

The Fatal Pursuit of Masculinity: The Gendered Struggles Behind Cesare Pavese's Suicide

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Introduction

It would be a simple task to cast labels upon Cesare Pavese: homosexual, misogynist, mentally ill, etc. Indeed, in the context of this course, Pavese appeared to me an evidently closeted gay man; he never had a successful relationship with women, was oddly submissive romantically, and in fact seemed to dislike women. This assumption, however, reduces the fascinating complexities of Pavese's own gender identity, romantic and sexual identities, and literary identity. Yes, by comparing Pavese's obsessions with dominant women in real life with the way he depicts unrequited love and suicide in his works of literature, one recognizes a phenomenon where Pavese queers his perception of himself through his writing: through poetry, novellas, and short stories, Pavese implements both female and male narrators to express how his despairs with relationships are tied to his internal struggles with gender – and more specifically, his lack of masculinity. The following paper will be divided into four main sections: his early relationships with women, the impacts of his three major relationships, his troubles with masculinity, and the intertwinement of gender roles and suicide in his literature. By first performing a biographical analysis of Pavese's relationship to women, I illustrate how he used writing to express his intertwining sufferings of rejection, emasculation, and depression.¹

Early life and relationships with women

Many familiar with Pavese's work agree that by the end of his life, he hated women.² In examining his diary entries, it is evident that Pavese harbored a disdain toward women, going so far as to exclaim that “women are the enemy race, like the Germans” (September 9, 1946).³ Despite his countless marks of misogyny, though, it would be presumptuous to summarize

¹ Though I will examine Pavese's diaries through the lens of gender issues, his diaries were about far more than women and relationships and focused largely on his contemplations on life and art.

² Nash, Peter Adam. Pavese: Love and the Abyss. 1 Mar. 2013, talentedreader.blogspot.com/2013/03/pavese-love-and-abyss.html.

³ Pavese, Cesare. *This Business of Living: Diaries 1935-1950*. Taylor and Francis, 2017.

Pavese's relationship with women with the word "hated." It was, instead, a complex dynamic of obsession, betrayal, and disgust; to better grasp Pavese's feelings toward women, one must examine his relationships since youth.

Pavese was born on September 9, 1908 in Santo Stefano Belbo to Eugenio Pavese and Consolina Fiorentina Mesturini. His father died when he was only six, and the loss compounded the household's heavy atmosphere. His mother, having already lost three children before Pavese and his sister, led a life characterized by solemnity. She forbade talk over meals and forced the children to finish everything she served. Consolina was a mother who loved by working hard, not by expressing affection. In *An Absurd Vice: A Biography of Cesare Pavese*, biographer Davide Lajolo described her method of raising children as "more like that of a harsh and dry father than that of a solicitous mother in that it made them feel more the weight of her authority than the warmth of tenderness."⁴ Consequently, Pavese was a boy starved of emotional nurturance, and in these years he began a lifestyle of loneliness.

The death of his father and his unaffectionate mother prevented Pavese from developing healthy social skills with women. He never left home, moving from living with his mother to his sister. Intriguingly, one finds a striking similarity between the lives of Pavese and Valentino from Natalia Ginzburg's *Valentino*. Yes, each had one sister, a distant mother, and a dead father. They would of course differentiate in their professional success, but it is difficult to overlook the similar gender dynamics in which they grew up around and the similar sort of women they would go on to be attracted to. Indeed, it is under these circumstances that Pavese and Valentino developed an attraction to strong, masculine women. In a passage from a presumably

⁴ Smith, Lawrence G. "Family and Friends." *Cesare Pavese and America: Life, Love, and Literature*, University of Massachusetts Press, 2008, pp. 36. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt5vk6h3.7>.

autobiographical short story that Pavese wrote in 1942 but never finished, he elaborates on how his family impacted his character:

My father died when I was six years old and I reached twenty without knowing how a man should behave at home ... My mother brought me up severely as would a man and as a result there were no kisses between us or superfluous words and I had no idea what a family might be like. So long as I was weak and depended on her I was mostly afraid of her.⁵

Pavese harbors an evident insecurity of not knowing “how a man should behave.” It appears that this childhood disposition birthed his gravitation toward independent women with whom he would not have to exude masculinity. Yes, Pavese would go on to reject those who loved him as well as maternal or submissive women; he instead sought assertive women who were often perverse and unfaithful.⁶ Regardless, even without speculating through Freudian psychology, it is clear that Pavese’s cold relationship with his mother initiated a future of difficulties with the opposite sex, in which he struggled with communication.

Pavese would only face rejection from women, starting from youth. Lajolo recalls the story of Pavese’s first noted childhood crush, Olga.⁷ Pavese often attempted to converse with Olga but felt too shy, so he watched her from afar. One day, when he walked past a boat with the name “Olga” on it, he fainted. Pavese’s intimidation of women was evidently more than a slight fear — it was a deep, physical terror that possessed him. Another incident occurred when he was 17; this time, Pavese managed to ask a singer at a cabaret out. They agreed to meet at six, and Pavese arrived punctually. He stood outside the club and waited for an hour, then five more hours — and in the freezing rain. As one may assume, it was without success, and he only made himself an ill fool; he returned at midnight humiliated and depressed, and a fever that would lead

⁵ Smith, Lawrence G. “Family and Friends.” *Cesare Pavese and America: Life, Love, and Literature*, University of Massachusetts Press, 2008, pp. 37. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt5vk6h3.7>.

⁶ David, Lester. “4 Cesare Pavese”. *THE “I” OF THE STORM*, Warsaw, Poland: De Gruyter Open Poland, 2014, pp. 35. <https://doi.org/10.2478/9783110374827.4>

⁷ Lester, David. “Understanding Suicide through Studies of Diaries: The Case of Cesare Pavese.” *Archives of Suicide Research*, vol. 10, no. 3, July 2006, pp. 297. EBSCOhost, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13811110600583750>.

to pleurisy consumed his body for three months. Pavese would later learn that the woman left via the back door with another partner. There would, of course, be many future infatuations full of anticipation and subsequent dejection to come.

Pavese's disdain for submissive women led to an endless pursuit of independent women, but this does not dismiss his patriarchal desire of ownership. In a diary entry about his choice of partners, Pavese wrote, "You are asking to be a loser ... Might it be true you only fall in love with women who are very popular ... and what you like about them is that everybody desires them and you suffer because you want to be the only one to possess them."⁸ The entry elucidates an obsession with masculinity: of glory and possession, yet he fails to achieve either aspect. Regardless, Pavese's harsh comments about his own desire highlight how his suffering is often directed toward the self, not the woman. He repeats "you," blaming himself over and over again for being a "loser" because of "what you like about them." This self-hatred derived from simultaneous attraction to masculinity and failure at achieving masculinity only intensifies as Pavese nears his death.

Three major romantic relationships

Pavese's three major romantic affiliations were pivotal in shaping his distrust toward women. Lajolo describes Pavese's first love as "the woman with the hoarse voice," whom scholars have identified as Tina Pizzardo. Pizzardo was not particularly beautiful, but she was strong, self-assured, and skilled in sports. She was pursuing a career in mathematics — opposite to Pavese's choice of English literature. She embodied the masculine qualities that Pavese struggled to find in himself; her cool demeanor stood in contrast to his anxious insecurities. As

⁸ Parks, Tim. "Stop It and Act." *London Review of Books*, 11 Feb. 2010, www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v32/n03/tim-parks/stop-it-and-act.

such, with this woman Pavese experienced “the fullness of his feelings”⁹ where he felt he had a companion and protector.

It was for Pizzardo that Pavese was arrested and sent to exile in 1935. He harbored an anti-fascist letter meant for her in his home and did not reveal that it was not a letter for him — an act of chivalry or weakness, depending on how one looks at it. Regardless, he went into exile receiving nothing but a few postcards from Tina, and upon his release, he discovered she left him for another man. The loss of “the woman with the hoarse voice” marks a major turning point in Pavese’s emotional and creative work; after that betrayal, Pavese would present nearly every woman in his short stories and novels as an embodiment of indifference and infidelity.¹⁰

The second major rejection Pavese faced was with the Italian intellectual Fernanda Pivano. Pavese met her in 1940, where he mentored and taught her English, and he would be in love with her for five years. He read her poems and novels, slipping her contraband copies of Edgar Lee Masters’s “Spoon River Anthology” and Whitman’s “Leaves of Grass.”¹¹ He asked her to marry him, but she did not reply, and eventually she married another man. Notably, during all five years, Pavese *never even kissed her*.¹²

Finally, in 1949 he met Constance Dowling. A seeming combination of all the aforementioned women, Dowling was a confident flirt who left Pavese hanging after she said she would marry him. Lester writes that, “as soon as he met her, he began to fear her desertion.”¹³

⁹ "Cesare Pavese - Davide Lajolo (essay date 1960)." Poetry Criticism, edited by Jane Kelly Kosek, Christine Slovey, Vol. 13. Gale Cengage, 1995, <<https://www.enotes.com/topics/cesare-pavese/criticism/pavese-cesare/criticism/davide-lajolo-essay-date-1960>>

¹⁰ "Cesare Pavese - Davide Lajolo (essay date 1960)." Poetry Criticism, edited by Jane Kelly Kosek, Christine Slovey.

¹¹ McInerney, Jay. "Grazie, Fernanda." The New Yorker, 16 July 1995, www.newyorker.com/magazine/1995/07/24/grazie-fernanda-2.

¹² Lester, David. "Understanding Suicide through Studies of Diaries: The Case of Cesare Pavese," pg. 298

¹³ Lester, David. "Understanding Suicide through Studies of Diaries: The Case of Cesare Pavese," pg. 298

Yes, it was following Dowling's departure to America and her subsequent silence that Pavese would commit suicide. After Dowling left, Pavese wrote, "In my life I am more hopeless, more lost than then. What have I accomplished? Nothing."¹⁴ Without a woman to cling to, Pavese reduced himself to "nothing." He would never recover from this affair, swallowing a mouthful of sleeping pills in a hotel room in Turin. "Non scriverò più": "I will not write anymore," he concluded his diary.¹⁵

Potential troubles with gender and sexuality

Unlike Valentino, there is no definite proof of homosexual behavior from Pavese. However, one must raise the question of whether a man truly loves women if he desires only the ones who will never fully love him back. The notion of "straight" vs. "homosexual" becomes blurred, as Pavese, a passive man, is attracted to dominant, masculine women. Furthermore, the aspect of sexual performance cannot be ignored. Pavese wrote, "... a man who ejaculates too soon had better never been born. It is a failing that makes suicide worth while" (September 27, 1937),¹⁶ yet it is known that he likely ejaculated prematurely and rarely satisfied his lover.¹⁷ Pavese has an obsession with the perfect male figure that should "possess" and please the lover, yet he is the opposite.

Indeed, Pavese's style of pursuit can be described as patient, always waiting for the lover to make the move. In commenting on his fiction, Pavese wrote, "My stories are tales by an onlooker who watches things greater than him-self take place" (February 21, 1942).¹⁸ Much like Ginia from *The Beautiful Summer* and Caterina from *Valentino*, Pavese was an observer, a

¹⁴ David, Lester. "4 Cesare Pavese". *THE "I" OF THE STORM*, pp. 35

¹⁵ Pavese, Cesare. *This Business of Living: Diaries 1935-1950*.

¹⁶ Pavese, Cesare. *This Business of Living: Diaries 1935-1950*.

¹⁷ Lester, David. "Understanding Suicide through Studies of Diaries: The Case of Cesare Pavese," pg. 297

¹⁸ Pavese, Cesare. *This Business of Living: Diaries 1935-1950*.

non-actor. His protagonists appear to mirror his own personality.¹⁹ Fascinatingly, Pavese seemed to recover self-esteem through exercising writerly control,²⁰ but he also seemed to grow more depressed upon literary success. He committed suicide soon after he won the Strega Prize for *The Beautiful Summer*. This was likely because “no matter how much he wrote or how enthusiastically it was received, he would compare himself with those who were married and had children and consider himself a failure.”²¹ There thus exists a web of complex interrelationships between Pavese’s literature, depression, and frustrations with gender roles. By looking into Pavese’s writings, one gains a clearer picture of how his troubles with women fueled his self-hatred that would lead to his suicide.

Depression and suicide in Pavese’s literature

Working backwards, one of Pavese’s final poems, “Verra la morte e avra i tuoi occhi,” or “Death Will Come and Look at Me with Your Eyes”²² was written with Dowling in mind:

Death will come and look at me with your
 eyes-
 the death that follows us around
 from morning to night, insomniac, deaf,
 like some stale, now irreparable guilt
 or ridiculous habit. Your eyes
 will be empty words,
 a suppressed cry, a silence-
 the way you see them each morning
 when you lean toward yourself alone
 in the mirror.
 O dearest hope, on that day we too will know
 that you were life, and you were nothingness.
 For everyone, death has a certain look.
 Death will come and look at me with your
 eyes. Then the habit will be given up,

¹⁹ Lester, David. “Understanding Suicide through Studies of Diaries: The Case of Cesare Pavese,” pg. 301

²⁰ Parks, Tim. “Stop It and Act.” London Review of Books, 11 Feb. 2010, www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v32/n03/tim-parks/stop-it-and-act.

²¹ Lester, David. “Understanding Suicide through Studies of Diaries: The Case of Cesare Pavese,” pg. 298

²² Translated by Alan Williamson

we will see in the mirror
 the dead face reemerging,
 the sealed lips will have their voice.
 And we, the silenced, go down into the abyss. (1-20)

Taking into account Pavese's recent rejection, "your eyes" (1-2) initially reads as those of Dowling's, or a lover's. They haunt the speaker, as if the lover's departure forces him to look into the face of death. The addressee's apparent departure leaves the speaker haunted. The image evokes a deep personal connection marked by longing and loss. However, by line 6, "your eyes" depict more of an idealized unattainable version of love itself. Unreciprocated love looks like "empty words, / a suppressed cry, a silence." The second person pronouns thereby become more personal and used to describe the self, much like how Pavese writes "you" in his diaries. In the end, the lover, death, and love itself seem to combine with the speaker as the "we" who "see in the mirror." The speaker looks at their reflection and sees a mix of love and suicidality — an evident glimpse into Pavese's state of mind. The shift in pronouns from "you" to "we" also reveals how his blame was directed toward the self rather than an external figure. When "we, the silenced, go down into the abyss," it is Pavese, his love, and his loneliness that disappear. The image of "silenced" and sinking "into the abyss" reminds one of Dr. Fadigati of *The Gold-Rimmed Spectacles* or the canonical homosexual character. Pavese, despite being a man who loved women, was "silenced" by his inability to express his sexual and romantic desires and consequently cast into an "abyss" of shame. There, his love remained unreciprocated, leaving him to "look at" death. This depression that stems from love itself rather than women is affirmed in his diary: "One does not kill oneself for love of a woman, but because love--any love--reveals us in our nakedness, our misery, our vulnerability, our nothingness."

Again, every attempt at love is met with the repeating motif of rejection, which exposes Pavese's own flaws in masculinity. Pavese seems to have found it easier to express his despair

with rejection through female narrators. Two of his major works, *The Beautiful Summer* and *Among Women Only*, are told from the perspectives of young women who observe the world more than they engage with it. One might equate Pavese's role in relationships with how Ginia pursues Guido. Ginia obsesses over Guido, yet Guido fails to ever truly love her back. Indeed, Pavese's passivity and rejections in romance are better understood by the average reader through the lens of a woman than a man: these books therefore present insight into how Pavese likely observed the world around him.

Among Women Only is particularly striking because it contains a woman who died by suicide in the same way that Pavese would go on to die by suicide. As such, it is worthwhile to examine the similarities between Rosetta and Pavese: Rosetta, a troubled girl, is entangled in a relationship with a man named Raimondo, yet their love never fully actualizes. In talking about men, Rosetta remarks, "[they] befoul the bed, the work they do, the words they use..."²³ Her ennui paired with her unsatisfying relationship prompted a disdain toward the male figure, parallel to how Pavese felt a disdain for women by the end of his life. When Rosetta ultimately commits suicide, the narrator Clelia exclaims that she could not have saved her: "You just can't love someone else more than yourself. If you can't save yourself, nobody can."²⁴ Pavese seems to have written in his own suicide into reality. Like Rosetta, his failures at love would evoke a depression that made it impossible to "save" himself.

Still, the story that best illuminates Pavese's complex relationship with gender and sexuality is his short story "Suicides," published in 1949. The narrator of "Suicides" is a middle-aged man, much like Pavese himself. However, the protagonist engages with a submissive woman named Carlotta, the sort of woman that Pavese would never pursue.

²³ Pavese, Cesare. *Among Women Only*. Peter Owen Publishers, 1997.

²⁴ Pavese, Cesare. *Among Women Only*.

“Suicides” consequently illuminates how Pavese may have behaved with a woman who did in fact love him: the story illustrates therefore accentuates masculine qualities in the narrator, like how he repeatedly rejects and manipulates Carlotta who loved him like a dog. The story grows complex, though, because Carlotta — who is unloved by her husband and treated poorly by all men — is in many ways the female version of Pavese. She mirrors Pavese’s own patheticness, so the protagonist’s treatment of her thus highlights the gendered complexities of Pavese’s self-loathing. The narrator ultimately despises Carlotta — and himself — for her submissiveness.

The queering of sexuality further comes into play with the protagonist’s mere inability to love Carlotta. Pavese writes, “I drank, knowing that it was the only way to love Carlotta.”²⁵ Perhaps this is due to Carlotta’s personality, but perhaps it is because she is a woman. Yes, “Suicides” is notably intriguing because Pavese appears to admit the protagonist’s homosexuality: in responding to Carlotta’s inquiry about another woman, the protagonist exclaims, “- That woman? I loved Jean, I’ve already told you.”²⁶ Finally, there is an explicit statement of love for a man that explains the narrator’s apathy toward women. The portrayal of Carlotta as a woman who craves the narrator’s comfort despite constant rejection, and the narrator’s own manipulative behavior, underscores the tragic interplay of masculine and feminine roles in Pavese’s romantic life. He loved women the way Carlotta loved the narrator, but his constant rejections made him hate himself the way the narrator loathed Carlotta. “Suicides” reveals the painful contradictions at the heart of Pavese’s relationships, suggesting that his despair and eventual suicide were not merely the result of external rejection but of an internalized battle between conflicting gendered expectations and desires.

²⁵ Santamaria, Ugo. ““Suicidi” Di Cesare Pavese | Pagina Tre.” *Paginatre.it*, 17 June 2021, paginatre.it/suicidi-di-cesare-pavese/.

²⁶ Santamaria, Ugo. ““Suicidi” Di Cesare Pavese

As such, I argue that Pavese's suicide ultimately stems from the depression of his passive masculinity. His distanced relationship with his mother led to a lifelong struggle to communicate with the assertive women he desired. In turn, each romantic encounter left Pavese with only more self-loathing. The ample misogynistic remarks in Pavese's writing stem not from an isolated hatred toward women, but from a swirl of negative emotions of love and rejection, as seen in his poetry. Through observing Pavese's literature, whether it be his biographical diaries or semi-biographical short stories, it becomes clear that Pavese's disdain was most directed toward himself: toward his inability to be the perfect masculine figure who succeeds in romantic pursuits and sexual encounters. Pavese was attracted to masculinity but lacked it himself, causing a cycle of rejection that fueled his destructive self-hatred and left him "silenced," needing to die by suicide.

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