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**THE BLACK MADONNA FIGURE  
AS A SOURCE OF FEMALE EMPOWERMENT  
IN THE WORKS OF FOUR ITALIAN-CANADIAN AUTHORS**

par

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**MÉMOIRE PRÉSENTÉ**

pour obtenir

**LA MAÎTRISE ÈS ARTS  
EN LITTÉRATURE CANADIENNE COMPARÉE**

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## Résumé en français

### **L'image de la madone noire comme source de puissance chez la femme, analysée dans quatre oeuvres italo-canadiennes**

L'image de la madone noire est la figure centrale du présent mémoire. La madone noire du paganisme d'avant Jésus-Christ est, selon Lucia Chiavola Birnbaum<sup>1</sup>, une métaphore des croyances italiennes héréditaires. Souvent interprétée comme déité souterraine, la figure de la madone noire représente sans doute une femme gardant une position puissante en confrontation avec la société patriarcale. En outre, elle exprime une icône religieuse préchrétienne que l'on trouve sous forme de statues diffusées dans au moins trois continents, soit l'Europe, l'Afrique et l'Asie.

En effet, la madone noire ne représente pas l'image soumise et obéissante de la Vierge Marie, comme le propose l'Église catholique. Quand le christianisme fit son apparition, l'image de la madone fut réduite à celle de la Sainte incarnant la virginité et l'obéissance. La couleur des statues de ces madones noires, d'après Birnbaum, est bien plus une indication de leurs origines païennes. Cette couleur des statues réfère à la peau d'une déesse

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<sup>1</sup> L. C. BIRNBAUM. *Black Madonnas: Feminism, Religion, and Politics in Italy*, Boston, Northeastern University Press, 1993, 273 p.

préchrétienne de la végétation, de la régénération et de la vie.

La notion de l'icône représentant la madone noire propose l'image d'un potentiel féminin vigoureux et inspirateur. De plus, elle rappelle des valeurs de femmes gouvernant la société. En rejetant la position de la femme historiquement subordonnée, l'image de la déesse noire délaisse cette marginalité sociale et politique, ainsi que la conception de la femme comme figure soumise, proposée par l'Église catholique et la société androcentrique.

L'image de la madone noire peut être expliquée par l'influence importante du paganisme sur la vie quotidienne italienne, qui comprend entre autres le concept païen du mauvais oeil. La madone noire ne possède pas seulement une qualité apaisante, mais représente aussi la cessation de la vie. La mort est une des trois "vies" de la madone noire (la naissance, la maturité, la mort). La croyance italienne dans le mauvais oeil, appelé *mal'occhio* en italien, est toujours vivante aujourd'hui, surtout dans les régions rurales.

Les mythologies occidentales ont tendance à être patriarcales. Par conséquent, la femme apparaît souvent mystifiée selon des *mythes masculins*. Les sociétés catholiques ont rendu conventionnelle l'image de la Madone

projetant l'archétype de la femme en deuil, pure et silencieuse. Quelques-unes de ces caractéristiques idolâtres sont reflétées par les personnages féminins des livres sélectionnés pour le présent mémoire. Les deux romans et les deux pièces de théâtre sont: le roman de Nino Ricci, *Lives of the Saints*, le roman de Frank Paci *Black Madonna*, les pièces de théâtre *The Last Adam* de Vittorio Rossi et *Addolorata* de Marco Micone.

Toutes les oeuvres analysées dans le présent mémoire témoignent de rôles spécifiques selon le sexe et de la position de la femme italienne suggérée par la société patriarcale. Néanmoins, elles offrent une image de la femme forte et indépendante qui s'oppose à celle de la femme servile. Suggérant l'image de la déesse primordiale, la figure de la madone noire, d'après Birnbaum, suscite en plus l'idée de l'être féminin fort, lequel ne se conforme pas aux modèles traditionnels de la suprématie patriarcale.

La question principale du présent mémoire est la suivante: la figure de la madone noire fonctionne-t-elle comme véhicule d'une grande force chez les femmes décrites dans les oeuvres sélectionnées? Une partie des femmes montrées dans ces livres se conforment toujours, au moins partiellement, aux exigences de leur environnement patriarcal. Pourtant, elles occupent toutes d'une façon ou

d'une autre une position de puissance dans le microcosme familial.

Les oeuvres sélectionnées montrent l'importance de l'efficacité et de la compétence féminines. En outre, ces femmes acquièrent de la puissance dans la famille aussi bien qu'en dehors de celle-ci, au moyen de l'image de la madone noire, cette image faisant partie de leur histoire ethnoculturelle. Nous formulons dès lors l'hypothèse suivante: l'image de la madone noire est une source de puissance pour les femmes, fait observé dans ces oeuvres. Cet archétype est moins dogmatisé, donc plus controversé que les symboles et images judéo-chrétiens; il faut alors chercher des origines plus implicites.

Les femmes décrites reçoivent toutes une force d'une source d'inspiration véhiculée par l'image d'une déité féminine. Cette force rejette, soit partiellement, soit entièrement, les valeurs patriarcales. À l'opposé de l'hypothèse de l'image de la madone noire, nous retrouvons l'image de la Vierge Marie, silencieuse, car réduite au silence.

La thèse contient les objectifs suivants:

1. L'interprétation et l'analyse scientifique des oeuvres, qui n'ont jamais été étudiées ensemble.

2. La réinterprétation du stéréotype féminin présentant le rôle traditionnel de la femme comme individu soumis et impuissant.

3. Le réexamen de certains mythes et la déconstruction de la plupart de la mythologie masculine, en rapport avec la critique féministe.

4. L'étude du féminisme en rapport avec la mythologie. La jonction de ces deux thèmes se fera dans le cadre de la littérature canadienne comparée.

La méthodologie principale repose sur l'approche critique féministe, en particulier dans la perspective de sa convergence avec la mythologie, l'interprétation de l'image de la déesse préchrétienne et même préhistorique (représentée par la madone noire) symbolisant la base de la puissance féminine, valeur contemporaine de la notion de la madone noire, et la réinvention féministe du mythe.

Dans les quatre oeuvres analysées, les femmes jouent souvent des rôles importants. La plupart de ces femmes ne se présentent pas comme des agents défiant le patriarcat, mais plutôt comme les gardiennes de traditions centrées sur la femme qui sont antérieures aux sociétés dominées par l'homme. Chaque personnage féminin possède une puissance et agit souvent de manière indépendante de la société androcentrique.

L'héroïne du premier roman analysé, *Lives of the Saints*, offre l'exemple le plus extrême. Habitant un petit village italien au début des années soixante, elle représente le commencement des influences ethnohistoriques de l'image de la madone noire en Italie, aussi bien que la signification féministe qui crée les mythes relatifs à une déité souterraine féminine (également représentée par la madone noire). L'héroïne Cristina fait preuve d'indépendance malgré l'opposition solide de la part des autres villageoises du roman, qui se soumettent toujours au code catholico-patriarcal du village. Le lien suggéré entre Cristina et la puissance mystique chez la femme est manifesté par la description de l'héroïne par son fils. Il la considère comme une déesse liée à la terre noire et fertile. L'image de la madone noire est liée aux activités coutumières du village, parmi lesquelles on retrouve la protection contre le mauvais oeil, ce qui atteste du maintien des coutumes païennes. Les villageois ont adopté à part égale la doctrine chrétienne et des superstitions païennes. Un élément notable identifié dans ce roman est le dualisme entre la bonne et la mauvaise femme, une donnée qui confirme la présence de l'autonomie féminine opposée au patriarcat. Représentant la sexualité active aussi bien que la procréation facultative, l'image de la madone noire rompt cette dichotomie.



Dans *Black Madonna*, le deuxième roman analysé, Assunta se présente comme une personne attachée à la terre. La madone noire est associée à la fécondité de la terre; par conséquent, elle représente des attributs dits maternels, comme la puissance transformatrice, la végétation, la nourriture. Assunta personnifie Déméter, déesse des semailles et de la terre nourricière. La fille d'Assunta, Marie, représente Perséphone, car elle se cherche et cherche sa mère. La réunification d'Assunta et de Marie est nécessaire pour que la fille puisse terminer sa quête de soi. La mort d'Assunta représente le commencement de cette union, après laquelle Assunta et Marie s'amalgament. Assunta représente sans doute la génération mourante, tandis que sa fille la remplace en adoptant ses caractéristiques.

Bien qu'elle vive en milieu urbain, Rosalia, la mère dans la pièce de théâtre *The Last Adam*, a préservé les coutumes du *villaggio* comme, par exemple, la protection contre le mauvais oeil. Comme Assunta, elle personnifie la force matriarcale absolue dans sa famille. En déclenchant le suicide de son fils Sal (le héros tragique de la pièce), elle personnifie la madone noire furieuse qui ne montre qu'une puissance négative.

La pièce de théâtre *Addolorata* suggère encore une fois un changement significatif après la mort de la mère. L'héroïne Lolita-Addolorata devient sa propre mère pour se libérer de l'oppression patriarcale, représentée par son père et son mari. Ici, la nourriture est devenue un symbole d'oppression, dénonçant la marginalisation de la femme. Représentant d'abord la statue symbolique (l'archétype de la femme asexuée, produit du patriarcat et de l'Église catholique), elle devient sa propre madone noire après la mort de sa mère.

Les mythes les plus communs découverts dans les quatre oeuvres sont la femme perçue comme l'épouse soumise de l'homme, et la matrice anonyme de ses enfants. L'étude de l'image de la madone noire dans la littérature italo-canadienne, explorée dans le contexte canadien comparé, révèle des caractéristiques du principe féminin.

L'image de la madone noire agit comme une source de puissance pour les femmes décrites dans les quatre oeuvres. La madone noire, cette figure d'autorité féminine, se révèle une inspiration de puissance pour la femme. Le thème de la madone n'est pas un phénomène purement italien, mais sa corrélation avec la culture italienne donne accès aux aspects spécifiques de cette culture et aux études multi-ethniques. La figure de la madone noire peut renouveler les

approches littéraires dans ce domaine de la littérature  
canadienne comparée.

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## INTRODUCTION

This thesis deals with the image of the black madonna, a pre-Christian female deity, in the works of four Italian-Canadian authors: the works include Nina Ricci's novel *Lives of the Saints*, Frank G. Paci's novel *Black Madonna*, Vittorio Rossi's play *The Last Adam*, and Marco Micone's play *Addolorata*.

\* \* \*

The black madonna, the central figure of this thesis, is not an exclusively Italian phenomenon. Most people probably associate her with the image of the Southern European, predominantly old, often Italian peasant woman, who is dressed in black clothes from head to toe. The black madonna statues, however, are possibly connected with the veneration of a female divinity, the Great Mother, Great Goddess, primordial goddess, and even earth mother. In his early myth and folklore collection, Sir George Frazer concluded that the "great Mother Goddess [of Western Asia], the personification of all the reproductive energies of nature, was worshipped under different names but with a substantial similarity of myth and ritual" (Frazer 299).

The black madonna is embodied in Italian vernacular beliefs: in Italy, indigenous conceptions of the woman divinity may be buried in people's respective everyday

actions. The black madonna metaphorically embodies Italian (but also other cultures') hereditary beliefs, emerging from pre-Christian paganism, in the primordial goddess of the soil. In their essay "In Quest of the Black Virgin", Leonard W. Moss and Stephen C. Cappannari suggest:

The black madonnas are Christian borrowings from earlier pagan art forms that depicted Ceres, Demeter Melaina [the so-called "Black Demeter"], Diana, Isis, Cybele, Artemis, or Rhea as black, the color characteristic of goddesses of the earth's fertility. (Moss and Cappannari 65)

These folk beliefs, as Moss and Cappannari's study testifies, suggest a woman holding a central, empowered position in communal life (Birnbaum, *Black Madonnas* 10).

Regarding her colour, black represents the feminine power of re-creation, inhabiting the subterranean "storehouse of all things" (Chevalier and Gheerbrant 93), the earth. As Robert N. Bellah and Philip E. Hammond note in their essay "The Five Religions of Modern Italy," a black madonna represents "'a subterranean deity, black with the shadows of the bowels of the earth, a peasant Persephone, or lower world goddess of the harvest'" (qtd. in Birnbaum, *Black Madonnas* 18). "Black," as Knapp suggests, being "a noncolor or the sum of all colors,... associated with the Great Mother, represents obscure and abysmal forces. But

just as the seed gestates in darkness, so blackness also stands for fertility" (Knapp 164). She may be known under various names in different cultures, and as shown above, she represents to some the Great Mother, or *Magna Mater*, "as a partial aspect of the Archetypal Feminine" (Neumann 11), to others the grain goddess, Demeter. The black madonna figure evidently signifies a woman in a powerful position, opposed to patriarchal society. The black madonna is also a religious, pre-Christian and Christian icon, found in the form of statues on at least three different continents. Birnbaum advocates the postulation that "the veneration of the indigenous goddess of Old Europe merged with African, Middle Eastern and Asian dark goddesses and persisted in the christian<sup>1</sup> era in vernacular beliefs and rituals associated with black madonnas" (Birnbaum, *Black Madonnas* 4).

With regard to these details, Italy has possibly been a controversial country: "[Italy] is the seat of world catholicism, yet widely shared Italian beliefs embodied in black madonnas differ heretically from church doctrine" (4). And indeed, the black madonna, in the primordial sense, does not represent the submissive and obedient variant of the figure of the Virgin Mother suggested by the Catholic Church. Birnbaum interprets the blackness of the madonna statues according to their respective places of origin. With

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<sup>1</sup> Birnbaum decided to omit the capitalization of terms "connoting hegemony" (Birnbaum, *Black Madonnas*, xvii).



the emergence of Christianity, however, "[t]he catholic church retained the figure of the mother but reduced the madonna to a great saint embodying virginity and obedience" (40). White--the colour representing virginity and pureness in modern Western societies--fitted perfectly to underline these virtues, but would hardly represent the Italian peasant woman (48). Mary Elizabeth Perry describes the mother and child depiction of orthodox Christianity as a "vulnerable swaying posture" (Perry 119).

The colour black in this sense, does not refer to clothing, but to the colour of the madonna's skin. Statues of dark-skinned female figures found in the Mediterranean area, may represent a pre-Christian goddess of vegetation, regeneration and life. Moss and Cappannari observe: "Catholic sources, for the most part, have denied the possible connection between the black madonnas and earlier earth goddesses" (Moss and Cappannari 65).

With regard to Italian culture and politics, the pre-Christian woman divinity is a significant phenomenon. According to Birnbaum, who studied the occurrence of the black madonna from the perspectives of feminism, religious belief, and politics in Italy, "[b]lack madonnas may be considered a metaphor for a memory of the time when the earth was believed to be the body of a woman" (Birnbaum, *Black Madonnas* 3). This memory of a female deity is one of the traces of ancient cultures that "preceded the male god

of judeo-christianity" (Birnbaum, *Liberazione* 4). The notion of the black madonna icon suggests an image of a strong woman demonstrating beneficial power as an inspiration. It also calls to mind female-focused values of society-governing women, and the existence of communities predominated by women. The image of the black goddess rejects the historically subordinate position of women, as well as their social and political marginalization. It declines the concept of woman as a non-resistant person, a figure honoured by both the Catholic Church and androcentric society in the form of the silent Virgin icon/silenced image of woman; nor does this image of female primal power support the characterization of woman as merely "a vessel, a funnel, or a receptacle for procreation" (Knapp 7). If the primordial goddess is responsible for the fruitfulness of the earth, she does not, however, represent the eternal fertilizer; she is a strong-willed woman, defying stereotypes of motherhood and household slavery. Rosalind Miles comments succinctly: "When [the Great Goddess] had sex, like any other sensible female, she had it for herself" (Miles 41).

The strong involvement of paganism in Italian everyday life explains the enduring presence of the black madonna image. The pagan concept of the evil eye, for example, is a fruitful component of a possible source of power. The primordial goddess has not only the forgiving soothing side,

as honoured in the ecclesiastical definition of the Madonna image, but represents death as well, her *darker* side. As the goddess holds reproductive energy, she embodies nature's life cycle and its definite phases, "birth, maturity, and death, the three ages of the goddess" (Birnbaum, *Black Madonnas* 54). Therefore death, while representing the termination of life, also connotes the new beginning of the life cycle, and rebirth. Erich Neumann, psychologist, Jung associate, and author of *The Great Mother*, a study on the archetypal feminine, explains, "the vessel character of the Feminine not only shelters the unborn in the vessel of the body, and not only the born in the vessel of the world, but also takes back the dead into the vessel of death, the cave or coffin, the tomb or urn" (Neumann 45). Death is completion and commencement, as it will be observed in the four works under study.

In Italy, there are widely spread popular beliefs in the subterranean power of the evil eye, often believed to be diagnosed and possibly cured by spinsters and old women (DiStasi 17). Beliefs in the evil eye have a long tradition in Italy: the evil eye is believed to be most frequently found in the Mezzogiorno area, which stretches from Naples to Sicily (DiStasi 17). Italian beliefs in the *mal'occhio*, the Italian term, have lasted practically to the present day, particularly in rural areas. The evil eye is, according to vernacular beliefs around the world, a supernatural,

powerful force. The bearer of this force may inflict the evil eye on an object or person he/she desires. This desire is believed to be transformed into an envy for the individual in possession of the desired object, which then, though often unintentionally, is said to provoke the infliction.

This belief in a source of benign as well as negative forces makes sense regarding the black madonna's cyclic features. Birnbaum explains, "mal'occhio implies the reality of the goddess, her negative as well as beneficent characteristics" (Birnbaum, *Black Madonnas* 129). M. Esther Harding, Jung alumna and author of *Woman's Mysteries*, perceives, what she calls, the "Moon Goddess," as a female deity with good as well as negative qualities, "thus giver of life and of all that promot[ing] fertility, and at the same time ... the wielder of the destructive powers of nature" (Harding 111).

According to Western mythologies, which tend to be patriarchal, and which lead to the mystification of women (in particular with regard to a world religion such as Christianity), woman may only be conceived as beneficent, unselfish, *un-herself*. In these, so-called *male myths*, woman emerges "in forms, figures, and images that aren't hers" (Sankovitch 3). This male idealization of woman which presents her as sacred mother and chaste wife, is reflected by especially one female character in the chosen works: the

authentic case of the socially and politically exploited female is incarnated by Addolorata, who leads a hermitess-style life as housewife and factory worker. In her thesis on *Myths of Identity in Women's Writing in English Canada and Quebec*, Jo-Anne Elder interprets the misconceived ideal of woman as statue as a typical product of patriarchal society:

[T]he statue and other visual representations of women are images of the symbolic woman: mythic images without any real human component. (Elder 169)

[T]he statue is a symbol of the feminine in patriarchy, the woman as object. It suggests not negative femininity, ... but absent or passive femininity. (186)

The total passivity of the statue also has a sexual connotation; it is symbolic of frigidity and sterility....

[T]he statue is the epitome of objecthood, deprived of humanity and autonomous identity. Passivity is linked to the lack of self-affirmation and expression. (181)

The image of the Madonna, in particular in Catholic societies, has largely been conventionalized to a projection of the pure and silently mourning female archetype. A typical connotation of this image may be a mourning Virgin Mary. In Western societies, the colour black has been for the most part representative of death, grief, and other distressful dilemmas. Set expressions in the English usage, such as *black day*, *black humour*, *black spot*, all corroborate

a, literally, sombre notion of the colour black. Mary Elizabeth Perry gives the example of the Black Madonna of Montserrat, a 12th-century, wooden statue, whose darkness "[m]ost churchmen and scholars dismiss ... as a minor and possibly embarrassing curiosity" (Perry 117). However, as Birnbaum clarifies, the dark colour could, according to vernacular beliefs, also suggest a positive attitude to life; as a matter of fact, black suggests the life-contributing energy. When referring to the Sicilian Black Virgins, Robert Graves, for example, interprets their appellation in "an ancient tradition of Wisdom as Blackness" (Graves 162). In her book, *Pure Lust: Elemental Feminist Philosophy*, Mary Daly believes that the black madonnas represent a strong influence, "because they are associated with the fertility of black earth" (qtd. in Birnbaum, *Black Madonnas* 11). Black madonna statues repainted white are often still referred to as black (Birnbaum, *Black Madonna* 3). This means, the black madonna represents the recurrent spirit of life itself. The fact of the matter then becomes, that the colour black accordingly honours the subterranean black (as the soil) female divinity. Black may connote death, but merely in its natural correlation with life and regeneration (52).

Birnbaum, who regards herself as "a feminist cultural historian" (10), also published a survey of Italian feminism, *Liberazione della donna: Feminism in Italy*. She

explains in this book, it was not until 1968 that Italian women were officially considered equal to men: "In catholic doctrine, as in secular law, woman's role was subordination to her husband; her circle of activity was the family" (Birnbaum, *Liberazione* 15). For example, Addolorata, the eponymous heroine of Micone's play, represents all these qualities. In the conclusion of her feminist study, Birnbaum argues, the vivacity of the Italian feminist movement lies in its attachment to ancient as well as contemporary doctrine: "The continuing vitality of the Italian feminist movement may be related to having tapped subterranean as well as rational beliefs" (261).

There not only appears to be a social exploitation of the Italian woman being presented in numerous works, but also a feature of iron will and some strong bonding between women in communities. In both of her books, Birnbaum illustrates that these female bonds may be traced back to ancient times, when woman owned a more powerful position in ancient, more earth-connected civilizations.

Features of the black madonna are brought forward in each of the four contemporary Italian-Canadian narratives to be studied. Moreover, these works all reflect on gender-specific roles and the Italian/Italian-Canadian woman's position suggested by patriarchal society, yet offer an image of woman in contrast to the subservient female as one of strength and independence. These women are portrayed as

powerful individuals, a fact which is reinforced by associations with communal beliefs in the black madonna. Cristina in *Lives of the Saints*, for example, rejects some of the aspects of the black madonna, hence does not embody a classic supreme female being. She is, however, empowered by an image of the black madonna, simply because of the inheritance of a collective, ethnic past, which includes the archetype of the black madonna. Through her son's narration, finally, she is depicted as a supreme being. Assunta in *Black Madonna*, appears to be the grieving black madonna, as she still practices a traditional mourning ritual. However, she is also strongly connected with earth, and the life-giving element of food. Rosalia in *The Last Adam*, by contrast, turns into a black madonna displaying only death and destruction. Addolorata, finally, becomes her own saviour, as she is reborn a black madonna herself, after her mother's death.

\* \* \*

Birnbaum's diagram of the black madonna suggests the image of a goddess, but also the notion of a female individual, as one of strength and independence from traditional patterns of patriarchal supremacy. According to Robert Graves, author of the folklore study *Mammon and the Black Goddess*, the image of a female supreme being (which he calls *White Goddess*) could represent either fossils of matriarchal society, or be "the harbinger of its return"



(Graves 148). Undoubtedly, the image implies far more than a possibility of the conception of the ancient female power figure, and certainly provides an encouragement to women of more woman-centred societies. Adrienne Rich evaluates quite accurately that it is the expressed attitude of the powerful female to which more attention should be given:

Her body possesses mass, interior depth, inner rest, and balance.... If, as very often, there is a child at her breast, or on her lap, she is not absorbed in contemplation of him (the "Adoration of the Virgin" with the Son as center of the world, will come later).... [E]ven in her most benign aspect the ancient Goddess is not beckoning to her worshipers. She exists, not to cajole or reassure man, but to assert herself. (Rich 93-94).

In the feminist sense, as Gerda Lerner observes in her work *The Creation of Patriarchy*, a female deity "'offers an alternative to androcentric explanatory systems'" (quoted in Young 107).

All the female protagonists in the chosen works are confronted with a male-dominated system, and some of these women do still conform to, at least, some of the dictates of their patriarchal microcosm. The ultimate dictum is the function as subservient housewife and child-caring mother in the male-dictated "womanspace" (Young 106).

Although numerous studies have been made in the field of immigrant literature, Italian-Canadian writing, anthropology, and feminist criticism, these four works have never been studied together, nor have they been studied under the subject of this thesis. Roberta Sciff-Zamaro's essay "*Black Madonna: A Search for the Great Mother*" is closest to the subject of this thesis. In her essay, Sciff-Zamaro analyzes, inter alia, Paci's novel *Black Madonna*, from aspects of pre-Christian female deities, and incorporates the Persephone/Demeter myth. Demeter, meaning *mother* in Greek, faces death in the form of her daughter's abduction. In her grief, she causes desolation on earth, symbolically often interpreted as nature's seasonal death, winter. Persephone's resurrection therefore may signify nature's rebirth with spring. The myth of Demeter's search for her daughter Persephone (and vice versa), after the latter has been abducted by Hades, has been incorporated in several feminist studies. Moss and Cappannari refer to pagan works of art which depict, inter alia, "Demeter Melaina" (Moss and Cappannari 65), the Black Demeter or Black Mother. In accordance with the ancient Greek mythology, Persephone was named "Savior, having gone through death and resurrection" (61). These two women endure the crises of loss and rape, respectively, but eventually reunite again. Sankovitch, for example, discerns their relationship as "the creative bonding of two women" (Sankovitch 59). Birnbaum understands

the two figures as indistinguishable, when, according to Jung's essay "The Psychological Aspects of the Kore," "'every mother contains her daughter in herself and every daughter her mother'" (qtd. in Birnbaum, *Black Madonnas* 38). Likewise Neumann interprets the myth:

[T]he daughter becomes identical with the mother; she becomes a mother and is so transformed into Demeter. Precisely because Demeter and Kore [Persephone] are archetypal poles of the Eternal Womanly, the mature woman and the virgin, the mystery of the Feminine is susceptible of endless renewal. (Neumann 309)

The central characters in the four works to be studied are also mothers, and the relationship with the mother is a recurrent theme in each book. In three of these works, the death of the mother will cause the (re-)birth of the daughter.

Though her subject is a similar one, Sciff-Zamaro does not deal with the other three writers chosen for this thesis. Her hypotheses and arguments differ slightly from those applied in this thesis: she employs a mythopoeic ethnic approach to her choice of works. She analyses *Black Madonna* with reference to the figure of the Italian *mamma* as a powerful part of the family and the Italian immigrant community. She also deals with the second generation's quest for identity, "out of a split self" (Sciff-Zamaro 80), that

is, the immigrants' children's difficulties of ethnic affiliation and simultaneous acculturation. By contrast, this thesis will stress the implication of significance of the black madonna to the female protagonists.

In terms of the main methodological approach of this thesis, feminist criticism and its convergence with mythology, only Ricci's book has been previously studied. Both Marta Dvorak's essay "Nino Ricci's *Lives of the Saints: Walking Down Both Sides of the Street at the Same Time*," and Roberta Imboden's study of "The Hyperbolic Project of Cristina: A Derridean Analysis of Ricci's *Lives of the Saints*" reflect feminist ideas. The former analyses Ricci's ambivalent position among other immigrant/Italian-Canadian works, whereas the latter correlates Cristina's attempt to grasp any possible freedom with a "demonic" (since it violates the village's social codes) project of a "rational madness" (Imboden 46).

All four works have been studied, at least superficially, as immigrant works. Of course, most works available on Italian-Canadian literature stress the Italian/immigrant element. Pivato's survey *Contrasts* might fit into this category, yet the essays collected in this book do not only deal with the immigrant's search for identity and the phenomenon of the closed-off world of immigrant communities. Sciff-Zamaro's essay on *Black Madonna*, which is included in *Contrasts*, compares the

generational gap between the novel's heroine and her mother to Persephone's search for Demeter.

The chosen works become significant as they all depict efficient, competent women, who gain their strength outside and inside their families, through the inherited image of the black madonna, which is part of their ethno-cultural history. Although most of the illustrated, in the patriarchal sense, traditional female characters of these books have had no access to any feminist ideology, they still act in a very progressive, independent way, a fact which will become significant with regard to the thesis's intended feminist re-investigation of mythology.

\* \* \*

The hypothesis of this thesis is that in these novels the image of the black madonna is a source of empowerment to these women. As this image/archetype is far less dogmatized and thus more contested than mainstream Judeo-Christian symbols and images, one has to look for more implicit roots. Birnbaum's work serves here as a useful source of information, as well as several other works by female and male authors, for example, Erich Neumann's *The Great Mother*.

All these women maintain at least one powerful position, mostly held within the family. They all eventually have the strength to stand up for themselves. Some of the power, ironically, is given to them through the male-imposed myth as mother/bearer of their husbands' children, which

manifests itself, for instance, in the case of the women in *Lives of the Saints*, and Lina in *The Last Adam*. But the actual source of empowerment is not their husbands, religion, nor the community, but the black madonna, or, to be more explicit, the inspirational source of the image of a female deity. Through this strength, patriarchal values are either partially or entirely rejected and the women eventually gain more control over their lives.

In *Lives of the Saints*, Cristina acts somewhat in the role of a precursor of female independence, as she does not have access to any possible feminist ideology. Marie (*Black Madonna*) and Grace (*The Last Adam*) have certainly encountered feminist thought. Furthermore, all these women employ traditional values as well. Thus, the image of the black madonna is not only purely an image of an ancient female deity, but as well a reflection of a possible source of inspiration for women, in order to give them a power base for their political actions. The powers the women are given are traditional roles of matriarchs, but also, in the patriarchal sense, the un-traditional function as the actual head of the family, which might become, as in Cristina's case, the defying agent of the "male monopoly" (Young 106). The black madonna image advocates female liberal sexuality and procreation by choice. Transformative powers are directly connected with the primordial goddess, and in this respect the four elements, in particular earth and water,

are symbolically associated with the womb. Therefore, the image of the earth-connected female deity and the potent blackness of earth also signifies the return to nature. The immediate affinity between human being and nature also draws a connection with the wild animal world. Characteristics such as active sexuality, aggressiveness, violence, hunger, are all portrayed in the four works under study. The aforementioned "three ages" of the black madonna, birth, maturity, death, confirm her affinity with the seasons/cycle of nature. Mysterious qualities of the black madonna appear in the form of paganism, in particular the superstitious belief in the evil eye.

In contradiction to this hypothesis stands the image of the silent/silenced Virgin Mary icon, being inflicted on women by male society. This image depicts woman as the passive, silently suffering female. However powerful the effigy of the black madonna may appear, if woman is perceived as object, a de-sexed symbol of the feminine, she might become the image of the statue, the "diametrical opposite of the Goddess figure[, ]... the ultimate reduction of powerful femininity" (Elder 186). Examples of the image of woman as statue are provided by *Addolorata*, and partially Lina, the daughter-in-law in *The Last Adam*.

\* \* \*

The female-focused methodology for this thesis is the mythopoeic feminist approach to the image of the pre-

Christian, and even prehistoric goddess as a power base for women, the contemporary value of the notion of the black madonna, and the feminist re-appropriation of myth.

The specific portrayals of these women and the current emergence of women's spiritual movement connected with beliefs in a female Supreme Being (see McDonald 46-51) encourage feminist ideas of re-appropriating mythology. The image of the black madonna serves here as a source of empowerment for women who are in search of their own identity, to develop strength, and to aim at a more woman-focused society. Thus, this thesis employs a feminist mythopoeic approach with regard to the validity of the black madonna as a modern image. The procedure of this thesis will also be informed by various approaches to myth criticism, in particular Birnbaum's study of specific myths, and from this the developing significance for feminist studies. Birnbaum's analysis serves as a leading source of data, as well as Elinor W. Gadon's *The Once and Future Goddess*, a chronicle of the ancient female deity and her re-emergence in modern cultures. Several other works by female and male authors re-investigating myths, are going to be included in the analysis of the four works. Erich Neumann's volume on *The Great Mother* is a valuable source of information investigating, inter alia, fertility symbols in connection with the earth-connected female deity. Essays on black madonna statues, such as Moss and Cappannari's "In Quest of



the Black Virgin: She Is Black Because She Is Black," and Mary Elizabeth Perry's "The Black Madonna of Montserrat," give further insight into the statues' origins (including their blackness), and the relevance to pre-Christian practices which are opposed by Catholic conventions. Finally, Jo-Anne Elizabeth Elder's aforementioned dissertation *Myths of Identity in Women's Writing in English Canada and Quebec*, serves as an effective reference work in the comparative Canadian context.

## NINO RICCI'S *Lives of the Saints*

*Lives of the Saints* is a novel written by Canadian-born Nino Ricci. This first novel is also the first book in a trilogy, the second being *In A Glasshouse*, the third yet to be written. In relation to the other works under study here, *Lives of the Saints* constitutes an exception in geographical and temporal terms and therefore deserves special consideration. As a literary work, the novel presents the starting point of this thesis, as it is set in the Molise area in Italy in the early 1960s, whereas the following three works to be analyzed all take place in Canada. The novel therefore provides the geographical access to Italy-based customs of veneration of a female deity.

The novel deals with Vittorio Innocente's memories of his mother, Cristina Innocente. The narrator recounts his early childhood experiences in the small Italian village of Valle del Sole. His mother Cristina is bitten by a snake, during a clandestine meeting with her lover in the family's stable. Vittorio only catches a quick glance of the snake, and his mother's blue-eyed companion. The event in the stable is followed by Cristina's pregnancy and her gradual alienation from the village community. Cristina and Vittorio, leaving his grandfather behind, eventually depart for Canada, where Cristina's husband, Vittorio's father, has

been living for several years. During the trip on the ship, however, Cristina gives premature birth to a daughter, and dies from internal bleeding. The novel ends with Vittorio and his baby half-sister being received by his father in Halifax.

The existence of the black madonna as image of female primal power in the community is presented as an archetypal image. This means, customs of Valle del Sole's community unconsciously reflect the presence of the primordial goddess: the village's solid faithfulness to pre-Christian rituals, is best shown, for example, during the *festa della Madonna*. This regular ceremonial event also affirms the survival of primordial goddess worship, which is, if in slightly modified appearance, still carried out in the Valle del Sole of the novel. Therefore the actual power base for women, the black madonna, is an inspirational image *within range*. *La festa della Madonna* is, despite the religious allusion which the name evokes, bidding farewell to the summer, and a truly agricultural festival which celebrates the primordial goddess. Several features of goddess worship are displayed, whereas the name of the feast itself remains an outward reminder of the magnitude of Catholicism. Many particulars of the festival demonstrate the tradition of pre-Christian customs that are devotedly carried out by the inhabitants, a fact which turns the entire procession into a ritual in honour of an earth-connected female deity: during

the procession that leads the madonna statue to the village cemetery, there are "black-cowled women" who throw "grains or rice in the Madonna's path." Others place "fruits and eggs at the Madonna's feet" or drape "garlands of dried figs" around the statue's neck (*Lives of the Saints* 84), a gesture implying fertility rites.

The Madonna herself is characterized by the narrator as a more anthropocentric than transcendental creation. After heavy rainfall during the procession, the Madonna's sheltering canopy is filled with water and the aforementioned legumes, a picture evoking fertility, one of the black madonna's characteristics. The practice of this ritual celebration states the transmission of ancient values, including the veneration of the black madonna:

The rain had stopped now,... [t]he procession had made its way back up via San Giuseppe and through the square again, Father Nicola still in front, shaking his aspergillum, holy water mingling with the mud underfoot, Mother Mary still riding dry and purple-canopied above the crowd, bobbing with the movement of her bearers, though her canopy sagged now from the wet and from the rice and grain that had collected in it. (87)

Being surrounded by a typically patriarchal social structure of male gatherings at Di Lucci's (the local bar),

and women going on with the daily work in the field and/or at home, Cristina appears exceptionally autonomous. She is entirely liberated from an otherwise male-imposed role as submissive wife, since her husband left for Canada some years ago. Cristina is also released from her husband's roughness, which is the only detail Vittorio vaguely remembers of his father:

I saw my father pick up something from the table, a dish or a bowl, and hurl it towards where my mother sat across from him, wrapped in shadows,... saw my mother recoil, her lips forming into scream or soundless horror as the object shattered against her cheek. (37)

Lastly, Cristina's affair with another man confronts the village's patriarchal authority. She appears in the tradition of the Great Goddess who not only had sex for procreative reasons, but primarily for personal pleasure (Miles 41).

Rejecting both mainstream religion (Catholicism) and pagan beliefs, she appears to be both an iconoclast in her hometown, and a prototype of feminist ideology. Though having no access to feminist teachings, Cristina is nevertheless a forerunner of the contemporary women's movement. She is conceived by the villagers (and her son) as a powerful female, as she revolts against Valle del Sole's

patriarchal values and ethics. Being strongly connected with nature and its elements, she reflects not only female power, but also earth-connected strength, which is linked to the pre-Christian woman divinity. Cristina displays an overt disregard for the Christian/patriarchal standards in the village. Her rejection of a symbolized supreme male power figure is depicted, for example, in her iconoclastic attitude towards the Church's doctrine of woman's passive, chaste image of the Virgin:

'I don't want to be the pope anymore,' I said. 'I want to be Jesus Christ.'

My mother laughed.

'It's too late for that. When the angel came your mother was already in bed with St. Joseph.' (*Lives of the Saints*

34)

The arguments between Cristina and her father confirm her ambition of autonomy, and reveal a typical patriarchal ideology on the part of her father:

'What I do is my own business.'

'And what I do,' my mother said softly, staring into the fire as if sharing a secret with it, 'is my business.'

'Not while you're living in this house, porca madonna! Not while you want to remain my daughter!' (91)

Father Nicola, the village's priest, is nicknamed by her "our fattened calf" (43). When in church, she, as observed by her son, remains silent during the congregation's responses: "[B]ut though I had quickly memorized all the Latin responses and spoke them out in *alta voce*,... my mother did not even bother to move her lips" (41). However, her affair with another man resulting in her pregnancy and her unorthodox behaviour regarding the village's standard lead to her communal isolation. Cristina overthrows patriarchy, Catholicism, and the other women's conventionalism. Vittorio remembers his paternal grandfather's sudden death, after the latter announced that while Vittorio's father Mario lived in poverty overseas, "he leaves his wife to run around like a whore!" (27). The evidence of a woman who has an extramarital sexual relationship, an image which resists the Christian concept of the de-sexed female, makes Cristina in the eyes of the other women an evil and dangerous woman, a fact underscored by the village's fast-spreading rumours: during her later, violent fight with Maria Maiale, "someone else whispered: 'Remember what she did to her father-in-law, everyone says it was her that killed him, for what he said'" (108).

But Cristina also bears Christian features of the suffering, yet withstanding female martyr, as the novel's title, *Lives of the Saints*, suggests. A strong parallel between her and a female saint (Santa Cristina) in a

collection of saints' stories given to her son, indicates that Cristina might be a female principle in the Christian sense.

The archaic conception of magic and evil powers is a recurrent theme of *Lives of the Saints*. Valle del Sole, for example, strongly exposes superstitious beliefs in snakes, as the narrator reports that "a snake crossing you from the right brought good fortune, from the left, bad, ... a brown snake was evil while a green one was good" (11). Valle del Sole's social code is a blend of superstitious convictions, as well as establishing patriarchal principles of the Catholic Church. The town has been governed by Cristina's father (who allegedly sold the villagers out to the fascists (157)) for several decades, and the priest Father Nicola, who, despite surreptitious mockery on the part of some villagers, is publicly respected (43). The other effectual superiority is symbolized by the villager's deeply-rooted superstitions, as a result of age-old pagan practices. Having a much determining effect on Valle del Sole's inhabitants, the vernacular beliefs control the villagers' daily activities, and most importantly, weaken an otherwise more controlling Church doctrine. On a feast day, after Cristina's recovery from the snakebite, as the entire village gathers in the church, "a long stretch of pew remained empty beside my mother" (43). On the same occasion, Father Nicola tries to gain control over the congregation,



by inflicting the fear of abysmal sin on the villagers:

... [Father Nicola] closed with a warning about the villagers' superstitions, which he said he would not name but which he assured us came from the devil. This last theme was by no means an uncommon one with Father Nick, and he never lost a chance to bring it up; but today as he spoke he seemed to cast a significant glance at my mother, as if pregnant with some secret meaning he wished to share with her.(43)

By contrast, Cristina displays indifference to the village's dogmas, since she lives according to a different doctrine, which denounces patriarchal standards and the Catholic Church's superiority. The villagers proclaim allegiance to both Christian and pagan creed, a fact which underlines the narrator's characterization of the coexistence of "two natures" (162) in Valle del Sole, the concurrence of reality and mystery. This dualism of vernacular beliefs and mainstream religion is further substantiated by the fact that Italy's mainland houses the Vatican's powerful, patriarchal miniature state, yet is very much affected by Church-opposing beliefs manifested in the black madonna statues (Birnbaum, *Black Madonnas* 4). Valle del Sole displays an almost dual presence of the representation of supernatural powers that influence

people's everyday life, as for example demonstrated during *la festa della Madonna*. Cristina, however, represents an exceptional deviation from the village's norm.

Pagan customs, such as making a cure to ward off evil spirits, are at first mockingly dismissed by Cristina, as "'stupidaggini'" (*Lives of the Saints* 57). Although overtly not sharing the superstitious beliefs, Cristina, however, is influenced by the pagan concept of a powerful female image, which makes her appear as an almost fearless, earth-connected woman. Cristina is, for example, strongly connected with nature, in particular earth and water. Throughout the novel, Vittorio describes his mother's physical features in association with a fertility-evoking environment. Water, the life-giving element, accompanies her throughout the novel: "At the river, which was swollen from the rains, we waded for a while along the shore, the hem of my mother's skirt catching the water and clinging to her thighs, translucent" (32). A secret cave with a hot spring, in which Cristina and her son bathe, is characterized by the narrator as vagina/womb symbol:

Soon we came to a large opening that receded into darkness in the cliff wall, its mouth so evenly formed it might have been dug by human hands; a small stream flowed out of the darkness in the direction of the river, as if it had burrowed itself out of the mountain like a worm. (32)

The cave is also, like the stable, another amorous meeting place for Cristina and her lover. In both places, Vittorio finds a pair of tinted glasses:

That afternoon [after Cristina's manoeuvring to the hospital], while herding the sheep back into the stable after their grazing, I found a pair of tinted glasses that someone had dropped in the straw.... I had found another pair of tinted glasses about a year before, when my mother had taken me down to the river. (32)

Pigs are another feature connecting Cristina with the black madonna. The pig, according to Neumann, is a fertility symbol (Neumann 45) representing "the Archetypal Feminine" (139). During the course of her pregnancy, a definite sign of fertility, Cristina becomes closely linked with pigs, an image depicting her as fecund, procreating female. Firstly, she conceives in the stable where the family's pigs are kept (*Lives of the Saints* 12). On Vittorio's birthday, at a restaurant in nearby Rocca Secca, her friend's wife, who has certainly heard some of the rumours concerning Cristina, drops explicit hints regarding a possible pregnancy, by relating this assumption to an old tradition of feeding pig tripe to grooms to increase their potency: "'But you should be careful how much you eat! A friend of mine ate tripe every day for a week, and she gave birth to triplets!'"

(70). Finally, after a possible attack of morning sickness, Vittorio finds her, again, "in the stable, leaning against the low wall of the pig's stall, the pigs squealing wildly" (110).

After Cristina is bitten by a green snake during the amorous meeting in the stable with her secret lover, it is both the superstitious beliefs in snakes and moralistic rules that gain the upper hand in the village. The village's notion of overt female sexuality is incompatible with female empowerment. Cristina holds a new position of power--marital and sexual liberation--which is unwelcome by the village's doctrinal uniformity. When Cristina is accused by Giuseppina of being "too proud" (50), it is at first the belief according to an old saying "'Do' l'orgoglio sta, la serpe se ne va,'--where pride is the snake goes" (11) that justifies the villagers' avoidance of her. Cristina's image of independent, sexual female in the feminist sense confronts the effigy of the snakelike seductress, perceived by patriarchal religion. Religion in Valle del Sole is, in fact, a mere pretext which officially exculpates from potential liability, such as covetousness and superstition:

'You know what they're saying about ... [Cristina] in Rocca Secca,' Maria said. 'As if everyone was blind. Walking around like a princess.'

'God will make his judgments,' said Giuseppina. 'It's not for nothing she was bitten by a snake.' (51)

The notion of the snake's evil forces in the Judeo-Christian tradition, however, quickly develops into the conviction that there must be a sombre connection between Cristina and the reptile: "[A]nd there were few who doubted that snakes, whatever their other properties, were agents of the evil eye, which the villagers feared far more than any mere Christian deity or devil" (11). In Valle del Sole, envy is believed to bring malediction, evoked in the form of the evil eye:

It was not simply the envy of one person towards another that the villagers feared; it was the tremendous forces which envy stirred up, forces age-old and sacred, ones that found their incarnation in the evil eye. (54)

In the doctrinal sense, these forces symbolize the villagers' deep-rooted vernacular belief in the supernatural powers of the evil eye. This superstition explains their avoidance of Cristina in the church, because they believe she has been touched by evil. But there are also more profane reasons buried in this behaviour: a remark by Maria Maiale, which Vittorio happens to hear, makes the notion of envy and the evil eye suddenly become synonymous with the

human nature of jealousy, and moral judgment:

'And Vittorio. Growing up like a weed. Do you ever see him getting up at four to help with the harvest, like my Vincenzo? Never. He and his mother play like schoolchildren all day. Someone should write to the boy's father--I have a mind to do it myself.'(51)

Therefore, on a more socio-critical level, these "age-old forces" might as well represent the other women's power to harm Cristina.

The snake has been portrayed in many cultures as a messenger of evil, if not evil itself. According to its mythic significance there has also been a bond with woman: the most conventional image of the snake is probably its embodiment of sin, as depicted in the Book of Genesis. Northrop Frye points out, "[t]he serpent, because of its role in the garden of Eden story, usually belongs on the sinister side of our catalogue in Western literature" (Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* 157). Margaret Hallissy goes one step further, as she explains, "[t]he serpent of Eden was often depicted as having a woman's head, to emphasize Eve's and her daughters' unfortunate propensity to sin" (Hallissy 89). In the Garden of Eden narrative, the serpent, woman's temptation, is depicted as deceitful element working against the act of God. In ancient Greek mythology, Medusa, her head

covered with snakes, is feared for her petrifying gaze.

In Italian popular culture, however, snakes play an important part in connection with the black madonna. Beliefs going back to pre-Christian times, depict the snake as a benign and healing symbol (Birnbaum, *Black Madonnas* 55). The black madonna holds reproductive energy, since she represents nature's life cycle. In ancient European societies, as Birnbaum reveals, it was believed that "the snake was a symbol of life and death and of rebirth, a sign of the regenerative and transformative power of the goddess" (54). With the advent of Christianity, the formerly positive image of the snake as "transformative power of the goddess" gave way to the most frequent image of the snake, that of sin and death. In addition, the precedingly praised aspects of beneficial, regenerative power of the female deity, were transmuted into the sole characteristics of the goddess as bringer of bad tidings, and overaccentuated in this respect the "'death wielding aspect of the goddess when the snake is poisonous and appears in the guise of a woman with some features of a snake'" (54).

The symbolic connection between Cristina and the snake is a manifest constituent of the novel: the affinity between the snake and a powerful female figure is documented, for instance, in the visits some villagers pay to the local witch, *la strega di Belmonte* (in fact, *striga* means "snake turned woman" (Hallissy 89)), in order to buy a special

powder made from snake skin (*Lives of the Saints* 11). The regenerative/reproductive aspect of the black madonna in connection with the serpent takes shape when the narrator reveals the snake's secret intrusion during Cristina and her lover's lovemaking in the stable, the moment when Cristina is impregnated. Cristina appears superior, at least spiritually, to the reptile's danger, since its appearance in the stable does not alarm her, but her lover, who, as she later confides to a friend, "'got very excited when he saw that snake'" (66). Speculations about the snake's intrusion, like Alfredo's prediction of a baby with "the head of a snake", that has to be killed "the minute it's born" (124), suggest sexual intercourse with the devil, as well as the roused forces of the evil eye.

The snake also becomes a phallic image and initiation symbol during Vittorio's secret meeting with Alfredo's gang. When he is asked about the snake's length, Vittorio eventually replies, "'[f]ive feet long'" (124). The attachment to pagan practices confirms the presence of the earth-connected female deity: in order to become a member of the group, Vittorio is supposed to perform intercourse with the earth (125).

In the narrator's perception--a child's mind filled with unsolved mysteries of life--the snakebite connects Cristina, as a woman, more closely to the snake, and nature itself, than man. The connection with earth obviously



opposes the transcendental image of the Holy Mother. Cristina is inspired by an earth-connected female deity, as she is strongly attached to water, earth, and womb symbols, such as the cave and the stable. Correspondingly, she is pictured by Vittorio as his earthmother: "I'd watch her sometimes through my balcony doors as she hoed in the garden, her hair pulled back now in a scarf, her breasts straining against her blouse as she bent forward to pluck out some weed" (77).

While she represents the soothing, maternal features to her son, she increasingly becomes a threat in the other women's eyes. In Valle del Sole, Cristina is reputed to be immune to physical pain, which makes her in the villagers' view powerful, and confirms Vittorio's adoration for his mother:

In the village, my mother was famous for her indifference to pain: everyone told the story about my own birth, ... how ... my mother didn't make a sound, and the midwife thought she had fallen asleep.... I'd seen my mother pull hot bricks from the fireplace with her bare hands, lifting them in one smooth motion into the oven. (17-18)

In an attempt to free her father, who is trapped in his bedroom after a fall, she chops down the bedroom door with an axe, leaving the observing Vittorio "awed by the force of

my mother's swings" (145). However, after the snakebite, the village's women begin to fear her as an obsessed madwoman. During her fight with Maria Maiale, in which Cristina attacks her without warning, she "straddled ... [Maria's] mountainous hips, Maria struggling wildly to keep my mother's hands from closing around her throat" (107-108).

To her son, Cristina appears to be a supernatural female. Her superiority is described by the narrator in many ways as features of a female supreme being. Vittorio perceives her as not only superior to the villagers, but, as the snakebite event shows, virtually immortal. Her independence is tied to both her mental energy and her sexual vitality. Birth pangs (which according to the Scriptures were one of Eve's punishments for sin) do not affect Cristina. After the incident in the stable she seems to have gained new strength and beauty. The source of her increased physical attractiveness is, in the narrator's eyes, the snake's venom, its regenerative power which has made her, in her son's opinion, prettier and stronger: Vittorio witnesses his mother's mystic, divine beauty in the ward, where Cristina "stood out like a flower in a bleak landscape, her colour returned and her hair flowing long and sleek around her shoulders" (31). In contrast to the lifeless creatures in the ward, she is the life-giving female, illuminating the ward with her nature and physical strength, a fact which Cristina herself confirms: "'Everyone in here

is dying except me'" (32).

A woman with a similar aura surrounding her is *la strega di Belmonte*. Both Cristina's and *la strega's* physical appearances are portrayed as stereotypical characteristics of the witch: whereas the former is radiant with beauty among the stout peasant women, the latter, merely a very old woman who rests in total seclusion, chases the narrator away with her witch-like appearance (55). *La strega* also violates the community's conception of woman dominated by man. *La strega's* and Cristina's refusal of submission denotes the conception of woman as free individual, which confronts the patriarchal conception of woman dominated by man. Though being consulted by many, *la strega* lives as an outcast, and she would possibly not be tolerated in any of the surrounding communities. Like Cristina, she displays an unusual dissimilarity, which may be correlated with mythic subterranean forces.

The banishment of woman in Valle del Sole has partly to do with the village's conception of saints. A most striking element in the novel is the ubiquitous presence of saints. In a religious sense, this expression might be appropriately lucid. With regard to the book's title and heroine, however, the term *saint* requires some clarification.

According to the villagers, Cristina is a promiscuous, immoral woman, thus scarcely considered by any of the inhabitants to be extremely good, or *meritorious*. In

Vittorio's eyes, the village's Christian-patriarchal structure equals life-long suffering or sinning, and then either heaven or hell. His teacher's sagacious understanding, "'God will always make you pay for your sins'" (40) captivates Vittorio very much, and creates his belief to be a sinner, "despite my best intentions" (42). The narrator is at a very young age obsessed with religion and to such an extent, that he, simultaneously, believes that "the devil had claimed a hold on my soul" (41), and aspires to become a pope when grown up. Being daily confronted with the village's protective pagan customs against the evil eye, for example "amulets of garlic or wolves' teeth" worn by the villagers and "goat horns" affixed to their entrances (11), he believes, the blue-eyed stranger might be a messenger of the evil eyes' dark forces:

[T]wo eyes suddenly swooped out of the stable like swallows, turning magically a luminous blue as they caught the sunlight, bright flames that held me transfixed and seemed to burn away all other features of the figure swooping down on me. I stumbled backwards and fell, my arms coming up instinctively to shield me against a blow  
.... (12)

It is hardly surprising that Vittorio becomes more attached to a female figure, his mother, since his world of

thought contains exceptionally violent or undesirable images of males: The blue-eyed stranger, Father Nicola, and the blurry, godlike image of a furious father, "contorted in anger" (37), "looming suddenly large and angry in our doorway one day, bringing with him some unspeakable doom" (155). Father Nicola literally puts the fear of God into every pupil with his patriarchal educational measures, when he tests on the children's catechism at school, by suddenly materializing in the classroom "like a dark angel" (44): for every incorrect answer the child in question, "always a boy" (44), is punished with three strokes with a paddle, "one for the Father, one for the Son, one for the Holy Ghost" (43). As a reaction to his fear of a male god, who, through Father Nick's brutal corporal punishment, demonstrates only violent power, Vittorio's idol is his mother, who displays the warm features of the feminine. He is raised without a father, and educated almost exclusively by women, thus is nurtured more likely with a gynocentric ideology. The affection for his mother, however, also strongly resembles oedipal adoration beyond infantile fondness. Cristina is symbolically paralleled by Harding's aforementioned Moon Goddess, "reigning supreme with her son who is usually also her lover" (Harding 98). Sharing the marital bed with his mother, he is her steady companion:

My mother's room,... had been warm and reassuring, rich with my mother's smells, the body smells that lingered on the bed sheets, the perfume my mother sometimes dabbed on her wrists and neck on Sundays or when she went to market, and rich with the memory of the years I had slept there with her .... (*Lives of the Saints* 38)

She shares the secret cave with him (33), at *la festa della Madonna*, she dances with Vittorio, "twirling with me at a breathless pace" (103). The other villagers may consider her an immoral woman; with her obvious strength, however, and mysteries that surround her, like her nonchalance towards pain, she is a true goddess to her son. The analogy between Cristina and a saint emerges, after Vittorio receives the hagiography of *Lives of the Saints* as a gift from his teacher. He almost immediately draws a distinct comparison between his mother and her namesake, Santa Cristina.

By defying patriarchy, the novel's heroine rejects her otherwise inferior status to men. In the male concept of monotheism, according to Elinor Gadon, "[t]he power of the feminine came to be seen as threatening to the established social order" (Gadon xiv). Cristina and her namesake are both alienated from society because they display a power structure unfamiliar to and unwelcome by an androcentric community. In the saint's story as well as the novel, the forces of male authority oppose female autonomy: both women

possess the strong-willed spirit to rebel against the codes set by a male hierarchy, and both scorn the conventions of their communities. Both women display a sense of iconoclastic determination and passion with regard to their respective conduct: Santa Cristina, the Christian, sells all of her father's "gold and silver images of the pagan gods" (*Lives of the Saints* 135) in order to raise money for the poor. The novel's Cristina displays female autonomy by overtly rejecting the village's social codes. As a consequence, the community in both stories attempts to deprive the women of their passionate spirit. The chastisement of Santa Cristina resembles very much the judgment upon the great harlot according to the Apocalypse (**Holy Scriptures**, *Revelation* 17:16): every possible step is taken to deform her female features, in order to bring about her submission: her flesh is torn away, she is thrown into a cauldron containing hot oil, her breasts are cut off, yet she does not succumb (*Lives of the Saints* 135-136). Denounced by her own father as "'a common whore'" (144), Cristina Innocente faces public as well as private degradation.

The pattern of Cristina's eventual anguish is also connected with the novel's motif of saints. With regard to the conception and function of saints, female autonomy is opposed, and even destroyed by male dictatorship. The adaptation of Santa Cristina, for example, documents the

Christian doctrine of female suffering, substantiated by the image of the Virgin. The eponymous collection is a religious volume of myths, praising Santa Cristina for devout bravery. The former ostracism of a female agitator is transformed into godly heroism, as Santa Cristina is eventually rewarded with sanctification. By contrast, Cristina Innocente, reflecting veneration of the female without the agony of de-sexing, is accused of adultery, witchcraft, prostitution, but the departure from Valle del Sole gives her peace and freedom.

Finally, Vittorio defines Cristina as a saint. By recounting the story of his mother, Vittorio virtually becomes his mother's hagiographer (besides, her nickname, being "Cristi," operates as a reminder of consecration). According to the collection, the saint, after being thrown into the sea, emerges from the sea to ascend to heaven. Cristina Innocente, after her death from internal bleeding, is buried in the sea. However, during his recovery from pneumonia, Vittorio, though being delirious, has a vision of "a large orange balloon floating calmly by in the sky, and someone in a basket beneath waving goodbye, goodbye to a friend on the earth" (233). The orange is associated with Cristina during her last hours on the ship, from the moment she carries it away from the captain's table (213) to the cabin, where she gives birth. Therefore, Vittorio's association between the saint and Cristina symbolically



comes full circle.

Cristina's powerful position as woman among the other peasants is certainly a most unlikely status in sleepy, patriarchal Valle del Sole. The other women all lead traditional lives as inferior females, working in the fields and simultaneously bringing up children. Yet, these peasant women also display a strong bonding among them. The conspicuousness of their strength and autonomy is a characteristic which connects them to the so-called *godmothers*. These late 19th century Sicily peasant women led lives as subservient wives to their husbands, but also created a space outside the patriarchal framework. Exclusively female communal areas, such as public wash troughs, became meeting places of prototypical female networks in arranging marriages, exchanging the latest news, or even terminating pregnancy:

These godmothers sustained an unequal society, submitted to a patriarchal system, and taught daughters to guard their virginity and to be faithful wives.... [They] extended the boundaries of the family to women bound to one another by children and mutual concerns, prefiguring contemporary feminist networks. (Birnbaum, *Liberazione* 11)

All the female characters in the village expose strength and strong will, yet most of them live in traditional roles as

subservient females. The male view of woman in Italy, as Birnbaum observes, is a matrix "of woman as madonna/wife, virgin/prostitute, companion/pupil" (8). Cristina reflects the dual character of the black madonna, because she exposes benign as well as negative powers. She does display features of, what Rosalind Miles calls, the patriarchal conception of the "good mother," who is perceived as "procreative and nurturing" (Miles 40). Cristina, however, also represents the "dangerous, dark and destructive opposite" of "the bad mother" (40). She is adulteress, temptress, and, if only in the eyes of the villagers, the devil's companion. In patriarchal society, as Miles wryly remarks, "[t]he good mother does not fuck around" (41). In the other women's opinion, Cristina's adultery has to come to an end, simply because she has transgressed the established social code. In her publication *Archetypal Patterns in Women's Fiction*, Annis Pratt comprehends the patriarchal tenacity, "that adulterous wives are especially cursed; and that women engaging in sexuality outside of marriage are 'fallen,' 'abnormal,' or 'whores'" (Pratt 73).

Yet, in the villagers' eyes, much seems to depend on gestures, which, like the protection against the evil eye, are supposed to confront/encounter the supernatural forces. Cristina is asked by her old schoolfriend Giuseppina, to perform a ceremony in either the Christian or pagan tradition, in order to prevent a curse on the village. The

first proposition consists in a confession at church. As a second suggestion, Giuseppina asks her to "make a cure" (*Lives of the Saints* 56), which, inter alia, consists in sacrificing a chicken or a goat, pouring the animal's blood into the earth, and saying, "[t]his is my blood, which comes out of me like a river to the sea" (56-57). This proposed ritual also connotes the fertilization of earth, similar to Vittorio's intended initiation ceremony during his meeting with Alfredo's gang.

As Cristina initially declines both performances, the women begin to both disregard and fear her. But after Cristina appears in the church on Christmas Day, the villagers believe that one of the proposed gestures is fulfilled, and "debated and discussed over Christmas dinner, finally taken perhaps as some kind of a sign, the sign of the repentance and guilt which the villagers had no doubt long been waiting for" (142).

What is mostly missing between Cristina and the village's women is female bonding. The women are waiting for a sign that connects Cristina with the village's canon. While the women are devout church-goers, Cristina does not "have any use for" (56) Father Nicola. Seemingly, she dismisses the pagan ritual, though she later performs the proposed cure in the stable: "[O]n a wooden block in front of the chicken run lay the limp headless body of a chicken, a bloodstained cleaver beside it and a pan of blood resting

on the ground nearby" (110). Interestingly, after Cristina's appearance in church, the women drop their formerly biased behaviour towards her, "as if they had suddenly remembered some sin or crime for which they themselves had gone unpunished, now openly solicitous towards my mother" (143). In their opinion, the gesture, the requested sign, has been contributed in the conventional way, and therefore, the women no longer reject Cristina. The preservation of the established codes seems to be consolidated again. Before the church visit, Cristina was even feared by some of the male villagers. In their opinion, her apparent sign of repentance, is proof that the patriarchal supremacy has gained the upper hand again: "It was as if something in my mother's misfortune had made them suddenly feel invulnerable and strong, and they joked with each other in a way that seemed strangely candid and coarse, all their timidity gone" (143).

In the novel, a possible exclusion from society is concerning exclusively women, who appear *non-Christian*. Two other female outsiders are the local witch, *la strega di Belmonte*, who lives as a recluse, and Marta, who visits the Innocente household on Sundays, together with her mother, Zia Lucia. *La strega* corroborates the vernacular beliefs in wise women with occult powers. Marta presents the obscure, maybe subterranean nature of the earth-connected female being. In fact, the rudimentary prototype of a social female

network is the quasi-alliance between Cristina and Marta. Being neither obedient wife nor dishonourable female, Marta's unconventional behaviour as woman challenges the village's dual perception of a "good" or "bad" woman, of saints and sinners. Valle del Sole's patriarchal concept of the flawless woman comprehends her in the most restricted sense as mother, housewife, subservient worker. Being childless and unmarried--a vulnerable position in patriarchal-Christian society--Marta is treated by the other villagers with a combination of arrogance and regard, "as if she were both simple and yet possessed of mystical powers, a witch" (47). As unmarried female inhabitant, she is directly connected with witchcraft and conceivably with the evil eye. Subterranean powers of the evil eye are often correlated with old women or spinsters (DiStasi 17). With Cristina's departure, Marta eventually becomes surrogate mother of the heroine's father, by looking after him.

Marta's dissociated conduct as observer of the course of events confirms the inspirational image of a supreme female being. Vittorio believes her to have extra-sensory perception, as she seems to discern Cristina's approaching predicament soon after the snakebite: "But Marta seemed especially canny today, in her dark silence, as if some usually dormant receptor in her had been aroused, the way some people's limbs ached before a storm" (*Lives of the Saints* 47). Marta remains the observer of the dramatic

events, Cristina's advancing pregnancy, and the increasing tension between father and daughter in the Innocente household:

Marta watched over us all like a fate,... and when I followed her eyes they seemed always to light away from the centre of things--on my mother scrubbing glasses at the sideboard, her back to the room, her shoulders working with a restrained violence; on my grandfather. (144)

\* \* \*

Like the black madonna, Cristina holds negative and positive power. Her strength and the continuity of her life as free woman are her beneficial characteristics. But Cristina also does damage, by destroying her grandfather's reputation among the villagers. As Roberta Imboden points out, Cristina "has beauty and power for good and for evil.... Cristina is eternal beauty, love, and eternal faithful relationship, as well as ugliness, treachery and unfaithfulness" (Imboden 44). In many respects, Cristina embodies mother, lover, and whore. To Vittorio she not only represents the nurturing mother, but also sexually active female, which are both features of the Great Goddess according to Rosalind Miles and M. Esther Harding. She is a mother and housewife, but to Vittorio, she is superior to the villagers because of her autonomy. After her paid visit

to church on Christmas Day, Vittorio gives the lie to the villagers' conviction of Cristina's alleged subordination: "If anyone had noticed the cold defiance with which my mother had walked down the aisle of the church and taken her place at her pew, they had chosen to ignore it" (*Lives of the Saints* 142).

Valle del Sole, this almost medieval village, is by no means a fruitful field for woman's emancipation. The collision of two power structures--the town's patriarchy and Cristina's individual feminism--only confirms the *menacingly* female power she holds. It is the villagers' self-righteousness that justifies the vernacular belief in Cristina's relation to exclusively negative powers. At first, she embodies the evil seductress, bearing "'some devil'" (108) inside her. Though eventually being alienated from Valle del Sole's community, she sustains her strength. Cristina is indirectly accused of witchcraft and intercourse with the devil, but this potentiality depicts her all the more as *supreme*. The accusations against her bear witness of the present image of the black madonna. As mentioned above, formerly positive and negative powers of the black goddess were changed into images such as the poisonous woman, a menace to man. Cristina commits adultery, but this infidelity also connects her with polygamous regeneration, an aspect of the primordial goddess. While the black madonna represents female sexual liberty and voluntary procreation--

as Cristina practices--the image of the Catholic Madonna (the image of the statue) characterizes the other features of female submission and compulsive reproduction imposed by men. Cristina is associated with the patterns of good/bad female (as explained by Annis Pratt and Rosalind Miles), by her son and the villagers, respectively. In her son's eyes, the images of the pre-Christian madonna and the Christian, celestial female are equally connected with Cristina: she is his black madonna, but Vittorio also correlates her with the Christian martyr, Santa Cristina. Cristina possesses power, as long as she appears menacingly different in the other women's eyes. To her son, however, she remains superior throughout the novel.

Cristina is by no means ignorant of other women's predicament, in particular female oppression. In a final discussion, her father predicts her life in America as a prostitute and "[d]isgraziata," whereupon Cristina replies:

'Ah, *sí*, he's [her husband] probably slept with every whore in America by now, but for me it's a disgrace. Women have had their faces up their asses for too long, they let their men run around like goats and then they're happy if they don't come home and beat them!' (154)

Although the image of the black madonna as autonomous female being empowers Cristina, she is never given the



opportunity to improve the woman's general position in her community, which could lead to a more woman-focused society. There is, however, some tacit agreement between Marta and her, which demonstrates that Cristina is capable of bonding with other women. She therefore reflects a more optimistic outlook on a female-focused society, an aspect of the black madonna. Towards the end of her life, during the boat trip, the spirit of female unity is even further substantiated. Cristina is once more accused of adultery, this time by the captain's wife. But instead of ignoring the woman's jealous pain, she soothes her, as she obviously understands the woman's anguish of being disrespected:

'Calmatevi,' [Cristina] said gently. 'I think you've made a mistake. I'm not the woman you're looking for.

.....

'We've both been tricked--the captain's friend isn't coming aboard this trip, they must have put me here to confuse you. I don't know anything else about it, except that they tried to make fools out of both of us.' (198)

If one dissects the story's mythical structure according to biblical conventions, one might argue that the snake, as a bad omen of the ending of the story, depicts the predetermined necessity of Cristina's death. The snake, on the other hand, serves as symbol of regeneration, is

therefore a cyclic image that foretells the regeneration of a goddess who, like the snake sheds its skin, is revitalized. The birth of a daughter and the mother's subsequent death is a recurring characteristic in Cristina's *blood*, because Cristina's own mother died after her birth (38). Through abandonment of her old form, the goddess dies only to be reawakened with the new life. Similar to Persephone's abduction and eventual resurrection, Cristina's newborn daughter indicates the beginning of new life. During the funeral at sea, Vittorio, though suffering from a fever, draws a distinct analogy between his mother's death and the cyclic conception of nature, "the kind of thing where dead people were not dead or where they could sometimes come back to life again, like that, the way the wheat around Valle del Sole, snow-covered in winter, could suddenly be green again in the spring" (235). The symbolic significance of water and water-connected fluids in connection with Cristina is once more brought forward during the delivery: the water depicts the life-providing amniotic fluid of her womb, with which she shelters the baby. The black madonna's transformative attribute is additionally reflected in the catalytic characteristic of blood. Cristina's bleeding to death echoes Giuseppina's proposed pagan cure, which embraced the incantation, "[t]his is my blood, which comes out of me like a river to the sea" (56-57). Therefore, she symbolically becomes a part of the life cycle and the pagan tradition.

## FRANK PACI'S *Black Madonna*

*Black Madonna* is a novel by Frank Paci, an Italo-Canadian writer born in Pesaro, Italy. At the age of four, Paci and his mother immigrated to Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario, following his father. He studied at the University of Toronto. His first novel *The Italians* was published in 1978, followed by *Black Madonna* in 1982, and *The Father* in 1984. Frank Paci's most recent novel, *Sex and Character*, published in 1993, is the sequel to *Black Blood* (1991) and *Under the Bridge* (1992).

\* \* \*

In the novel, which takes place in Sault Ste. Marie, Adamo Barone, a first-generation Italian, has just died of cancer. His daughter and his grandson are coming from Toronto to attend the funeral. The widow is Assunta Barone, the novel's eponymous character. Assunta's son, Joey, who has never left the Sault, still lives in his parents' house and works in the local steel plant (in his student days, Paci worked for four years at the Sault's steel plant). With the father's death, the other members of the family are now about to display even further the breakdown and mutual aberration of the Barone household. Marie's disturbed relationship with her mother was one of the main reasons she left the parental home for the big city. The missing oneness

in the family and the lack of understanding between Marie and Assunta consequently lead to a total dissolution of the strained relationship between the two women. The women's lack of affinity becomes the novel's key element. The story is told within a double level of narration: one course of the story is seen from Joey's point of view, and takes place in the present, while the second is seen through Marie's eyes. The novel narrates the development of Marie and Assunta's strained relationship from the former's adolescence to the latter's sudden death and funeral.

Two strong-willed female personalities dominate in the Barone household, namely Assunta and her daughter Marie. Whereas the former depicts the tyrannizing matriarch, the latter displays her alleged superiority in particular in front of her younger brother Joey. Marie and Assunta conduct a troubled, at various times extremely strained relationship with each other, due to several, explicitly insoluble discords. These disagreements can be put down to arguments of linguistic, inter-, and intra-cultural nature. Moreover, it is Marie's search for self that marks the novel's plot most. Not only does Marie lack an ethnic identity, as she defiantly rejects her Italianess, but she aspires to a female power base, something which will honour her not only as "a mere woman who had to fulfil her biological requirements" (*Black Madonna* 143). Although the two women are in conflict with each other, and despite the daughter's

rejection of her mother, Assunta, the Black Madonna, is Marie's unrealized, unconscious object of a quest for female recognition. Symbolically, Marie's pursuit parallels Persephone's search for Demeter, after the former's abduction to the underworld, which will be discussed later in this chapter.

Assunta Barone epitomizes, as the title at least outwardly suggests, the female image of the sorrowful, submissive woman, as indoctrinated by the Catholic Church, the mourning Italian widow. Yet, Assunta's character also reveals features of a woman as powerful, ruling individual, who is mysteriously connected with nature. Assunta is not only associated with earth, but with *native soil*. One of her ancient habits, for example, involves walking the tracks every spring, "to pick *cicoria*" (81) for dandelion salad.

Her strong connection with a primordial female deity is further authenticated after her husband's death. The wake, held in the Barone house, substantially implies pre-Christian mourning rituals. Assunta's anguish for her dead husband manifests itself in an ecstatic, trance-like mourning ceremonial, which she performs, together with five other women her age, in the couple's bedroom, where Adamo's body is laid out on the nuptial bed. The mourning ritual also embodies some collective wailing, which is concluded with a "piercing shriek" resembling "an animal caught in a trap, knowing it was about to die" (7). The mysteriousness

of the ceremonial performance shows a distinct influence of pagan customs and beliefs inherited. In her chapter on daily operations of Italian peasant women, Birnbaum describes a similar practice:

These women, dressed in black, led the cries and praises of the dead in a *lutto* (mourning period) that lasted nine days.... [I]n unconscious layers of vernacular belief, peasant women who wear black most of their lives may be honoring the ancient goddess and her values of life, death, and regeneration. (Birnbaum, *Black Madonnas* 52)

In the novel, the women's sombre clothing of "black shawls over their heads" (*Black Madonna* 12), merely touches on a Christian tradition of a grieving Virgin. The mourners' gloomy outfit and the ancient nature of their bearing depicts them more likely as earth-connected females.

Their ritual behaviour responds to the archetypal foundation of pre-Christian ceremonials. As observed in Jung's theory of inheriting ideas and concepts from an ethnic past through one's unconscious mind, the Sault's wailers response seemingly on a quasi-conscious level to their shared, religious as well as pagan, past of ancient native customs. The black mourners' sleep-like state, underlined by "solemn trance-like expressions" (12) being reflected on their faces, strongly suggests the subconscious

step into former times, in their collective minds. This well-preserved practice of the old country connotes the black madonna's negative power (death). And according to Joey, who witnesses the ceremonial, the women's demeanour sustains an archaic quality: "Like a chorus of professional mourners, they could've stepped out of the middle ages.... [Joey] remembered they mockingly used to call them Black Madonnas in the old days" (13).

These women also exemplify a specific, female affinity to spirituality. Moreover, the church in Sault Ste. Marie offers sanctuary from the new world and perpetuation of ancient practices. Adamo's earlier remark that "[c]hurch was for women" (14) not only authenticates the male speculation that women might have more use for religious rites, it is also an affirmation of a patriarchal practice of restricting women's social environment. Furthermore, it implies a possible incompatibility of men and women due to ideological dissimilarity. In the Sault, the church is a common meeting place for the women from the old country. Female spirituality leads here to female bonding, and a gender-specific ritual practice.

Regardless of the cultural ethos presented in these mourning customs, Assunta's mourning illustrates not only her detachment of the new world's actuality, but most of all, attachment to old, mysterious forces, unfathomable to her son. During the funeral cortege, Assunta suddenly bursts

into a hysterical crying fit, which Joey interprets as a true sign that "Adamo's death meant something to ... [Assunta] that they had no way of knowing" (24).

Since her arrival, time seems to have stood still for her. Assunta has been living in Canada for three decades, yet hardly speaks any English. She still acts according to old, well-protected customs, constantly rebuffs any modern practices (except watching television), and simply is utterly "old-country" (7). The stubborn non-adaptation to new customs and the nostalgia for the old country make her appear as the stoic, ever-suffering female. Numerous characteristics in Assunta's behaviour, however, suggest matriarchal power. These elements are most strikingly present in the Barone household. Assunta's absolute dominance over the other family members is indisputable. She relentlessly controls, for instance, the children's eating:

Assunta Barone was an absolute tyrant at the dinner table. Marie didn't know how she came to be that way or why, but it had been the case ever since she could remember. The table was like her theatre of operations and her rules were unquestioned. Whatever was put on the table had to be eaten.... And woe to the person who didn't eat his full portions. She badgered all during the meal--and even went so far as to put the food up to their mouths. (31-32)



Likewise, regarding her marriage, it is Assunta who wears the trousers. Procreation, for example, takes precedence over all other matters in Assunta's microcosm. At first glance, Assunta seems hardly correlated with Miles's aforementioned Great Goddess who has sex mainly for pleasure (Miles 41). Yet, an analogy between her and Assunta remains. Assunta understands procreation as a life fulfilment, not marriage, as Father Sarlo later recalls, "'[i]f there was one thing [Assunta] wanted in all the world, she said, it was having children. To make life worthwhile, she said'" (*Black Madonna* 185). Assunta's daughter derisively refers to her as "a mail-order bride" (37), since her marriage was arranged through a photo sent to Adamo. To a certain extent, however, Assunta chooses the new country and Adamo as a means to fulfil her greatest wish, in preference to the old country and her family. In a broader sense, Adamo becomes merely begetter of Assunta's offspring, a fact which transposes her at a level similar to the Great Goddess.

Both Marie and Joey are brought up according to patriarchal values, for example, it is Marie as a teenager who has to keep her brother's and her room tidy (66). It is, however, Assunta who indisputably becomes responsible for a female-focused ambience in the Barone household: after one of the several arguments between mother and daughter, Marie overhears the subsequent marital dispute, in which Assunta is dominating:

She was accusing Adamo for all the trouble. If only he had put his foot down long ago and not allowed her to leave. If only he was more forceful, and sided with her for once, instead of being so indulgent and giving their daughter money to stay away from home. (103-104)

But Assunta also possesses a mysterious, earth-connected nature, which directly connects her with Birnbaum's black madonna. She is clearly linked with the transformative power of objects. The ability to create is one of the characteristics connected with, what Neumann calls, "the Maternal-Feminine" (Neumann 29). Assunta is also correlated with the cyclic conception of the black madonna's "three ages" (Birnbaum, *Black Madonnas* 54), birth, adulthood, death.

Assunta is a devoted mother, who adores her children. But apart from this maternal love, the two items closest to Assunta are food and the house she lives in. With the assistance of these two elements, she raises her family. While the former represents the means of transformation and growth, the latter represents the place where the feeding/growing/transforming process develops. Assunta's closeness to her house defines her as strongly attached to the earth-connected goddess. Like the vessel and the receptacle, the building may be a symbol of the womb, woman's life-creating organ. Even more striking, Assunta's

governing area, the kitchen, is located in the basement, literally providing a womb of nourishment. Meals are taken there as well, according to Joey, "an Italian custom here" (*Black Madonna* 166).

Food offers Assunta a means to preserve the beloved ones, and thus possibly the only testimony of affection. As it is later revealed, Assunta's family in Italy had to endure a period of famine, which haunts her for the rest of her life. Father Sarlo vindicates Assunta's way of expressing love with a parable: "'Love came from a need.... It's like bread. You need bread to live. Then from your need you come to love your food'" (157). Nourishment, in a broader, figurative sense (for example, affection as literally the food of love) becomes the metaphysically crucial element in Assunta's life. Her prepared dishes may be the only possible testimony of love Assunta can offer. As Joey puts it, "'[m]aybe she's just trying to be a mother the only way she knows how'" (102). Alas, her total obsession with food leads to serious problems with her oldest daughter, Marie. Assunta virtually force-feeds her children. Her powerful presence around the kitchen table leaves her unreachable, and absolutely no space for female intercommunication, as Assunta is not the liberator, but, in terms of provision, the dictator. Assunta's force-feeding, of food and anachronistic educational methods, leads to Marie's painful duration as an overweight teenager.

The mother's maternal despotism which poisons the relationship with her daughter obscures the latter's perception of Assunta, as Marie comprehends her mother as "[s]omeone from the dark ages" (108), not in the mythical, but socio-historical sense. Feeling physically crippled because of her overweight, Marie desperately attempts to lose weight, and simply not become what her mother wants her to be. As daughter as well as woman, she senses the mother's discrimination against her. Consequently, Marie develops a deeply-rooted repugnance for her ethnic background, an almost italophobic attitude to anything even slightly connected with her (mother's) origins.

Marie's dilemma of identity crisis as a woman becomes most distinct with puberty. Puberty, the end of childhood and the beginning of sexuality, is a most traumatic experience for Marie. Being confronted with the compulsively pure image of the Virgin, the de-sexed woman, menstruation indicates in her opinion a malediction. The patriarchal/Christian conception of woman, as exhibited in church, totally denies the reality of the black madonna, namely a connection between womanhood and eroticism. Though menstruation marks the beginning of Marie's procreative vigour, she feels "unclean inside" (31), a fact which denotes a compulsive Catholic upbringing. Woman's image of the statue in patriarchy and Catholic doctrine possesses Marie to a great extent. Not only does Marie feel tormented

by her menstruation, but, with the arrival of her sexual maturity, considers herself sinning when masturbating. Because of an oppressive Catholic education, masturbation appears to her a fanatic, evil vice. The confrontation of the local church's madonna statues displaying "beatific expressions" (77) eventually causes her to quit going to church. Marie now becomes symbolically Persephone, or a young woman, looking for Demeter, the mother, to help her through this difficult period: "[Marie] felt so miserable she wanted the earth to open up and swallow her right there" (41).

Marie's eventual exodus from home to metropolitan Toronto symbolizes another step in her state of deprivation/rejection of her feminine power base within, as she leaves her mother without any attempt of reconciliation. Without realizing it, the image of the black madonna, her mother's female power base that is, becomes her constant goal of achievement. Yet, she is also haunted by the image of the earth-connected female, as it represents all the compulsive characteristics about her mother which Marie repels. For example, her mother's earthiness about her daughter's bodily functions makes her in Marie's eyes absolutely repulsive:

**As a girl, whenever she was particularly naughty or Assunta found fault with her, her mother would maliciously bring**

up the fact that she wet her bed well past the acceptable age. "Che stupida ragazza, you pissed your pants like a fountain," she'd say. Or, "I had to wash your sheets every day, you little pisser." (71-72)

Disgusted by her own body, these remarks cause her as a teenager to abhor her sexual needs. Overwhelmed by sexual fantasies at night, she draws a distinct connection between her childhood bedwetting and her body's sexual moistness: "It seemed if she wasn't wetting the bed one way she was doing it another" (76).

Feeling oppressed by the doctrine of an over-emotional mother, her first attempts to gain individual independence are in an unemotional field of mathematics, in order to prove that "Marie Barone, ... of humble Italian parentage, had shown she could do the job in a field dominated by men" (104), but also to distance herself from her emotional background. Bonanno explains in his essay that many Italians educated in Canada learn "the emotional language at home and the non[-]emotional one at school, and since emotions are learnt from experience and not from books it is arduous to express them in English" (Bonanno 169). Marie obviously tries to distance herself from her mother and the Italian culture, because her mother (and her self) and being Italian are the two factors which primarily agitate her. In her opinion, to be emotional equals absence of control. Her

bodily needs seem to be uncontrollable to her as well, therefore the separation of body and mind becomes the only method for self-control.

As a student at university, she overtly acknowledges feminist ideas, since they are obviously in disaccord with her mother's views. Toronto represents to Marie the flight from matriarchal tyranny into female liberation. But whereas Sault Ste. Marie signified compulsive control over her, Toronto will lead to uncontrollable, powerless eating habits and eventually an eating disorder. The strained mother/daughter relationship and Marie's conviction of her mother's withdrawal of love, lead to Marie's total rejection of any food linked in the slightest with Assunta. Neumann explains that "[t]he function of rejection is closely related to that of deprivation, which in the elementary sphere forms the counterpart to the function of giving" (Neumann 67). Like Assunta, Marie has become obsessed with food. Her food mania, in contrast, is the exact flip side of Assunta's, an almost pathological aversion to any Italian food, resulting in her anorexia. Her incapability of eating food--the symbol of maintenance and growth--exemplifies Marie's inner disequilibrium. The lack of unity between body and soul makes her powerless. Moreover this lack is reflected in Assunta and Marie's relationship. Assunta represents the body, in a sense the food Marie needs to grow. This characteristic of fecundity is denied in Marie's

demeanour. Without her recognizing Assunta's power base, as a woman and a mother, Marie's quest for self cannot be fulfilled. Marie's, at this point unaccepted, earth-connectedness not only is reflected in her eating disorder, but her suppressed sexual desire and dysfunctional marriage.

As her new lifestyle in Toronto differs one hundred percent from the days in the Sault, so does her husband Richard. He is an anglophone, Protestant, rational-appearing man, who embraces none of the characteristics she most rebuffs in her family: being Italian, the church, and emotion. The refusal of her mother is also a self-denial, and moreover prevents her from uncovering her hidden, true self. Through sexual self-control tending towards marital frigidity, Marie is forced to realize that Richard "could never bring her to the point where she lost herself" (*Black Madonna* 114).

But her outward, rational facade simply cannot deny her body's instability with tensions to be emitted. The conscious refusal to eat equals her denial to make up with her mother, and denotes sex starvation. At a New Year's party in the University's residence, she is suddenly overwhelmed by a vision of her mother's Christmas food, which she refused to eat merely days before. Marie also happens to be under the influence of alcohol, an additional stimulus to recover her unconscious, *hungry* self. It is her craving for food, sexual satisfaction, love, which abruptly



inundates her consciousness.

Tentatively at first she reached over and touched the length of the bread loaf. It felt silky soft on the surface but firm underneath. The turkey was slippery with oil.... She chewed hungrily on the juicy delicious flesh .... She could've screamed with pleasure. (112-113)

Her split identity causes Marie to develop repentance for her sexual needs, instead of fully relishing them. The image of the subterranean female deity possesses Marie already to a great extent, if subconsciously. The imbalance in her marriage, the impression that her husband patronizes her does not help to improve their sex life. The compulsion of her Catholic upbringing makes her feel ashamed of her body's "urges" (76). Her need to masturbate not only reflects a fully-developed sexuality, but the growing awareness of her own, female body-consciousness grounded on earth-connectedness. This cognizance, however, remains half-denied and hated: "It would humiliate her beyond measure to tell her husband she had to touch herself every so often. Because she couldn't be dry for too long. She had to feel the moisture in the dark, deep part of her" (152). Yet, her own characterization of her sexual needs delineates her earth-connectedness, and defines her body as a transforming organ.

The lack of feminine fulfilment urges Marie's wish for

rebirth. Unconsciously, some of the required characteristics, like the black madonna's transformative power, are already in place. At night, synonymous with darkness (one of the attributes of the black madonna), Marie believes to be "deeply peaceful and strangely whole" (150). But after giving birth to a son, she feels even more inferior to her husband, and more incarcerated in a malfunctioning marriage. Though she does not appear to be obsessed with religion, her humiliation of giving birth embodies the Catholic concept of the inferior woman. In her opinion, Richard's professional career has become a beatification, which lifts him up. Although procreation actually brings her closer to the cyclic image of the primordial goddess, it exemplifies to Marie one step back in her social position. Moreover, the lack of sexual conformity between Richard and her confirms Marie's need to believe in her self:

Michael's birth had brought her down, closer to the earth. She could feel her body wanting to unravel, open up, and break through in the moist, dark earth. And that her body itself was composed of this moist, dark earth that wanted to take things in and push them out renewed and engorged with life. (151-152)

Marie's search for self, and her quest for reunion with her mother, is expressed throughout the novel by the search for a hidden key. Marie's personal instability is repeatedly displayed whenever there is a confrontation of ideologies between Assunta and her. After the usual arguments she habitually looks for the hidden key to her mother's dowry trunk, the only item Assunta brought over when she left the Italian village to marry Adamo. The trunk signifies Assunta's ethnic and cultural past, and the key becomes a recurrent motif. Without the symbolic key, a reunion between the two women is impossible. While Assunta refers to the trousseau trunk as "*bavulo*," Marie always calls it "Hope Chest" (10) (though the trunk belongs to Assunta, and contains her belongings from the old country), as she connects the trunk directly with herself, and the *hope* to find a symbolic home. She questions her mother's, but also her own value as a woman, as being "equated with the contents of a trunk" (39).

The dowry trunk eventually gives Marie a new impetus to her quest. After her mother's death it belongs to her, according to custom. During the ultimate search for the hidden key after Assunta's death, Marie discovers that the trunk has long been unlocked. The mother's dowry, the inherited culture of her and her daughter's people, has been of access to Marie for a longer period, as if Assunta prepared her departure. Assunta's cryptic, yet prevalent

entity, and her life in another country at another time, is revealed, when Marie eventually uncovers the sought-after "value hidden in that old trunk" (188). A new search, this time for cultural roots, is initiated, and will be extended with Marie's eventual trip to Italy. Her quest for completeness is terminated, as she finally reunites with her mother. On a symbolic level, Persephone finds Demeter, as Marie digs up her mother's past in the trunk, layered like earth strata. It is now that her mother fully appears as an image of the earth-connected female. In a dream-like operation of discovering and putting on a black mourning dress, Marie, sitting in front of the bedroom mirror, asks her mother for forgiveness. Conclusively, Marie and Assunta merge into one:

... [Marie] waited patiently. Any answer, even no answer, would be all right. She felt her mind unloosen, clear itself of all cleverness and expectation. Slowly it extinguished itself and there was darkness.

The stunted hardness of her mother's face softened. Colour was restored to the bony cheeks. The face twitched with life. The corners of her mouth slowly turned upward. (192)

But it is also the socio-historical character of the trunk that partly deciphers Assunta's mysterious ways. Marie reveals some snapshots taken before Assunta's departure,

which witness the famine her mother's family endured. These photos explain Assunta's obsession with food, which was merely a deeply rooted anguish of starving her beloved children, thus an indisputable testimony of Assunta's love for Marie.

\* \* \*

Assunta appears as a woman with a manifold nature: the apparently victimized first-generation Italian woman, and the archetypal earth-connected female. She represents domestic tyranny when it comes to the feeding of her children and the female Italian nature in her daughter. To her children, in particular her son who witnesses her gradual disintegration, she appears as the ultimate *mater dolorosa*, dressed continually in black, and mourning for her deceased, personal saviour from spinsterhood, Adamo. Nonetheless, this apparently patriarchy-obedient immigrant woman shows traces of pre-historic female control, and reveals a strong affinity with the fertile earth. Like Cristina in Ricci's *Lives of the Saints*, Assunta is a mysterious woman who does not expose her inner thoughts. One may only guess where her ancient customs originate from, and, as Joey remarks, Assunta "had never ceased to puzzle him" (11). To her daughter, she eventually represents on a spiritual level, what Marie must find within herself, for herself, to complete her search for self. Marie is looking for Assunta, who symbolically represents Demeter, the earth-

connected goddess. Marie's anorexia parallels the withdrawal of and the need for her mother's love: she refuses her mother's food, and therefore cannot eat at all. In this respect, Marie's conduct coincides with Father Sarlo's parable that "[l]ove came from a need" (157).

Unlike Cristina, an insubordinate woman who reflects very much of a pre-Christian black madonna, Assunta represents, at least outwardly, patriarchy's outgrowth of a strong woman, who nevertheless acknowledges male-imposed values. Like Valle del Sole's women, Assunta is a *godmother*. She becomes the mourning female in the patriarchal sense, who permanently wears black in honour of the dead *man*. However, she bears primordial features that strongly resemble elements of matriarchal civilization, shown in her strong earth-connectedness and marital dominance: the gender-specific, collective wailing that leads her into trance to reveal her buried, true nature; her domestic recklessness around the kitchen table and obsession with food; her powerful appearance as the black-draped woman, the image of "the Black Madonna" her son can "never escape" (135).

Her total rejection of almost everything associated with the new world sketches her overwhelmingly powerful resolution and self-assertion, all factors which, in spite of the obsolete quality about her, portray her as quite an autonomous woman. These details also confirm the continuity

of the black madonna. If Assunta has moved away from the original image of the black female deity, to the grieving widow, it is therefore Marie who eventually, at the end of her quest for identity (which is partially completed with the uncovering of the trunk's contents), not only externally intermingles her mother's features, but adopts the ancient image of a female power figure closely attached to the *soil* of her body. Marie's decision to go to Italy is another proof of her quest for ethnic, as well as individual identity. As Marie is dressed like her mother now, in the mourning dress from the trousseau trunk, Assunta's spirit accompanies her on this trip, "the return journey that Assunta had always wanted to make" (187). The mother has become an integral part of the daughter. The women's former discrepancies in upbringing and retaining of ethno-cultural traditions resulted in the irrevocable separation between the two women, and induced, on a mythical level, the Demeter/Persephone search. Marie's quest for self has ended with her incorporating her mother's features of an earth-connected woman. Her body and soul are re-connected, as her appetite for food has returned (181). Her journey marks the return to her mother's roots, but also the beginning of a new phase/cycle in Marie's life, underlined by the positive event of her cousin's wedding in Italy: "[Marie] had had enough of death. A wedding would perhaps set things in order again" (187).

But Joey as well finds salvation and liberation through the image of the powerful female, executed by his girlfriend Annalise. She represents features of the modern decisive, and creative female. With her influence, Joey's transformation, or as she calls, "awakening" (173), takes place, through which Joey discovers his aptitude for carpentry.

Assunta is recurrently described as an "old woman," by which not only age but her ethnic and cultural heritage is meant. Her ancient habits, picking dandelions as well as the mourning practice, depict her as earth-connected individual. Her further attachment to her house (symbol of the womb) and her obsession with food delineate her transformative and nurturing powers. Regarding age, she is the portrayal of the old, dying generation that gives way for the younger born, in order to come to full circle. Her vocation as life-giving creature has been fulfilled. With her death, as Marie is reborn with strength and Joey in his prime of life, Assunta's power is handed over to her children. Marie's trip to Italy marks her coming full circle with her ethnic past.



## VITTORIO ROSSI'S *The Last Adam*

Vittorio Rossi was born and raised in Montreal's Ville Emard. He studied and graduated from Concordia University, where he was also playwright-in-residence in 1990-91. For his first plays *Little Blood Brother* and *Backstreets*, he received Best New Play awards at the Quebec Drama Festival in 1986 and 1987. His first full-length play was *The Chain*, followed by *Scarpone* and *The Last Adam*, all of which have been published. His most recent play *Love and Other Games* was produced at Centaur Theatre in 1995.

Vittorio Rossi's domestic tragedy *The Last Adam* deals with, inter alia, ethnicity and pagan customs. The Leone family live in Montreal's Ville Emard. The Leones are Rosalia and Armando, a first-generation Italian couple, who have three children. Their eldest son Marco works as a buyer in the fabric trade. Sal(vatore), a drifter, is the aimless black sheep of the family. Grace, the youngest, is a design student. Lina, finally, is Marco's wife, who, on the basis of jealousy, schemes against Sal. A fourth child, Sal's twin brother, Adam(o), died 27 years ago, supposedly from a fever. Since Adam's death, the meaning of existence as a member of the Leone household has been revolving around the unfortunate event and the dichotomy of life and death: each member is repeatedly reminded of the dead family member.

Adam's day of death is commemorated annually in a grotesque form of solemn ceremonial, inaugurated by the mourning parents, in particular mother Rosalia. Sal's birthday, in comparison, which apparently occurs at the same time (*The Last Adam* 58-59), has never been celebrated in the family, and is missed out regularly for the sake of Adam's memory. Meanwhile, after several failures, Sal tries to put another business deal together, which involves Marco and their cousin Gates, and for which Sal intends to travel to Italy. Armando, who fears the revelation of the cause of Adam's death by the family's estranged uncle Olimpio, prevents the business deal with the help of Marco. Sal, justifiably accusing his father of thwarting the deal, begins to investigate the cause of the mysterious death and discovers that Adam died from a fractured skull. During the play's catastrophic denouement, Sal accuses Armando of killing Adam, but Rosalia finally reveals that Sal pushed his brother down the stairs. The play ends with Sal's suicide.

There is an anomalous meaning to life in the Leone household, as it is constantly opposed to death. Rosalia and Armando are haunted by their son's death, an incident which 27 years later, still causes nightmares and Armando's heavy drinking. Life opposes death, a not very fortunate combination to the family's collective peace of mind. By contrast, Sal, the living twin brother, is object of an emotional torrent of criticism on the part of his parents,

particularly his father. A disequilibrium in the family manifests itself in the protagonists' conduct regarding the family's official and unofficial gender-specific roles. Not unlike Paci's depiction of the Barones, this family's official patriarch, Armando, appears at times to be much weaker than one would expect from the head of an otherwise typically male-structured family.

The three female characters, Rosalia, Lina, and Grace, affect considerably the play's symbolic relevance. On conscious and unconscious planes, they all display insistent resoluteness towards the male protagonists, especially the play's tragic hero Sal. Consequently, each one of the threesome is determined to accomplish a certain ambition. Grace aspires to gain autonomy by becoming a designer. Rosalia desires familial harmony. Lina wants more conjugal as well as social power within the Leone household.

The three women also represent three different social positions in the Italian family's microcosm. Rosalia is housewife and mother, but also works as a seamstress, thus represents the female Italian immigrant. Grace is the youngest, unmarried second-generation Italian woman who disregards the housewife tradition by learning a profession and thus becoming independent. Lina, housewife and soon-to-be mother, holds the orthodox position as submissive female in patriarchy.

The notion of female operability within a gendered network subsequently manifests itself, especially towards the end of the play. With the story's dramatic progression one common ground is detected which these three women share: each woman knows precisely what she wants, and moreover aims with iron will to attain her goal. All three women seem to possess a hidden source of empowerment. But it is Rosalia in particular, whose strength is most closely connected with the image of the black madonna.

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As seen before in the case of the Innocentes and Barones, "family" is a major importance to these Italians. Family network is also a critical issue in the Leone household. Androcentric and egalitarian ideas clash ceaselessly, each time the second generation communicates. Lina, for example, jealously observes that her brother-in-law Sal is the favoured son, though according to the male-directed tradition, Marco is the oldest male descendant, thus first heir. She regards herself as an outsider in the Leone household. She experiences that sibling ties are stronger than the marital bond, and she is not necessarily on good terms with the other female member in the family about her age (Grace), who, on the other hand, gets along perfectly with Sal. Michiko Aramaki explains in her dissertation on Montreal Italians:

The sibling tie is seen as everlasting, cooperative and protective [in the Italian family]. Yet, as soon as the element of the outsider (inlaws) comes in, such a picture can reveal some ambivalence (or room for ambivalence). This ambivalence relates to the fact that the family business tends to be inherited by the male "blood" line: female siblings marry out. The level of the sense of 'wife as outsider' varies from family to family, yet, it can be blatant, lasting throughout the marriage. (Aramaki 47)

Lina is the in-law under the Leone roof. Thus, she persistently fights for respect, since she experiences no sense of belonging to the Leone house. The awareness of being socially inferior to the other members increases due to the fact that the others make her comprehend she is not blood-related, thus secondary. She becomes the active agent in the family's power struggles concerning pecuniary affairs. Male-centred, political power is Lina's compulsive ambition, which is underscored in an argument with her husband, in which she repeatedly emphasizes Marco's right as the first-born:

LINA. What did you think I would do: Just sit by while your brother runs this family? You want him to just take over? You're the oldest. You're the one they trust. Not Sal. And he's the one who's always borrowing money.

.....  
Your enemy is his directionless life. Your enemy is how he  
mobilizes the entire family to get anything he wants.  
While you gain nothing. (The Last Adam 34-35)

Lina's greatest predicament therefore is powerlessness. In order to be more powerful, Lina has developed an aptitude for intriguing, and this almost exclusively against Sal. In the household she appears more than once as "nothing but a manipulator" (85). To make matters worse for her as a woman, even her marriage to Marco was no love-match, but rather, according to Sal, "because ...[Marco] lost a bet to date another girl" (85).

Lina has obviously lost her individual autonomy through her quasi-segregation from the household. This, however, becomes a motivation for strength of survival. The predicament develops into an impetus to improve her status. Lina's jealousy of Sal also prevents closeness between her and Grace. But how could she possibly get along with someone, who represents all those qualities (financial and social independence) she never possessed? Instead, she draws attention towards Grace and Sal with her animosity more than once, yet appears as the silenced, humble wife in her marriage with Marco. But her conduct makes perfect sense in her situation. By no means is she any weaker than Grace, who does not live according to patriarchal values. On the other

hand, it is Marco's patriarchal practice which hurts Lina as a female and which probably provokes her to intrigue against other family members. In addition, his patriarchal attitude leaves Lina, who married at an early age, no other choice than to co-operate with her husband, in order to comply with the traditional framework of paternalism:

(MARCO enters with a bushel of tomatoes. LINA follows him in.)

MARCO. Grab the one on the floor here.

LINA. I'm gonna drop it, break my back down there.

MARCO. Will you just do it! (18)

Being intimidated by her own husband, the power of female independence through individuation seems forever lost to Lina. Nonetheless she discovers another method of manipulating power in the Leone household, namely through her pregnancy. The mother status seems to be of some significance to her husband. As soon as he learns about her pregnancy, his behaviour towards her changes drastically:

LINA. I'll stir the pasta.

MARCO. Wait, wait, wait. Sit down, let Grace do it.

LINA. It'll boil over.

MARCO. Lina. (Crosses to her.) Lina. (He gently kisses her.)

LINA. What was that for?

MARCO. (Pause.) I don't know. (75)

Lina eventually gains control over her husband: the news of her pregnancy converts him into a suddenly gentle, respectful husband. With her pregnancy, she has reached a more elevated position (the maternal status) in the family's hierarchy.

Her pregnancy becomes the vehicle for gaining the only accepted, therefore ambiguous form of female power in the patriarchal-Christian sense--the prerogative of childbearer and mother. One may imagine Lina in a community such as Valle del Sole, where she would be smoothly integrated. Like the women in *Lives of the Saints*, Lina has the power to govern unrestrictedly--since she has enough strength to considerably weaken Sal's status--but declines the prospect of female independence in favour of male-centred traditionalism. Despite the plain facts about her pregnancy, she does not illustrate sexual activity, but fiscal fixation. It is, however, questionable how elevated this position might be. Does it not resemble a little too much the image of the patient Madonna who still subsidizes patriarchal values, thus will never be at liberty? Additionally, Lina cultivates absolutely no female links, neither does she reveal any earth-connectedness. Her Machiavellian achievement of the desired status is the



effect of a stubborn conventionalism of male-imposed roles, with which she only isolates herself further. Lina chooses to be in accord with the conventionalism that still emphasizes male authority in the family household. Supporting her husband and the patriarchal tradition helps her at the same time to gain and consolidate a secure, since more reputable, status for herself. Through pregnancy and a perhaps advantageous fight that leads to her hospitalization for abdominal cramps, she achieves the intended matriarchal and even marital power:

LINA. Marco, what you have to say right now is nowhere near as important as what I'm carrying in here. So go outside and skip rope, or you can watch me and learn how to handle a family.

MARCO. Listen...

LINA. You better do as I say, or so help me this baby won't even know its father, you understand? (112)

Lina eventually misuses her power position, by applying it against Grace and therefore herself: "LINA. ... Tell me, Grace, what kind of aunt will you make for my child? Huh? I'll tell you what kind. Zero. Nothing. My child won't even know you as an aunt. You will be nothing. Nothing. I'll make sure of that" (111). With Sal's additional tragic ending, there will probably not even be superficial amicability

between her and Grace. Lina certainly demonstrates prime authority through tenacity. And as Adrienne Rich observes in a reflection on whether motherhood is synonymous with female oppression, "[w]hatever the conclusion drawn, there is an inescapable correlation between the idea of motherhood and the idea of power" (Rich 72).

Features of the young, independent female are displayed by Grace, at 22 the youngest and only daughter in the Leone family. She remains the lone female figure who exposes an untraditional attitude, for which she is rejected mostly by her father and oldest brother. Trying to establish her own identity and develop her own power, she decides against immediate marriage in favour of a professional career as a fashion designer. Her determination to become financially and socially independent must have caused some tension. Father Armando certainly does not accept this new, independent role as woman under his roof: he refused to financially support her (a fact which will prolong the duration of her studies): "GRACE. ... I spent two years working office jobs so I can pay my school. Daddy said no, I said it's my life. And I moved on. For me. For me. Not him" (*The Last Adam* 57). Her brother Marco, who displays patriarchal authority most obviously in the Leone household, signals his disapproval of the little sister's oral intervention during his business discussions with Sal, as he warns her repeatedly to "stay out of this" (25). It is an

indication towards Grace to stay out of the male-inhabited world of commerce, and to return to the allotted domain of housekeeping, which, indeed, is a female-dominated field of work in the Leone family. A power struggle not unlike the one in Valle del Sole, presents Grace as a woman who must have a lot of strength withstanding Marco's enduring verbal attacks. By continuously revealing his dislike of his sister's independent enterprise, Marco also exposes androcentric beliefs. His opinion on female independence is revealed in a conversation with his brother. When Sal remarks that no family member ever utters a word to Grace "that she's good enough" at her design studies, Marco matter-of-factly remarks, "[w]ell if that stops her, then she isn't good enough is she?" (30). When he accuses his sister of dishonourableness, he simultaneously exposes traditional ideals: "You're old enough to be on your own, like all your artist friends, whore around... Why don't you do that?" (111).

Grace involuntarily becomes an agent of Sal's downfall. Being courted by her cousin Gates, she is the ominous object of desire and enmity: Grace's relationship with Sal not only is the most intense in the family, but with the play's progression Sal's un-brotherly affection for his sister becomes evident. After an argument between Sal and Gates, the latter uncovers some of the hidden feelings Sal has for his sister: "Tell me you never looked at your sister. Tell

me to my face. You can't, can you? You want to accuse me of something. Go ahead. I'm her cousin. You're her brother" (105).

\* \* \*

Just as an ethnic community very often represents a protective microcosm of its own, so does the Italian family. Tradition is a keyword to the Leones. Tomato sauce bottling is one of the widespread Italian customs among families, including the Leones and, as will be discussed in the next chapter, Addolorata's family. To Marco and Lina, tradition becomes synonymous with the sustenance of patriarchal values. Adam's service, however, has become the Leones' very specific tradition. Rosalia, wife and mother, is the driving force on family matters. She parallels the image of powerful peasant women emerging from Italian folk stories, "presiding over life, death, regeneration, and justice" (Birnbaum, *Black Madonnas* 10), who partly succumb to patriarchal values, but who hold silent mysterious power. In *Lives of the Saints* and *Black Madonna*, various sources of myths are displayed in rural environments, as both stories are set in smalltown/village communities. By contrast, *The Last Adam*, taking place in urban Montreal, documents an almost seamless transition from rural old-country-customs to city life. Though living in a city now, Rosalia has preserved mysterious customs from the *vilaggio*, including the protection against the evil eye.

Rosalia at first appears to be a typical first-generation female immigrant, who leads a life according to a typical male-imposed role, as housewife, and who is still more comfortable in her mothertongue. Italian, mainly spoken by Armando and her, represents here as well the emotional language expressing anger, sorrow, and beliefs. In the progress of the story, however, Rosalia's authoritative nature is increasingly revealed. She is the tacit, controlling force in this, in reality, female-governed household, the mother hen who keeps watch over the family. The other family members' knowledge of her matriarchal power is brought forward by Sal's exclamation that Rosalia "is the Queen of the kitchen. She's the boss! And she has the power to excuse!" (*The Last Adam* 84).

The honouring of the dead son, annually executed in the form of a commemorative service, exposes Rosalia's ambivalent power, which, like the black madonna's, is negative as well as positive. The service for Adam is almost ritually carried out according to her and Armando's precise instructions. Every year, a macabre routine of holding a mass, sending flowers to the grave, and preparing a "good meal" (51) for the dead, is arranged in honour of their dead son. The feast itself corresponds to cultism. The meal represents the image of ritual pacification of the dead, because Rosalia is as superstitious as Valle del Sole's inhabitants. This true funeral meal is also a reminder of

the tragic fact that Adam's untimely death preceded the parents', an irregularity of the natural life cycle.

Rosalia also has possession of pagan beliefs still valid in Italy, like the aforementioned evil eye. Being acquainted with the powers of the evil eye, she cautiously protects herself against them as well. Similar to the door decorations in Valle del Sole, Rosalia puts garlic and the like around the window, in order to "ward off the evil spirits" (94). Gates, her nephew, has just returned from Italy, where he most likely met the family's now estranged uncle Olimpio. Olimpio had immediately left Canada after Adam's alleged death from a fever, and has never had any contact with the family since then. Rosalia, in fear that Gates might have received important details about Adam's strange death, successfully tries to intimidate Gates, by 'giving him the evil eye' (ominously staring at him). And her message to him is an axiomatic warning to stay out of this family matter: "You've been told things. Some things are best kept unspoken. 'What is sweet to the ear can be fire to the heart.' Trust your zia. I don't wish you harm" (63).

Rosalia not only represents a very nurturing mother. With the play's progression she growingly displays a less positive nature, and more damaging characteristics, corroborated, for example, by her threatening cross-examination of Gates. By overtly exposing her grief over

Adam's death, she rejects Sal. Sal's imbalance of individual identity is produced by his mother's consistent inclination to the dead Adam. Rosalia's darker side, her disturbed unconscious, is revealed in recurrent nightmares, in which she cries for her son Adam (22). She holds the key to Adam's death, and hence Sal's redemption or condemnation. Rosalia is an ultimate matriarch, a mother full of love for the dead son, who unconsciously holds Sal responsible for Adam's death: while fighting over a toy, two-year-old Sal had pushed his twin brother down the basement stairs. The basement of the Leone household not only symbolically represents the positive womb image of transformation, where Rosalia sows and preserves tomatoes, but is also a place of demise, the symbolic tomb. Rosalia spends the most time downstairs, and in one scene, while dropping a jar of tomatoes, cries out Adam's name (50). Rosalia's dissimilar affection for Adam and Sal respectively, moreover witnesses the considerable fear of a family curse, as earlier in the play alluded to by Armando's remark: "When we had the twins we thought for sure we were blessed. Instead, it's been a curse" (22). Rosalia reveals a schizophrenic trait: her superstition produces her interminable love for the dead son, and the eventual rejection of Sal. In many cultures, twins are perceived as an exceptional phenomenon. According to various folktales, for example, "[o]ne is good and the other wicked, the latter constantly attempting to bring to

nought the creational and civilizing activities of his twin" (Chevalier and Gheerbrant 1049). In Rosalia's opinion, Sal was the cause for the destruction of a family formerly "blessed" (*The Last Adam* 22) with twins, and therefore her feelings towards him are ambiguous, because in her superstitious view he is harmful by nature. The family's benediction comes first. Controlling Sal's life, Rosalia holds the most powerful position in the family, since she indisputably holds power over life and death in the family. When Sal starts to make inquiries about his brother's death, Rosalia threatens Sal, knowing she has the power to annihilate him, knowing he is capable of endangering the family's peace. She relates the story about herself as a child, when her uncle Luigi forced her to watch him kill a rabbit.

**ROSALIA.** That day I ate the same rabbit. At the dinner table, Luigi looked me straight in the eye and said, never ever forget that your family always comes first. You do what you have to do to keep it alive.

.....

Don't play with my family. *Lascia stare*. Or you will learn the hard way. Just like when I was a little girl. (90)

It is the food which represents the significance of the family's survival. The rabbit has to be sacrificed so that



the family can live. Rosalia makes her point clear to Sal, that, in case of endangered harmony, she *would* make the necessary sacrificial offering.

The psychological imbalance of affection, reproach, and superstition, eventually induces Rosalia to become the catalyst for the escalation and disclosure of the family's mystery. It is now the negative side of the black madonna, her primary connection with death, which breaks through. Rosalia acts as a Fury, a woman who eventually punishes her son's violation of her established rules with death. She is symbolically related to the Fates because she controls Sal's destiny. Sal is, literally, tempting fate by playing with Rosalia's family. Since Rosalia dominates Sal mostly emotionally, she, not surprisingly, becomes the active agent of Sal's final failure: she is witness of Armando's will to name Marco as sole heir (73), an arrangement which also obliges Marco to abandon the deal, in order to prevent Sal from going to Italy. And Rosalia eventually reveals the actual occurrence of the accident. She becomes the catalyst for her son's end, by 'cutting' Sal's 'life thread', as she reveals her earlier withheld viewpoint to the accident: "You pushed Adam down the stairs. Adam died from your own hand. And no one else!" (120). When Sal asks his mother for forgiveness, a certainly crucial moment, she turns away (122), thus signalling him to leave the family.

Rosalia's final report reflects an over-emphasized concern for the family. As she exclaims, "[y]ou killed my son," and "[y]ou destroyed the family" (120), she denounces and therefore separates Sal from the household. Her energy is provoked by Sal's inquiry. This power enables her to simultaneously condemn and execute Sal. Her faceted, ancient nature represents her as the ultimate Fury.

Sal in fact is completely controlled by all three women: Rosalia--originally his life contributor--controls him by challenging his very existence, a death threat to his identity. She prefers a "family of lies" (119) to no family at all. She and Armando commemorate death while depriving Sal of his own birthday. Her husband's genuinely repentant conduct towards Adam's death is counterbalanced by Rosalia's actually directing the family. Grace--for whom Sal feels more than brotherly affection--controls, if inadvertently, his sexual desire. Lina questions his credibility as reliable son through her guileful disclosures in front of the family, and eventually controls his identity in the family. In this respect, both Grace and Lina are shadows of Rosalia's power.

The Leone household therefore is dominated by women. The image of a fully independent female is not completed, because these women, with the exception of Grace, are still mainly manoeuvred by patriarchal values. Ironically, it is Grace, who, though liberated, has the least power in the

household. Lina eventually gains female power, whereas Rosalia is independent within patriarchy.

Rosalia is the ruling figure in the house, but regarding an outside community, she still occupies the marginalized position as housewife. On a mythical level, however, she shares the affinity with the black madonna's dark feature of *mal'occhio*. The powers of the evil eye represent a source of empowerment to Rosalia over Gates, and are evidence of persistent existence of pagan beliefs from the old country in the new world. Rosalia's dark powers, the negative side of the black madonna, reveal a well-preserved heritage of pagan customs.

### MARCO MICONE'S *Addolorata*

The works studied so far, present women who all control their respective lives. They possess power, although as it seems, at times, ambiguous power, as Lina displays it. All of them do display, however, powerful characters, a factor which contributes to their achievement of authority. Although patriarchy is a dominant element in the three works studied, it does not prevent most of the female characters from noticing and/or defying this hegemony. Even those women in traditional positions as housewives have established and maintained a powerful position within the family. So far, there have been several examples which document the well-preserved traces of ancient, female-focused rituals. For example, *la strega* in *Lives of the Saints*, exemplifying age-old sage erudition, exercises considerable influence on an entire community. Likewise the mourners' hypnotic conduct in *Black Madonna*, embodies a female-directed, spiritual ceremonial. The recurring materialization of the notion of the evil eye in *Lives of the Saints* and *The Last Adam* are directly and/or indirectly associated with a woman. Cristina, for example, not only seems to be in possession of a hidden source of power, but to her son Vittorio, she herself is a source of powerful inspiration, leading to the narrator's belief in pagan rituals, and religious mystery.

Assunta, as mother and mythic female, eventually inspires, soothes, and empowers her daughter Marie. Demeter and Persephone merge into one.

Pagan beliefs often underscore the preservation of the so-called *old-country* heritage, as it could be observed in *Black Madonna* and *The Last Adam*. Rosalia, the matriarch in Rossi's play, and Assunta both maintain old-country customs, to control the evil spirits, and in honour of the dead, respectively. But how does the image of the female principle operate as a, strictly speaking, modern image, a contemporary source of empowerment? So far, the black madonna figure has been described as a primordial goddess, keeper of the fertile, hence black earth. The definite phases of birth, adulthood, death, are one of her main characteristics. Black characterizes fecundity, yet also the shadows of death and mystery. The black madonna is a symbol of female-specific characteristics associated with female power.

Playwright Marco Micone is a native of Montelongo, which is in the Molise area. He emigrated to Canada in 1958, at the age of thirteen. His plays, *Gens du silence* and *Addolorata*, written in 1979 and 1982, were both stage hits. Another play, *Déjà l'agonie*, was published in 1988. *Le figuier enchanté*, written in 1992, is an amalgam of the narrator's self-reflections, epistolary novel, and a play.

In *Addolorata*, the reader/audience discover female will of liberation confronted with the male ethos of the traditional, conservative way of life as humble housewife. Therefore, Micone's decision to have two different actresses to personify the heroine at the age of 19 and 29 respectively, makes sense, as the playwright explains in an opening phrase of the play's directions: "Lolita et Addolorata: deux moments dans la vie de la même personne" (*Addolorata* 7). This domestic drama illustrates the life of a woman, at simultaneously two different stages: the heroine Addolorata (then called 'Lolita') just before her wedding at the age of 19, and after her mother's funeral, ten years later. Now interacting, now acting synchronously, the heroine becomes two women. The two performers not only portray one person at two different ages and stages in her life, but the two women also represent two separate individuals with distinct viewpoints and ideals, which is a significant aspect of the play.

Lolita-Addolorata represents patriarchy's immediate victim: she has always been the servile daughter and subordinate wife *Lives of the Saints'* Cristina could never be converted to. Addolorata is the a young girl, who, by changing her name, hopes to change her life. She is the browbeaten daughter, and later silenced wife, whenever the man domineering her life, first her father, then her husband, appears. While Assunta Barone is still capable of

asserting her *self* no matter what her social environment confronts her with, Lolita-Addolorata has no individual life. While all the other female characters in the first three works display strength through decisiveness, Addolorata still dwells on the crossroads in her life.

As a teenager, she is referred to as Lolita, whereas at 29, she has re-adopted her proper name. At 19, unmarried, yet engaged to Giovanni, she is full of hope for the future, a fact underlined by her name change. She works at the department store occasionally, at home virtually everyday. At 29, after ten years of marriage with two children, the heroine is now Addolorata, "la vierge des douleurs" (88) by name and function. She has become a disillusioned housewife and factory worker, who is underpaid and overstrained. Young and naive Lolita, emotionally the counterbalance of Addolorata, has (besides the daily household chores) to endure her Italian father's despotism, which denies her any individual freedom whatsoever.

Both women are desperate to change their present situation for the same reasons: both women are not only incessantly confronted with male oppression, but governed by male dictate. Both are victims of male aggression--on the basis of parental and conjugal violence, respectively. Here, woman's social position is restricted to a stove, in this case the ultimate symbol of marginalization, which is reaffirmed by Lolita-Addolorata's perpetual occupation with

the preparation of tomato sauce. In the play, the preoccupation with perfecting tomato sauce is a metaphor for female oppression. The ostensible necessity of refining the Italian cuisine is manifested weekly on TV, "au téléjournal du programme italien" (24). Much depends on a good tomato sauce in Lolita's parental home, if only the family's peace. As the girl insinuates, "c'est la sauce tomate qui cause le plus de chicanes" (23). One is reminded that the Leones' famous "Tomato Season" (*The Last Adam* 18) involves all family members helping, but only the women are transforming the tomatoes into sauce, and overcooked pasta causes a lot of excitement (81). In her novel *Volevo i pantaloni*<sup>1</sup>, Lara Cardella describes a situation corresponding to Addolorata's dilemma: after her father gives her the double-bind-choice of "[o] la scuola o la casa"<sup>2</sup> (Cardella, *Volevo i pantaloni* 8), the adolescent heroine decides to go to school, in preference to "slaving for hours over gallons of tomato sauce" (Cardella, *Good Girls don't wear trousers* 2). Throughout the play Lolita-Addolorata keeps returning to her pot of simmering sauce, exclaiming each time, "ma sauce tomate" (*Addolorata* 22). Addolorata struggles, and the tomato sauce thus represents maybe the greatest obstacle--the fear of the unknown she has to overcome. She knows she

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<sup>1</sup> I wanted trousers

<sup>2</sup> Either school, or home



has to change her life, in order to achieve autonomy. In contrast to a recipe for happiness, she at least has one for acquiescence.

The death of her mother causes an enormous change in the heroine's life. Through her mother's death, Addolorata begins to fathom that she has reached a dead end in life:

"Maintenant que t'es plus là, maman... maintenant que t'es plus là, je pourrai plus te faire de peine. C'est décidé! J't'aurai plus dans mon dos, Giovanni. Jamais plus" (21).

*Black Madonna* confronts the reader with the daughter's search for self/her mother, but it is only after Assunta's death that Marie completes her symbolic quest for Demeter. Similarly, Addolorata becomes her own mother through death, in order to break free from male tyranny. In fact, her life has been quite analogous with her mother's since adolescence: her mother worked in a factory, was a housewife (50), and was a regular church-goer (93). *Lolita's* adolescence is marked with her father's petty housework instructions. *Lolita* leads a Cinderella-style life. Everyday, her father completes a list of chores she has to do. It is part of a consistent cycle of power abuse, because her father treats her badly in order to work off his own frustration:

JOHNNY. ...

Qu'est-ce que c'est ça, cette poudre blanche-là? Y en a partout su'l'plancher.

LOLITA. C'est de l'Ajax. C'est mon père qui fait ça, le matin, avant de partir, pour être sûr qu'on lave partout.

(15)

Lolita is merely last in the chain reaction of social oppression: her father's boss apparently "fait la même chose à l'usine" (16) with him, and Giovanni will eventually take over her father's behaviour pattern.

Addolorata, without having a source of inspiration in her environment, has to find the power *within*, and become a black madonna figure herself. The ritual character of her mother's death thus marks the possible end of and departure from her subjugation. Whereas the heroine as teenager eagerly awaits the termination of her days as servile daughter in the androcentric household of her tyrannical father, 29-year-old Addolorata, having learned by now that her liberation through marriage was sheer misconception, has no more patience. After her mother's death, which marks an initiating experience for Addolorata, she is now determined to put an end to her misery, by declaring that she wants to "faire ce que je veux" (21), and that she will not "me sacrifier pour personne" (100).

The end of this phase in Addolorata's life is also

underlined by one of the play's introductory scenes, in which both women are writing cards. While Lolita is formulating invitation cards for the approaching wedding with Giovanni, Addolorata, by sending out thank-you cards regarding the recently held funeral ceremony, seals the cessation of the mother's existence. In fact, several boundaries designate certain changes in Addolorata's life, the first two being her marriage to Giovanni and the death of her mother. A third, potential boundary could be the separation from her husband, a possible rebirth. These boundaries are characterized by the two women representing Lolita-Addolorata. In the figurative sense, parts of their respective lives become parallels or constitute ironic contrasts, such as Lolita's preparation for the wedding and Addolorata's concurrent cardwriting after the mother's funeral.

Similar to Paci's *Black Madonna*, the title of the play connotes a religious female figure. The heroine Lolita-Addolorata epitomizes quite accurately the "vierge des douleurs" (88) in the religious sense as well as in a socio-critical context: being called *Notre Dame de sept Douleurs* or simply, *virgin of pains*, she has endured emotional as well as physical pain, virtually since childhood. This simulacrum of the suffering female also suggests physical violence, including marital rape, which Addolorata has been exposed to. She is the outcome of male mythology. These male

myths are reflected in the iconization of woman by the Catholic Church, for example. Tilde Sankovitch remarks:

As a secondary component of the male universe, often beloved--even adored--certainly admired, yet also feared and hated, woman does appear in male myths, but in forms, figures, and images that are not hers, and do not reflect her adequately or accurately. (Sankovitch 3)

Before the decision to leave her husband, the only refuge from marital obligations remains the Mass in church. Ironically, the Church, another active agent in female oppression, in Addolorata's case exemplifies sanctuary: "La messe, c'est notre seule sortie pour nous, les Italiennes... à part les mariages et les funérailles. C'est mieux que rien du tout" (*Addolorata* 93). While Giovanni believes that church merely distracts women from their difficulties (93), Addolorata appreciates church as a private meeting place for women, like Assunta does in *Black Madonna*. By contrast, Lolita naively attempts to free herself from patriarchal prison--her parental home--through marriage. The aspired eternal bliss turns out to be merely a marital dictatorship. Whereas before it was the domineering father, it will now be her husband taking over the father's place. Giovanni is no longer the understanding boyfriend, but soon, in terms of violence, rather transforms himself into a surrogate father

figure for Addolorata. On their wedding night, he tries to penetrate her violently. But Addolorata not only is raped by her own husband, but also deprived of her illusory beliefs in female liberation through patriarchal marriage. Addolorata's effort of equality is thwarted by Giovanni's traditional conception of the husband's ownership of his obedient wife.

In fact, Giovanni remains a rather shadowy figure throughout the play. Played by the same actor at the age of 19 and 29, he functions as representative of the oppressive nature of an androcentric society. Before the wedding, Giovanni calls himself Johnny, a common English nickname, with a touch of Western-movie-style male stereotyping. His sobriquet embodies everything Giovanni defiantly desires: machismo and financial success. Once married, he drops his nickname, and becomes the Italian macho. But he also portrays the classical victim of the system: without appropriate employment, he vents his frustrations and ethno-social inferiority complex on his wife.

Comparatively speaking, the play shows less conspicuous elements of a pre-Christian female deity as perceived in *Lives of the Saints*, *Black Madonna*, and *The Last Adam*. Yet, when Addolorata finally confronts Giovanni with her decision to leave him, the image of the black madonna surfaces in her powerful conduct. Feminist viewpoints are incorporated into the storyline from the beginning of the play. The play's

announcer, the symbolic voice through which the author maybe expresses his own opinion on the matter, describes women like Addolorata and the hardship they have to undergo, leading to "les jambes enflées, les reins brisés, l'âme meurtrie, le visage vieilli.... S'il y a une d'elles qui tombe, aidez-la. C'est peut-être ma soeur, ma mère ou la vôtre" (10).

Lolita and Addolorata exemplify a positive-negative motif with regard to their respective names and behaviour. On the one side, there is the lively girl in flowered clothing, opposed to the disillusioned, matured woman dressed in black (7). The former names herself after Vladimir Nabokov's innocent, yet tempting womanchild, an image which represents her optimistic outlook on life. But the pseudonym, with which she hides her real self, also characterizes Lolita's wish to be someone else, for example an "Espagnole" (68), in order to escape reality. As long as unmarried, Lolita innocently speculates on obtaining (ethno-)social freedom and ethnic anonymity with a different name. In contrast to this, Addolorata appears embittered, but also valiant when she decides to leave Giovanni. With the mother's death, coerced marital obligations are no longer tolerated by her.

GIOVANNI. Mais, toi, t'as changé depuis qu'elle [her mother] est morte. T'as drôlement changé.

.....

Puis, j'comprends pas pourquoi: t'es devenue une vraie tigresse depuis qu'elle est morte. (58-59)

In this case, "tigresse" is comparable to the English *shrew*, which means that Addolorata is much more articulate than before her mother's death. As Giovanni observes, a new power drive has been awakened with the death of Addolorata's mother. The death of her mother turns into a liberating move for Addolorata. In the absence of the image of the black madonna in her environment, she differs from the traditional Italian female studied so far. She has been the outcome of male myth, a statue (as her name literally implies). With the death of her mother, she is destined to become a black madonna *herself*.

Lolita's and Addolorata's everyday lives present none of their own wishes. The only downtown place the teenager knows is The Bay, where Lolita works occasionally. Enjoyment--social and sexual--has been withheld from Lolita-Addolorata. Lolita, for example, has never been allowed to "aller en bas de la ville, au moins une fois, danser dans une vraie discothèque" (25), whereas Addolorata's female qualities of sexual attraction and procreation are misused. Sexuality is non-existent to both of them. While Lolita is

still a virgin, sex equals only marital rape in Addolorata's eyes. She presumes out of experience that sex is undesirable and violent, an attribute implying the denial of her female sexuality. This is true with regard to her sex life. As a consequence of his beliefs in the husband's privileges, Giovanni has adopted a certain code of behaviour during intercourse, reassuring his wife that, if it hurts her, "[c]'est normal" (86).

GIOVANNI. ... *Porcoddio*. Tu pleures encore? Qu'est-ce que j't'ai fait? C'est moi qui devrais pleurer d'être obligé de me crosser comme un adolescent après dix ans de mariage....

ADDOLORATA. C'est les seules fois que tu me touches. C'est la seule chose qu'on fait ensemble et tu me demandes même pas mon avis. (88-89)

Both Lolita's and Addolorata's female figures are the result of male imagination. They have become scapegoats of patriarchal society, as a consequence of social isolation. Lolita makes up her proper myth, by understanding marriage as a means of salvation, whereas Addolorata, when deciding to leave her husband, bravely confronts the reality of her marriage. Another essential factor in the development of female and individual consciousness, is female bonding, which both women are denied. Whereas Lolita acknowledges



that because of paternal intimidation she is "obligée de voir mes amies en cachette" (38), Addolorata, after ten years of marriage, comprehends that she wearies "de pas avoir d'amies. De pas pouvoir sortir" (39). Therefore, church may provide not only a refuge from her home, but also an opportunity to bond with other women, and find strength through spirituality. Though disenchanted, Addolorata is yet lucid enough to strive for an amelioration of her present life's condition. She not only becomes a black madonna figure, but also a surrogate mother/friend to herself. Similar to Marie's situation in *Black Madonna*, the absence/death of the mother opens the door to self-realization. In a way, her mother's death provides Addolorata with a certain rite of passage to reach a new stage in her life. One is reminded again of Jung's earlier quoted statement (a passage from his essay "The Psychological Aspects of the Kore") that "'every mother contains her daughter in herself and every daughter her mother'" (qtd. in Birnbaum, *Black Madonnas* 38). Being represented virtually twice--once as innocent and once as matured woman--Addolorata is perceived as both daughter and mother.

The qualities of the de-sexed, de-sensualized woman, which are often advised by the Church, are no longer granted. Another, third character is the play's narrator, who comments not only on the couple's struggle in life, and

that of other immigrants, but adds a feminist view to Addolorata's situation. Having a choral function he introduces the play in a prologue, provides an inter-scene comment, and presents the Greek chorus of two women halfway through the play. The chorus recites the heroine's dilemma, and furthermore underlines the play's female-focused approach. Addolorata has become the silently suffering Virgin, often penetrated, and still, as the chorus suggests, never really touched, "toujours immaculée" (*Addolorata* 74), maybe even ignorant of all the pleasures kept from her. In her essay "The Black Madonna of Montserrat," Mary Elizabeth Perry compares the image of this black madonna statue to what Rosemary Radford Ruether characterizes as "'the shattered image, because woman, in being made to represent the projections of what men are not, their fears and aspirations became a mirror-image without real selfhood of her own'" (qtd. in Perry 120). Her father made Addolorata become an obedient, hard-working young woman. Giovanni not only uses her as *receptacle* of his offspring, he also completes her father's begun work of transforming Addolorata, as a woman, into the ornamental element, the above-mentioned statue of the silenced woman.

In fact, as hinted earlier, Addolorata's father and Giovanni hardly differ from each other. Though the father is not portrayed by an actor in the play, Lolita-Addolorata's remarks reveal the father's and the husband's similar

temper.

LOLITA ET ADDOLORATA. J'en peux plus...

LOLITA. ... de ses gifles.

ADDOLORATA. ... de tes viols.

.....

LOLITA ET ADDOLORATA. De jamais rien décider. J'en peux plus. (*Addolorata* 39-40)

In *Addolorata*, one at first observes a lack of the strong female character, unlike the works studied above. *Addolorata* differs from the other Italian females studied in this thesis, since there is no source of empowerment in her environment. Lolita is mainly interested in languages and getting married, because she is not aware of the values she has been fed, a fact that increases her weakness. Yet sane-minded *Addolorata* is conscious of her present social status, and, after the death of her mother, whose illness she respected throughout the years (59), no longer willing to succumb to a male-imposed ideology. She is prepared to change her life, in order to adopt other qualities which grant women, such as freedom of decision, sexual dignity and respect. This time, there apparently does not have to be an image of the powerful female at hand. *Addolorata* seems to have the power of the female *within*, awakened with her mother's death.

Both Lolita and Addolorata expose vulnerability and intellectual inactivity. Analogous to Elder's statement on the visual representation of woman, both Lolita and Addolorata have been created, on a metaphorical plane, according to the mythic "images of the symbolic woman" (Elder 169), effigies, thus falsities of women. In Addolorata's case, the image of the black madonna, the power of female selfhood, surfaces as unconscious energy, and is transformed into the conscious determination to govern her own life. She finally uncovers new courage, in order to achieve the desired autonomy. When she tells Giovanni the news, he first laughs at her. In the final scene, however, he begs her to stay, after realizing her power and his powerlessness: "Moi, j'ai besoin de sentir qu'y a quelqu'un qui m'attend. *Non posso vivere solo...* Addolorata, tu comprends? J'peux pas rester tout seul. *Che faccio solo?*" (Addolorata 101). Addolorata has the urge to be finally true to her feminine self, because she is not willing to become like one of the women in the neighbourhood, "[p]arce qu'y a plus de femme en elles: leurs maris ont tout tué" (100).

## CONCLUSION

Corresponding to this thesis's subject, the image of the black madonna, which confirms the existence of female primal power, may be a source of empowerment within reach. In three works, this image is a maintained figure established in the environment. In *Addolorata*, the heroine must create her own source of empowerment, and finds the black madonna within.

All the female characters display strength, many of them are independent from a male-centred society, or gain autonomy during the course of the respective storyline. Most of them are not patriarchy-defying agents, but rather keepers of woman-centred traditions *preceding* male-focused societies.

Though being individual women, they display similarities in their conduct. Cristina, the heroine of *Lives of the Saints*, represents the starting point regarding ethno-historical influences of the primordial goddess figure in Italy, as well as the feminist mythopoeic significance of the black madonna. She demonstrates active individual independence in spite of constant opposition by most of the villagers. The suggested link between Cristina and some mysterious female power is made manifest through Vittorio's characterization of his mother. In her son's eyes she

represents all the characteristics of the earth goddess. In many scenes, she is surrounded by earth and/or water, like her own garden and her secret cave. Through the narrator's eyes, nature's life cycle (the seasons as well as human regeneration) is associated with Cristina. She is a sexually active female, which means she has sex for pleasure, like the Great Goddess according to Rosalind Miles. She is connected with the snake, with regard to pagan practices and Christianity. The serpent serves as phallic healing and initiation symbol, as well as motif of evil. The villagers associate Cristina with the evil eye (that is, after the snakebite), because the snake is perceived as both mysterious and malignant creature. The black madonna appears as an archetypal image in Valle del Sole, as it is reflected in pagan practices, such as the grain throwing during the Madonna procession, and the cure against evil forces suggested by Giuseppina. Furthermore, the narrator finds himself in a female-focused environment at home, though Valle del Sole's patriarchal social structure is undeniable. Cristina represents the outlook on a gynocentric society, because he is brought up by women. Vittorio understands her as his black madonna, but also associates Cristina with the Christian martyr, Santa Cristina. Cristina corresponds to the black madonna, since she holds positive and negative powers: she displays the soothing, maternal, regenerative side, but also negative energy when ruining her father's

reputation. The image of the primordial goddess emerges from the villagers' customary activities, like, for example, their protection against the evil eye. The female autonomy of Valle del Sole's women, if restricted, confirms the inspiring image of a female power figure, because all these women display power in connection with pagan and spiritual beliefs.

Assunta in *Black Madonna* reveals features of woman according to patriarchal/Christian conception, but concurrently, she is another woman strongly attached to earth. Assunta's connection with earth manifests itself in her habitual track-walking to pick dandelions, but also in her crudeness towards Marie. Furthermore, her depiction as the cryptic black-cowled mourner, reveals Assunta's mysterious, subterranean characteristic. In this regard, she embodies Demeter, the Great Mother her daughter is looking for. Without reuniting with her mother on a spiritual level, Marie cannot terminate her quest for self. Assunta clearly represents the dying generation, an aspect being concluded with her death, while Marie adopts even more so her mother's features of the earth-connected woman to recommence the cycle of the black madonna. Assunta is also the bullying matriarch of the family. Like Cristina, she has established a specific autonomy in a totally opposing environment.

Similar to Assunta, Rosalia in *The Last Adam* runs the family, despite a typically male-structured environment. Her

ideology incorporates pagan beliefs tending towards superstition similar to Valle del Sole's inhabitants: the former blessing of having twins has turned into a curse in her eyes. She protects herself against evil spirits, but also applies them in order to protect herself from further misfortune, as it can be observed during her scrutiny of Gates. The combination of maternal love and a superstitious obsession with death makes her become the catalyst of Sal's downfall. Familism, in this case the cultural conservatism of patriarchal family values, is a key element regarding Rosalia's final operation of disclosing the family secret. She is a furious black-madonna-figure in action.

Addolorata at first represents the image of the de-sexed female, deprived of all autonomy and freedom of decision. Her father and her husband have turned her into the subordinate, reproducing female. Having been raped several times by Giovanni, she understands sex as a violent act. She is a symbolic woman, an archetype conceived by patriarchy and the Catholic Church, the de-sexed woman as statue, the depiction of woman which clearly opposes the image of the black madonna. Church represents refuge from marital terror and hope for female bonding. Having no friends and being totally disillusioned, she becomes her own source of empowerment after her mother has died. Motivated through her mother's death, Addolorata turns into her own mother.



The black madonna personifies nature's life cycle, a characteristic embracing birth, maturity, and death. In three of the works studied, death is also an indication of the recommencement of life. When Cristina dies after giving birth to a daughter, the child succeeds to the mother's existence. In *Black Madonna*, the mother-daughter-search interrelates symbolic rebirth through death. The unity between mother and daughter is provided not until Assunta's death, after which Marie and Assunta become one. Marie's search for self, correlated with the embittered relationship between the women, is completed as she comes to terms with her own ethnic identity, marked by the women's conclusive bond. In *Addolorata*, the decease of the mother turns into an impetus for improvement or change. In order to empower herself, Addolorata finds the black madonna within, and becomes her own mother. In *The Last Adam*, by contrast, the image of death overshadows life. The annual ceremony to honour Adam's death replaces the celebration of life, Sal's birthday. Finally, Rosalia reveals her negative powers, by symbolically interrupting Sal's life. Therefore, the cyclic features of the black madonna are asymmetrically balanced in Rosalia's case, since death weakens Rosalia's beneficent qualities as caring mother.

The black madonna is associated with the fruitfulness of the earth, thus responds to *maternal* attributes, such as transformative powers, vegetation, and nourishment. The

mother status, as implied by Adrienne Rich earlier on, is undoubtedly correlated with the notion of power (Rich 72) in all four works. Cristina, Assunta, and Rosalia all display maternal power, directly linked to a nurturing energy. Food, which is also a symbol of nourishment and growth, is another important element in the works. In *Lives of the Saints*, during the procession, it is dried fruit representing reproduction, which confirms the black madonna's archetypal presence. The pig and pig tripe, both symbols of fertility, are associated with Cristina. In *Black Madonna*, Assunta's prepared dishes represent maternal care. Even her absolute fixation with food delineates her as nurturing mother, in view of the fact that she had to endure famine in Italy. Likewise, the daughter's search for/rupture with her mother parallels Marie's anorexia as a sign of withdrawal of love. In *The Last Adam*, food resembles a ritual offering. Rosalia expresses her love for the dead son with food, by preparing each year a spectacular meal. Food also means survival, as Rosalia's recounted childhood experience with the dying rabbit shows. However, in *Addolorata*, the preparation of food becomes an emblem of patriarchal oppression and female marginalization. The aforementioned symbols of fertility and growth in connection with food are ineffective. Lolita-Addolorata's preoccupation with tomato sauce symbolizes her state of subjugation, and the last hurdle to take to free herself.

Regarding the four works under study, myths of women, which respond to a feminist approach to rejecting the repetitive misconception about women, have been most and for all, woman as submissive 'wife of man' and selfless bearer of his children. None of the characters studied are born into or obligated to accept the role of the silenced female. Often it is not, as for example in *Valle del Sole*, their husbands, but the environment of established codes which is uncomplainingly adopted. Yet, the power of female sexuality often becomes, according to the male-centred perception, an evil and dangerous force to *man*. The phobia about female autonomy may be one of the reasons for misogyny. Regarding incorporated notions of female autonomy confronting patriarchy, the dichotomy between saint and whore, for example, is repeatedly identified in *Lives of the Saints*. Cristina is regarded as both saint (by her son) and whore (by the village's women). Her independence is tied to her sexuality, her power base; and when she learns of her pregnancy, she has to be even more autonomous. However, the black madonna, representing both sexual activity and optional procreation, breaks down this dichotomy.

The analysis of the four works has revealed furthermore, that female bonding is directly and/or indirectly connected with religion. As mentioned before, the black madonna is not only a primordial goddess, but also a pre-Christian and Christian icon. The black madonna statues

confirm the veneration of the primordial goddess, and the substantial validity of religious figures in Italy. The female affinity with spirituality, Christian and pre-Christian, has been observed in all works. The books' titles all suggest a religious association with the respective plots. In *Lives of the Saints*, the theme of the madonna embraces pagan as well as Catholic beliefs, as observed during the Madonna procession, and with regard to Vittorio's portrayal of his mother. While Cristina borrows features of the black madonna, and consequently creates her own religion, Assunta in *Black Madonna* is equally attached to the Sault's church, and ancient old-country practices. Therefore, she is the black-draped mourner, as well as the earth-connected female. Rosalia in *The Last Adam* has preserved doctrines in a similar fashion. Her spirituality is linked for the most part with dark forces, such as the evil eye. Addolorata, finally, regards the church as refuge from home and meeting place for women. Female bonding is an essential factor of survival, especially in a marginalized position, and in Addolorata's case, it can only be accomplished in church. Her spiritual attachment is the only positive experience in her life.

\* \* \*

The madonna theme is not an exclusively Italian phenomenon. As mentioned before, Demeter for example embodies in some cultures the earth-connected female deity.

The Demeter/Persephone myth has been analysed and employed in literature extensively. The mythological feminist approach of this thesis has included Demeter's search for Persephone and vice versa. This symbolic quest demonstrates the relevance of bonding among women, and advocates the closeness to nature. The myth has been identified in *Black Madonna, Addolorata*, and fractionally in *Lives of the Saints*. The myth occurs in these works on an unconscious level, and may be interpreted as a primeval characteristic of these women. Like the black madonna, this primordial image of collective female empowerment authenticates a power base for women's political actions.

Likewise, the image of the powerful female encountered with gender-specific themes such as sex discrimination and conjugal violence, is not an infrequent phenomenon in numerous publications. In this thesis, one has come across women holding female power, often opposed by patriarchal tradition. In this respect, one noticeable element has been the dualism of good/bad woman. Concepts of woman as the output of male-made myths, or evil temptress are defeated by the image of the black madonna.

Generally speaking, the issue of madonnas is present in other works. The theme of the Christian Madonna, for example, has formerly been inspected in a comparative Canadian context. In Robertson Davies's *Fifth Business*, for example, the portrayal of one particular woman is analogous

to *Lives of the Saints's* heroine. Mary Dempster, the parson's wife, is subject to two particular images: the hero Dunstan Ramsay believes she is a saint, whereas in the eyes of the town's puritanical inhabitants, she turns into a whore, after having sex with a tramp. Not unlike Vittorio's perception of Cristina, Mrs. Dempster represents to the hero a wise and mysterious woman, who will eventually inspire him to become a hagiographer. Yet, while Cristina is primarily inspired by pagan borrowings and nature, Mary Dempster's strength is characterized through absolute faith and religiousness. Although she commits adultery, Mrs. Dempster does not appear as libidinous female. The black madonna, however, deliberately connects sexuality and spirituality. Michel Tremblay's *À toi, pour toujours, ta Marie-Lou*, for example, delineates a long connection between sexuality and religion, comparable to *Lives of the Saints*, *Black Madonna*, and *Addolorata*. While Cristina possesses an absolute power base in her sexuality, both Marie and *Addolorata* fail to have a healthy sexual relationship. In Tremblay's play, the mother Marie-Louise is obsessed with religion but sexually powerless because of her frigidity. On the other hand, her daughter Carmen, a dancer at a club on Montreal's Main, has freed herself from her mother and is thus sexually liberated. Thematically speaking, the image of a socially and sexually powerful female, as represented by the black madonna, is the missing link between sexuality and

spirituality.

Another French-Canadian publication dealing with the dichotomy of good/bad woman in association with the Christian dogma, is Denise Boucher's *Les fées ont soif*. An important feminist work in Quebec's literary history, this play presents the three most common patriarchal myths of woman: the housewife and mother, the prostitute, and the Statue (of the Virgin Mary). *Les fées ont soif* (a title contrasting nicely Anatole France's *Les dieux ont soif*) offers the Christian paradigm of woman's role, represented through three female archetypes. By the end of the play, the women finally become one by creating a new ideology. Similar to the image of the black madonna, they now display strength, sexual power, fertility, undivided completeness.

The black madonna represents sexuality emancipated from patriarchal oppression. In Margaret Laurence's *The Diviners*, the heroine Morag Gunn decides in favour of motherhood, but against marriage. By repelling her husband's educational methods of permanently condescending to Morag, she overcomes the patriarchal monopoly and achieves at the same time female sovereignty. Similar to Addolorata, Morag turns into a black-madonna-figure herself. The evidence of total female autonomy is further substantiated through her open relationship with the Metis Skinner Tonnerre.

\* \* \*

The image of the black madonna provides a source of empowerment to the women depicted in the four works. Although this thesis concentrates on Italian-Canadian works, the image of the black madonna, in the broad definition, does not necessitate the reference to Italian origins. The diagram of a female power figure reveals the potentiality of inspiration to women. The women portrayed in the four works under study are all of Italian descent, yet they are individuals with different lives in different regions. The madonna theme is not an Italian phenomenon, yet its correlation with the Italian culture, for example, gives access to culturally specific aspects and cross-cultural studies. Regarding future analyses in the comparative Canadian context, the black madonna theory might offer new approaches to literature.

The connection with earth, for example, is inborn, and the black madonna is in this respect an archetypal image illustrating "a metaphor for a memory of the time when the earth was believed to be the body of a woman and all creatures were equal, a memory transmitted in vernacular traditions of earth-bonded cultures" (Birnbaum, *Black Madonnas*, 3).



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