

FIORENZO IULIANO

“BOYISH AND ALMOST GAY”*Celibate men and fathers in Sherwood Anderson’s The Triumph of the Egg*

ABSTRACT: Benjamin Kahan’s 2013 book on celibacy and modernism investigates celibacy in early twentieth century United States as a prominently urban issue, questioning and to some degree discarding the commonplace of a sexually saturated modernism. This article aims at broadening up the scope of this analysis by investigating celibacy and sexuality in Sherwood Anderson’s short stories, mostly set in small provincial towns. The main contention of the article is that in Anderson’s stories male celibacy questions the social and symbolic order sanctioned by the typical nuclear family of rural and peripheral towns of the United States. More specifically, the stories discussed here and collected in *The Triumph of the Egg* overthrow the traditional attribution of sexual roles within the nuclear family, thus subverting the usual representations of both masculinity and fatherhood.

KEYWORDS: Sherwood Anderson, *The Triumph of the Egg*, Modernism and Sexuality, Celibacy, Modernism and Masculinity

I don’t like any goddess who’s adored at night.
(Euripides, *Hippolytus*)

In his 2013 book *Celibacies*, Benjamin Kahan describes celibacy as “a coherent sexual identity rather than as a ‘closeting’ screen for another sexual identity” (2), and “as a crucial social identity in the 1840s,” which later turned into a sexual identity, thus mirroring “the transformation of chastity from a traditional gender requirement to a sexual practice that is itself the site of modernist innovation” (8). By emphasizing the “active” role of celibacy in the definition of sexual identities at the beginning of the twentieth century, Kahan contests the common view of modernism as an era of sexual transgression and infringement of moral codes. Kahan attempts at charting the “celibate plot” in modernist literature, suggesting that, along with a “hypersexualized modernism” (8), celibate modernism was also part of the gradual redefinition of normative gender

roles, questioning the injunction to get married and raise a family as the gist of the US middle-class culture.

However, Kahan exclusively focuses on New England and the Mid-Atlantic states, understanding celibacy as a challenge against the moral and social standards of the times especially in the big cities of the East Coast. Scant attention is paid in his book to other areas of the United States. Sherwood Anderson, for instance, is mentioned just once in the whole book, as one of the authors who, along with, among others, Willa Cather and William Faulkner, took “celibacy as an explicit subject matter” (9). The absence of works set in and dealing with peripheral and rural areas in Kahan’s book establishes a clear-cut opposition between celibacy as a rebellious move against the norms of sexual behavior – as typical of urban cultural and subcultural circuits – and celibacy as one of the long-lasting practices that had always characterized US peripheral and provincial areas. Only in those areas in which the “hypersexualized modernism” was the norm, according to Kahan, celibacy functioned as the legitimate antagonist of sexual normativity and of the nuclear family as an institution.

I would like to raise questions about celibacy as a symbolic site of sexual insubordination *also* in peripheral America, hypothesizing that the celibate posed a challenge to the rules of what was considered the sexual norm in rural regions of the States no less than in the big urban centers, in which the “celibate plot”, by default, was located. I will refer to Sherwood Anderson’s collection *The Triumph of the Egg*, published in 1921, arguing that the chaste men – often husbands and fathers – featured in most of the stories challenge the sexual norms of the time in both epistemic and sociological terms. On the one hand, celibacy, as a sexual practice in its own right, questions the very notion of sexual identity as something that needs to be constantly enacted and performed rather than established once for all; on the other, it functions as a strategy to reject the rules of normative masculinity and fatherhood in both the private and public sphere. By pinpointing the conflicts experienced also because of the loss of the longstanding norms of traditional masculinity, the stories of *The Triumph of the Egg* corroborate the assumption that, at the beginning of the twentieth century, US white middle-class men were “the exemplary early victims of emotional injury” (Travis 2002, 127). Celibacy is the behavior that, at the same time, bespeaks and controls this crisis.

Mostly set against the backdrop of Chicago, a city in which sex was “an easy want to be satisfied” (Anderson 1921, 217), *The Triumph of the Egg* is crowded with people who, for one reason or another, do not or no longer have a sexual life, having either renounced it or been rejected by their sexual partners. Sexual abstinence, moreover, parallels social marginality and individual unsuccessfulness. Most of the stories collected, finally, feature celibacy, and especially that of adult men, husbands, and fathers, as the void nucleus, the unmentionable, shameful and embarrassing condition that triggers the protagonists’

actions, and provides a rationale, albeit often an obscure and controversial one, for their behavior.

Scholars who have focused on gender issues in Anderson’s works have often highlighted the importance he ascribed to homosexuality and homosexual behavior as instances of sexual insubordination. Though never overtly praising homosexuality, nor celebrating or even supporting the manifestations of gay and lesbian subcultures, Anderson was nevertheless aware of the existence of a homosexual scene, which, in the 1920s, started to become increasingly visible in US urban realities (New York and Chicago above all), and which he discovered after moving from rural Ohio to Chicago.¹ As Mark Whalan remarks, homosexuality and the open displaying of “queer” behaviors are fully acknowledged in Anderson’s narrative worlds. Whereas Sally A. Rigsbee identifies in femininity the “hidden ‘something’ that corresponds ... to the secret knowledge that each story is structured to reveal” (233), according to Martin Bidney it is “the androgyny myth” that, as a matter of fact, functions as “the organizing principle” (261) of *Winesburg, Ohio*. The latter collection, in fact, features a number of short stories centered on homosexual male characters; “Hands” and “The Teacher”, among others, foreground homosexuality as part of the human and social experience of the time. Though never defined as homosexuals, and despite being rejected by their fellow citizens and cast at the margins of the public sphere, the protagonists of both stories occupy a distinct and peculiar spot in the social texture of their communities. They are assigned a social position, though a marginal one; as marginal figures, their role is that of sanctioning, rather than subverting, the correct functioning of normative identities. Thus, while acknowledging the existence of homoerotic tendencies in human behavior and of a burgeoning homosexual scene in the big cities of the time, thus, Anderson was quite skeptical about their subversive potential, hardly believing that “homosexuality and inversion may well lead down separate paths of inquiry ... connected by cultural anxiety, political identification, and aesthetic experimentation” (Lyon 2005, 228).

Celibacy, conversely, is explored in its complex, though less detectable, subversive potential, and given a prominent role in the stories collected in *The Triumph of the Egg*, which Anderson published only two years after *Winesburg, Ohio*. This book addresses sexuality as such as a set of normative rules. Whereas in *Winesburg, Ohio* homoeroticism was regarded as tentatively opposing the commonly accepted social standards of normativity, in *The Triumph of the Egg* the only way out of sexuality as itself a social ordering principle is provided by the abstinence from sex, which sounds all the more

¹ Modernism, as Janet Lyon remarks, highly emphasized “the creatively flexible relations between negotiated gender identity” (227); sexual ambiguity, though not necessarily implying same-sex orientation, was part of a symbolic order that willingly disrupted the codes of traditional sexual and gender identity.

unusual and provocative as it is enacted by adult and married men. By erasing sex from (presumably) regular husbands’ and fathers’ lives, Anderson’s stories question the domineering function of men within the family and the public sphere, envisaging chastity as the most outrageous and the least manageable of all forms of sexual insubordination. The trope of the “inviolable man” was not unprecedented in the history of American literature, as David Greven points out. Along with Ichabod Crane, the protagonist of Washington Irving’s “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow,” there are plenty of characters (“James Fenimore Cooper’s Natty Bumppo; Hawthorne’s Fanshawe, Minister Hooper, Owen Warland, Giovanni Guasconti, Dimmesdale, and Coverdale; the constructed inviolable selves of Thoreau and Frederick Douglass; Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Tom; and, at a much greater temporal though not thematic remove, Melville’s Billy Budd”, 39) who, as Greven remarks, “articulate the intense anxieties that surround the contested site of American manhood” (39) by leading celibate existences. Anderson’s stories, however, by featuring celibacy as the trigger and the expression of the transformations that masculinity and fatherhood were undergoing on social, economic, sexual and symbolic planes, overtly participate in the debate about gender identity and sexual behavior, indirectly questioning the achievements of both medical science and psychoanalysis.

Celibacy also poses an epistemological challenge, as Kahan suggests by referring to Eve K. Sedgwick’s hypothesis about Euro-American literary modernism as instancing the “epistemology of the open secret” of homosexuality (3). According to Kahan, in fact, as the “empty secret” of sexuality, void of any visible content, celibacy is nevertheless crucial in furthering the knowledge about people’s identity. As the empty secret of the sexual revolution occurring in the first decades of the century, celibacy questions the emphasis on diversity and sexual tolerance that modernism has always been too optimistically credited with. It functions, in Anderson’s writings, as a gray area still undermining modernist allegedly libertarian positions. As for the epistemological nature of Anderson’s analysis, *The Triumph of the Egg* clarifies its stakes on its very opening. The first story, “The Dumb Man”, which has rather the aspect of a narrative poem than of a short story, focuses on the hidden truths of its protagonists (and consequently on the narrator’s dumbness), suggesting that the innermost core of their identity is far from being decipherable, let alone understandable. “The Dumb Man” features three men whose lives and identities remain unknown and incomprehensible to the narrator (the dumb man of the title), as the last lines remark: “If I could understand him I could understand everything. ... I would no longer be dumb. ... Why was I not given words? Why am I dumb? I have a wonderful story to tell but know no way to tell it” (205). There are stories to tell about the male protagonists of the book – since, as the collection clarifies on its very opening, men are the protagonists of its narratives – but there is “no way” to recount these stories. These men have, we surmise, truths to be unveiled, but there are no means of knowledge to expose their truths.

My attempt in the remainder of this article is that of reading celibacy as a *dispositif*, a collection of beliefs and practices that relate the protagonists’ private lives to different public institutions and apparatuses of power, highlighting their mutual interdependence. Among the themes addressed in the book, the relationship between sexual activity and entrepreneurialism is a crucial one, in that it questions the role of economic productivity in the US society of the early twentieth century as a site of public respectability. “Seeds,” besides being one of the few stories written by Anderson explicitly dealing with psychoanalysis,² could also be located in that debate about artistic production and economic productivity that had been started by William D. Howells in 1893. Discarding the idea that “any man ought to live by an art” (Howells 1893, 431), Howells argued that writers should be included among the productive categories of the nation, and referred to them as exclusively men, confining women to the mere function of readers. Taking literally and at the same time challenging the business/gender *dispositif*, the protagonists of “Seeds,” as wannabe artists (a musician and a painter) are social outcasts and, *as such*, live celibate existences: “LeRoy the painter is tall and lean and his life has been spent in devotion to ideas. The passions of his brain have consumed the passions of his body. His income is small and he has not married. Perhaps he has never had a sweetheart. He is not without physical desire but he is not primarily concerned with desire” (Anderson 1921, 218). The strong connection between gender roles (especially male) and job position, typical of old representations of American virility, is here replaced by the rejection of both economic productivity and sexual activity. The protagonists’ sexual abstinence, in fact, voices their social uselessness and the fact that, as artists, they are excluded from the circuits of material production. By rejecting sexuality, moreover, they reveal their lack of interest in occupying any position within the public sphere. Their refusal of any form of dependence on other people parallels and substantiates their desire to escape the grids and the norms of the community to which they belong. LeRoy puts it very clearly, declaring, at the end of the story, “I would like to be a dead dry thing ... I would like to be a leaf blown away by the wind. ... I would like to be dead and blown by the wind over limitless waters” (221). Considered from both an epistemic and a sociological perspective, thus, celibacy voices the protagonists’ need for disidentifying from the models of normative gender roles of the time, rejecting, together with sexuality, the

² According to Whalan, “Seeds” “fictionalizes Anderson’s experience of conversation with the Freudian psychoanalyst Trigant Burrow at Lake Chateaugay in 1916 and 1917, and intimates that Anderson did have more awareness of Freudian theory than he was ever willing to let on” (88). As a matter of fact, Anderson “had absorbed at least a layman’s knowledge of Freudian theory,” and “Seeds” is among his texts the one that best reflects his “specific acquaintance with Freudian psychodynamics” (Rideout 2006, 267).

necessity to comply with the standards that men and women were supposed to play both in the private and public spheres.

Chastity as a *dispositif* that challenges American ideology of economic productivity is also paramount in “The Door of the Trap,” a story that Anderson adapted from his novel *Mary Cochran*,³ in which celibacy is related to the question of belonging – both in terms of material property and as mutual dependence among people. In the story, the myths of old masculinity are evoked as part of the protagonist Hugh Walker’s inner conflicts. On the one hand, he is aware of the need to accumulate, preserve and, if need be, even hide not only his material properties but also his desires. On the other, the story gradually reveals how miserable he feels in denying himself the right to enjoy what he has achieved. The phrase that often recurs in the story, “this belongs to me,” does not mark the protagonist’s greediness and pride. On the contrary, property, as a staple of national ideology, far from having been assimilated and fully ingrained in Hugh’s daily life, somehow scares him. This applies even more to human relationships, as mutual dependence and the need to belong are regarded as the threatening aspect of each relation, to the point that, at the beginning of the story, Hugh compares his own family to a prison. When he falls in love with one of his students, who more and more frequently visits his house and gets acquainted with his wife and children, he realizes that his attraction to her derives from his conviction that she does not belong to anything and anyone – not even to him, and has no part in the adult world he so much despises: “Unlike Winifred and these children she does not belong to me. I could go to her now, touch her fingers, look at her and then go away and never see her again” (280). Hugh is fully aware that a time will come when the girl will no longer be as free and independent as she appears to him now, but he is confident that he will have lost all interest in her by that time: “She does not belong to me. She will go away out of my sight. Winifred and the children will stay on and on here and I will stay on and on. We are imprisoned by the fact that we belong to each other. This Mary Cochran is free, or at least she is free as far as this prison is concerned. No doubt she will, after a while, make a prison of her own and live in it, but I will have nothing to do with the matter” (281). He discovers, however, that Mary, too, has a regular life like anyone else, losing all his interest in her, and bitterly acknowledging that there is no difference between Mary and other adult people: “She isn’t like a young tree any more. She is almost like Winifred. She is almost like a person who belongs here, who belongs to me and my life” (283).

The tension the protagonist experiences with his role as a grown-up middle-class man is voiced by this contradiction: he can feel attracted only to women with whom no sexual

³ Both “The Door of the Trap” and “Unlighted Lamps” elaborate narrative material from *Mary Cochran*, a novel that Anderson never published (Rideout 2006, 178).

involvement is possible – women who, like Mary, do not belong to anything.⁴ Rather than with the girl, in fact, he is in love with the indeterminacy of her individual condition. Celibacy, as the rejection of any claim of property on people and the instance of non-belonging *par excellence*, is what would ideally make the relationship possible, at the same time, paradoxically, preventing it from being thoroughly enjoyed. Property is regarded by the protagonist of the story as a symbolic site of abjection, something that trivializes any person or things that “belong” to anyone, and makes property, as a matter of fact, utterly unlovable. Far from being one of the staples of the US middle-class ideology, it is refused as it smears the alleged pureness of any object of desire, which could be craved only insofar as it stays out of anybody’s reach. Hugh can finally kiss Mary just to tell her to go away, never to return.

When celibacy encroaches on the lives of families, its disturbing and revolutionary potential is all the more visible. Not only does it deprive Anderson’s characters of their sexual lives, but also of their gender identity, which sexual activity was supposed to inform and define. The presence of chaste fathers and husbands is noticeable in many stories of the collection. Marriage is presented as one of the instruments that successfully curb the protagonists’ desires and appetites into innocuous abstinence. Fallen into chastity, these characters are not only deprived of their sexual desires but also reduced to an undifferentiated mass of asexualized subjects, as one of the protagonists of “The Other Woman” remarks: “We will be human beings. Forget we are a man and woman. [...] We will not have to be husband and wife” (226, 228). The protagonist of the story betrays his future wife the day before they get married, with a woman ten years older than him. The story opposes adultery to the sexless life of the couple, as if marriage and sexual life were almost incompatible, and sex were to be enjoyed only outside the domestic sphere.

Celibacy and fatherhood are central in “Unlighted Lamps,” which, by featuring a medical doctor as a protagonist, questions the definition of masculinity according to the man’s professional status. The man used to lead a chaste life in the past, when he was still married (“He remembered how often, as a young man, he had sat in the evening in silence beside his wife in this same office and how his hands had ached to reach across the narrow space that separated them and touch her hands, her face, her hair,” 251). After being abandoned by his wife, he devoted his life to his profession, going through a process of infantilization and feminization (“her father had, on that evening, appeared boyish and almost gay”, 255), to the point of being perfectly happy, before dying, for having helped a woman give birth to her son. As an adult man having a sexless life, gender

⁴ A possible explanation in biographical terms is provided by James Ellis, who, mentioning an autobiography of Anderson published by Kim Townsend in 1987, argues with regards to Anderson’s fear of sexuality, and hypothesizes a similar dynamic in his life: “This conflict – the feeling that to admire a woman as beautiful seemed inevitably to invite the debasement of that beauty by man’s sexual desires – turned Anderson to male friendships as an outlet for his need for spiritual communication” (596).

identities and family roles have no significance to him, so that, in his mind, his daughter's and his former wife's figures gradually overlap, and the distinction between the functions of wife, mother, daughter is of no import. The control of sexual impulses and drive, crucial in the past to the definition of masculinity as the expression of full mastery of the self (Kimmel 2006, 87), here, is what emasculates the protagonist. Celibacy, thus, denies masculinity by paradoxically taking its principles literally. Whereas in the past men's public respectability derived from their capability to preserve and not waste their own energy, and to curb their natural (and even obvious) unrestrained sexual appetites into socially recognized institutions (the family) or into sanctioned activities (sports), now celibacy backfires on the very male figures it was supposed to champion. In rejecting sexuality, moreover, the protagonist of the story implicitly renounces the social norms that, as a man and father/husband, he is supposed to comply with. In the story, this process is staged within the only institution in which sexuality was allowed with almost no prohibitions, the heterosexual marriage, and eventually turns its protagonist into the opposite of what his status as a married man should have granted him to be. This visibly disproves what Mark Whalan maintains in his study, namely that “despite his repeated criticisms of the American middle class, Anderson's primary interest was less in challenging the economic infrastructure than in maintaining patriarchal hegemony within a period of rapidly challenging economic circumstances” (94). In the story, conversely, class and gender issues influence and determine each other, both participating in the process of reshaping lower-middle class masculinity in the small towns of the Midwest.

In “The Egg,” a “sadly funny tale of unsuccess” (Rideout 2006, 21), the celibacy of the narrator's father (probably modeled on Anderson's own father), fuels a mechanism of gender dis-identification and the eventual feminization of the man.⁵ Here, too, normative gender laws are subverted by their literal enforcement, turning into the final displacement of the traditional roles within the familiar nucleus. The narrator's father is presented, at the very opening of the story, as a “cheerful, kindly man” (230). A previous farmhand, he moves with his family to the small town of Bidwell, Ohio, and starts running a restaurant. However, it is only his wife who is obsessed with the need to make money, to climb the social ladder by making a fortune out of her and her husband's business. She is also the one who encourages her son (the narrator) to pursue his own ambitions. Her husband, on the contrary, has no investment whatsoever in entrepreneurialism. This crucial distinction between the two parents, as for their degree of interest in business and in making money, bespeaks the transformation masculinity was undergoing in the 1920s, when it was perceived in terms of consumption rather than, as it had been until few

⁵ The story was probably inspired by an episode that occurred in Anderson's life: when he wrote advertising copies, he happened to know J.W. Miller, who manufactured chicken incubators; one model of these machines did not function properly, and all chickens were smothered (Rideout 2006, 126).

decades before, in terms of production and productivity. It also implicitly refers to the crisis that the role of the “marketplace man” as an “American icon of hegemonic masculinity” (Fusco 2007, 47) was going through at the time, because of the transformation of American capitalism. Mass industrialism, rapidly taking over the US economy at the time, allowed little space for individual talent to emerge on a mass scale. As a consequence, a man was considered a man as long as he accumulated goods, and only insofar as his lifestyle and mannerism faithfully reflected his social status. The more commodities he had and made use of, the more he was perceived as capable of mastering his life – and thus, the more of a man he was. In the previous century, on the contrary, the capability to produce and to save what had been produced was the essential trait of normative masculinity. Social issues too are, thus, at stake in the father’s transformation, whose role as the one who accumulates and exhibits his “goods” is openly mocked at in the story.

“The Egg” also highlights a social transformation that was paramount in rural and semi-urban America at the time: namely, the process of proletarianization of former landowners and farmers, who decided to move to big cities. This transition invariably brought about a radical reconfiguration of domestic and gender issues within the nuclear family. The era of the separate spheres (an idealized rather than an actual social construction as Gianna Fusco remarks; 2007, 21), the story suggests, is finally over, to the point that a woman – the narrator’s mother – plays an essential part in a rags-to-riches plot that, in the century of the “genteel patriarchs and heroic artisans,” (Kimmel 2006, 13-14) was essentially a male narrative. The sexual victim of this troublesome process is, however, the husband/father. There is no romanticism or intimacy between the narrator’s parents, as the narrator more than once remarks, emphasizing their sexual abstinence as an apparently neutral datum. The protagonist’s father, in fact, besides giving up any ambition as a businessman, also renounces his sexual life, as, almost incidentally, the story points out: “He slept in the same bed mother had occupied during the night ... During the long nights, while mother and I slept, father cooked meats that were to go into sandwiches for lunch baskets for our boarders” (235).

Most of the narrative revolves around the father’s strange and bizarre mania for monstrous eggs. Whereas the wife is worried about their business and with her desire to encourage their son to be, unlike his father, an ambitious man, the husband, unmindful of his family’s and his business’ needs, is only devoted to some monstrous creatures he takes care of and protects, in the hope that they will eventually bring him celebrity. He is sure, in fact, that only the monsters he preserves in his jars will sooner or later give him fame and money, were he only able to give them life anew, so as to exhibit them as freaks: “He had some sort of notion that if he could but bring into henhood or roosterhood a five-legged hen or a two-headed rooster his fortune would be made” (233). As a farmer, he was fascinated with breeding chicks. Now that he works in an urbanized context, he is

reduced to preserving chicks’ fetuses and chickens with monstrous features in jars filled with alcohol. The story centers on the egg (231) rather than on what comes out of it, unless it is a dead creature or, even more creepily, unless it is an unborn monster, like the “five-legged hen or a two-headed rooster” (233), which the man keeps on display on the shelves of the restaurant. The emphasis on the egg – after which the story (and the whole collection) is titled – is not due, thus, to its potential for bringing life; it only instances, on the contrary, the initial and at the same time last stage of life, a simulacrum of those lives that do not perpetuate, but merely live *per se*. The choice of the monstrous egg as the protagonist’s obsession seems to ridicule the fact that, during the 1920s, fathers were acquiring an increasingly bigger role in children rearing. What Ralph LaRossa defines “masculine domesticity and domestic masculinity” – that is, “the norm that men should interject their manliness into domestic work” and “the maxim that men’s manliness needed to be placed under house arrest ..., civilized and tamed” respectively (1997, 34) – is, in the story, recoded as a process of feminization of the protagonist. If the monsters-breeding egg stands for the anomalous nature of a man that had openly renounced the codified standards of masculinity, celibacy functions as the material condition for the process to take place. Only avoiding sexual activity, the story seems to imply, the metamorphosis of the father could be accomplished.

The father’s celibacy, therefore, seems to symbolically embrace both his figure as a marketplace man whose insane passion for eggs has replaced his bygone interest in business, and the subversion of normative roles within the couple: while his wife is worried about business, he seems lost in his reveries about eggs and hens. Sexual abstinence, far from being a marginal detail in the description of the couple’s routine, is crucial in reshaping the symbolic role of fatherhood within the new familiar and social setting. Controlling sexual instincts does no longer result in curbing erotic tension and channeling it into more productive and socially recognized activities. As the story points out, in fact, sexual continence turns out to be merely disruptive and self-annihilating in the end, making a grotesque figure out of a supposedly respectable father and businessman.

The family as a site of expectation and investment in the future is thus deprived of its intimate, much as ideological, essence. At the same time, it is also the notion of family as a putative hotbed of labor force that no longer makes sense, given the father’s lack of ambition and interest in his business, which he runs with the only apparent purpose of impressing his lodgers and telling them stories about the eggs that he almost literally hatches. Both feminized and infantilized, his role seems to fall in step with the figure of the companionate father, whose popularity was increasing in the 1920s, in that he constructs his image more as his child’s playmate than as a responsible economic provider (LaRossa 1991, 996).

The paradoxical epilog of the story decrees the accomplishment of the man’s transformation, featuring him while pointlessly trying to impress Joe Kane, one his lodgers, by showing his freaks (238). Masculinity as a “homosocial enactment” (Kimmel 2006, 5), a set of practices and rituals to be continuously displayed, is evoked to here. Since it is no longer possible, however, to rely on old, almost mythic figures of masculinity (the frontiersman, the heroic artisan), the homosocial bond is reduced to the showing off and the public enjoyment of one’s own goods in the presence of other men.⁶ In their final squabble, the man tries to impress the lodger by showing his eggs and the monsters he preserves in his jars. The latter, however, only wonders about his interlocutor’s mental soundness, laughing at his awkward attempts to stupefy him. Male rivalry, which in other times would have probably resulted in a duel between two gentlemen or two cowboys, now, on the contrary, gives rise to an almost pathetic attempt at impressing the other. At the same time, the urge to display one’s possessions here embodies a new model of consumerism. The compulsive need to purchase products is in fact paralleled by “an acceptance of pleasure, self-gratification, and personal satisfaction” (D’Emilio 1988, 234), a tendency that has, as John D’Emilio remarks, also a gender overtone, since traditionally women were supposed to consume and men to possess. While women’s consumption had long been ascribed the function of displaying a man’s wealth, this new public performance of masculinity is marked by the need to accumulate, store and exhibit objects, without any other reason than the pleasure of showing off. Masculinity, thus, is finally an essential part of the new system of production and consumerism. The men’s “loss of control over most other aspects of public life,” determined by capitalism, is in fact compensated by the “emphasis on personal gratification” (234).

By foregrounding celibacy as an insubordinate behavior that counters sexuality and its prescriptive norms, *The Triumph of the Egg* overthrows the traditional attribution of sexual roles within the nuclear family, profoundly questioning masculinity and fatherhood above all. Celibacy, in the stories here briefly analyzed, proves effective in blurring gender and sexual categories. Whereas the latter are, at least, conceivable and representable, celibacy only “speaks” through its silence, and through the silence of the missing acts that it evokes. A controversial issue at the time, celibacy was overtly praised in the first decades of the twentieth century by the social hygiene movement, which

⁶This transition cuts across ethnic boundaries: the emergence of a black middle class in the first decades of the twentieth century suggests that the new “man” had not necessarily to be white. On the contrary, class issues seem to be still crucial in the process: this transformation, in fact, while involving all men, affected the lowest strata of US society much more dramatically than affluent men or professionals, as the former could not afford to “manifest” their virility by way of consumption and inevitably got stuck with a model of masculinity dating back to a previous era. Gender issues and gender roles were thus, to a great extent, a matter of class, and not only of sexual identity or identification.

envisaged in sexual abstinence the most effective way to stop the spreading of venereal diseases (D’Emilio 1988, 206). By emptying celibacy of any moral or prophylactic function, *The Triumph of the Egg* addresses it as a cultural, ideological and psychological condition, never fully accepted or willingly claimed as a free choice by the book’s characters, who are visibly at odds or in open conflict with their own sexual life. Caught in the middle of the transition from old and new norms and paradigms of sexual identities and behaviors, they experience celibacy – hardly ever enjoying it – as the last chance to exert a form of control upon their lives.

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