

The Cultural Identity of Italian-Americans in the Television Series *The Sopranos*

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ABSTRAKT

Tato bakalářská práce se zabývá analýzou zobrazování italsko-americké kulturní identity prostřednictvím mužských a ženských postav v televizním seriálu *Rodina Sopránů* (1999-2007). Teoretická část této práce se zaměřuje na historické a kulturní pozadí Italoameričanů od 19. do 21. století. Praktická část práce obsahuje stručné představení seriálu, po kterém následuje analýza kulturních identit postav a vlivu organizovaného zločinu na jejich vývoj.

Klíčová slova: *Rodina Sopránů*, italoamerická identita, kulturní asimilace, organizovaný zločin, rodinné hodnoty, genderové role

ABSTRACT

This bachelor's thesis provides an analysis of the portrayal of Italian-American cultural identity through male and female characters in the television series *The Sopranos* (1999-2007). The focus in the theoretical part of this work is on the historical and cultural background of Italian-Americans from the 19th to the 21st century. The practical section of the thesis features a brief introduction to the series, followed by an analysis of the characters' cultural identities and the impact of organized crime on their development.

Keywords: *The Sopranos*, Italian-American identity, cultural assimilation, organized crime, family values, gender roles

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I hereby declare that the print version of my bachelor's thesis and the electronic version of my thesis deposited in the IS/STAG system are identical.

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INTRODUCTION

The Sopranos is widely regarded as one of the most impactful television series in American history, particularly during the late 1990s and early 2000s. The series ran for eight years, starting in 1999, and received remarkable accolades, including 21 Primetime Emmy Awards and 5 Golden Globes. Whilst the series is primarily recognized for its depiction of organized crime and the psychological struggles of its main character, Tony Soprano, the cultural representation of Italian-Americans forms an essential layer of the narrative. It follows the tension between the heritage of the old world and contemporary American society and its values, as well as the effort to preserve traditional values, such as loyalty and honor.

The aim of the thesis is to depict cultural identity as it unfolds throughout the series, utilizing an analysis of male and female characters. To achieve this objective, it is necessary to define key aspects of Italian-American culture and their relevance in everyday life. Moreover, a thorough examination of the historical and cultural background of Italian immigration to the United States during the late 19th and early 20th century. Understanding the significance of family, religion, and traditions within Italian-American communities, along with the process of adaptation and assimilation to a new environment, will provide critical insight.

The analysis is structured into two sections, focusing on male and female characters and illustrating how each gender navigates their cultural heritage and how individual identities transform throughout the series.

I OVERVIEW OF ITALIAN- AMERICAN CULTURE

1 WAYS OF DEFINING CULTURAL IDENTITY

As described by social psychologists and anthropologists like Maykel Verkuyten (who is both), identity is a fundamental part of what it means to be human. It shapes who we are and how we and others see ourselves. Almost nothing about how people live their lives is set in stone, and there are numerous possibilities for doing so. All humans have essential and non-essential needs that must be met, affecting decision-making in all aspects of life. While everyone has a different approach to dealing with those needs, the fundamental issues remain the same: Who are we? What holds the most significance for us? Where do we fit into society? How do individuals and groups perceive one another?¹

These questions emphasize how identity can be defined in various ways. As sociologist Manuel Castells emphasizes, identity is how people create meaning in their lives. Instead of being simply inherited or assigned, identity is actively shaped by what individuals choose to embrace and the importance they ascribe to it.² Contrary to popular belief, religious identity applies to everyone in some ways. According to sociologist and theologian Peter Berger, all humans have certain beliefs and engage in practices associated with religion, such as Christianity, Hinduism, Judaism, Islam, or even atheism.³ National identity reflects an individual's connection to a country or nation, marked by shared history, cultural practices, legends, economic systems, and mutual legal obligations within that nation.⁴ Ethnic identity is not necessarily about where an individual was born, although it may be closely related to an individual's sense of belonging to one or more ethnic groups that share the same language, customs, traditions, heritage, and, in many cases, the same physical features as the color of hair, skin, or eyes.⁵

Cultural identity combines all these characteristics. The individual identifies with a culture or subculture with the same values, beliefs, traditions, language, religion, practices, and interests.⁶ Italian-Americans, for example, have navigated numerous challenges of migration, including discrimination, prejudice, language barriers, and the pressure of assimilation. Their resilience stems from their emphasis on family and loyalty to one another,

¹ Maykel Verkuyten, *Identity and Cultural Diversity: What Social Psychology Can Teach Us* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 13-14.

² Manuel Castells, *The Power of Identity*, 2nd ed., vol. 2 (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2010), 6.

³ Peter Berger, *Religion and Identity: The Emergence of New Religious Movements* (Chicago: University Press of Chicago, n.d.), 105-110.

⁴ Anthony D. Smith, *National Identity* (London: Penguin Books, 1991), 14.

⁵ Kanchan Chandra, ed., "What Is Ethnic Identity? A Minimalist Definition," in *Constructivist Theories of Ethnic Politics* (Oxford University Press, 2012), 51-55.

⁶ Jonathan Friedman, *Cultural Identity and Global Process* (London: SAGE Publications, 1994), 78-83.

as well as their connection to religion, close-knit communities, traditions, and a shared culinary heritage. By embracing their heritage, they have preserved a deep connection to their roots and also made significant contributions to the cultural, economic, and social spheres of the United States.

1.1 Key Aspects of Italian-American Culture

Italian culture is celebrated globally, with its influence permeating even the most diverse societies. Italians have made a considerable impact wherever they have settled. Many regions in the United States bear the distinct marks of the Italian immigrants who have contributed to the country's development.

Italy has a rich and intricate cultural history marked by enduring traditions and its evolving influence over the centuries. The country's unification was achieved through the Risorgimento (resurgence), a political and social movement in the second half of the 19th century.⁷ As a result, many Italians take pride in their regional backgrounds, emphasizing their specific origins when expressing their cultural pride.

1.1.1 Cuisine

Food is well-known as a main aspect of Italian and Italian-American cultural identity. It is the cornerstone of both cultures, as it plays a significant role in everyday life, with many rituals tied to food. Cuisine is one of the main regional differentiators. Social historian Harvey Levenstein describes how, when Italians arrived in America, their cuisine was considered too ethnic and exotic by the Americans because they cooked with garlic and spices, like dried chili peppers.⁸ These ingredients were staples in many households.

In the 1880s, many Italian women in America showed little interest in cooking classes intended to teach the "American way" of cooking. They believed their traditional practices were superior.⁹ But with the arrival of World War I, Americans began to appreciate how, despite the low cost, meals were simple to prepare yet complex. This shift occurred as meat and other foods became more expensive. Additionally, Italy, being one of the Allies of the United States during the war, helped improve the perception of Italian cuisine.¹⁰ Over time,

⁷ Nancy C. Carnevale, *A New Language, A New World: Italian Immigrants in the United States, 1890-1945* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 22.

⁸ Harvey Levenstein, "The American Response to Italian Food, 1880-1930," in *Food in the USA*, ed. Carole Counihan (New York: Routledge, 2002), 75–76.

⁹ Levenstein, 80–81.

¹⁰ Levenstein, 83–84.

some staples of the Italian diet became American staples, though they have undergone changes.¹¹ As noted by Carol Helstosky, a researcher on the history of Italian food, one remarkable example is pizza, which gained popularity during World War II. Americans in Chicago modified the dish and created the Chicago deep-dish pizza, which differs significantly from the original Neapolitan version. Nonetheless, Italian-Americans embraced it, as it originated from their motherland.¹² Other examples include pasta, gelato, panini, and wine.

Most Italian immigrants remained loyal to their traditional dietary habits due to rituals surrounding food. Multiple-course dishes allowed family members, including grandmothers, mothers, and daughters, to bond during preparation and share their experiences around the dining table.¹³ Italian-American families commemorate Christmas Eve with *La Vigilia* (the Feast of the Seven Fishes), where they prepare traditional seafood dishes to honor their heritage and uphold cultural customs.¹⁴ This celebration of cooking and eating together enriched family bonds and created a ritual that connects generations across time.¹⁵

Italian immigrants often resisted major changes to their diet, and this conservatism helped shape their sense of identity abroad. In the United States, for instance, they exemplified what historian Donna Gabaccia describes as “culinary conservatives,” continuing familiar food traditions even in a new environment. Many immigrants reinforced these food practices by working as food vendors, shopkeepers, and participating in community organizations. In their new surroundings, the foods they ate represented personal success, strong family bonds, and communal belonging.¹⁶ The presence of family-owned specialty shops, such as *salumerias* (shops with cold cuts, cheeses, and wine) or *panetterias* (bakeries), helped maintain these eating habits, allowing them to purchase traditional items from their homeland, including cheeses, meats, bread, wine, and more.

¹¹ Donna R. Gabaccia, *We Are What We Eat: Ethnic Food and the Making of Americans* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 137, 177.

¹² Carol Helstosky, *Pizza: A Global History* (Reaktion Books: London, 2008), 48–49, 71.

¹³ Gene Veronesi, “Chapter 9: Italian Families, Festivals and Foods,” accessed 1 January 2025, <https://pressbooks.ulib.csuohio.edu/italian-americans-and-their-communities-of-cleveland/chapter/chapter-9-italian-families-festivals-and-foods/>.

¹⁴ Machael A. Di Giovine, “La Vigilia Italo-Americana: Revitalizing the Italian-American Family Through the Christmas Eve Feast of the Seven Fishes,” *Food and Foodways* 18, no. 3 (2010): 181–85, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07409710.2010.529012>.

¹⁵ Di Giovine, 189–91.

¹⁶ Carol Helstosky, *Garlic and Oil: Politics and Food in Italy* (Oxford: Berg, 2004), 29–30.

1.1.2 Language

Italy is home to 34 dialects among its numerous regions and city-states. According to the book *An Introduction to Language* by Fromkin, Rodman, and Hyams, dialects are variations of a language that are typically associated with specific regions or social groups. They can differ in vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar. Dialects are often considered informal, primarily orally used language variations.¹⁷ When two people from different regions of Italy meet, they may struggle to understand each other. Some dialects are so distinct from Italian that they could be considered their own languages.

When Italians immigrated to the United States, the first generation of immigrants primarily spoke their native dialects, maintaining a sense of unity and cultural cohesion. As time passed, the gradual loss of the Italian language and a shift towards English occurred in subsequent generations. Many felt pressured to stop speaking their native language due to discrimination, believing it made them outsiders. Nevertheless, the Italian language has substantially influenced the English language. Certain words, phrases, and expressions are used frequently in everyday speech.¹⁸ Countless words are food-related, such as pizza, pasta, cappuccino, and gelato. Examples of other often used words include *comare* (close friend, usually a partner in an extra-marital affair), *gumba* (people of Italian descent in the United States), *agita* (heartburn, anxiety), and *stunad* (stupid, crazy).

1.1.3 Arts

Italy has made significant contributions to the arts, with a legacy in painting, sculpture, opera, classical music, fashion, and cinema. Over the centuries, the country has profoundly impacted the world, including in America. The Italian Renaissance, with master artists like Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo, introduced new artistic techniques, setting a standard for complex creativity in Western art. Caravaggio revolutionized Baroque art with dramatic figures and lighting, transforming paintings into moments of faith and revelation.¹⁹ Many of

¹⁷ Victoria Fromkin, Robert Rodman, and Nina Hyams, *An Introduction to Language*, 11th ed. (Boston: Cengage Learning, 2017), 279–85.

¹⁸ Carnevale, *A New Language, A New World: Italian Immigrants in the United States, 1890-1945*, 10, 22–23.

¹⁹ Martin Kemp, ed., *The Oxford History of Western Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 154, 217.

these artworks are displayed in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, reflecting the appreciation of Italian art in the United States.²⁰

The plastic arts are closely tied to architecture. Italian architecture influenced the design of many American buildings. Neighborhoods like Little Italy in New York and “The Hill” in St. Louis incorporated traditional Italian elements such as wrought iron balconies and stucco facades. These elements evoke the life and atmosphere of Italy, merging architecture with identity.²¹

Italian cinema continues to influence Italian-American directors and actors, with Martin Scorsese and Francis Ford Coppola exploring themes of family and identity in their films. Prominent 20th-century actors include Al Pacino, Sylvester Stallone, and Liza Minnelli.²² The television series *The Sopranos* offers a realistic portrayal of the lives and struggles of Italian-Americans, featuring a protagonist dealing with anxiety. While the series includes standard elements like the romanticization of organized crime and reinforces stereotypes about Italians, the focus on the protagonist’s mental health is a unique aspect of a “mafia” series.

1.2 Catholicism as a Cultural Foundation

Traditionally, Italians have been characterized by their deep religious beliefs, with Catholic faith serving as a foundation of their culture, history, politics, and social structures for centuries. This faith became the foundation of Italian-American identity as Italians came to America. There has been a gradual decline in the number of those who identify as Catholic. Currently, over half of the Italian population still adheres to these beliefs.²³ They actively participate in fundamental traditions, such as baptism and burial, and attending Sunday Mass remains common.

This religion played a crucial role in shaping American history, culture, society, and politics in connection with Italian, Irish, and Latin American immigrants. Immigrants from traditionally Catholic countries relied on the Church to sustain their cultural heritage. Over

²⁰ Will Fenstermaker, “American Artists Abroad: Stephanie Herdrich on Italy’s Influence on American Art,” 20 April 2018, <https://www.metmuseum.org/perspectives/american-painters-italy-stephanie-herdrich-interview>.

²¹ Gary Mormino, “Immigrants on the Hill: Italian Americans in St. Louis, 1882–1992,” in *The Routledge History of Italian Americans*, ed. William J. Connell and Stanislaw G. Pugliese (New York: Routledge, 2017), 246–47.

²² Joseph Giordano, ed., *The Italian-American Catalog* (New York: A Dolphin Book, 1986), 146–54.

²³ Franco Garelli, “Flexible Catholicism, Religion and the Church: The Italian Case,” *Religions* 4, no. 1 (March 2013): 1–13, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel4010001>.

time, the presence of this institution expanded, and its influence deepened through the establishment of schools, charitable organizations, and hospitals that served the communities. These institutions also advocated for labor rights, justice, and civil rights.²⁴

For many immigrants, Catholicism served as a spiritual anchor and a vital bridge to community life amid the challenges of integration. Irish, Polish, and German immigrants found strong support within the religious community; however, this was not the case for all immigrant groups. Italian-Americans often faced resistance in Catholic churches and centers that were dominated. Hatred towards Italian immigrants and minimal knowledge of English meant unwelcome status in these institutions. In response, Italians in New York or Chicago started building their churches, incorporating architectural details from their heritage.²⁵ The immigrants were convinced they themselves could build the houses of worship with more precision and attention to detail. These parishes hosted traditional religious festivities and celebrations, and helped them feel part of a community. Italian-Americans actively participate in many of these activities. A close family relationship, belief in Saints, and sacraments such as baptism, communion, and marriage are often at the center for them.

At the break of the 20th and 21st centuries, the popularity of the Roman Catholic Church began to decline. Younger generations had other interests and often even different beliefs. The decline in Italian American attendance was not as drastic because religion has remained a means of preserving tradition and heritage in a rapidly changing world. It was almost one of the only constant things in their life. The growing population of Latino followers made Catholicism in America more diverse. Still, Italian-Americans have continued to exert considerable influence within the religion.²⁶

1.3 Family and Loyalty as Core Values

For Italian-Americans, the concepts of family, honor, and loyalty guided their journey and their lives. They were central to Italians, and as they immigrated, they helped them navigate the challenges of migration and cultural adaptation. Although in some sense these values were static, they provided a sense of normalcy. In America, they were reconsidered to blend what they knew with the modern world's expectations.

²⁴ Gillis Gester, *Roman Catholicism in America*, 2nd ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020), 55–58, 103.

²⁵ Gester, 75–80, 83–85.

²⁶ Gester, 103–5, 110–12.

For most Italian-Americans, the value of family (La Famiglia) was at the center of their lives, providing emotional support and a means to survive. Traditionally, in the South of Italy, the family was not a closed circle of a few members, but an extended family network that included not only relatives but also godparents and family friends. This network functioned collectively with shared resources and responsibilities. It was called *Lordine della Famiglia* (Order of the Family). For instance, the *comparatiko* (the relationship between godparents and their godchildren) customs integrated non-blood relatives, adding another layer and deepening their social bonds.²⁷ Italians came to the United States, a new environment, and brought these survival strategies with them, quickly forming Italian neighborhoods in many cities, often referred to as Little Italy, which reflected this family model. Not only family members, but also neighbors and friends, were there to provide support to one another. Societies that offered mutual aid, informal job referrals, and shared living helped many immigrants.²⁸ Over time, the traditional structure evolved across generations, but its role in retaining cultural identity remained unchanged.

Loyalty was another critical value for a family, reinforcing unity and cohesion. It was a concept that is more important to a family than social behavior. Family members were obligated to support their relatives and community emotionally and financially. This value was an informal mutual aid system that helped immigrants in a new environment, where relatives who had already established a life there were expected to assist them in navigating their new lives. It created a sense of community where no one was left behind.²⁹ When it came to loyalty, elders were the ones who supported traditional values, offered guidance, and ensured that the younger generations understood their importance.³⁰

²⁷ Richard Gambino, *Blood of My Blood: The Dilemma of the Italian-Americans* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1974), 1–6.

²⁸ Gambino, 101–3.

²⁹ Gambino, 9–10.

³⁰ Donna R. Gabaccia, *Italy's Many Diasporas* (London: Routledge, 2000), 159–62.

2 ITALIAN-AMERICAN HISTORY AND IMMIGRATION

Human migration is the intentional process of relocating from one place to another, often regarded as a long-term, though not necessarily permanent, decision by those who migrate. Migration can be categorized in two ways: based on whether individuals or groups are leaving a country or arriving in a new one. Emigration involves either voluntarily departing from one's home country or being forced to leave due to numerous circumstances. In contrast, immigration is defined as the act of moving to a different country in search of better opportunities or resources.³¹ The reasons for migration are countless; for clarity, they are typically classified into four main categories: economic, political, environmental, and social factors.³²

2.1 Push Factors: Motivations to Leave Italy

Migration is shaped by push and pull factors. Push factors are unfavorable conditions that drive individuals to leave their countries, while pull factors attract immigrants to locations with better opportunities. Even if the decision to leave can be daunting for many, the severity of push factors often leaves them with little choice but to seek better prospects elsewhere.³³ Italians, for example, despite their love for their country, felt compelled to seek more preferable prospects abroad, such as in the United States, Argentina, and other countries.

Italian-American historian Donna R. Gabaccia outlines in her book *Italy's Many Diasporas* that the history of Italian immigration dates to medieval times, with Italians migrating to various places over the centuries.³⁴ The various challenges they encountered prompted many to leave their homeland—the stark contrast between the impoverished South and the more prosperous North shaped migration patterns. Southerners endured significant hardships due to the lack of economic resources, limited work opportunities, food scarcity, and land shortages. Natural disasters, such as earthquakes and volcanic eruptions, destroyed their houses and agricultural lands. Northerners faced fewer existential threats, benefiting from better access to employment, education, and a generally more stable economy.³⁵

³¹ Nancy C. Carnevale, *A New Language, A New World: Italian Immigrants in the United States, 1890-1945* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009)

³² Migration Data Portal, "Migration Drivers," accessed December 20, 2024, <https://www.migrationdataportal.org/themes/migration-driver>.

³³ Mariusz Urbanski, "Comparing Push and Pull Factors Affecting Migration," *Economies* 10, no. 1 (January 2022): 21, <https://doi.org/10.3390/economies10010021>.

³⁴ Gabaccia, *Italy's Many Diasporas*, 1–6.

³⁵ Gabaccia, 6–11.

People began leaving Italy in large numbers, driven by the hope of securing a better life for themselves and their children. Based on the accounts of fellow immigrants, they believed America offered solutions to many of their problems. A significant influx of Italians started arriving in the United States in the 1880s, even with their limited proficiency in English and unfamiliarity with American customs.³⁶ American values are shaped by a belief in personal independence, a sense of responsibility for the individual's success and well-being, and the idea that everyone should have control over their personal space and choices.³⁷

2.2 Waves of Italian Immigration to the U.S.

The first major wave of immigration, often referred to as a diaspora, began in the 1880s, prompted by the poor living conditions and poverty in Southern Italy, called the Mezzogiorno. Neglected by the Italian government after the Unification, many Southerners left for America, driven by the promise of better work opportunities and greater freedom.³⁸ They believed that they could live the American dream, which promised them success through hard work. This dream puts emphasis on how anyone can have a better life, for example, by owning a house and therefore achieving a sense of financial security.³⁹ The desire to keep close regional ties also played a crucial role in this mass migration; many identified strongly with their local villages and opted to emigrate together collectively.⁴⁰

Between 1881 and 1900, over 500,000 Italians immigrated, with the peak between 1901 and 1910, resulting in more than two million arrivals. This surge was driven by affordable transatlantic travel and favorable stories shared by relatives already in America.⁴¹ Many immigrants hailed from Naples and Sicily, regions with economic underdevelopment and widespread illiteracy. Many identified as “birds of passage” (*uccelli di passaggio*), viewing their journey as a temporary one, hoping to return home after earning enough money. Between 1880 and 1920, over four million Italians came to America.⁴² Upon arrival, they faced arduous working conditions, discrimination, and marginalization within American

³⁶ Gabaccia, 9–18.

³⁷ Rober N. Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, Updated (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 76, 143, 56.

³⁸ Michael Burgan, *Italian Immigrants* (New York: Facts on File, 2005), 28–29.

³⁹ Jennifer Wolak and David A. M. Peterson, “The Dynamic American Dream,” *American Journal of Political Science* 64, no. 4 (2020): 968, 970.

⁴⁰ Gabaccia, *Italy's Many Diasporas*, 32–34.

⁴¹ Burgan, *Italian Immigrants*, 39–43.

⁴² Burgan, 32,42,54.

society due to their linguistic differences, darker skin color, and predominantly Catholic faith.⁴³

Mass immigration was temporarily halted during World War I; however, the early 1920s witnessed a resurgence of Italian immigration despite restrictive immigration laws like the Quota Acts of 1921 and 1924.⁴⁴ The Act of 1924, in particular, limited the number of incoming Italians to just over 5,000 per year.⁴⁵ While the 1920s marked a decline in the number of new Italian-American immigrants, the overall population already in the country continued to grow and gradually integrate into U.S. society.⁴⁶ Initially, the process of integration was slow for many Italians, as they struggled with isolation and poverty. Regardless, over time, they found better job opportunities, leading to greater stability in their lives.⁴⁷ Early struggles gave way to success among the second and third generations, with some achieving success as businessmen and politically active citizens. Notable figures include Patsy D'Agostino, who made significant contributions to the restaurant industry at the beginning of the 20th century, and John Volpe, who made history as the first Italian-American appointed to a presidential cabinet in 1969, serving under two presidents.⁴⁸

After World War II, changing U.S. immigration policies and Italy's improving economy, aided by international support from countries like the United States and its Marshall Plan, facilitated Italy's recovery and influenced immigration patterns. As a result, the number of arrivals in the 1980s decreased to an average of 3,000 per year.⁴⁹ Today's immigration primarily consists of educated professionals seeking career opportunities and others motivated by economic, professional, educational, or lifestyle reasons.⁵⁰

⁴³ Ben Mangione and Jerre Morreale, *La Storia: Five Centuries of the Italian American Experience* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), 55.

⁴⁴ Mangione and Morreale, 316–18.

⁴⁵ Catherine M. Petrini, *The Italian Americans* (San Diego, CA: Lucent Books, 2002), 85.

⁴⁶ Gabaccia, *Italy's Many Diasporas*, 34.

⁴⁷ Burgan, *Italian Immigrants*, 66–67.

⁴⁸ Burgan, 69–71.

⁴⁹ Burgan, 68–69.

⁵⁰ Luciana Fellin, "The Italian New Wave: Identity Work and Socialization Practices in a Community of New Italian Immigrants in America," *Forum Italicum* 48, no. 2 (2014): 294, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0014585814529228>.

3 CHALLENGES AND TRANSFORMATIONS IN ITALIAN-AMERICAN CULTURE

Acculturation constitutes a multifaceted process in which people from different cultural backgrounds interact with each other and gradually change both the immigrants and the host culture. Acculturation involves mutual adaptations between cultures that span multiple generations.⁵¹ According to psychologist J. W. Berry, individuals may adopt four strategies when navigating acculturation. These strategies include assimilation (adopting the host culture), separation (maintaining the original culture), integration (blending both cultures), and marginalization (losing connection to both cultures due to exclusion).⁵² Assimilation is a strategy that can be both voluntary and forced, thereby affecting identity and social integration.⁵³

3.1 Assimilation of Italians

Like other immigrant groups, Italian newcomers faced obstacles when reconciling their cultural heritage with the demands of American society. Their assimilation process was gradual, marked by increasing exposure to the English language, diverse work environments, and the education system.

While early generations prioritized core cultural values, exposure to American culture led to changes in religious practices, gender roles, and family structures.⁵⁴ Their involvement in political organizations and labor unions facilitated their interaction with broader communities.⁵⁵ The second and third generations, born and raised in the United States, experienced cultural clashes with their parents due to differences in lifestyle and values, benefiting from education and job opportunities.⁵⁶ A turning point in this integration process emerged in the post-World War II era, as more Italian-Americans secured higher-paying jobs and even began working in law enforcement after a long history of distrust towards police. All this was possible because of their eventual trust in these American institutions.⁵⁷

⁵¹ John W. Berry, "Acculturation: Living Successfully in Two Cultures," *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 29, no. 6 (2005): 698–99, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2005.07.013>.

⁵² Berry, 704–6.

⁵³ Berry, 705–8.

⁵⁴ Burgan, *Italian Immigrants*, 48–50.

⁵⁵ Burgan, 49–50.

⁵⁶ Petrini, *The Italian Americans*, 90–91.

⁵⁷ Petrini, 92–93.

Regardless of these adaptation efforts, they faced discrimination and prejudice rooted in stereotypes linked to their darker skin tones, the Catholic faith, and perceived association with criminal activities. The padrone system, which involved a network of labor brokers and facilitated job placements for Italian workers, was viewed as corrupt and exploitative, contributing to the negative public perception.⁵⁸ Newspapers, the media, and public officials depicted them negatively as criminals and strike-breakers, further entrenching the social stigma.⁵⁹ In spite of these challenges, they ultimately gained political representation as politicians, governors, and mayors. These achievements showed their increasing integration and influence on American life.⁶⁰ A vital support system for Italian immigrants was in neighborhoods such as Little Italy in cities like New York and Boston, and enclaves in other urban cities like New Jersey. Italian immigrants created tightly knit communities where they could preserve their dialects and traditions and feel safe.⁶¹

In her study of young Italian-Americans, sociologist Rosemary Serra documents how third- and especially fourth-generation individuals engage with their heritage in superficial and optional ways. This concept is referred to as “symbolic ethnicity” by sociologist Herbert Gans. Serra explains that cultural identity is often expressed through food preferences, nostalgic objects, or sporadic traditions, rather than a consistent cultural framework.⁶² By the fourth generation, many of her interviewees report little connection to Italy or the broader Italian-American community. They define their identity primarily through their American experience, often feeling disconnected from both cultures. For these later generations, cultural affiliation can lead to uncertainty or ambivalence, reflecting struggles over belonging and self-definition.⁶³ This shift parallels the portrayal of generational loss in *The Sopranos*. Meadow’s occasional references to her roots contrast with her clear rejection of traditional roles. In comparison, AJ’s aimlessness reflects the fading influence of cultural authority.

The Italian-American experience involves continuing cultural traditions while adapting to American society. The numerous challenges of assimilation and identity negotiation are among the key themes explored in non-academic works. *Wild Dreams*, edited by Bonomo

⁵⁸ Burgan, *Italian Immigrants*, 32–33, 39.

⁵⁹ Petrini, *The Italian Americans*, 78–79.

⁶⁰ Burgan, *Italian Immigrants*, 39–40.

⁶¹ Burgan, 33, 35.

⁶² Rosemary Serra, *Sense of Origins: A Study of New Yorks Young Italian Americans*, trans. Scott R. Kapuscinski (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2020), 80.

⁶³ Serra, 273–75.

Albright and Clapps Herman, features essays detailing real-life experiences. In the analytical section, this collection will serve as a bridge for comparing the fictional portrayal in *The Sopranos* with these stories based on the real lives of immigrants.

In his influential work *Simulacra and Simulation*, French cultural theorist Jean Baudrillard introduces the idea of *hyperreality*, where contemporary society interacts with representations that detach from their original sources. These representations stop being reflections of reality and begin to replace reality entirely. What might be perceived as “real” is shaped by layers of signs and models rather than direct experience.⁶⁴ Initially, these signs represent something authentic, but they can obscure the truth over time and evolve into artificial constructs.⁶⁵ Baudrillard also addresses how it applies to cultural identity by examining how some societies attempt to preserve traditional cultures.⁶⁶ This concept can be used when thinking about communities like Italian-Americans and their Italian cultural identity. Since they do not live in Italy, they might have little contact with the evolving reality of the country, and therefore their version would be based on inherited rituals, family stories, and media portrayals. In *The Sopranos*, their Italian-American identity becomes a simulation, and they imitate cultural signs, like food, family, and loyalty.

3.2 Evolving Gender Roles Across Generations: Traditional vs. Modern

It is essential to acknowledge that examining gender roles among Italian-Americans is a relatively new field of interest, which scholars only began to study in the second half of the 20th century. Most of these sources are written by third- or fourth-generation descendants who tend to subjectively either describe their own experiences or interview one or two older family members about their memories and lives. The foundation for Italian-American gender roles had once been the system in Italy, one in which men were typically the primary breadwinners. Still, women oversaw the family,⁶⁷ managed the household, and planned the use of resources.⁶⁸

⁶⁴ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 1–2.

⁶⁵ Baudrillard, 6.

⁶⁶ Baudrillard, 79.

⁶⁷ Donna R. Gabaccia, *From the Other Side: Women, Gender, and Immigrant Life in the U.S., 1820-1990* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 15–16.

⁶⁸ Gabaccia, 16–17.

3.2.1 Men

In his book *Blood of My Blood*, Richard Gambino examines the Italian-American male stereotype, its dual nature, and the presented contradictions, as a man is expected to be both impassioned and composed, family-oriented yet independent, and proud yet deferential.⁶⁹ The key to understanding this dual nature can be found in Gambino's concept of *pazienza* (patience), as the proper Italian-American man should uphold self-control and wait for the right moment to act.⁷⁰ Honor and cleverness are essential to men of Southern Italian families, and all their lives, they are taught to be cautious of *pigliato per fesso* (being taken for a fool).⁷¹

Even with this emphasis on carefulness, the men were defined by their bursts of passion and action when the security and honor of the family were at stake.⁷² For many Italian-American men, the economic security of their families was a top priority, which can explain why men from the second and third generations often worked in certain civil service jobs, such as police officers and firefighters.⁷³ Working in civil service thus allowed them to have some influence, even if their distrust in the government of the Old World was still present in America.⁷⁴

A major obstacle for traditional Italian masculinity is the view on homosexuality, often seen as a threat to the family unit in a system that emphasizes male dominance and procreation.⁷⁵ Expectations for men to protect and provide for their families have created limited opportunities to express masculinity. Furthermore, public displays of affection among men, like hugging and cheek-kissing, have frequently been misunderstood, raising doubts about Italian-American masculinity.⁷⁶ Nonetheless, studies like Tager and Goods in 2005 show increasing acceptance among Italian and American men.⁷⁷ Popular media, such as *The Sopranos*, show the rigid perception of masculinity, with several stories exploring the topics of sexual orientation and male identity. The tragic fate of the character Vito Spatafore,

⁶⁹ Gambino, *Blood of My Blood: The Dilemma of the Italian-Americans*, 117–18.

⁷⁰ Gambino, 119–20.

⁷¹ Gambino, 122, 123.

⁷² Gambino, 132.

⁷³ Gambino, 131.

⁷⁴ Gambino, 131, 140–41.

⁷⁵ Fred L. Gardaphé, "Italian American Masculinities" (Queens, NY: City University of New York, Queens College, 2017), 559, 560, https://academicworks.cuny.edu/qc_pubs/560.

⁷⁶ Gardaphé, 554.

⁷⁷ David Tager and Glenn E. Good, "Italian and American Masculinities: A Comparison of Masculine Gender Role Norms," *Psychology of Men & Masculinity* 6, no. 4 (2005): 268, <https://doi.org/10.1037/1524-9220.6.4.264>.

for example, is directly determined by his sexuality and the threat that it represents to the broader organization.

3.3 Organized Crime

In the United States and beyond, Italian-American migration, community, and social exclusion are closely linked to the Mafia, known as *La Cosa Nostra* or LCN, the FBI code that the informant Pussy uses with the agent in the episode “The Knight in White Satin Armor” in season 2. Established by Sicilians in the 19th century, immigrants brought with them the organizational structures, traditions, and the members’ adherence to *omertà* (silence). *La Cosa Nostra* has had a durable structure, with members having defined roles.⁷⁸ *Cosa Nostra*, as detailed by historian specializing on Italy John Dickie, has been characterized by mystery and violence. Thanks to the testimonies of key informants like Tommaso Buscetta in the 1980s, the internal workings of the Mafia have been exposed as a highly organized and hierarchical structure. At the heart of *Cosa Nostra* lies a tiered system that begins with the soldiers who carry out orders, including extortion, enforcement, and racketeering. Above them is the *capodecina* (head of ten), who supervises a group of soldiers and reports to a family boss, the leader of a Mafia family. The boss is assisted by one or more *consiglieri* (advisors). Several Mafia families, whose territories are adjacent, form a *mandamento* (district).⁷⁹ In *The Sopranos*, the characters often refer to their criminal groups across the Northeast USA in English as “our thing.”

Becoming a member of *Cosa Nostra* requires proof of worth. Before earning the title of made guy (man of honor), recruits are observed and reminded that they hold little value within the organization without formal initiation. The burning of a saint’s card symbolizes leaving behind their old life and being reborn into a new family.⁸⁰ For the members, loyalty also presented challenges, including remaining silent about relatives involved in illegal or harmful activities. This behavior was motivated by a sense of responsibility towards the family and a way to avoid shame. Even though the involvement in criminal activities was true for only a handful of Italian-Americans, this familial loyalty created an environment in

⁷⁸ James O. Finckenauer, *The Mafia and Organized Crime: A Beginners Guide* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2007), 18–21.

⁷⁹ John Dickie, *Cosa Nostra: A History of the Sicilian Mafia* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 18–19.

⁸⁰ Dickie, 29.

which transgressions were usually not directly addressed but remained somewhat hidden within the family and were entirely concealed from outsiders.⁸¹

Ethics and society philosopher, H. Peter Steeves, argues that the Mafia operates under traditional values like honor and loyalty, but also mirrors the power dynamics of corporate capitalism. He posits that individuals are deeply influenced by their social and cultural contexts, making their moral identities tied to community relationships.⁸² In this light, the Mafia embodies a “communitarian” ethic, by which loyalty and obligation shape identity. This ethical landscape becomes compromised by capitalism, as *The Sopranos* men, such as Tony, justify violence with phrases like “It’s business.” This justification reflects corporate practices, where violence takes a legal form, such as foreclosures, illustrating how both systems harm individuals.⁸³

3.3.1 Women

Traditionally, the husband was regarded as the ultimate authority, responsible for decision-making, and the wife was expected to provide support, manage the home, and raise the children. Although Italian-American women were often subordinate in public and economic spheres, they had considerable influence at home, acting as the emotional backbone of the family. The women’s strength frequently rivaled or surpassed the men’s as these women enforced family tradition.⁸⁴ The ideal Gambino describes for women is *serietà* (seriousness), which emphasizes self-restraint and commitment to family above all personal desires. Even though their roles were honored, they also came with significant demands, as women were expected to be the center of the family.⁸⁵

Micaela di Leonardo, a cultural anthropologist with extensive research on gender-related inequalities, introduces the term “kin work,” which refers to women’s responsibilities in fostering and facilitating family connections. This labor, she argues, is fundamental, but remains undervalued and unrecognized in society.⁸⁶ The work includes, on the one hand, organizing events and buying gifts, and on the other hand, resolving disputes and reinforcing

⁸¹ Gambino, *Blood of My Blood: The Dilemma of the Italian-Americans*, 250–52.

⁸² Peter H. Steeves, “Its Business; Were Soldiers”: The Sopranos, Liberal Business Ethics, and This American Thing of Ours, ed. Mollie Painter-Morland and Patricia Werhane, *Cutting-edge Issues in Business Ethics*, 2008, 22–24, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4020-8401-0_3.

⁸³ Steeves, 24–25.

⁸⁴ William S. Egelman, “Traditional Roles and Modern Work Patterns of Italian American Women in New York City,” *Italian Americana* 18, no. 2 (Summer 2000): 188, 194.

⁸⁵ Gambino, *Blood of My Blood: The Dilemma of the Italian-Americans*, 146–47.

⁸⁶ Micaela Di Leonardo, “The Female World of Cards and Holidays: Women, Families, and the Work of Kinship,” *Signs* 12, no. 3 (Spring 1987): 442–43, <https://doi.org/10.1086/494338>.

kinship roles.⁸⁷ A 2010 study conducted in New Jersey and North Carolina by Hannah Burgwyn highlights another essential role of women as “memory keepers” in preserving Italian-American traditions and heritage through cooking and storytelling.⁸⁸

Many of these values and expectations of the *la via Vecchia* (the old way) encountered a cultural shift in the United States, and the second-generation daughters were drawn in by the opportunities offered by American society.⁸⁹ The young women struggled to uphold traditional values alongside the ideals of individualism and freedom, and they viewed their mothers as oppressive and outdated.⁹⁰ When second-generation women became mothers, they adopted a more modern, American approach to parenting, encouraging their daughters to pursue education, be more independent, and simultaneously uphold traditional family values.⁹¹

These predominantly Southern women have undergone a notable transformation, shifting from traditional roles to become active participants in the American workforce and pursuing higher education. With America being a much more individualistic country than Italy, both men and women adapted to the country’s economic and social ways of life. In New York City, a prominent Italian-American hub, William S. Egelman, in his study, *Traditional Roles and Modern Work Patterns of Italian American Women in New York City*, highlights how employment opportunities, education, and cultural shifts impacted these women’s lives during the 20th century. Although the center of his research is New York City, the trends he mentions reflect broader patterns evident in these communities across the United States.⁹²

Initially, facing long hours, low pay, and few benefits, these women largely integrated into the workforce by 1990. Between 1980 and 1990, the number of college-educated women doubled from 7.1% to 15.2%.⁹³ This transformation of women’s roles reflects an interaction between societal change and tradition, where these women managed to break free from traditional roles while honoring their heritage. Still, they are expected to carry the family’s success on their shoulders, whether through work, household management, or social

⁸⁷ Di Leonardo, 446.

⁸⁸ Hannah Burgwyn, “Memory-Keepers: An Ethnographic Look at Female Agency among Italian-Americans,” *Southern Anthropologist* 35, no. 2 (Winter 2010): 84–86.

⁸⁹ Gambino, *Blood of My Blood: The Dilemma of the Italian-Americans*, 154–55.

⁹⁰ Gambino, 155, 158.

⁹¹ Gambino, 160.

⁹² Egelman, “Traditional Roles and Modern Work Patterns of Italian American Women in New York City,” 190, 192, 195.

⁹³ Egelman, 192–93.

negotiations, and are often considered symbols of wisdom and guidance.⁹⁴ That is why understanding this connection helps explain why Italian-American culture continues to hold women in such high regard.

⁹⁴ Gambino, *Blood of My Blood: The Dilemma of the Italian-Americans*, 164.

II **ITALIAN-AMERICAN**
IDENTITY IN *THE SOPRANOS*

4 *THE SOPRANOS*

Created by writer and director David Chase, *The Sopranos* aired from 1999 to 2007 on HBO. The series revolutionized television storytelling with its nuanced cultural commentary, elements of gangster drama, and psychological exploration. Chase has commented on his long-standing fascination with organized crime, an interest deeply influenced by his Italian-American upbringing in New Jersey, where the series is also set. He recollects that the initial idea of “a depressed mobster in therapy” was inspired by his own psychotherapy sessions.⁹⁵

In the 2024 HBO (Max) two-part documentary *Wise Guy: David Chase and The Sopranos*, Chase details how his life experiences influenced the story. In particular, he emphasizes the challenging relationship with his mother, which inspired the tense dynamic between the protagonist Tony and his mother, Livia. He reveals, “Livia was modelled somewhat on my own mother – an acerbic and fearful woman,” pointing out how this relationship in the series had intensely personal roots.⁹⁶ The documentary additionally highlights how, during the casting process, Chase insisted on casting as many Italian-American actors with authentic connections to the New York-New Jersey region to enhance the series’ realism. Among the few exceptions are Nancy Marchand, who was cast as Livia Soprano for her realistic portrayal of an Italian-American mother despite not having any Italian heritage. Steven Van Zandt, a musician of Italian heritage (despite his surname) with no prior acting experience, was considered for the role of Tony Soprano, which was eventually given to James Gandolfini after his captivating audition. Initially, *The Sopranos* was only supposed to be a movie. Still, as Chase and other key creative contributors such as Frank Renzulli and Michael Imperioli shared interesting memories and experiences of their Italian-American upbringing with executives from HBO, it was decided that a series was a better format. When *The Sopranos* became an instant hit, eventually 6 seasons for a total of 86 episodes were produced, with both critics and academics generally claiming that the quality of the story arcs and depth of character relationships was not only maintained over the years but grew stronger every season.⁹⁷

As mentioned, the series is centered around the life of Anthony “Tony” Soprano, a mob boss in northern New Jersey struggling to balance being the head of a criminal organization

⁹⁵ David Chase, *The Sopranos* (New York: Hachette Book Group, 2009), chap. Introduction.

⁹⁶ *Wise Guy: David Chase and The Sopranos*, directed by Alex Gibney (HBO Documentary Films, 2024).

⁹⁷ David Lavery, “Can This Be the End of Tony Soprano?,” in *Reading the Sopranos: Hit Tv from HBO*, ed. David Lavery (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006), 5–6.

with his personal life, battling anxiety and depression. Because of panic attacks, he starts visiting psychiatrist Dr. Jennifer Melfi, and their sessions serve as a crucial narrative device, as they allow Tony, but also the audience, to explore his internal struggles deeply. He is married to Carmela Soprano, a devout Catholic who knows of her husband's not-so-secret life and is often there to support him without asking about the details of his work. Together, they have two children, Meadow and A.J. (Anthony Jr.), through whom we can see the difficulties of having a father who is in the Mafia as well as general conflicts of growing up, high school, university, etc., in the early 2000s. As the series continues to evolve, viewers are introduced to many complex characters with interesting backstories, for example, Tony's uncle Corrado "Junior" Soprano, Tony's sister Janice Soprano, and Johnny "Sack" Sacrimoni, a rival mob boss based in New York.

Although centered on the life of Tony as a mobster and his close circle, mostly consisting of other mobsters, in *The Sopranos*, questions of identity seem to run much deeper than the mafia storyline. Cultural identity is a battleground for men, women, and their children. The characters grapple with the complexities of their Italian-American lives, where family, tradition, and cultural expectations shape every aspect of their lives, often in contrast to the broader US mainstream culture. In the HBO documentary, creator David Chase recalls that the story is not only about organized crime. It is also a commentary on the current situation in the United States. At the time of writing the pilot episode, Chase sensed that the country was in decline, consumed by consumerism and selfishness.⁹⁸

⁹⁸ *Wise Guy: David Chase and The Sopranos*.

5 THE SOPRANOS MEN

The male characters in *The Sopranos* embody the traits of a patriarchal, honor-based culture. They are expected to retain control and exercise authority, provide for their families, and adhere to the principles of loyalty inherent within organized crime. Their affiliation with the mob influences their identities and behaviors, shaping their everyday lives.

5.1 Family as Ideal and Illusion

In Italian-American culture, family is more than a private bond. It is the foundation of tradition, identity, and respect. This is reflected in *The Sopranos* in how the main character, Tony Soprano, presents himself as a successful family man with a wife and two children, upholding the role of provider and protector. He lives in a luxurious house in the suburbs, living out his American dream and showcasing his success. The foundation of his dream is morally questionable, as he did not attain his wealth through hard work and honesty, but rather through criminal activities.

On the surface, Tony and his family have a wonderful and happy life. The family dinner scene in “Boca” from season 1, where Tony, Carmela, Meadow, AJ, his mother Livia, and his uncle Junior sit together, visually reinforces this image of Italian-American tradition, as they eat together and share stories. But beneath the surface, the tensions are visible, such as how Livia undermines Tony with her passive-aggressive comments.

This strained relationship with Tony’s mother is evident in the first episode, where his mother only undermines and laughs at him. He talks about this with his therapist, whom he starts visiting after his first panic attack in “Pilot” from season 1. What causes his depression and anxiety is not only the relationship with his mother but also the state of his cultural identity, where he feels neither American nor Italian. He tells Dr. Melfi about his current feelings: “I feel like I came in at the end... the best is over,” to which she replies, “A lot of Americans feel that way.” Dr. Melfi directly connects Tony’s personal crisis to the broader national mood. He feels a connection with Dr. Melfi due to their Italian-American heritage, believing she will understand his family dynamics, worldviews, and hopefully his work. As the series evolves, Tony attends their meetings to discuss his feelings while still having a tough exterior. He begins to understand his inner chaos, but only on his terms. He only wants to manage the panic attacks rather than to fully “get better.” This idea goes with the argument of William M. Epstein, who critiques psychotherapy as a form of American civil religion. Epstein claims that therapy functions less like medicine and more like a secular

version of church, where patients confess moral failings and reaffirm their commitment to American ideals like self-control, personal responsibility, and redemption.⁹⁹ Tony's sessions with Dr. Melfi consistently follow this structure: he confesses violent or unethical behavior, reflects (often shallowly) on his choices, and tries to reassert control over himself, although he rarely attempts permanent changes.

Despite Tony's flaws, he tries to be a caring father and husband who places great importance on his family. For example, when in "College" in season 1, when Carmela has the flu, he accompanies Meadow on a college tour in Maine. Their serious conversation in the car reveals she is no longer a child:

MEADOW: Are you in the mafia?

TONY: Am I in the what?

MEADOW: Whatever you wanna call it. Organized crime.

TONY: That's total crap, who told you that?

MEADOW: Dad, I've lived in the house all my life. I've seen police come with warrants. I've seen you going out at three in the morning.

TONY: So, you've never seen Doc Cusamano go out at three in the morning on a call?

MEADOW: Did the Cusamano kids ever find \$50,000 in Krugerrands and a .45 automatic while they were hunting for Easter eggs?

TONY: I'm in the waste management business. Everybody immediately assumes you're mobbed up. It's a stereotype. And it's offensive. And you're the last person I would want to perpetuate it.¹⁰⁰

Tony attempts to reassure her that he has an ordinary job, arguing that his Italian heritage does not imply criminal involvement. Professor of Italian-American studies Fred Gardaphé's work, *From Wiseguys to Wise Men*, highlights how their stereotyping as mobsters is a trend that stems from early gangster films. The connection between "Italian" and organized crime has become so entrenched that it continues to shape perceptions across generations. Conversely, the reality is that most Italian-Americans are just everyday people, not criminals.¹⁰¹

Meadow's frustration leads Tony to partially admit the truth: "Alright, look, Med, you're a grown woman, almost. Some of my money comes from illegal gambling and

⁹⁹ William M. Epstein, *Psychotherapy as Religion: The Civil Divine in America* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2006), 129, 227.

¹⁰⁰ *College*, season 1, episode 5, directed by Allen Coulter, aired February 7, 1999, on HBO Entertainment.

¹⁰¹ Fred L. Gardaphé, *From Wiseguys to Wisemen: The Gangsters and Italian American Masculinities* (New York: Routledge, 2006), xi–xvi.

whatnot.”¹⁰² This moment highlights Tony’s internal conflict as a father. While he tries to protect his children from the reality of his illegal activities, he also struggles to keep their trust by revealing just enough to satisfy their curiosity.

5.2 The Mafia: Rules, Power, and Masculinity

Tony’s best efforts to be a supportive father are complicated by his commitment to his crime family, which forces him to take action. By chance, he notices a former member of the DiMeo crime family at a gas station who is now in witness protection after testifying against the organization. After dropping Meadow off at another university, he drives back to find the traitor, and before killing him with his own hands, Tony says: “You know how much trouble you’re in now? You took an oath, and you broke it.” It can be assumed that the man wanted to live a safer life and feared all the criminality, so he decided to cooperate with the police. This instance demonstrates the cruel rules of the Mafia, upheld by the members and rooted in tradition.

In *The Sopranos*, many, including Tony, feel their family’s involvement predetermines their paths. In “College,” Tony reflects to his daughter Meadow, saying, “You know, I put food on the table. My father was in it. My uncle was in it. Maybe I was too lazy to think for myself. I considered myself...a rebel (College 1:5),” indicating his struggle with self-identity. This tension between familial connections and personal choice is further emphasized in the ritualistic oath of loyalty that new members like Tony’s “nephew” and mentee, Christopher Moltisanti, must take in “Fortunate Son” from season 3:

TONY: Now, as the card burns, so may your soul burn in hell if you betray your friends and family. Now rub your hands together like this and repeat after me. May I burn in hell.

CHRISTOPHER: May I burn in hell.

TONY: If I betray my friends.

CHRISTOPHER: If I betray my friends.

TONY: Welcome.¹⁰³

Tony instructs Christopher to swear allegiance to friends and family, warning that betrayal would condemn his soul to hell. This moment highlights how deeply rooted these obligations

¹⁰² *College*, season 1, episode 5

¹⁰³ *Fortunate Son*, season 3, episode 3, directed by Henry J. Bronchtein, aired March 11, 2001, on HBO Entertainment.

are, showing that even those who struggle with their identity, like Tony, ultimately reinforce the cycle for the next generation.

In the context of family predestination and strict codes, masculinity plays an important role in mob culture, where deviation from the norm is intolerable. This is illustrated in “Mr. & Mrs. John Sacrimoni Request...” from Season 6, where Vito Spatafore’s homosexuality is perceived as a severe affront to honor and authority among mobsters. His identity threatens the crew’s image, prompting Vito to flee to New Hampshire. Eventually, he returns as he longs for his family and the excitement of mob life. During a crew meeting, Silvio expresses concerns: “That’s the bottom of the line here: were in a fucking business. And when guys are off doing God knows what with other guys, it’s a problem.”¹⁰⁴ Tony recognizes that Vito poses a threat to their reputation. Phil Leotardo, the acting boss of the Lupertazzi crime family, believes Vito has already harmed their reputation, especially since Vito’s wife is Phil’s second cousin. This disdain leads Phil’s men to kill Vito in “Cold Stones” from season 6. Silvio’s remark not only reflects traditional views on masculinity but also touches on the aspect of profit. Vito’s murder is as much an emotional reaction as it is a strategic decision. His presence threatens the men’s reputation, cohesion, and perceived masculinity, which are crucial to the functioning of the “business.”¹⁰⁵

In *The Sopranos* mafia environment, consumerism serves as a reward for the men’s life of crime. The men prove their worth with expensive suits, cars, and big houses. Jean Baudrillard explains that buying and owning things in consumer culture is not only about meeting needs. The amount owned becomes a way to express moral value, where success and identity are tied to visible wealth.¹⁰⁶

A strong element of masculinity of American men is that they have sexual relationships with women outside of their marriage. Such relationships are largely acted out in front of and for other men, shaped more by the men’s validation than purely for personal pleasure.¹⁰⁷ In *The Sopranos*, these women are referred to as “goomars,” and all the crew members are aware of them. The men give them gifts and provide for them financially, but the women are

¹⁰⁴ *Mr. & Mrs. Sacrimoni Request...*, season 6, episode 5, directed by Steve Buscemi, aired April 9, 2006, on HBO Entertainment.

¹⁰⁵ *Cold Stones*, season 6, episode 11, directed by Tim Van Patten, aired May 21, 2006, on HBO Entertainment.

¹⁰⁶ Jean Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*, trans. Chris Turner (London: SAGE Publications, 1998), 81.

¹⁰⁷ Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History*, 4th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 23, 215.

told not to expect anything beyond that. The moment any of the women becomes emotionally dependent or begins to threaten his marriage, the relationship is ended immediately.

An example of such a relationship is between Tony and Gloria Trillo, who met in his therapist's waiting room and were instantly smitten by each other. Tony is so enamored by Gloria, an Italian-American, independent, and liberated woman, that he spends every minute of his free time with her. It all changes when, one day, without disclosing who she is, she offers to drive Carmela home to see where his family lives. Carmela does not suspect anything, as she thinks Gloria is only a thoughtful worker at the Mercedes-Benz dealership, where Carmela took her car to get it fixed. When Tony finds out, he is furious. This incident triggers his growing panic, and later, when Tony tries to break up with Gloria, she threatens to call Carmela directly. Since she has already violated that boundary once:

TONY: No more calls, no more nothing. You see me, you cross the street. Cause you're a dangerous fuck, and I don't want you in my life.

GLORIA: Don't go, don't go! I'll call your wife!

TONY: What'd you say?

GLORIA: I'll go to Columbia [university, where Tony's daughter is studying]. I'll tell your daughter about us.

TONY: (fights with her and slams her on the floor) Now, you listen to me. You go near my wife or my family, and I'll fucking kill you, you understand me? I'll fucking kill you!¹⁰⁸

Tony explodes and becomes violent, showcasing his obsessive need to keep his two worlds separate. Tony's violence is both personal and cultural – his pride, masculinity, and “family man” identity are threatened, and he reacts with pure aggression.

5.3 Being Italian-American: Disconnection and Performance

Food and its cultural significance are essential to the characters in *The Sopranos*, often serving as a facade for their dealings. Satriale's Pork Store, while embodying a certain level of Italian authenticity – or at least a cultural performance of it – becomes a symbol of moral decay, where food is intricately tied to power and violence. Present language fragments, such as “gabagool” (dry-cured ham), and Catholic iconography evoke nostalgia, but these elements are more about looks than genuine cultural connection.

In contrast, Vesuvio/Nuovo Vesuvio stands out as a restaurant built on genuine culinary passion. For Arthur “Artie” Bucco, cooking is an art, and food is a cultural bridge. He aims

¹⁰⁸ *Amour Fou*, season 3, episode 12, directed by Tim Van Patten, aired May 13, 2001, on HBO Entertainment.

to create a place of genuine Italian hospitality that is refined, elegant, and rooted in tradition, detached from Mafia violence. As Tony increasingly integrates the restaurant into his business dealings, Artie's dream of honoring his culture in an honest way becomes tainted, revealing the complex relationship between crime and heritage. Instead, what should serve as a place of nourishment and community becomes a front of ethical decay.

Many characters view food as a means of asserting their roots, but this connection often relies more on nostalgia and imitation than authenticity. This theme reaches a peak during a business trip to Italy in "Commendatori" from season 2, when Tony, Christopher, and Paulie confront a cultural shock. Their journey to Naples, intended to seal a weapons deal with the local Mafia, reveals a vast gulf between their expectations and reality. Instead of a homecoming or a spiritual connection, they encounter a version of Italian life that contrasts with their romanticized perception. The local Mafia is colder, older, and more formal than what they know. Paulie is shocked by the food, finding the local cuisine unappealing compared to his beloved American dishes, like meatballs and baked ziti. His frustration peaks when served seafood pasta, and instead, he asks for "gravy," baffling the Neapolitans and highlighting his disconnect from food and identity.¹⁰⁹

This moment symbolizes how Paulie's craving extends beyond mere food; it reflects a longing for a version of identity shaped more by imagination than reality. All three of the men expected something different, communicating not in the language of authentic Italian culture but in an Italian-American dialect. Paulie relies on phrases he has heard back home, such as "commendatori" (knight or "sir"), which sound odd to the Neapolitans. Paulie's disenchantment grows when he realizes that Italy is not the idealized country from movies and myths, but rather a distant reality, highlighting that their connection to their heritage is fraught with illusion and disillusionment.

One of the main ways the men in *The Sopranos* break away from the pressure of their role, the existential void, is through consumerism. By accumulating material possessions and luxuries, men replace success, power, and masculinity, and material status replaces identity. The men prove their worth with expensive suits and luxury cars, and they live in large modern houses.

A.J.'s youngest son, Tony, was born into an American lifestyle. As a child, he looked up to his father, admired him, and wanted to be like him. Tony has a relationship with Italian

¹⁰⁹ *Commendatori*, season 2, episode 4, directed by Tim Van Patten, aired February 6, 2000, on HBO Entertainment.

culture, especially with food, verbal expressions, traditions, and loyalty. A.J. shows no interest in Italian culture or in the history she tells him:

TONY: You see that church! Your great-grandfather helped build that almost 80 years ago. He was a stonemason, the old man. Came over from Avellino with four dollars in his pocket.

A.J.: Yeah, but I saw in a book where you could get a hotel room for like ten cents a week then. Room service must've been like one or two cents a meal.

TONY: Room service? We're talking about history here, A.J. Your family's history. Newark's history.

A.J.: Well, who gives a shit about Newark?¹¹⁰

A.J. is visibly unfazed. Unlike Tony, who identifies with his ethnicity and culture, A.J. is oblivious to it. A.J.'s attitude reflects how many third- and fourth-generation Italian-Americans feel. Tony, representing the second generation, is much more in touch with his heritage. He passionately tries to explain to A.J. how rich their heritage is. Tony tells him how their ancestors built a church when nobody wanted anything to do with Italians. A.J. looks almost annoyed, as if he cannot understand what Tony is trying to tell him.

A.J. repeatedly falls short of Carmela and Tony's expectations for him to be tough and strong. As a result, Tony often blames A.J. for his perceived weakness and laziness. This leads A.J. to struggle with his identity and lose sight of his goals. After just one semester of college, he decides to drop out and work at a club, yet he continues to feel unfulfilled in his life. His relationship with an older woman is complicated, and when she breaks up with A.J., he falls into depression. After returning from psychiatric treatment, his new Latina girlfriend with a small child immerses him in her community, and A.J. believes that this time he has found something new. He is briefly interested in terrorism or the environment. The new relationship quickly falls apart, leading to A.J. falling into depression once again. Tony realizes that A.J. is not suitable for the family business and steers him in the direction of capitalism without danger. He gets a job in a production company, just because his father knows the investor. A.J. thus accepts the benefits of his family again. It is obvious that A.J. cannot identify with the idea of being the son of a mafia boss, nor with the image of a modern American man. He is not a gangster yet, but he is also not able to stand out from the shadows of his family.

¹¹⁰ *Watching Too Much Television*, season 4, episode 7, directed by John Patterson, aired October 27, 2002, on HBO Entertainment.

6 *THE SOPRANOS* WOMEN

The complex female characters of *The Sopranos* are influenced by their environment, balancing traditions and American values. Unlike the male characters, who find power in organized crime and masculinity, the female characters navigate their strength within domestic and professional settings, employing strategies like emotional power, guilt, and adaptability. While some women are victims of their circumstances, others actively shape or resist them.

6.1 Traditional Role: Loyalty, Faith, and Complicity

In Italian-American culture, women are often considered caring mothers and loyal wives and are the emotional anchor of the family. They strengthen male authority and are the basis of stability and tradition. The women in *The Sopranos* hold these roles, even though they are aware of the violence and crime that surround them. As an Italian-American housewife, Carmela Soprano expertly manages the domestic sphere and takes care of their two children. Carmela also takes on the role of memory-keeper within her family, preserving the traditions and stories that define their Italian-American heritage. She is the one who commemorates family gatherings, ensures that cultural rituals are honored, and maintains a connection to their shared history. In “Marco Polo” from season 5, Carmela organizes her father’s birthday party, prepares the food, and invites relatives and friends. Although the gathering happens in a New Jersey backyard, Carmela visibly and actively tries to uphold Italian-American tradition and ritual. Carmela’s role of doing all the physical and emotional labor contrasts with the male characters, such as Tony or his cousin Tony B, who simply arrive and enjoy all that Carmela had planned and coordinated.¹¹¹

The Catholic faith plays an important role in Italian-American culture, not only as a religious system but as a bearer of moral values and cultural continuity. Women such as Carmela Soprano, Rosalie Aprile, and Gabriella Dante are Catholic on the one hand, attend church, and devote themselves to charity. On the other hand, they consciously overlook the moral contradiction between religious principles and the criminal life of their mobster husbands. Carmela most often turns to her faith in moments of doubt about her life and

¹¹¹ *Marco Polo*, season 5, episode 8, directed by John Patterson, aired April 25, 2004, on HBO Entertainment.

confides in Father Phil Intintola, a member of the Italian-American community. When she is home alone in the “College,” during a confession, she laments:

CARMELA: I have forsaken what is right for what is easy. Allowing what I know is evil in my house. Allowing my children, oh my God, my sweet children, to be part of it. Because I wanted things for them. I wanted a better life and good schools. I wanted this house. I wanted money in my hands, money to buy anything I ever wanted. I’m so ashamed. (*pause*)

CARMELA: My husband, he has committed horrible crimes. I think you know all about him, Father Phil! And I am the same. I’ve said nothing, I’ve done nothing about it. I got a bad feeling that it’s just a matter of time before God compensates me with outrage for my sins.¹¹²

Carmela’s admission highlights her inner conflict: she is aware of the darkness surrounding Tony’s work, yet she feels powerless to act against it. For Catholics, marriage is a sacred institution, meaning divorce is not a solution for most, including Carmela, who says: “But I still love him. I still believe he can be a good man,” expressing her belief that there is still hope for their relationship.¹¹³

Faith plays a significant role in Carmela’s identity, serving as a moral compass and, later, as a convenient excuse for her choices. Though she is a devout Catholic, this devotion often becomes more symbolic, offering her comfort. Her loyalty is emotional and material, as she benefits from a luxurious lifestyle rooted in Tony’s income. The Soprano mansion is filled with expensive décor, Carmela drives expensive cars, and wears the latest fashion. It is a shift from spiritual salvation to being saved through material possessions, a concept that aligns with Baudrillard’s critique of consumer culture.¹¹⁴ Carmela reflects this tension as she is caught between the self-denial of her Catholic origins and a culture that equates personal worth and happiness with wealth and appearances. She has developed an internal system of justification that helps her keep her faith and possessions. But she realizes that she does not live in accordance with Catholic values. Her condition culminates in “Whitecaps” from season 4, when she receives a call from Tony’s ex-lover, who wants to take revenge on him by revealing details about his affair with another woman. Carmela, hurt by Tony’s further infidelity, throws him out of the house. But this step is only temporary, and Tony is eventually taken back.¹¹⁵ This shows how firmly rooted her relationship is in materialism and comfort. Carmela is thus a silent and loyal accomplice to Tony’s activities.

¹¹² *College*, season 1, episode 5.

¹¹³ *College*, season 1, episode 5.

¹¹⁴ Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*, 61.

¹¹⁵ *Whitecaps*, season 4, episode 13, directed by John Patterson, aired December 8, 2002, on HBO Entertainment.

In Carmela's world, complicity is not uncommon, given that family members must be loyal to keep everything hidden in the close circle. Gabriella Dante also fulfils the expected role of a supportive wife, remaining quiet, respectful, and non-confrontational. Rosalie Aprile, the widow of a mafia boss, remains part of the Mafia social circle and never questions the culture that took her son.

6.2 Power from the Margins: Quiet Influence in Domestic Life

In the male-dominated world of the Mafia in *The Sopranos*, women repeatedly have little chance of influencing the course of things. However, this does not mean that they are powerless. On the contrary, these women find ways to adapt and survive by asserting their influence through emotion, silence, moral coercion, and manipulation.

In traditional Italian-American households, there are instances where older women occupy a unique space of influence, grounded in emotional control. This maternal power is highlighted in the memoir *Mama Rose* by Ann Hood, excerpted in *Wild Dreams: The Best of Italian-Americana*, which describes the frequent presence of a strong and commanding Italian-American woman in real-life household circumstances. In this memoir, Ann Hood lives with her intimidating grandmother, Mama Rose, who controls everyone in her family. While her intentions are not violent, her influence on others is very felt. She constantly undermines and insults her granddaughter by calling her a "puttana" (a whore) and telling her to "Shut your mouth already. Get out of here before I go crazy, before I have a heart attack!"¹¹⁶

The memoir shows how much power older women can have. Livia Soprano, due to her age, appears fragile and helpless on the surface, but beneath her vulnerability lies a bitter, emotionless nature, and she is capable of plotting against everyone for her pleasure. Livia will never show love, not even towards her own children, and she even plans Tony's murder after learning about his therapy. In "Isabelle" from season 1, Livia uses her brother-in-law, Junior, to do it, saying that something must be done because she believes Tony is no longer under control. And even though Junior loves Tony as a son, his pride is so strong that he cannot get over the fact that Tony has overtaken him in the leadership position. This is depicted in the scene where Livia manipulates Junior without openly revealing her intentions.

¹¹⁶ Carol Bonomo Albright and Joanna Clapps Herman, eds., *Wild Dreams: The Best of Italian Americana* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 270–74.

LIVIA: My cousin Cakey, after he had his lobotomy. Looked exactly like my son.

JUNIOR: Livia...

LIVIA: Empty, a shell. Better Cakey had died than go on living like that. That's what his own mother used to say.

JUNIOR: Don't talk about it anymore... It's done.¹¹⁷

Livia is used to making decisions in the family so much that she suggests removing her own son. She cannot accept Tony's visits to the therapist, where he discusses matters that should be addressed and stay within the family. When Livia and Junior learn the same day that the attack was unsuccessful, Livia starts crying, desperately saying, "He was my only son."¹¹⁸ Throughout her scenes with Junior regarding Tony, she demonstrates why she does not need guns – how she exploits her age and status as a mother to control those around her.

Tony acknowledges that his mother "wore [his father] down to a little nub. He was a squeaking gerbil when he died."¹¹⁹ This is a testament to how strict and fierce Livia was within her own family. Her strictness and coldness shaped her children's lives, but impacted her husband, leaving him powerless. This oppressive dynamic left a lasting imprint on Tony, causing him to eventually see a therapist.

The tension between Italian-American culture and modern pop culture is embodied by the character of Janice Soprano, Tony's older sister. In her youth, Janice left New Jersey to escape the confines of the Mafia environment and Italian-American tradition. She immersed herself in pop culture and New Age practices in her absence. Living in a West Coast hippie community, Janice engaged in various forms of therapy and New Age spirituality. According to Sarah M. Pike, who studies how individuals utilize religion and rituals for identity and trauma management, New Age spirituality is a loosely structured movement emphasizing self-healing. This approach encourages individuals to draw from diverse religious and cultural traditions without strict adherence.¹²⁰ Janice actively embodies this spiritual consumerism. She engages in New Age beliefs, therapeutic talk, and self-help ideas, but rather than facilitating meaningful change, she employs these tools to justify her actions. Even when she talks about her trauma, her behavior is also self-centered and manipulative. After the death of their mother, Janice wants to get the records Livia gave to the Russian

¹¹⁷ *Isabella*, season 1, episode 12, directed by Allen Coulter, aired March 28, 1999, on HBO Entertainment.

¹¹⁸ *Isabella*, season 1, episode 12,

¹¹⁹ *The Sopranos*, season 1, episode 1

¹²⁰ Sarah M. Pike, *New Age and Neopagan Religions in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 31, 112.

caregiver, Svetlana. In “Fortunate Son,” Janice steals Svetlana’s prosthetic leg and will return it only if she gets her mother’s gramophone records back. Janice claims that the records are the only memory of her mother. Tony warns her not to mess with Svetlana because her cousin is a member of the Russian mafia. Tony also knows that Janice only wants money from selling these records. As Janice lies in the hospital, after Svetlanas cousin beat her and took Svetlanas leg back in the next episode, Janice has her spiritual moment in front of Tony: “Cause I feel born again in the Lord,” “And I pray to God, and I asked him to forgive Svetlana for what she’s done.”¹²¹ Pike describes how such language shifts attention from personal appropriateness to a more flattering story of personal struggle and growth.¹²²

Janice claims to be looking for love and stability. Still, above all, she is trying to gain power and control, often through financial manipulations such as her attempt to profit from her mother’s house by being seen as taking care of her mother. She is prone to sudden mood swings and impulsive behavior, which can be seen in “The Knight in White Satin Armor” from season 2, where, in a fit of rage, she shoots her fiancé, Richie Aprile, after he physically attacks her. Her reaction shows that she can behave like a real mafioso. It is a perfect example of how women in a mafia environment can be just as ruthless and power-hungry.

Throughout the series, Janice evolves from a spiritual seeker to a Mafia wife, reflecting her adaptability in assuming advantageous roles. Pike notes that the New Age spiritual notion of “no one right way” allows for inconsistent beliefs.¹²³ Seeking a comfortable life, Janice capitalizes on Bobby Baccalieri’s vulnerability after his wife’s death. She starts cooking for him and taking care of the children and the household, but soon, she begins to use her manipulation skills. Bobby is depressed and stops doing the work assigned to him by Junior. In “Pie-O-My,” Janice intervenes and tries to convince him that nothing is wrong and that he needs to think of his children: “Bobby, my uncle loves you. He needs you. So, you’re gonna get up tomorrow morning, and you’re gonna get dressed, and you’re gonna get in that car, and you’re gonna do what needs to be done, aren’t you?”¹²⁴ Eventually, they get married and have a daughter together. Janice’s changing identity demonstrates how women

¹²¹ *Employee of the Month*, season 3, episode 4, directed by John Patterson, aired March 18, 2001, on HBO Entertainment.

¹²² Pike, 110–11.

¹²³ Pike, 31.

¹²⁴ *Pie-O-My*, season 4, episode 5, directed by Henry J. Bronchtein, aired October 13, 2002, on HBO Entertainment.

can strategically play any role that gives them informal power, whether it comes from tradition or modernity.

6.3 Breaking the Mold: Resistance, Adaptation, and Independence

Some female characters in *The Sopranos* adapt to their cultural roles, and others attempt to step outside of them by either resisting, adapting, or becoming independent.

The character of Adriana La Cerva represents the younger generation of Italian-American women. At times naïve, she strives to be modern and independent, representing the conflict between the world of the Mafia and her attempt to escape from it. Adriana is the girlfriend of Christopher Moltisanti, a member of Tony's crew. She sincerely longs for love, marriage, and children, but at the same time, she wants to fulfill her American dream: to be a music group manager and be respected. When she gets the opportunity in "The Tell-Tale Moozadell" from season 3 to run a music club, she considers it the first step towards fulfilling her dream. However, the club is under FBI surveillance because it is used for mob meetings, money laundering, and drug dealing. Adriana is forced to cooperate but believes she can remain loyal to Christopher and not give up any important information. She has health problems caused by the stress of working with the FBI, and when she confides in Christopher, she hopes to run off with him. Christopher argues they could never come back. Adriana is so determined to leave that she replies: "I don't wanna come back. I just want you."¹²⁵ Christopher's loyalty to his second family ultimately leads him to tell, resulting in her execution. Adriana's fate shows that even those without a formal oath face severe consequences for betrayal. In their world, resistance is seen as a violation of loyalty and silence.

Angie Bonpensiero is another woman who makes her way in the mob world. She is kind and welcoming, and the wife of Salvatore Bonpensiero. When Salvatore, the breadwinner, suddenly disappears, she becomes desperate for money, so for some time, she takes it from Tony. The turning point comes when Angie refuses Tony's financial help. She does not want to be a woman surviving on handouts. When she gets the opportunity to take over her husband's auto body shop in "Marco Polo," she takes it. At first, she is reluctant to repair the cars of some of Salvatore's clients, other mobsters. Eventually, her attitude towards this business changes, and she becomes busier than ever, which is noticeable when

¹²⁵ *Long Term Parking*, season 5, episode 12, directed by Tim Va Patten, aired May 23, 2004, on HBO Entertainment.

she is having lunch with her friends: “I hate to be a pain, but I gotta get back [to work].” During the same dinner, they discuss how much money each one will put down. Angie shocks them when she says, “Put me down for \$2,000 worth of bodywork and/or paint,” showing how financially independent she is. However, her independence is not absolute, because she is still part of the community: “She was one of us. Now it’s like she’s one of them.” Angie does not really try to get away from her life, and when she sees what it offers, she makes it work for her.

Of course, not every woman with Italian roots is connected to the Mafia. In the series, Italian women represent a number of professions, such as lawyers and doctors. The psychotherapist, Dr. Jennifer Melfi, exemplifies the principles of education and personal rights. In contrast to the main characters, she uses sophisticated professional English but is also able to communicate in an easily understandable way to her patients and with her family. She has built a successful career, and her identity is not anchored in a relationship to a man or family, but in her profession, moral values, and independence. Even with the dangers Tony presents, she treats him out of a genuine desire to help and professional curiosity, and the complex, evolving relationship between these two characters is a key feature of the entire series. Throughout their sessions, Dr. Melfi remains composed and listens attentively.

The therapist continues to treat Tony regardless of his mafia connections. From a professional point of view, however, it is an interesting case for her. In sessions with Tony, she tries to act calmly, hears him out, and as a professional, she wants to help him. Nevertheless, she cannot remain without emotions in the case that he behaves towards her in a commanding way. Her true nature shows in “I Dream of Jeannie Cusamano” from season 1 when Tony tells her to go into hiding because other mobsters know Dr. Melfi is Tony’s therapist. Dr. Melfi gets worked up and asks what her patients would do in the meantime, showing how passionate she is about her work. When Tony tries to be sarcastic, Dr. Melfi reacts: “Jesus fucking Christ!”¹²⁶

A crucial moment occurs when Dr. Melfi discovers the limitations of the legal system after she is sexually assaulted in “Employee of the Month” from season 3. Realizing that her attacker can go free despite the crime, she feels the weight of her powerlessness. Although she could seek informal justice through Tony, she ultimately decides against taking that route. This decision highlights her rejection of the Mafia’s power dynamics, which rely

¹²⁶ *I Dream of Jeannie Cusamano*, season 1, episode 13, directed by John Patten, aired April 4, 1999, on HBO Entertainment

heavily on violence and loyalty. Instead, she makes a conscious choice to resist this culture. Dr. Melfi also visits a therapist because she wants reassurance that she's doing the right thing and that Tony is a patient who needs help. Gradually, she concludes that instead of really working on himself and becoming more balanced, he uses therapy only to his advantage and educates himself on his manipulative abilities.

Dr. Melfi represents modern American values of autonomy, rationality, self-awareness, and ethical boundaries. Over time, she becomes emotionally entangled in Tony's contradictions. They have moments of connection, but by the end, Dr. Melfi realizes that for Tony, therapy is a tool of self-justification. Dr. Melfi rationally and professionally decides to terminate their sessions in "The Blue Comet."¹²⁷ This decision makes her the only woman to say "no" to Tony. She does not do it in anger or out of fear, but from a position of reasoned, ethical resolve. She sets boundaries for herself. Her power is grounded in professional ethics, moral clarity, and emotional independence. By choosing integrity, she exposes the limits of both Tony's charm and his control. She deliberately rejects complicity, and through her independence, she becomes a form of resistance.

One moment when the values of the Italian-American community clash with contemporary American values is illustrated by Meadow Soprano, Tony's daughter. As the daughter of the boss, Meadow grows up in luxury, attending a Catholic school. Her connection to her Italian roots is even more tenuous and superficial than that of her parents. As a teenager, she is critical of her family's world. She is intelligent and perceptive, and she starts questioning the source of Tony's wealth and the moral implications of his actions. This tension is visible when Meadow and Tony pick up a conversation in "College":

TONY: There was a time, Med, when the Italian people didn't have a lot of options.

MEADOW: You mean like Mario Cuomo?

TONY: (*raises eyebrows, annoyed*)

MEADOW: Sorry.

TONY: You know, I put food on the table. My father was in it. My uncle was in it. Maybe I was too lazy to think for myself. I considered myself...a rebel.¹²⁸

What Tony says seems like an excuse and self-pity to Meadow. Meadow's reference to Mario Cuomo shows that she is aware that Italian-Americans, including her family, are no

¹²⁷ *The Blue Comet*, season 6, episode 20, directed by Alan Taylor, aired June 3, 2007, on HBO Entertainmentnet

¹²⁸ *College*, season 1, episode 5.

longer a poor immigrant class. Mario Cuomo was the first Italian-American governor of New York. Cuomo prided himself on being a descendant of poor Italian immigrants and being proud of his origins.¹²⁹ Her remark highlights how much the status of Italian-Americans has changed since Tony's ancestors first immigrated to the United States. This exchange points out Meadow's growing skepticism and desire for clarity in a world shaped by conflicting values.

In college, Meadow becomes a liberal, critically minded young woman. She rejects racism and violence and helps as a volunteer at a counseling center for immigrants. She is in a relationship with Noah, an African-American Jew. He thus opposes the father's idea of a "suitable" partner. When Tony makes a racist statement about Noah, Meadow takes a decisive stand against his father.

With age, Meadow's idealism changes, and instead of studying medicine, she decides to study law to defend unjustly persecuted Italians:

TONY: You said you wanted to be a lawyer for black people.

MEADOW: That's all I said? Really? What I said was that the state can crush an individual.

...

MEADOW: You know what really turned me? Seeing the way Italians are treated.¹³⁰

This scene shows how her decision to defend the rights of Italians, as she feels what happened to her father when the police dragged him away was not fair. Her character is important because even though she has worked her way up to a higher social class and has rejected the Mafia life, she does not fully distance herself from her heritage.

¹²⁹ Robert S. McElvain, *Mario Cuomo: A Biography* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1988), 30, 34, 60.

¹³⁰ *Made in America*, season 6, episode 21, directed by David Chase, aired June 10, 2007, on HBO Entertainment.

CONCLUSION

This thesis presents an analysis of the cultural identity of men and women within the Italian American community. Through the everyday lives of families and individual characters, the series *The Sopranos* portrays connections to Italian heritage, faith, language, and traditions in American society.

In the theoretical section, key aspects of Italian American culture are characterized, highlighting the significance of cuisine, religion, and family in shaping their cultural identity. As Italian immigrants and subsequently as Italian Americans, they faced challenges related to immigration and assimilation. Between 1880 and 1920, over four million Italians left the predominantly poor southern regions of Italy to seek opportunities in America, the land of dreams. Many settled in New Jersey, which is also the home of the main character, Tony Soprano. The influence of Italians in America is visible both in the series and in reality. However, they were not always well-received. Upon their arrival, Italians were often regarded as inferior and different. Nevertheless, they supported one another and overcame these challenges as a united community. This effort to maintain their community and traditions is evident in *The Sopranos*, particularly through the character of Carmela, Tony's wife.

The analysis is divided into a brief introduction concerning the creation of the series, its author, and the actors. The remaining part is divided into themes for men and women. Each character reacts in his own way to life between a strong reference to Italian traditions and modern America. *The Sopranos* presents a nuanced exploration of cultural identity that highlights its fluid and evolving nature. The characters navigate a life where their Italian-American heritage is both a source of pride and a backdrop for tension. For Tony Soprano and his family, the traditional values and codes of conduct inherited from previous generations clash with the realities of contemporary American life. This tension is not merely a subplot; it serves as a critical lens through which the series examines the pressures of assimilation and the complexities of identity. Cultural identity is a constantly changing negotiation, which becomes evident as characters grapple with their backgrounds in the face of personal aspirations and societal expectations. For instance, characters like Carmela strive to maintain their cultural roots while also seeking upward mobility and acceptance in a broader, often more affluent, American society. This dynamic illustrates that cultural authenticity is not a fixed attribute but a performance influenced by context and circumstance.

Moreover, *The Sopranos* engages in a broader dialogue about American values, touching on themes such as personal choice, independence, and success. As the characters confront choices that challenge traditional notions of right and wrong, the series invites viewers to reflect on the compromises that individuals make between their cultural heritage and their personal desires. Generational shifts play a crucial role in this exploration. The younger characters, like Meadow and AJ, often find themselves at odds with their parents' expectations, highlighting how new cultural influences and changing societal norms can reshape identity. Their experiences underscore the fragility of cultural authenticity; as they navigate their dual identities, viewers are reminded that cultural identity is continuously redefined through experiences, relationships, and the interplay of past and present.

By intertwining these personal narratives with broader societal themes, *The Sopranos* ultimately paints a complex picture of cultural identity, one that resonates deeply with contemporary audiences. It underscores the idea that while heritage provides a foundation, identity is an ongoing process shaped by choices, relationships, and the ever-changing circumstances of modern life. This layered portrayal encourages viewers to consider how much of their own identity is a reflection of cultural roots and how much the broader world around them influences it.

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