Observations on Self-resilience in Italian-American Identity: Education and Sacrifice in Helen Barolini's *Umbertina*

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Abstract

Helen Barolini, who passed away on March 29, 2023, made significant contributions to Italian-American literature. Her anthology *The Dream Book: An Anthology of Writings by Italian-American Women* amplified the voices of Italian-American women, while her seminal novel *Umbertina* (1979) deeply examines Italian memory from the perspective of cultural heritage, as well as migration, assimilation, and identity. In this novel, through the story of the Longobardi family, Barolini traces the journey from Calabria to the challenges of Americanization and the pursuit of the American Dream. In this essay, we focused on Umbertina's self-resilience, who struggles between survival and the preservation of cultural heritage. In choosing to succeed, she also decides to Americanize herself - and she does it through her Italian "primitive strength." Transitioning from migration to a successful future settlement, she offers a nuanced exploration of the Italian-American experience.

Keywords: Italian-American literature, Helen Barolini, ancestral Identity, Americanization

Introduction

The post-Italian Unification migratory wave was driven by the pursuit of the American Dream among southern Italian farmers and laborers. Inspired by stories of wealth and opportunity in the New World, they left a homeland offering little hope for the future. For many, returning to Italy was unthinkable, as it symbolized failure and disgrace. As a result, many of them persevered in the United States, striving for social mobility through Americanization, often at the cost of severing ties with their cultural heritage. This assimilation process created tension, as the Italian community feared losing its identity and leaving future generations disconnected from their roots. Italian-American literature offers insight into the complexities of Americanization, particularly from a trans-generational perspective. Authors such as Pietro Di Donato, John

Fante and Pascal D'Angelo explored this theme, but Helen Barolini stands out for her "multigenerational approach".

The aim of this text is to focus on the development of generational evolution in Italian-American identity in Helen Barolini's *Umbertina*. It explores how assimilation, cultural negotiation, and education have shaped the Italian-American experience, examining how this differs from the works of other major Italian-American authors. The text also situates *Umbertina* within a broader sociological framework of immigration and identity formation, emphasizing the role of education as both a means of cultural assimilation and a tool for reconnecting with one's heritage.

When analyzing the key figures associated with the Italian emigration to America, one often recalls authors such as Di Donato, D'Angelo, and, in a somewhat different mode of expression, Fante, due to the influence of his father's migration from Torricella. However, one notable omission from this list is Helen Barolini, an author who stands out for her ability to capture the full scope of the Longobardi's migration story. In contrast to the aforementioned writers, Barolini divides the narrative of her family's experience, allowing her female characters to reveal the sociological, cultural, and traditional nuances of the generations that preceded Marguerite, the last protagonist of her work. This structure sets Barolini's narrative apart, offering a more complex and layered account of migration compared to the other authors who typically focus on the immediate impact of migration on the generation that settles in the new country.

This study applies a content analysis methodology with an observational approach, which is discernible in its focus on textual examination and thematic interpretation. Content analysis serves as a valuable tool in this context, allowing for a detailed exploration of how Barolini constructs her Italian-American experience. By examining the narrative structure and protagonist development within Barolini's work, this paper aims to highlight the role of education in *Umbertina* and stimulate further exploration of the deeper implications of self-resilience in Italian-American identity.

The prologue of Helen Barolini's novel *Umbertina* is set in Rome during the 1970s, where Marguerite finds herself in the office of her psychiatrist. Although she enjoys a comfortable bourgeois life, Marguerite feels a profound sense of loss and is uncertain about the true meaning of her existence. In her reflections, she often recalls her maternal grandmother, Umbertina, whom Marguerite believes possessed a "primitive strength" that she, as a third-generation immigrant, not only longs for but is also perpetually searching for.

The first part of Barolini's novel begins in the 1860s, a pivotal period during the Italian Unification. The setting is Castagna, a small village in

Calabria. Serafino, the husband assigned to Umbertina, purchases a small piece of land to cultivate. Soon after, Umbertina gives birth to three children. However, oppressive taxes, high interest rates, and the growing difficulty of profiting from their land create insurmountable obstacles. In response, we observe the strength of Umbertina, who urges her husband to take control of their fate. She convinces him to move the family and emigrate to America. This "primitive strength" of Umbertina's will serves as a guiding light that, two generations later, enables her granddaughter Marguerite to lead a prosperous life, pursue her studies, and ultimately secure a privileged position in late 20th-century America. By transcending the stereotypical "Italian dago" identity and the alienation faced by illiterate Southern Italian Catholics, Marguerite avoids the racial discrimination that plagued many of them. Umbertina's understanding of the importance of Americanization - to be interpreted as the assimilation into the emerging American identity and traditions following the Civil War - was key to ensuring a better life for her children.

Thanks to the efforts of writers such as Di Donato, D'Angelo, Fante and Barolini, who have chosen to reconnect with their roots, and the contributions of critics such as Francesco Durante, Italian-American studies are increasingly recognized as part of the contemporary literature and criticism. These scholars and authors continue to explore the Italian-American experience, examining the past of their ancestors and engaging with this field of study. However, a significant risk remains: the danger of perpetuating on the highlighted points by Anthony Tamburri in his 2003 essay, "*Beyond 'Pizza' and 'Nonna'*! Or, *What's Bad about Italian/American Criticism?*". The essay's title references the two most pervasive non-mafia stereotypes in Italian-American culture: "food" and "family" (Ruvoli, 134: 2018)."

Over the past decade, Italian-American literature has gained significant recognition, with novels exploring the Italian-American experience winning American Book Awards and receiving critical acclaim, as seen in the case of Di Donato. The *Feminist Press* has published works by Helen Barolini and reprinted novels by Italian-American women, accompanied by critical afterwords. Notable examples include Barolini's *Umbertina* (1979) and Tina De Rosa's modernist novel *Paper Fish* (1980). Furthermore, journals such as *Italian Americana* and *Voices in Italian Americana* (VIA) serve as vital forums for ongoing discussion and debate on the subject (Hendi, 156: 2001). Additionally, a growing number of scholars are following in the footsteps of Francesco Durante, one of the most influential Italian-American critics, who passed away a few years ago. These emerging reseachers are continuing his legacy by exploring new facets of this topic. Many of them attend the John Fante Festival, held annually in Torricella Peligna for the past 19 years. The festival not only honors Fante but also commemorates the contributions of

Italian-Americans and early Italian migrants. It is directed by literature critic and teacher Giovanna Di Lello.

From Helen Barolini to Umbertina

Helen Barolini, born Helen Mollica in Syracuse, New York, to parents of Italian descent, stands as one of the most influential voices in Italian-American literature, particularly within the feminist literary field. She graduated in English literature from Syracuse University in 1947 and pursued further studies in the United Kingdom at the University of London. Helen later traveled to Italy, where, in 1950, she married writer and journalist Antonio Barolini, a longtime correspondent for *La Stampa* in the United States. Her literary career began with translation work, but she soon expanded into poetry, theater, and literary essays. In 1979, Barolini completed her groundbreaking novel *Umbertina,* which earned her the Americans of Italian Heritage Award in 1984 and later, in its Italian translation, the Giuseppe Acerbi Literary Award in 2008. Her contribution to Italian-American literature reached a milestone in 1985 with the publication of *The Dream Book: An Anthology of Writings by Italian American Women*. This pioneering work gave voice to Italian-American women writers, whose contributions had largely been overlooked. The anthology received the American Book Award and the Susan Koppelman Award for Feminist Studies in 1986, cementing Barolini's status as a key figure in the field due to her reminiscence of her parents' experiences. It remains a masterpiece with few equals, rivaled perhaps only by the work of Francesco Durante, one of the foremost scholars of Italian-American literature. Throughout her later novels, Barolini remained deeply connected to Italian-American culture, becoming one of its most authentic and celebrated voices. She passed away on March 29, 2023, at the age of 97 (Williams, 1-4: 2023)

Barolini's biography itself reflects the same "primitive strength" she attributes to Umbertina, a strength rooted in her Italian heritage, which she described as almost mythological (Barolini, 27: 1999). Indeed, she was the granddaughter of Italian immigrants from the ancient Magna Graecia region of southern Italy. Although she did not know much about her grandparents due to linguistic barriers - the Calabrian dialects they spoke felt alien to her - she recognized that their cultural background was steeped in a rich classical and artistic legacy. These ancestors embodied human resilience and creativity, linking her identity not only to America or Italy but to a unique Italian-American experience.

Barolini's personal journey of self-discovery mirrored the struggles of her literary characters. She traveled to Italy to reconnect with her roots, imagining the lives of her ancestors as a way to reconcile her American identity with her Italian heritage. This spiritual and material journey enabled

her to embrace her "*italianità*" while accepting her place in the American cultural society.

This psychological conflict - caught between two cultures - is a theme that Barolini shares with other Italian-American authors, particularly Fante. His protagonist, Arturo Bandini, similarly grapples with his identity, returning briefly to his home in Colorado in *Dreams from Bunker Hill* as part of his quest for self-understanding (Fante, 697-699: 2004). However, unlike Fante, who leaves Bandini's identity bond to the Italian roots (Cacco, 175: 2024) by not allowing him to fully assimilate into Hollywood culture, Barolini's Umbertina character makes the difficult choice to embrace American society, albeit with suffering, and integrate it into her identity. In contrast to Di Donato, who narrates the preservation of ties with his West Hoboken Vastese community, and Fante, who resisted full Americanization, Barolini's characters reflect the aspirations of her own parents. Her father symbolized this transition by breaking away from traditional Italian-American neighborhoods and integrating into American mainstream society. His membership in institutions like the Rotary Club and the Syracuse Yacht and Country Club marked a significant leap toward assimilation, shaping Barolini's early experiences and influencing her literary perspective (Barolini, 26: 1997).

Umbertina's migration

The first part of Helen Barolini's *Umbertina* introduces us to the protagonist's grandmother, Umbertina Nenci, a sixteen-year-old goatherd living in the impoverished rural village of Castagna. Sharing a small, one-room stone house with her parents and numerous siblings, Umbertina's family epitomizes the struggles of southern Italian peasants. Her father, Carlo, is a tenant farmer, dependent on the land of the local aristocrat. This setting reflects a broader theme of dual Italies - North and South - highlighting divisions between urban centers (North) and rural villages (South), which were even more heightened by the concept of "Campanilism.". Beyond these internal divergences, the Catholic Church, functioning as both a spiritual and socio-political institution, operates within these stratified dynamics, aligning more closely with class interests than with equitable religious principles (Tamburri, 85: 1997).

Against this backdrop, Umbertina's personal story unfolds. Despite her budding romance with Giosuè, a handsome charcoal maker from a neighboring village who gifts her a heart-shaped tin box for her knitting needles, her father arranges her marriage to Serafino Longobardi, an older soldier offering financial stability. To prepare for her new life, Umbertina commissions Nelda, the priest's housekeeper, to weave a wedding bedspread, a symbol of her transition and one of the few possessions she will bring to her

marital home. Nelda also gives her a rosemary cutting, symbolizing strength and hope, accompanied by the proverb: “where rosemary thrives, the women of that house are its strength.”

Umbertina's journey to America begins in Naples, where her family boards a ship to New York. Upon arrival, Umbertina works as a laundress, while Serafino takes on manual labor. However, their financial struggles persist. After losing their savings in an immigrant bank collapse, Umbertina sells her cherished bedspread to fund a move to Cato, New York, where Serafino finds work in a railroad yard. Seizing an opportunity, Umbertina begins selling sandwiches and pizza to laborers, eventually renting land to grow vegetables and opening a grocery store. Through self-resilience, her business thrives, and the family achieves economic success, becoming increasingly “americanized”. Umbertina, who bears six children - including Carla, the mother of Marguerite - lays the foundation for future prosperity, yet her final moments are marked by longing for the simplicity of her origins, symbolized by a vision of her lost bedspread and a request for spring water from Castagna.

Barolini’s narrative captures a multigenerational journey, with the process of Americanization beginning with Umbertina and culminating in Marguerite, the third-generation descendant. While Umbertina’s sacrifices enabled her descendants to flourish, the benefits come with new challenges. Marguerite, for instance, is paralyzed by feelings of inadequacy and low self-esteem, stemming from the unresolved struggles of her mother, Carla, and the unspoken burdens passed down through generations (Mannino, 7: 2002). Unlike Umbertina, who could not afford the time for introspection, Marguerite is consumed by existential doubt, a stark contrast that illustrates the shift in priorities and pressures across generations.

The novel reflects a broader theme in Italian-American literature: the third generation's struggle to reconcile their heritage with their identity. While some first-generation immigrants, like Umbertina, sought to escape the poverty and limitations of their homeland through assimilation, their descendants might return to their roots. They explore their heritage not to balance their Italian and American experiences, but to find a deeper sense of understanding and appreciation of themselves as individuals (Patti, 245: 1986). Nevertheless, Barolini's portrayal also highlights how assimilation threatened cultural identity. For many other Italian immigrants, embracing American customs, such as learning English or sending their children to American schools, was seen as a betrayal of their origins. Yet, as Barolini’s narrative demonstrates, this fear was often unfounded; the sacrifices of the first generation paved the way for subsequent generations to preserve and reinterpret their heritage within a new context. While some clung to the traditions of their native villages (just think of West Hoboken in Di Donato),

recreating them in Little Italies, Umbertina recognized the limitations of such isolation. Her reinvention lies in her ability to balance her cultural identity with the demands of her new environment, resisting the alienation described by characters like Arturo Bandini in Fante's *Wait Until Spring, Bandini* or Paolino in Di Donato's *Christ in Concrete* and *Three Circles of Light*.

Through her exploration of the Longobardi family, Barolini offers a nuanced perspective on the evolution of Italian-American identity. By the third generation, figures like Marguerite engage in a process of rediscovery, seeking to understand the sacrifices and struggles of their ancestors. This shift reflects a broader trend in ethnic literature, as noted by Daniel Aaron (Gardaphe, 72-73: 1987), who observed that third-generation writers often reclaim their heritage by delving into the experiences of their predecessors. Barolini herself embodies this trend, using her novel to immortalize the stories of the illiterate first generation and to bridge the gap between her ancestral past and her present. Barolini's reflection on her grandmother's tin heart -a simple, rustic artifact - captures the essence of this journey. The tin heart symbolizes the self-resilience and humanity of the first generation, whose stories often went untold. By narrating the life of Umbertina, Barolini ensures that these experiences are not forgotten, preserving their legacy for future generations. In doing so, she not only honors her heritage but also establishes a framework for understanding the complexities of Italian-American identity - a journey that begins with sacrifice and culminates in self-discovery.

The important question, therefore, is whether assimilation poses a danger to Italian identity in America. According to Barolini's interpretation, identity was not as at risk as the first generation, who resisted Americanization (such as sending their children to American schools and learning English), feared. In fact, while they were certain that resisting American identity was necessary, the real concern was that the second and third generations would ultimately lose their "primitive" identity in exchange for a better life, trading their ancestral heritage for new opportunities. The paper's interpretation of Barolini's words is that the path Umbertina took through self-resilience and sacrifice as a first-generation immigrant would eventually be followed by the Italian children born in America. These are the words I referred to earlier, when she herself narrates this misconception, which can be linked to the 'resulting imbroglio' of Italian-American identity:

> She thought of herself in the States angrily explaining that she was not Italian-American. My father is Italian and my mother is a third generation [Italian] American who never heard Italian until she got to Italy to study; I am part Italian and part American, not Italian American. It was a splitting of hairs that convinced no one, not even Tina. But she felt obliged each time to put up her defense against being merged in that ethnic mess

> she saw and despised in the States. She thought of a bumper sticker that disgusted her: "Mafia Staff Car, Keepa You Hands Off… (Gambino, 231: 1994)

The observations of this text, focuses primarily on the first part of the novel, which is particularly significant for those studying Italian-American studies: the self-resilience of newcomers. This is something she frequently referred to with the phrase "primitive strength," which surely allowed Umbertina to gradually integrate into American society and achieve success. However, the novel is not autobiographical, as the author herself explains. This distinction allows us to see how Barolini possesses, not only through personal experience but also through analysis, a deep understanding of Italian-American culture. She studied it so thoroughly that she identified the key to enabling future generations to deal with their past: namely, the education needed to better cope with assimilation. This progressive shift is what allowed her to tell the story of the Longobardi family without focusing solely on the first generation. Only by doing so could the sacrifices made by the first woman in her family, and the positive effects on subsequent generations, become clear to Marguerite. This concept is indirectly affirmed by Daniel Aaron, when he stated, "Italian-American writers will never merge into the mainstream of national culture, will not complete their 'passage,' until they have come to terms with themselves and their repressed 'Italian foundation.'" By the third generation, Italian-Americans had assimilated into American customs through educational institutions and marriage. They gained greater political, social, and economic control over their lives. This sociological assimilation shifted the focus of fiction produced by Italian-American writers. However, as Aaron noted, this return to ethnic identification is becoming more prevalent: "Today's new ethnic writers and intellectuals reclaim their identity by locating their ancestral roots, digging them out, and showing them" (Gardaphe, 72: 1987, referencing Daniel Aaron, The Hyphenated American Writer, 4-5: 1984-1985). We see this with Marguerite, who begins to uncover the past of her family - the same past that the first generation sought to leave behind, as it was associated with poverty.

Barolini used her sociological insights to embed the Longobardi family into her fictionalized biography, altering it in the process. Unlike Di Donato and Fante, who aimed to write the great American novel, Barolini's work implicitly emphasizes education as a transformative force. In doing so, she unintentionally set the identity boundaries between herself, as a "descendant," and the first generation of migrants in her family. Only after a process of education and geographical exploration did Barolini gain clarity on her origins and true past. In her interview with Von Huene Gremberg, she stated:

> It all started when my mother, while cleaning the house, came across the tin heart that my grandmother had brought as a young girl from Calabria. In my February 25 diary, I say that, My parents were here and Mother brought Grandma's stocking iron: a piece of raw tin. A rough piece of tin in the shape of a heart with a hammer edge design and a piece of black wire. I can imagine the goats grazing their flocks on the rocks (…). And now, for the first time, I am touched by these rough, poor, incomprehensible ancestors. Theirs was an epic of American life, and it should be written down, because those who lived it did not keep diaries. But we descendants can write and tell, and the time has come before the last of them dies out.".>> (von Huene Greenberg and Helen Barolini , 91: 1993)

She felt a deep need to preserve those ancient stories and traditions. For her, writing and self-narrative (even when fictionalized) were the keys to preventing the experiences of the first migrants from fading into oblivion. With many of them being illiterate, only future generations could immortalize their tragic daily lives and emotions. However, when discussing the success of her novel, she recalled how "publishers themselves care little about the fate of those people who had left their country" (Von Huene Greenberg and Helen Barolini, 106: 1993).

Conclusions

The evolution of Italian-American identity in literature reflects a complex and nuanced process of assimilation and cultural negotiation. Critics have identified a five-stage sociological framework to describe this evolution, which manifests through stages of initial cultural impact, the necessity of assimilation, repulsion (shaped by Italian and American political tensions, including WASP dominance and Fascist ideologies), counter-revulsion, and eventual entrenchment into American society. This framework underscores the gradual journey of Italian immigrants and their descendants as they navigated their place within the broader fabric of American culture.

In *Umbertina*, this gradual assimilation is depicted differently than in works by Fante, Di Donato, or D'Angelo. These authors highlighted the generational conflict between first-generation immigrants and American-born children. Many first-generation immigrants struggled with the balance between preserving their heritage and adapting to American society, a tension that shaped the experiences of their children (i.e. second generation) in different ways. For the first generation, assimilation was mostly seen as a threat to their identity, exacerbated by Fascist Italy's efforts to preserve and promote Italian heritage abroad, framing Mussolini's propaganda as an

idealized version of the American Dream. Conversely, the second and third generations, though they faced challenges and internal family conflicts, increasingly embraced Americanization as a strategy for success. The challenges faced by Italian immigrants were immense: many arrived after the Unification, speaking regional dialects and often lacking literacy, making the acquisition of English particularly arduous. Cultural differences, from cuisine to customs and celebrations, further marked them as outsiders and subjected them to discrimination. These challenges forced many into insular ethnic enclaves such as "Little Italies." Their American Dream often collided with harsh realities, as they were relegated to grueling manual labor in factories and construction, roles that were both dangerous and poorly compensated. Yet, despite these adversities, Italian labor became foundational to American progress, serving as a pillar of the country's industrial growth.

As the Italian-American community evolved, many embraced education and American customs as part of their journey toward integration. *Umbertina* poignantly captures this shift through the experiences of Marguerite, the educated granddaughter of the titular character. Marguerite's journey back to her grandmother's village in Italy symbolizes a rediscovery of her ancestral roots, but her American upbringing and education render her an outsider in that "old world", now that she is a "product of education" (Pechie, 11: 2014). Her reflective capacity and yearning for connection underscore the profound changes wrought by generational shifts. Marguerite's experience reflects the culmination of years of social struggles, particularly those led by women, with Barolini herself contributing significantly through her advocacy and writings, such as her Women's Anthology. Education emerges as a transformative force in the narrative of *Umbertina*, symbolizing both the challenges and the opportunities faced by Italian-Americans across generations. For the first generation, education was often viewed with suspicion and even resistance. They clung to their heritage as a means of preserving their identity in an alien and often hostile environment. However, as subsequent generations grew up in America, the perspective on education shifted dramatically. The second and third generations, born into a society where success was often contingent on the ability to navigate American systems, began to see education as a pathway to social mobility and personal empowerment. This shift was not without conflict; the second generation, in particular, faced the dual burden of reconciling their parents' traditional values with the demands of a rapidly modernizing American society. For them, education became a tool not only for economic survival but also for asserting their identity in a way that blended their Italian heritage with their American aspirations. In *Umbertina*, this evolution is epitomized in the character of Marguerite. Unlike her grandmother, whose survival depended on physical labor and self-resilience, Marguerite represents a new era of Italian-American

identity. Her access to education allows her to explore her heritage from a place of intellectual curiosity rather than necessity. Her journey back to Castagna, her grandmother's village, highlights the complexity of this transformation. Marguerite's feelings of being an outsider in her ancestral home underscore the distance that education and assimilation have created from her roots. Yet, this distance does not diminish her connection to her heritage; instead, it allows her to approach it with a reflective and nuanced perspective. Through education, she gains the tools to understand and honor her past, even as she navigates a distinctly American identity. Education, as portrayed in *Umbertina*, is more than a means of individual advancement. On the contrary, it is a generational strategy for survival and renewal. For Marguerite and her generation, education is about reclaiming and redefining their cultural legacy: her story illustrates how education can serve as a bridge between the old world and the new, enabling individuals to integrate into American society while maintaining a connection to their origins. This dual role of education as both an assimilative and a restorative force underscores its transformative power. It allows Italian-Americans to assert their place in the broader cultural landscape while preserving the rich heritage that defines their identity.

Ultimately, *Umbertina* reveals that education provided a way to navigate the challenges of assimilation while fostering a deeper understanding of one's roots. Marguerite's journey exemplifies how education became the key to bridging the divide between tradition and modernity, survival and success, heritage and identity. In doing so, it affirms the profound role of education in shaping the Italian-American experience, highlighting its capacity to transform challenges into opportunities and to weave a complex, enduring narrative of cultural self-resilience.

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