about himself" (p. 85).

4. It is well known that John Fante, more often than not, adopts the first-person narration, a technique which involves a peculiar impact on the protagonist's point of view. In the light of Cesare Segre's reflections, we may conclude that in Fante's fiction the epistemic horizon is often coincident with that of the main character (Cesare Segre, *Intreccio di voci. La polifonia nella letteratura del Novecento*, Turin, Einaudi, 1991, pp. 16-18).

say, and how they will smile when they see me swallow those squirming forkfuls of spaghetti, and shout for more cheese, and roar my pleasure. For they are my people, and I will have returned to them and to the love of my mother.<sup>5</sup>

Through the protagonist's words, the idea of returning home is associated with happiness – the initial phrase shifts the focus from the present progressive (the segment *I am singing* which anticipates the moment of happiness) to the future moment of his happiness (expressed in the segment *soon I shall be home*). After the repetition of the personal pronoun in the initial phrases (*I am, I shall be*), the narrative voice tries to imagine the events awaiting him in an impersonal manner. This is evidenced in the double repetition of the phrase *There will be...* which also seems to signal the anxiety of his return in a kind of circular process.

It is significant that, on a strictly semantic level, the first reference is to food: “spaghetti and wine and salami” – a precise reference to his Italian identity. Not only, but the food on the table is obviously associated with his mother who emerges as the central inspirational figure of the story. It is no accident that the first scene with which the reader is presented is where the narrator's mother appears, as he imagines her lovingly laying the table for his return: “My mother will spread a great table piled high with the delicacies of my boyhood. It will all be for me.” The hint that must not be ignored is the continuity here between past and present: the mother will prepare the same delicacies for her son as when he was a child – food assures a sense of continuity in which all traumas and tensions are absent. The same food, the same mother, the same hands that do the cooking from which the guarantee of continuity in time derives.<sup>6</sup>

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5. John Fante, “Home Sweet Home”, in *The Wine of Youth: Selected Short Stories*, Santa Rosa, CA, Black Sparrow Press, 1997, p. 147. All subsequent references will be to this edition; page numbers will be indicated in the text after “HSH.”

6. In John Fante's correspondence with his mother, the writer very often refers to food and maternal concerns about his way of living and eating. In a letter dated January 24, 1935,

Interestingly, the lexeme *mother* appears three times in the incipit as if to indicate a sort of emotional crescendo around the connection between her figure and the domestic setting: a) the mother laying the table b) the mother's love expressed through her cooking; c) the mother's love as the point of arrival of the return journey to his home. Besides this is the fact that within the first paragraph the narrator repeats the phrase *the love of my mother* no less than twice, thus throwing into sharp relief her emotional and moral importance. It is interesting to observe how, in his evocation of the family sitting at the table, he mentions his brothers and sisters but not his father, a role which he himself – "the big brother" – seems to perform, at least this is the impression we are given by the family's admiration towards him. However, this is not exactly how things are, since his father enters the scene immediately after. In this case, the association is not so much with food or with the laid table, as with wine of which the father is a big drinker. Indeed, the son identifies himself with his father in that he also cannot resist the temptations and pleasures of wine. In his daydreaming, the narrator imagines himself drinking a lot of wine while the family celebrate him: "I shall pass my glass to my father, and I will say: 'More of that wine, Pa', and he will smile and pour the red stuff with a sweet taste into my glass, and I will say: 'Atta boy!' and I will swallow it slowly and deeply, feeling it warm my belly, tingling my heart, singing a song to my ears" ("HSH", p. 147). Wine is one of the most recurrent paradigms in Fante's works. He uses it not only to represent the state of transgression possible through drunkenness, but also – in a positive sense – companionship

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Fante clearly expresses his aversion to the food he is forced to eat in Los Angeles: "It might be that there is something wrong with me. I mean, my physical condition. I am getting to be awful fat and the things I eat are something awful. I eat lots of meat and things like that for a couple of weeks and then all of a sudden I change over and do nothing the whole day through except guzzle milk by the bucketful. The trouble may be that I am not getting food the way you fix it. I am getting fat – sure! But not on the right kind of food. *I mean that I wish you were cooking for me*" (John Fante, *Selected Letters 1932-1981*, Seamus Cooney [ed.], Santa Rosa, CA, Black Sparrow Press, 1991, p. 92, my italics).

and the confluence of thoughts and identities. In this sense, appropriately, after placing a particular emphasis on his mother's role, the narrator dramatizes the moment of communion with his father through wine, as part of a ritual which recalls the rural (and therefore archaic) culture from which the family come – a world in which sharing wine was a fundamental law of hospitality, part of a ritual which entailed the acceptance of values and the nuclear family. It may also be recalled that Dante, in *Purgatory* (Canto XXV) connects wine with the heat of the sun, and thus, with the sacred values of life as a conjunction between body and soul: “E perché meno ammiri la parola, / guarda il calor del sol che si fa vino, / giunto a l'omor che de la vita cola” (vv. 76-78).<sup>7</sup>

In John Fante, wine is also connected with blood and, consequently, with the inextricable bond between father and son which is a form of complicity whereby common passions would seem to establish something more than a bond – the son is simply the father as a young man. What emerges is an absolute continuity which, precisely, is the same as that which in “Altar Boy”, with reference to the father, the first-person narrator hyperbolically calls “swell red stuff.”<sup>8</sup> As a result, it is no accident that in the following scene the ritual of the meal is evidenced in terms of the interlinking destinies of father and son:

[...] my mother will smile with the *happiness* that only my mother knows, and my father will smile a little too, for he will be looking at his own flesh and blood, and I will get a throb in my chest, and I will avoid my father's eyes, for they will not be able to conceal their *happiness*.

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7. Dante Alighieri, *La Divina Commedia: Purgatorio*, Commento e a cura di Anna Maria Chiavacci Leonardi, Milano, Mondadori, 2005, p. 745.

8. It is not without significance that in his first story, “Altar Boy”, the narrator reports how the wine used during the ritual of Sunday Mass is worth nothing compared to the wine his father keeps in his cellar: “The wine was not real wine at all. My father has swell red stuff in his cellar, but this was blackish-red grape juice, kind of bitter, and just as thick as ink. The guys used to swipe a mouthful every once in a while and pretend they were stewed, but I did not because it did not taste so good, and my father says you can down a whole barrel of it without it fazing you” (“Altar Boy”, in *The Wine of Youth*, cit., p. 40).

That will make me feel very tenderly jubilant, but I will not show it in my face, but my eyes, looking down at the yellow spaghetti, will not be able to hide it, and my father will catch the twinkle there, but he will look away in a flash, for it will make him as bashful as a boy, and I bet he will do some retrospecting, and think about me in the years of my boyhood, and he will see every minute and second of my twenty-one years in the fleeting glance of my eyes, and I will think exactly the same thoughts, for we are of the same flesh and bone, and the stuff of my brain and spine is the stuff of his, and so we will think the same things together, and each will know that the other is thinking the same things ("HSH", pp. 147-148, my italics).

It seems obvious that the happiness the narrator feels about returning home is associated with the memories of his childhood when his parents gave a meaning to his life and represented the beginning and the end of the world and their way of life and its cultural traditions. The protagonist not only imagines his return home in euphoric terms but also fantasises about what pertains to the intimate sphere of his emotions: once home, instead of living in the present, the whole family will cast back nostalgically their minds to "the years of my boyhood" and thus establish a gap between the present – which concerns the twenty-one-year-old son who has become a writer – and the past years of his childhood towards which they attempt to establish a connection that signifies the continuity of the family as the fundamental value of their lives.

In the extraordinarily evocative intensity of the opening, the attention of the narrative voice is concentrated almost exclusively on the looks and eyes of his family which reveal the emotions they are unable to express verbally because of their cultural limitations. Therefore, talking about his father, the protagonist states that "he will see every minute and second of my twenty-one years in the fleeting glance of my eyes" – everything is transformed into an epiphany, everything becomes a revelation of his happiness.

2. Intense and allusive, "Home Sweet Home" represents *in nuce* one of the main themes that pervade John Fante's novels: the

relationship between father and son. As already mentioned, Jimmy's life and his father's life seem to be interwoven in a temporal shift that places Jimmy in the future, when he will be the same age as his father, (which at the moment of narration is fifty-two) and his father in the past, when he was the same age as his son is now: "I am younger than my father; my hopes scream to the skies. His have dwindled to despair. I know my father sees me at fifty-two, and I at fifty-two am my father" ("HSH", p. 153). Although his father's job is never explicitly mentioned, there are various allusions to Svevo Bandini's job as a bricklayer in *Wait Until Spring, Bandini* (1938). The story develops the bond between father and son by evidencing their union and conflict, their convergences and divergences:

My father will keep on filling my wine glass, and together we will drink, and we shall always feel that kindredness which is a gorge neither of us can leap.

I will look at my father's hands.

I will say: "Are you working?"

He will answer: "No, I'm not working". "No work here, eh?"

"No, no work here".

"Any work in Sacramento?"

"No, no work in Sacramento".

I will be silent then, for I will know I have touched a painful spot, and he will not have sympathy. He will fight it away.

I will speak about myself. I will make my father envious. He knows that I, too, have the seeds of greatness in me, but my father believes they will be choked up by the treachery which is the heritage of both father and son ("HSH", pp. 152-153).

This passage is not only important for its explicit reference to his father's job – in the long Colorado winters he was forced to stay home from work due to the extreme cold – but also for the way in which the narrator behaves vis-à-vis his father, whose thoughts he is capable of interpreting. Among these thoughts, the most dominant concerns disloyalty, or infidelity – "the treachery which is the heritage of both father and son." On the one hand, infidelity is towards others (above all his wife who he continually betrays with

other women) and on the other, it is towards himself and his future plans. The future he envisages for his son Jimmy, therefore, is a betrayal of his ideals and his artistic vocation. It seems obvious to the father that even if his son has a brilliant literary career awaiting him, he will never be able to make "the seeds of greatness" grow – an expression the narrator repeats twice on the same page. Moreover, his admiration for his father also concerns his work as a bricklayer which, in spite of moments of unemployment, is invested with a very positive value by Fante who gives it even more importance in his main works. In fact, in *Wait Until Spring, Bandini*, the bricklayer's work is praised since the home becomes the family's refuge from a religious point of view and the space par excellence in which they can affirm their identity. Thus, in the novel, Svevo Bandini's occupation as a bricklayer is the continuation of that of his father, Arturo Bandini:

He was a bricklayer, and to him there was not a more sacred calling upon the face of the earth. You could be a king; you could be a conqueror, but no matter what you were you had to have a house; and if you had any sense at all it would be a brickhouse; and, of course, built by a union man, on the union scale. That was important.<sup>9</sup>

The bricklayer's job is contrasted with the narrator's only on the surface. What clearly emerges is the idea that there is a common element in the two activities: the bricklayer patiently puts together brick after brick to build walls which then become the space for people to live in together and to follow their individual destinies. Similarly, the narrator puts words together with the cement of his creativity on pages that are like walls and invents stories about complex human relationships within a topology of houses and streets which, instead of being of brick and mortar, are the products of literary creation. Ultimately, the bricklayer's activity becomes,

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9. John Fante, *Wait Until Spring, Bandini*, Santa Rosa, CA, Black Sparrow Press, 1997, p. 74.

by a paradoxical inversion, the metaphor for the art of the novel, which suggests in its various versions (Svevo Bandini, Nick Molise<sup>10</sup>, ecc.) the father's metaphorical embodiment of his son's literary activity.

From this point of view, we cannot fail to notice how "Home Sweet Home" signals the first representation of the relationship between father and son according to a genealogical typology of perfect continuity – the continuity, that is, between the father who is a bricklayer and the son who is a writer:

*I will look at my father over the rim of my wine glass. I will see myself. I will know again the streak of cruelty and treachery within me by looking at my father. I will look at the hands of my father, and a turning and a grinding will go on within me, for my father still has the seeds of greatness in him, but they have been choked by the treachery and cruelty that I know – always too late – crouch me. My father will catch the feeling in me, and in his eyes it will come out for me to look upon, and he will see the same lurking in my eyes, and we will not have strong enough chins to glare at each other, and let those two pairs of eyes collide, and kill that lurking which lies in both our eyes ("HSH", p. 152).*

This is not just a relationship based on complicity but, more precisely, an intertwining of feelings that becomes revelatory: the protagonist receives from his father a genealogical vision of what he will become with the passage of time. This narratological aspect is not just one of the recurrent motifs of Fante's macrotext but also

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10. For the heroic and rebellious figure of Nick Molise, perhaps even more than for Svevo Bandini, being a bricklayer means being an artist, creating for eternity: "He was a flawless craftsman whose imagination and intelligence seemed centered in his marvelously strong hands [...] He had great contempt for himself, yet was proud and even conceited. Nick Molise believed that every brick he laid, every stone he carved, every sidewalk and wall and fireplace he built, every gravestone he fashioned, belonged to posterity" (John Fante, *The Brotherhood of the Grape*, Santa Rosa, CA, Black Sparrow Press, 1996, p. 18). In regard to Nick Molise and the narrative function of the profession of the bricklayer, see Teresa Fiore, "L'esperienza migratoria degli italiani negli Stati Uniti come 'architesto': muratori e scrittori nelle opere di John Fante", *Bollettino di italianistica*, n.s., 8, 2 (2011), pp. 339-358.

represents the way in which he dramatizes his own internal conflict divided as he is between two worlds.<sup>11</sup> On the one hand, the centripetal force of the family line which induces him to a condition of stasis, to the immobility of sitting around the home fire, to the return to past values and the tradition of his actual family and, going back in time, to all the members of the family originating in Torricella Peligna in Abruzzo. On the other hand, there is the libertarian, anticatholic and, above all, anti-romantic centrifugal force intent on forging an individual free and independent of others. This is the power that speaks of the American dream, of the streets of Los Angeles and the restless and stubborn pursuit of success, of the vocation he does not want to suppress and, finally, the desire to shake off the influence of a family that sometimes becomes too obsessive both on a psychological and behavioural level.

3. In the light of family dynamics it is more than obvious that "Home Sweet Home" presents a precise definition of relationships based on the continuity of a family line that stretches back to its cultural roots and its original system of values. As we have seen, the narrator insists on the fact that he and his father are, deep down, the same thing, they share the same thoughts and words and the same positive and negative behavioural traits. In the last analysis they are too similar not to be in conflict. The similarity of their ontological space and their confluence in the same psychological-behavioural area produces friction and conflict. Too similar to get on well with each other, father and son wage a war not so much of actions and words but of silent skirmishes and facial expressions that say everything about the analogies and differences of their respective worlds.

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11. In *The Brotherhood of the Grape* written during Fante's maturity, the father-son conflict is actualized in Henry's desire to achieve a social redemption which his father Nick was unable to reach through money: "I lay on my back and thought of the future. Any hopes for writing would have to be postponed. What mattered now was just staying alive. From that day forward I resolved never to be poor again. I would work hard for Coletti and the Toyo Fish Company. I would hoard every penny. I would jingle coins in my pocket and store away dollars in the bank. I would cover my body, my life, with money" (Fante, *The Brotherhood of the Grape*, cit., p. 69).

On the same level of continuity, the parallelism between father and son is echoed by that between mother and daughter. This element psychologically reinforces the closeness of the family and, at the same time, the axiological continuity which, although from a polemical position, the narrator wants to defend. In this case, the image of the mother is superimposed with that of the daughter: Jimmy, the narrator, sees in the beauty of his sister (she is never called by name, only "my sister") the beauty of his mother who he can only vaguely remember but who, in any case, he can only imagine when he thinks of his mother as a young girl when she was the same age as his sister:

*My sister*, who has spoken only a little, will primp for me. She will be seated next to my mother, and I will steal glances at her, and I will see that she is becoming more beautiful with every breath. I will be amazed again at the loveliness of her immense brown eyes, which are like those of some giant squirrel, and she will know that I am peeping surreptitiously at her, and she will be inwardly singing with happiness, and I will see that her beauty is that which drew my father to my mother when he came to America thirty years before, a conceited young Italian, conceited even as I am. My mother will be at *my sister's* side at the table, and I will study the faces of the two, and I will vow that my sister shall not have the agony which has been my mother's, and I will see *my sister* lift her chin disdainfully at the remarks of my little brother, and he will shout: "Aw, you're not so smart. You needn't show off just because Jimmy is home". *My sister's* face will turn pink-scarlet, and she will look suddenly at me, and I will be delighted by her squirrel eyes, and she will glare at my brother and say: "And what about you? What about you, playing like you like wine, just because he's home?" And my little brother will say: "Aw, keep still". And my father will say: "Hey! How many times do I have to tell you to cut out that talk?" And my brother will say: "Well, she started it." And my mother will say softly: "Let's all be nice today. Let's not have one fight" ("HSH", pp. 149-150).

By repeatedly highlighting the similarity between the mother and the daughter the narrator strategically places them next to each other

in the dining room, so that his gaze constantly finds confirmation in the female line of the family: the enormous squirrel-like hazel brown eyes have something in them that makes Jimmy happy and he cannot help making only one conclusion: "I will see that her beauty is that which drew my father to my mother when he came to America thirty years before" – in part, his sister's beauty makes him think of his mother's beauty, that is, thirty years earlier when he was not yet born. In other words, he sees in his sister what his mother used to be like, which he could not see himself for chronological reasons. Obviously, his convictions are based on interpretative certainties, which, however, are not verifiable and are part of his internal world as a response to what is visible to him – he just observes and makes his own conclusions.

In this analysis of the relationship between mother and daughter, Jimmy – albeit indirectly – blames his father for his mother's sad and difficult life. Therefore, the difference between the mother and daughter, who are equally beautiful, must be the different destiny that awaits the girl whose eyes are like a squirrel's – which is like saying she has a tender expression but is also terrified by the thought of a future marked by sacrifice, evening rows, whining children and a husband more bent on getting drunk than being tender with his wife.

The narrator, still using the future tense, declares all this in a peremptory tone that indicates a commitment and a moral tension: "I will vow that my sister shall not have the agony which has been my mother's."<sup>12</sup> In the passage quoted previously, when Jimmy underlines his enormous pleasure when looking into his sister's

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12. In Fante's novels and short stories, the relationship of the protagonist's parents is never a happy love relationship. Thus in *The Brotherhood of the Grape* the reader is informed of the permanent mother-father conflict that reigns in the Molise family: "Nicholas and Maria Molise had been married for fifty-one years, and though it had been a wretched relationship from the beginning, held together by the relentless Catholicism of my mother who punished her husband with exasperating tolerance of his selfishness and contempt, it now seemed utter madness for these old people to leave each other at such a late time in their lives, for my mother was seventy-four and my father two years older" (Fante, *The Brotherhood of the Grape*, p. 1).

squirrel-like eyes, he also implies that he feels a complete identification with her behavioural and psychological condition. This, in effect, marks the moment in which he senses a difference with respect to the rest of the family. In fact, throughout the whole story Jimmy's sister is always the one who is most glorified. Somehow, she becomes his ideal model of a woman in which Italian features are to be seen at their best.<sup>13</sup>

This binary opposition between male and female runs through the whole story to reveal the limitations of a world – as represented by Jimmy's father – which, on closer inspection, embodies a reactionary conception with regard to women's rights. From this point of view, the text signals a notable difference in that in his description of what it means for him to return home to his parents, the narrative voice betrays a profound melancholy at the thought of the sufferings of his mother, not only for the fact that her husband has been unfaithful and impetuous, but also because of the poverty that reigns in their house and which fills his sister with shame since she cannot bring her boyfriend home to meet her parents:

“I have a new boy friend. Gee, he's keen!”

And then the whole family will attack her.

My mother: “You are too young for boy friends.”

My father: “I'll kill that bum if he hangs around here.”

My brother: “Aw, he's no good.”

How my sister will defend her new boy friend! Her face will change to pink, her arms will grow hard, and her white teeth will bite the words. She will threaten to run away and never

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13. In John Fante's writings, the female element consists of women of the outside world (mostly American or Hispanic women) and women of the domestic universe. In this sense, in *Wait Until Spring, Bandini*, though Maria, the protagonist's mother, was born in America, Fante depicts her as a totally Italian woman: “She had but to turn her hand and examine the palm, calloused from a washboard, to realize that she was not, after all, an American woman. Nothing about her, neither her complexion, nor her hands, nor her feet; neither the food she ate nor the teeth that chewed it – nothing about her, nothing, gave her kinship with ‘the American women’” (*Wait Until Spring, Bandini*, cit., pp. 74-75).

return. She will seize her napkin, twisting it in her fingers. She will fire denunciations at each reviler, and I will understand that she is right, and that my people are unfair and wrong.

I will say: "Why don't you bring him here to meet your father and mother? Maybe that would help".

And she will stare at the four bare walls, at the stiff furniture, the curtainless windows, the carpetless floors gone gray with age and with the cracks between boards pressed smooth with dirt.

I will say nothing. No one will speak, but around the table will be four people who feel *the great pain of poverty*, and my father, whose hopes are despairs, will be hurt most painfully ("HSH", p. 155, my italics).

In the unfolding of events, the moment of happiness is countered by unhappiness as a result of a life of poverty.<sup>14</sup> Thus, the return home does not only mean embracing his mother and enjoying all the good Italian food spread on the table, but also seeing the other side of the happiness his journey promises. Significantly, it is through the story of his sister – who is the only one he completely admires – that the difficult condition of the family is dramatized. Underlying the delicacies on the table, we discover the extreme state of ruin of the house, with its filthy and dilapidated walls, its almost useless furniture and worn and dirty floor. This is the other side of the happiness that does not allow anyone to be welcomed, not even his sister's boyfriend. And in all this, Jimmy sides with his sister whilst his parents prefer her to remain enclosed within those mouldy and bare walls. As is clear from the quotation, his sister communicates through her facial expressions a feeling of despair, despite her

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14. As Donald Weber writes: "Fante's early fiction offers a rich testament to how the often disabling powers of shame and self-hatred can somehow inspire the literary imagination. Fante risked the judgment of both the old world fathers and the new world at large in the act of telling the truth" (Donald Weber, "'Oh God, These Italians!': Shame and Self-Hatred in the Early Fiction of John Fante", in *John Fante: A Critical Gathering*, Stephen Cooper and David Fine [eds.], Madison and Teaneck, Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1999, p. 66).

undeniable beauty: the surrounding space becomes, in a sense, the objective correlative of her internal anguish.

What emerges is clearly a clash between two different generations. For there is no way the parents' generation can understand Jimmy and his sister. In fact, just as Jimmy has gone away from home to make his dreams come true, his sister will also threaten to leave the house so that her dream of love can also be secured. This act of rebellion shows her to be very different from her mother who sides with her husband to defend the backward and antifeminist view of women's role in society. But the society in which Jimmy and his sister live is not that of the Italians from Abruzzo: unlike their parents, they are totally American, and, thus, they want to behave exactly like American boys and girls. Yet in spite of their attempts to distance themselves from their parents, Jimmy and his sister – like many of Fante's characters – experience the conflict of those who live between two substantially different worlds and are forced to deal with contrasting behavioural codes. What Catherine J. Kordich notes about Arturo Bandini in *Ask the Dust* is equally applicable to Jimmy: "This mixing of referential codes is indicative of his border consciousness and reveals Arturo's search for self and cultural definition as he operates within the border matrix."<sup>15</sup> For precisely these reasons, the initial idyll of "Home Sweet Home" only seems to be the projection of a narrator who wants to find happiness in his encounter with his family after his first literary success. In reality these worlds are poles apart and conflict is an inevitable consequence of change.

4. If we take into consideration the religious aspect of "Home Sweet Home", and the values of Catholicism in John Fante's

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15. Catherine J. Kordich, "John Fante's *Ask the Dust*: A Border Reading", *The Journal of the Society for the Study of Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States*, 20, 4 (Winter 1995), p. 26. As Kordich writes: "In John Fante's 1939 novel *Ask the Dust*, protagonist Arturo Bandini struggles with the shifting agenda of a young man simultaneously reviling and reveling in his Italian-American upbringing and asserting himself as a participant in the California success ideal. Arturo does not seek out the embrace of Southern California's Italian community" (p. 17).

universe, it may be useful to consider the extent to which his works often dramatize a close confrontation with the cultural origins of his formation. This attitude is evident from his first novel *The Road to Los Angeles*, in which the protagonist strives to define his artistic vocation by acknowledging the difficulties he has had to face and how he is forced back to the provincial immobility from where he came.<sup>16</sup> In the case of "Home Sweet Home", Catholicism represents an element of transgression that concerns the narrator more than his father since Jimmy feels, as we have seen, that he is nothing less than his literary projection. To be diegetically exact, the short story does not underline the father's religious rebellion simply because the rejection of religion is taken for granted. Rather the theme concerns the son who has come home to his family and whose behaviour seems to reflect a mentality that is not coextensive with that of his family: the narrator, speaking in the future tense, gives ample space to his Californian experiences in this way distancing himself from his family's culture as well as from Catholicism which his mother fervently safeguards:

My mother will say: "Please. Let's all be happy. Let's all hope for the best, and not quarrel".

I will say: "I'm not quarreling, Ma".

My sister will say: "I read your story in the magazine. I knew you'd write against the Church".

I will say: "Don't be dumb. That wasn't against the Church".

This will not interest my father, for he does not care what I write, nor does he read it. I will drink wine now, for I must prepare myself for the question which my mother will now ask.

She will say: "Do you go to Mass every Sunday, my Jimmy?"

I will answer: "Sometimes, Ma. Sometimes". I will be lying.

She will ask: "Do you still read books against God?"

I will say, lying again: "Not any more, Ma" ("HSH", p. 153).

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16. As Kordich observes: "*The Road to Los Angeles* is a fascinating novel, for itself and as an artifact of Fante's early work. The novel reveals a writer at a creative crossroads. His published stories up to that time were, in the main, sweet, if forgivingly sardonic, chronicles of Italian American life in a small Colorado town" (Kordich, *John Fante: His Novels and Novellas*, New York, Twayne Publishers, 2000, p. 69).

Apparently, the narrator finds himself alone, surrounded by almost every member of the family – with the exception, of course, of his father. Above all his mother and sister, expressing their total respect and adhesion to the Catholic church and its rites, distance themselves from his narrative productions, especially since his stories are “against the Church”, as his sister zealously puts it. On an autobiographical level, we cannot help but think of Fante’s early works, such as “Altar Boy.”<sup>17</sup> However, apart from the facts of Fante’s life, what must be underlined is the distinction between the father and the mother and their different attitudes not only with regard to the Catholic way of life, but also to his literary success: “This will not interest my father, for he does not care what I write, nor does he read it.”

These words show his father to be a complete rebel and iconoclast. Consequently, the man is not only against the Catholic church and literature: he is totally disinterested, if not full of disdain, for all that does not concern the selfishness of his own powerful and determined personality. The mother, on the other hand, looks outwardly. Thus, when she discovers that her son reads books that allude to the antichrist of the New Testament, almost like Oliver Cromwell’s puritans, she sees such literature as the road to her son’s damnation, without realising that it is a philosophical work by Nietzsche. The fact remains that the mere title of the book, *The Antichrist*, elicits her horror and tears:

And I will look at the face of my mother, and I will remember a night when we lived in the South, and I came home, and I saw my mother in tears, and sick unto death, and the doctor was called, and he saved my mother, and he came out of the room wherein my mother lay, and he held a book in his hand, and he handed it to me, and he said: “This is the cause. If you must read such stuff as this,

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17. See Fred L. Gardaphé, “Left Out: Three Italian American Writers of the 1930s”, in *Radical Revisions. Rereading 1930s Culture*, ed. Bill Mullen and Sherry Lee Lyndon, Urbana and Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 1996: “One impediment that continually keeps Fante’s protagonists from identifying completely with mainstream American culture is their strong connection to Italian Catholicism” (p. 68).

do it where your mother can't see you". When I looked at the book, I saw that it was the *The Anti-Christ*. Now I will be home soon, and my mother will ask if I read books against God, and I will answer that I do not.

My sister will say: "Why do you write about your family all the time?" ("HSH", p. 153).

It is not the book itself which is the problem, for the mother ignores its contents, but only its title which seems to proclaim an allegiance with evil forces. Her exaggerated reaction is linked to the fact that, from a spiritual point of view, she feels she has lost her son. But the scene occurs in the past: it is a flashback in the memory of a person who wishes his mother would no longer think about the front cover of the book by Nietzsche. Yet, the narrator-protagonist – even though he knows that this is a closed chapter in his life – also knows that his mother will want to question him about his Catholic faith: Jimmy knows he will be forced to lie and declare to his mother that his readings have nothing to do with an anticatholic world.

Even the strong alliance with his sister weakens with regard to this topic. For like her mother, she will also ask him about his faith. Not only, but the girl, introducing an element of unease in the family environment, wonders why his stories are always centred around his own family. This reference, naturally, calls into question Catholicism laying bare, through its autobiographical representation, its ridiculous and humorous aspects, besides those that are blatantly antireligious and sacrilegious. To put it briefly, as the protagonist gradually expands on the phases of his return home, he realises that the happiness that drove him towards the domestic hearth becomes the opposite; during his narration of the future moment everything becomes transformed for Jimmy, even his unconditional attachment to his mother, even the enormous affection he has for his sister and finally, even the pleasure of sharing a delicious meal and drinking lots of wine with his father.

Happiness is substituted by a form of resignation that verges on sadness: as he imagines himself in the future being welcomed by his family, his initial euphoria becomes sadness and everything a wretched life prevents his family from doing. It is not the language

of happiness that will dictate his condition but that of poverty and the consequent sense of frustration. The future narration is superimposed by another future – the hope that sooner or later better times will come for everybody. At a logical-temporal level this will be the future in the future imagined by Jimmy's father:

Maybe, as he sometimes does, he will say: "Ah, well, better days are coming". But that, I will remember from Nietzsche, is hope – the first sign of defeat. My father will tremblingly, avidly drain his glass, fill it, and drain it again. His hand will go out to my sister, and he will chuck her under the chin" ("HSH", p. 155).

The father's gesture of affection towards his daughter reflects the desire of a father not to be rough and insensitive: the scene highlights a possible reconciliation after the row between the youngest child, Tony, and his daughter. But this tender gesture is not enough to mitigate the harshness of their poverty. The Nietzsche quotation shows the degree of the narrator's scepticism as he now feels the world of the Italians transplanted in America to be drawing to an end. The father becomes a figure on the brink of extinction: the future now belongs to the Italians who, after years of hard work from one generation to the next, will at last have become completely American, with no nostalgia or regret for their home country.

In this sense, the final scene of "Home Sweet Home" must be interpreted as a re-affirmation of this dynamics. Besides, the very fact that the future tense is constantly and coherently used throughout the story gives a sense of movement which very often indicates a world of insecurity and uncertainty. These traits are obviously characteristic of youth, given that Jimmy explicitly refers to his age as being twenty-one.

The return home, that is, the choice to rediscover a firm anchor point, only encourages the protagonist all the more to escape: immobility does not suit his temperament and, in the end, after so many words about domestic happiness, there is only the desire to leave the little town of Colorado where he was born and to get away from the small conservative world that only suffocates his imagination:

I will go to the front yard, light a cigarette, lie on my back on the lawn, and grow restless. The stars will begin to twinkle, and I will think of a favorite line in *The Mysterious Universe*: "And the total number of stars in the universe is probably something like the total number of grains of sand on all the seashores of the world". I will linger with the words, and wish that I could have written such a line. I will think about my girl Claudia, who is far away, and I will see her in a red dress, and I will think about kissing her. She will come between me and the stars, and the whole sky will be filled with her.

I will get up on my feet and flip my cigarette, and wish I were with her, and not in this goddamned, godforsaken, one-horse town ("HSH", pp. 156-157).<sup>18</sup>

From a narratological point of view, the story's construction in the future tense implies a particular tone: the narrative voice imagines the scenes of his return one after the other, from the moment he arrives in the house until the moment he leaves. Both moments are implicit in the development of the narrative which underlines, especially in the final scene, the impossibility of living within the four walls of a domestic environment and a socio-cultural context which the protagonist feels he does not belong to. The female figures of the family (the mother and sister) are replaced by the erotic vision of another woman: "I will think about Claudia, who is far away." The remoteness of Claudia triggers an alternative movement to the ghostly image of his return home; the girl evoked in the final scene of "Home Sweet Home" calls into question

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18. It is not unlikely that John Fante read Sir James Hopwood Jeans's *The Mysterious Universe* (1930) in the Boulder library. As can be understood from the story, the narrator refers only to its title thus completely ignoring the author's name. Here it may be interesting to underline that in the Italian translation the source is completely misunderstood, to the point of considering the quotation a verse of a poem, with an obvious reduction of the semantic impact of the quoted text: "Le stelle cominceranno a brillare e mi verrà in mente il verso preferito di *L'universo misterioso*: 'È il numero totale delle stelle dell'universo è probabilmente come qualcosa come il numero totale di granelli di sabbia di tutte le spiagge del mondo'. Indugèrò su queste parole desiderando di aver scritto un verso simile" (John Fante, "Casa, dolce casa", in *Dago Red*, tradotto da Francesco Durante, Torino, Einaudi, 2006, p. 202). In this case the lexeme *line*, as indicated by OED, means "a particularly noteworthy written or spoken sentence."

another, more colourful, reality, above all made up of different desires: "I will see her in a red dress, and I will think about kissing her. She will come between me and the stars, and the whole sky will be filled with her." The erotic desire that emerges conceals a centrifugal movement of great significance which culminates in the revelation of all things, and thus also in a lowering of the levels of emotions and expectations regarding the family context.

It is particularly significant that, in the final segment, the story quotes Sir James Jeans's *The Mysterious Universe* (1930), which popularised Einstein's theory of relativity starting from Plato's *Republic*. The vision of an endless universe, populated by millions and millions of stars makes the protagonist feel the insignificance of the world of his upbringing and family affections as well as the relativity of his own literary success. Before the immensity the sky and the mysteries of the cosmos, Jimmy also senses the risk of falling into the abyss of nothingness and meaninglessness. For this reason, in a final erotic outburst of self-exaltation, he imagines the sky described in *The Mysterious Universe* as dominated by the presence of Claudia who is apparently the only woman capable of giving a meaning to his life.

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