

John Fante

1909-1983

«The Odyssey of a Wop»



“The Odyssey of a Wop”

- Published in *The American Mercury* in 1933
- “**Wop**”: used as an insulting and contemptuous term for a person of Italian birth or descent. Etymology: Italian dialect *guappo* swaggerer, tough, from Spanish *guapo* [...] First known use of *wop* was in 1906.

Source: “Wop.” Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, Merriam-Webster, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/wop>. Accessed 9 Apr. 2024.

- **Paradox/contrast** between the two terms of the title. “Odyssey”: the epic journey of Odysseus v. “wop” a derogatory term, suggesting the figure of an outcast, underdog and marginalized individual because of her/his ethnic background
- However, there is a common element: a story of **HOMECOMING** (both Odysseus and the narrator have finally come home)
- Main themes: conflict of identity; racism

- “ ‘The Odyssey of a Wop’; such title[s] come from the same reflection on discrimination and ethnicity and play on the contrast between the use of discriminatory expressions to define the supposed protagonist and hero of the story, thus introducing the reader to what appears a mainstream point of view just to reverse it through narration and glimpses to the ethnic character’s personal pain.”

Bordin, “THE MARGINALIZING EFFECT OF ETHNIC EXPECTATIONS: JOHN FANTE’S ‘ASIAN’ WRITINGS”, p.297, Iperstoria



- Recollection of his grandfather: “a good little wop”. Feelings of pity and not admiration because of his grandfather’s passive acceptance of the racial insult
- The narrator seems to be ashamed of his grandfather’s **goodness**
- Narrator's admiration of his father who fights back and violently avenges his own father: the narrator’s father provides a model of aggressive masculinity

II

- **“Double Consciousness”**: the narrator’s mother use of terms like “Wop” and “Dago” is reminiscent of what occurs in Hughes’s essay “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain”: “In the home they read [African-Americans] white papers and magazines. **And the mother often says “Don’t be like niggers” when the children are bad.** A frequent phrase from the father is, “Look how well a white man does things.” And so the word white comes to be unconsciously a symbol of all virtues. It holds for the children beauty, morality, and money.” (Hughes, “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain)
- The Irish grocer: racism among immigrants, a hierarchy within ethnic groups of immigrants
- As his identity is revealed by the grocer’s use of “wop”/“dago” the narrator’s “feel[s] NAKED”, thus exposed, revealed to the eyes of the community.
- Narrator’s revenge: stealing and mocking the grocer’s daughter



- Narrator's complete REJECTION of his origins and consequently, of the signs which reveal his "Italianess"



- French last name; lunch break and the "Italian looking" sandwich; deep loathing of famous Italians such as Colombo, Vespucci and Dante; hoping his father's birthplace is Argentina...

IV

- Fighting in school: violence used as a means to gain recognition and acceptance; father's approval of narrator's behavior
- An Italian HOME and its symbols, which reveal the narrator's ethnic background (proudly displayed by his father)



- Heirlooms (pictures of Victor Emmanuel, Milan Cathedral and St. Peter's)
- Grandmother: "hopelessly a Wop" and her "bad English"
- Use of the Italian language: the narrator avoids speaking Italian when he is with his friends, he even pretends that he cannot understand his grandmother when she is talking to him in Italian
- however, he when expressing his own emotions, he resorts to the Italian language through exclamations

V

- At the Jesuit Academy
- First day of school: the narrator has a Joycean **epiphany**, when he realizes his father is indeed **a wop** as he fully embodies the cultural stereotype of the Italian immigrant
- A fake identity: the narrator's lies about his parents' origins: father from Argentina
- Racism of the priest, who uses ethnic slurs: "kike", "wop", "shanty Irish" to identify the students

VI

- pp.93-94 **biological determinism**, not only cultural but related to one's biological origins



- " and I **sense** the Italians"
- "they [the Italian chef and his assistants] know at once I am of the **breed**"
- Latin language and Italian: "a **thoroughbred** Italian" "the language is in your **blood**"

VII

- The protagonist's **HOME COMING** corresponds to the acceptance of one's identity
- The encounter with "the Plaza man" during a Mexican fiesta and subsequently at Rocco Saccone's restaurant, ignites the process of ethnic self-recognition experienced by the narrator
- The narrator sees himself reflected in the attitude and behavior of the "plaza man" who functions as a mirror; the plaza's man exposes the narrator's painful journey of self-loathing and rejection
- The narrator's desperate need to belong is finally fulfilled the moment he recognizes and accepts his being Italian
- **"your own corpse"** = a break with the past? Possibility of rebirth ?