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# Over Her Dead Body

The Construction of Male Subjectivity  
in Onetti



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## CHAPTER I

### Introduction: Toward a Feminist Reading of Onetti's Male Subject

Juan Carlos Onetti's central importance to the development of the contemporary Latin American novel has been widely recognized during the last decade. He is, without a doubt, one of the most ambitious and prolific figures of the so-called "boom" in Latin American literature.<sup>1</sup> In 1980, this Uruguayan author received Spain's Premio Cervantes and, consequently, his narratives gained the international acclaim that was long overdue.

The aim of this study is to elaborate a feminist reading of four works by Onetti: *El pozo* (*The Pit*) (1939), *La vida breve* (*A Brief Life*) (1950), *Para una tumba sin nombre* (*A Grave with No Name*) (1959), and *El astillero* (*The Shipyard*) (1961).<sup>2</sup> I focus on Onetti's representation of the male narrating subject. The application of scholarly studies on gender, subjectivity, and narrativity by theorists such as Teresa de Lauretis, Nancy Chodorow, Jessica Benjamin, Julia Kristeva and others, sparks new insights into the role of gender in organizing and constructing subjectivity as well as into the intersubjective relations in Onetti's fiction.

I argue that in these texts male subjectivity has as its cornerstone the denial of feminine subjectivity. The male protagonists tend to relate narcissistically to the female

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<sup>1</sup>Hugo Verani affirms that Onetti is "uno de los indiscutibles fundadores de la nueva narrativa hispanoamericana" (1981:13) [one of the undisputed founders of the new Spanish-American narrative]. He goes on to explain that "María Luisa Bombal y Juan Carlos Onetti fueron quienes iniciaron en Hispanoamérica el proceso hacia la interiorización lírica y convirtieron la novela en género de montaje, basado en las asociaciones de una conciencia narrativa que sugiere y evoca, en contraste con la escuela naturalista precedente" (1981:71) [María Luisa Bombal and Juan Carlos Onetti were the ones who started, in Spanish America, the process toward lyric introspection and turned the novel into a genre of *montage*, based upon the associations of a narrative consciousness that suggests and evokes, in contrast with the preceding naturalist school].

characters—who are almost always represented as Other in relation to the male subject. This refusal to posit women as independent subjects contributes to the distress and anguish of the male characters. At the same time, Onetti's protagonists desperately attempt to preserve a sense of their "masculinity" which is elusive and forever slipping from their grasp. These same characters project onto relationships between genders anxieties and frustrations stemming from their own marginality, sense of national impotence, and extreme social alienation.

Thus, the figure of Woman—whether she is depicted as a wife/mother surrogate, a madwoman, or a prostitute—is often portrayed as the scapegoat of other marginalized victims in an oppressive social order. And at the same time, young women are frequently represented as a projection of a male fantasy. From the vantage point of the male desiring subject, this idealized Woman symbolizes innocence and purity that will be lost when she gains sexual experience with men and comes into contact with a corrupt world. Women characters in Onetti's fiction are rarely valued for their inherent qualities. On the contrary, they tend to function in this author's texts as Woman, that is to say, as a pure signifier of difference and of Otherness.

These, then, are the main questions of this study: How does Onetti interpret sexual difference and gender roles? What are the specific ways in which his novels reinforce a cultural and literary tradition that presents subjectivity as a male prerogative? And finally, what is the relationship between male desire, the silencing (death being the absolute form of silencing) of women, history, and narrativity in the evolution of the male subject in these texts?

The ideology of gender inscribed in Onetti's narrative tends to reproduce without calling into question the patriarchal paradigm of male power and female subordination. This phallogentric model is presented as though it were natural and universal. In other words, Onetti represents Woman as if that gender were an

essential category, rather than a socially and historically constructed one (Millington 1987: 359). Since the issues addressed in this book reveal such fundamental tensions in Onetti's texts, it is surprising that few critics have taken an approach that focuses on the category of gender. In fact, the present study is the first book-length feminist reading of his work.<sup>3</sup> My goal, therefore, is to add an important new dimension to our critical understanding of Onetti's rich, multifaceted novelistic production.

One of the objectives of my interpretation of this author's work is to denaturalize the characterization of women and to "deconstruct the social construction of gender and the cultural paradigms that support it" (Green and Kahn, 2). "Critics, like artists," asserts Page DuBois, "must 'defamiliarize' the historical world for themselves and their readers. Otherwise we are operated on by the assumptions, by the ideologies of our own world, devoured by habituation, unable to think toward change because we accept the categories of our own ideological location. . . Feminist criticism has sought to disrupt what we might see as the male narcissism of traditional scholarship, which only considers the role of the male in culture. . ." (7). In other words, I will bring into focus aspects of Onetti's narratives which deal with masculinity and femininity that have been overlooked and have remained unquestioned by most Onettian critics.

### I. The Theoretical Framework

The almost obsessive fascination by male writers and artists with the topos of the death of women is a long-standing literary and cultural phenomenon in the Judeo-Christian tradition. In her compelling study, *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity, and the Aesthetic*, Elizabeth Bronfen examines the disturbing conjunction between thanatopoetics and the feminine in Western culture. She comments upon our cultural blindness to the ubiquity of

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<sup>3</sup> Some of the critics who comment upon the representation of women in the traditional roles of wife, mother, prostitute, and madwoman in Onetti include Jorge Ruffinelli, Josefina Ludmer, Hugo Verani, Mark Millington, Yvonne Perrier Jones, Linda Maier, and Lydia Yvonne Grove.

representations of feminine death: "Though in a plethora of representations feminine death is perfectly visible we only see it with some difficulty"(3). In spite of the fact that dead female bodies are scattered throughout Onetti's fiction, these female corpses usually go unnoticed and unmentioned by Onettian scholars and critics.<sup>4</sup> This tendency of the critics to overlook the death of a woman motif in Onetti's literary production confirms Page DuBois's crucial point about the "male narcissism of traditional scholarship."

Bronfen's book provides several key concepts which are applicable to my thesis about the link between a woman's death and male narrative activity in Onetti's fiction. First, there is the general notion that female death disrupts social stability and marks a moment of ambivalence in the male psyche. She argues that "the threat that death and femininity pose is recuperated by representation, staging absence as a form of re-presence, or return, even if or rather precisely because this means appeasing the threat of real mortality, of sexual insufficiency, of lack of plentitude and wholeness"(xii). Secondly, Bronfen's use of psychoanalytic and semiotic terminology to explore the interstice between the female corpse and the image of Woman in literature is useful for understanding the construction of male subjectivity in Onetti. Her theory about the sacrifice of a woman for the production of art and the re-establishment of order will be applied to the first three texts examined in this book. In these particular novels the male writing subject is represented as having achieved a sense of wholeness through the act of narration. In Onetti's fiction, narrative activity is closely associated with the obliteration of a woman through her death and her reappearance as a textual image in the form of a female corpse. I shall focus on the relation between the representation of the deaths of Ana María in *El pozo*,

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<sup>4</sup> One exception to the tendency to minimize the significance of the death of a woman motif in Onetti's fiction is Josefina Ludmer's excellent book, *Onetti: Los procesos de la construcción del relato* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamericana, 1977). Especially useful are her insights into the structural role of the death of a woman motif in *La vida breve*.