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TWO FATHERS: COMPARING ITALIAN AND AMERICAN FATHERHOOD IN WALLY LAMB'S *I KNOW THIS MUCH IS TRUE*

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***Abstract**: This essay examines the complex dynamics of fatherhood in Wally Lamb's novel* I Know This Much Is True *(1998) through the lens of three distinct paternal figures: the abusive stepfather Ray Birdsey, the idealized yet oppressive grandfather Domenico Onofrio Tempesta, and the protagonist, Dominick, himself, grappling with the loss of his infant daughter and the subsequent challenges to his own paternal identity. The analysis explores how cultural factors, including American masculinity and Italian patriarchy, shape these paternal figures, contributing to their respective approaches to child-rearing and interpersonal relationships. The study draws upon sociological theories of masculinity, family dynamics, and cultural studies, to understand the impact of these influences on the characters' experiences and the enduring consequences of intergenerational trauma. Ultimately, the essay examines Dominick's journey towards self-discovery and the possibility of rewriting his own narrative, transcending the limitations imposed by his familial and cultural heritage.*
***Keywords**: fatherhood, Italian-American experience, patriarchy, Wally Lamb*

1. Introduction

Wally Lamb's novel *I Know This Much Is True* (1998) is a complex family saga, centered on the challenging relationship between identical twins Dominick and Thomas Birdsey. Thomas develops a personality disorder at a young age, which culminates on October 12, 1990, when, at the age of forty-one, he enters a library and cuts off his own hand as an act of protest against U.S. foreign policy, specifically Operation Desert Storm in the Persian Gulf. Following this event, Thomas is committed to a mental hospital, while Dominick, acting as a father figure, does everything he can to protect and free his increasingly fragile twin. The present of the story is the frame for flashbacks that reveal the second—and perhaps more pervasive? - theme of the novel: fatherhood. The twins have never met their biological father, nor known anything about his identity. They have been raised by Ray Birdsey, their mother's husband, a "five-foot-six-inch […] giant" (Lamb 1998: 9) who has never been kind to them or to their mother Connie. The violent pattern seems to be deep-rooted in the story of the family, as Connie's father Domenico, a Sicilian immigrant, used to behave in the same oppressive way with his daughter and wife. Yet the detailed story of 'Papa' remains a mystery until, right before her death

from cancer, Connie gives Dominick the manuscript of an autobiography in Italian written by Domenico, which she is not able to read, as she has forgotten, and actually never spoken fluently, the language of her ancestors. Dominick has the manuscript translated in order to provide his mother with a memorable last gift before she dies, but the translation gets completed too late, when the woman is already dead, and her son finds himself reading the autobiography years later, while struggling for Thomas's freedom.

The novel explores three distinct father figures: the man who raised the twins, the romanticized figure of their maternal grandfather, and Dominick himself, who acts as a surrogate father to Thomas, after his opportunity to be a father was tragically cut short by the death of his infant daughter, three weeks old Angela. These three father figures each represent different parenting styles, shaped by their cultural backgrounds and their notions of masculinity. Ray and Domenico, in particular, embody the traditional patriarchal role, acting like monarchs who demand the same allegiance and obedience from their family members that one would expect from subjects (Buchbinder 2013: 105). As Sofia Aboim (2010: 61) notes, the family is "a key site of power", where the oppressive and dominating nature of masculinity - though sometimes tempered by familial bonds of affection - finds its most potent expression. This raises the question: how does culture influence the power dynamics between fathers and children? Is Ray's distinctly American form of domination truly different from Domenico's Southern Italian approach? And can one rewrite their narrative - as both son and father - despite the traumas and cultural influences inherited from their parents and grandparents? This essay will attempt to answer these questions.

2. Ray Birdsey, the American stepfather

To understand Ray's character and the protagonist's deep-seated hatred toward him, it is essential to address a long-debated question: is biology the only thing that makes a father? Throughout much of the novel, the central issue revolves around Ray's lack of a biological connection to the twins. Dominick, the protagonist and narrator, repeatedly emphasizes that Ray is not the twins' real father, suggesting that the ideal man who contributed to Thomas' and his conception should be "anyone but Ray" (Lamb 1998: 93). What makes Ray an undesirable father figure is the atmosphere of terror and abuse he inflicts on his household. His frequent temper tantrums lead to the destruction of objects and the physical abuse of his adoptive children and wife, all under the guise of toughening up the twins, to prepare them for the harsh realities of the world. Ray's behaviour and severity seem to stem from various factors that have shaped his concept of fatherhood, ultimately leading to his children's rejection of him. The first factor to consider is the man's idea of masculinity as something devoid of feelings and weaknesses. It is the same notion he tries to instill in the twins, especially in Thomas, who is always the weaker child, the one with a closer and almost exclusive relationship with his mother. Ray's violent demeanour seems to suggest a convergence with the Kantian concept of authority applied to the family, which implies that fathers should show no emotions and should keep a distant attitude

towards their offspring (Seidler 1988: 276). For this reason, the abundance of feelings shown by Thomas seems to elicit the stepfather's most violent reactions, especially when Connie gives the impression of seconding her son's attitude by playing with him and creating a sort of private universe, where only she and Thomas exist. A similar tendency, according to sociologist Nancy Chodorow, can be deeply harmful not only for the relationship between fathers and sons, but also between husband and wife. Chodorow (qtd. in Seidler 1988: 289) argues that boys tend to separate from their mothers, rejecting their primary love and empathy, because these traits are often perceived as feminine. When this separation fails, husbands may see this closeness as a reminder of something they relinquished long ago, potentially leading to feelings of jealousy and rejection that can trigger violent reactions. This theory aligns somewhat with sociologist's Talcott Parsons sex-role theory, which posits that the identification of daughters with mothers, and sons with fathers, is essential for maintaining the gendered division of labour within the Western family, with deviations from this norm seen as aberrant (Heward 1996: 35). Similarly, political studies scholar John Beynon (2002: 20) connects the professional conditions of certain men with their violent outbursts at home. For example, working-class men like Ray, a typical blue-collar worker, often lack power in the workplace and may adopt "macho identities" to conceal their powerlessness, compensating by dominating at home. The link between social class and child-rearing becomes evident when the twins decide to attend college after high school. Ray expresses his disdain for college professors, dismissing them as "all communists," and struggles to understand why "two able-bodied young men out of high school couldn't work for a living or enter the Navy" as he had done (Lamb 1998: 131). This judgment proves partially correct in Thomas's case, as he ends his first year of college with disastrous grades. Ray's reaction is one of mockery and rage: "What's the story here, Einstein? You been taking a joyride up there? First you flimflam me out of my hard-earned money, and then you can't even bother to study?" (idem: 257). Ray's understanding of college dynamics is limited, given that he only completed his third year of high school. Yet, he emphasizes his own experiences by ironically stating that he "only fought in two wars" (idem: 259). Even Dominick's good grades fail to impress him, as he dismisses all subjects as either "happy horseshit" or beyond his comprehension.

Another factor that shapes Ray's approach to fatherhood is his intense Americanness. The author highlights Ray's patriotism at several points in the novel - mentioning that he fought in World War II and Korea, recalling his enthusiasm for the American moon landing as a victory over the Russians in the space race, and noting his suggestion that Dominick buy an American truck instead of a Japanese one. This strong sense of being purely American, along with other previously discussed factors, may contribute to Ray's obsession with toughening up his stepsons. As literary scholar Elizabeth Abele (2003: 142) notes, the twentieth century saw a rise in American imperialism and corporate business culture, which influenced the very concept of American masculinity. Men were expected to be tough, obedient, loyal, reliable, and willing to sacrifice themselves. To instill these qualities in the next generation, new child-rearing techniques were developed to counteract the softening influence of mothers and "discourage crying and other forms of emotional

expression" (ibid.). This is precisely the kind of upbringing Ray imposes on the twins. However, years later, when Thomas cuts off his hand and is hospitalized, Ray realizes that all his efforts to counteract Connie's protective ways have failed, and he blames her for Thomas's mental illness. Ray also compares his life and experiences to those of the twins, reinforcing his belief that exposure to life's hardships should make people stronger:

> "But Jesus Christ, what did you have to go and cut off his hand for? I don't care how crazy he is. That's what's eating me up… you two were lucky. You never had to go to war like I did. It changes you: being in a war. You come home, you don't want to talk about it, but… it just changes you. That's all. The things you see, the things you do, and then you come back into civilian life and… when I was stationed over in Italy? I have seen a guy get blown apart right in front of me. Cut in half, right at the waist… so every time I think of him going over there to the house and taking my knife off the wall. Taking his hand off voluntarily…. At the library, of all places. I know he's crazy. I know he can't help it… but Jesus…" (Lamb 1998: 470)

Ray also realizes that Connie's flattery was exclusively directed at Thomas, not Dominick, a circumstance highlighting their divergent personalities, despite their identical appearance. Ray informs Dominick that, had Connie allowed him to raise Thomas with a focus on preparing him for the outside world, their current predicament might have been avoided (Lamb 1998: 62). Paradoxically, despite his apparent disdain for Thomas's perceived weakness, Ray considers him his child, repeatedly addressing him as "my kid," a behaviour Dominick finds perplexing (65). However, the twins never view him as their father, addressing him instead by his first name.

This paternal assertion extends beyond mere nomenclature. The narrator recalls the stepfather's attempts to forge a bond often rebuffed by the stepson, such as providing condoms when Dominick begins dating his future wife, Dessa. Dominick struggles to "accept [that] sudden father-son stuff" (309). This paternal inclination is further evidenced in the present, when Ray is upset that Dominick did not call for help after a car accident, insisting that as "his kid," he should have informed him (467).

Thomas exhibits a markedly different approach to his stepfather, perpetually seeking his approval and affection. Dominick recalls that every year, on Ray's birthday, Thomas would meticulously prepare presents, wrapped a week in advance, along with homemade "best dad in the world" cards, carefully tucked away in his bureau drawer. In contrast, Dominick would hastily assemble gifts minutes before church, wrapping candy bars in repurposed newspaper comics and adorning them with a rapidly scrawled "happy birthday" note. Despite these contrasting efforts, the stepfather's reaction was consistently one of embarrassment, seemingly oblivious to the disparity in their endeavours.

Ray's actions become a focal point of Dominick's conversations with Dr. Patel, the psychiatrist treating Thomas. To understand the genesis and progression of Thomas's illness, Dr. Patel seeks information from the healthier twin. Dominick details Ray's physical abuse, noting a particular cruelty reserved for Thomas. The stepfather's punitive measures, often resembling military-like tactics, such as taping hands or forced kneeling on rice-covered floors, were prolonged and intensified when inflicted upon the weaker twin, whose pleas for mercy were met with indifference.

When questioned about Connie's response to these torments, Dominick confesses her complicity, admitting she was "more scared of Ray than [they] were" (125). Paradoxically, despite the evidence, Connie insists that the absence of a biological bond did not preclude Ray from being a considerate father, a notion Dominick vehemently disputed:

> "The only thing that makes him my father is some stupid piece of paper he signed. What kind of father would bully his son the way he bullied Thomas tonight? What kind of father wants his sons to go off to war and get wasted?"
> "He didn't say that, Dominick. Don't put words in his mouth. He loves you boys".
> "He can't stand us and you know it. He resents everything about us. He's been that way all our lives" (Lamb 1998: 262)

Connie attempts to mitigate her son's resentment by revealing a potential explanation for Ray's behaviour. She disclosed her husband's troubled upbringing, describing his mother as a "no-good tramp" (263). Unimpressed, Dominick seeks information about his biological father, a query Connie deftly evaded. Years later, following Thomas's tragic suicide, Dominick publicly denounces Ray's failings as a stepfather at the funeral reception. Dessa, his ex-wife, offers a poignant perspective, emphasizing the significance of the "real father" label (777). These revelations, coupled with extensive therapy, initiate a process of acceptance and objective analysis for Dominick.

Ray's subsequent health crisis, necessitating a leg amputation, creates a parallel to Thomas's ordeal and prompts introspection. Dominick grapples with the complex figure of his stepfather, realizing that the abusive man who had raised him was also the one who planted tulips at the grave of his infant daughter Angela. Even Ray's fervent patriotism took on new meaning as Dominick contemplates the man's unwavering duty to his country. Dr. Patel's assertion that Ray's consistent presence constituted a form of fatherhood offered a fresh perspective. Ultimately, triggered by illness, Ray exhibits a glimmer of remorse, acknowledging his past mistakes:

> "I know I made mistakes with you two," he said. "With him especially. The day of the funeral there? Afterwards back at the house? You weren't accusing me of anything that I hadn't already accused myself of… I just never understood that kid. Me and him, we were like oil and water… I hadn't grown up with a father, see? All I knew was that it was a tough world out there. I figured that was the one thing I could do for you two: toughen you up a little, so that you could take whatever soccer punches life was going to throw at you… 'They're just little boys, Ray', she used to say to me all the time. But I didn't see it. I was pigheaded about it, I guess. And, of course, I knew neither of you two liked me that much. Had me pegged as the bad guy all the time. The guy who wrecked everyone's fun. Sometimes you three would be laughing at something, and I'd walk into the room, and bam! Three long faces."
> "It was your temper" I said. "We were afraid of you." (Lamb 1998: 857)

And there comes a further admission on Dominick's side: that they were all "a little screwed up, Ma included" (857). Connie's story had already been filled with violence well before she met Ray, as domestic abuse had been part of her family history, in the person of her father of Italian origins: Domenico Onofrio Tempesta.

3. Domenico Onofrio Tempesta, the Italian grandfather

The figure of Domenico Onofrio Tempesta, the maternal grandfather who died in 1949, looms large, not only in the numerous photographs of him, cherished by Connie, but also, as Dominick observes, in her "life of service to him" (15). This devoted daughter idolized him as a paragon of success, embodying many patriarchal stereotypes that reinforced his position as the unquestioned head of the household. Connie's accounts portray Domenico as a self-made man who emigrated to the United States from Southern Italy in 1901, working tirelessly to amass wealth and purchase land. As the first Italian immigrant to own property in Three Rivers, Connecticut, he built the family home on Hollyhock Avenue with his own hands.

Connie draws parallels between Ray's strict demeanour and her father's, asserting that Domenico was even more severe. She illustrates this claim with anecdotes of his harsh disciplinary tactics, such as forcing her to consume a cigarette as punishment for smoking (18). A potential explanation for the convergence of Ray and Domenico's personalities lies in the 1930s theory positing that fathers serve as models for sons and ideal mates for daughters (Griswold 2003: 163). Indeed, Domenico was unquestionably his daughter's hero, as Dessa later acknowledges (Lamb 1998: 783).

While Connie's recollections offer insights, they pale in comparison to Domenico's self-authored manuscript, intended as a guide for aspiring Italian immigrants. Titled *The History of Domenico Tempesta, a Great Man from Humble Beginnings*, the text transcends mere self-aggrandizement, aligning with a broader trend among Italian immigrants of documenting their experiences. This shift from oral to written narratives emerged as a response to the disintegration of "Little Italy" communities across the United States. As literary scholar Fred Gardaphé (2004: 21-23). observes, "only when the present interacts with the past can we say that a tradition is being created," and these personal histories served as crucial vehicles for intergenerational heritage transmission.

Dominick's discovery of the manuscript challenges his preconceived notions of his grandfather. The enigmatic figure, previously confined to photographs and maternal anecdotes, is revealed as a complex individual beyond the idealized image cherished by Connie. Domenico's untimely death while completing the manuscript, a project shrouded in secrecy, further deepens the mystery surrounding him.

Dominick's reading of the manuscript reveals a far less idealized grandfather, instead portraying Domenico as pompous, misogynistic, and reprehensible (Lamb 1998: 35). Similar to Ray's actions being rooted in American cultural norms, Domenico's behaviour is often shaped by traditional Italian values. His profound disappointment in not having a male heir aligns with the culturally prescribed role of Italian men as providers and protectors (Gardaphé 2003: 242). Domenico's tumultuous relationship with his wife, Ignazia, is exacerbated by her inability to produce a male offspring, a failure he deems a personal disgrace (Lamb 1998: 528). Despite the initial pregnancy resulting in twins, a boy and a girl, the boy's stillbirth casts a long shadow over Domenico, haunted by the fear that the symbolic baptism he performs on the dead child condemned it to eternal damnation (670). The loss of

his only male heir, coupled with Connie's perceived unmarriageability, leads to a despairing realization that the "proud name of Tempesta" will perish with him (526). The Tempesta family name is synonymous with pride, rooted in Domenico's Sicilian heritage and his self-made success in America. He attributed his fortune to "hard work and seriousness of purpose" (557), embodying the quintessential immigrant dream of escaping poverty through westward migration. As Gardaphé (2004: 13-14) suggests, America represented a realm of "complete freedom, real equality, absence of persecution, and unlimited potential", ideals that Domenico wholeheartedly embraced. His conviction that his labor contributed to America's greatness is evident (Lamb 1998: 557).

The family home on Hollyhock Avenue serves as a microcosm of the immigrant experience, blending old and new worlds. While the front facade reflects American architectural styles, the backyard evokes Sicily with its tomato and pepper plants, a space for Domenico to indulge in nostalgic reverie (587). Yet, a poignant irony emerges as Dominick realizes that the house is now occupied by Ray, a non-Italian outsider (173), symbolizing the displacement of the original family and their cultural heritage.

Like Ray, Domenico adheres to rigid gender roles, defining the male as the sole provider of material support (722). This perspective informs his paternal approach, devoid of affection and marked by an expectation of filial servitude. The tragic death of Ignazia, fleeing a loveless marriage (836), intensifies the insular dynamic between father and daughter. Dominick's subsequent discovery of the manuscript fuels a disturbing suspicion of incest, potentially explaining Thomas's psychological turmoil (844).

Ultimately, Dominick learns that Henry Drinkwater, part African American and part Native American, who died in the War of Korea, is the twins' biological father. Ray's revelation of Domenico's deep-rooted racism sheds light on Connie's refusal to reveal her pregnancy to her father, aligning with the patriarchal Italian honor code: "The Italians needed someone to feel better than, I guess. Lots of them were prejudiced as hell when it came to the coloreds. The Indians, too. Her father, for instance. He would have murdered her if he'd known" (874). As Gardaphé (2018: 552) and Mangione (1992: 95) elucidate, Italian fathers exerted absolute authority over their families, vigilantly safeguarding female chastity. While Connie exhibited moments of defiance, the patriarchal imprint remained indelible, influencing her subsequent choices and perpetuating the cycle within her own family.

Domenico's figure is despised for most of the novel by his grandson, but he recognizes there is at least one thing they share - besides the name – and this is the loss of a child, which in Dominick leaves a denied fatherhood which he tries to recreate in several ways, as it will be shown in the next section.

4. The denied fatherhood: Dominick Birdsey

The protagonist and narrator, Dominick Birdsey, emerges as the novel's third paternal figure. As previously explored, he navigates a life shaped by the violent temper of his stepfather, Ray, and the imposing specter of his absent grandfather,

from whom he inherited his name. The elusive ideal father, a figure superior to his upbringing, remains a constant aspiration. These formative experiences could have predisposed Dominick to become a less-than-ideal parent himself. However, before he could demonstrate his paternal abilities, his and Dessa's infant daughter, Angela, succumbs to Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS).

This tragedy shatters their marriage, as SIDS inflicts a pervasive grief that encompasses "a multitude of second losses," including "the loss of hopes and dreams, of future potential, of parenthood, of being able to nurture and protect a child" (Mahat-Shamir 2022: 1186). Dominick grapples with the unique and profound sorrow of losing a baby at such a tender age (Lamb 1998: 514). As behavioural scientist Michal Mahat-Shamir observes, the early occurrence of SIDS hinders the formation of enduring bonds, rendering the loss "ambiguous" and the deceased child's psychological presence "not defined or established" (idem: 1190). Parents in such circumstances mourn the unrealized future, the "wishes, hopes, and fantasies about one who could have been but never was" (ibid.). This profound sense of powerlessness and insecurity strains the marriage, culminating in divorce.

To prevent future loss, while Dessa is traveling to Greece - the country of her family's origin - Dominick undergoes a vasectomy, a decision that he explains years later to Doctor Patel as something provoked by "partly a not-wanting-to-get-into-it: the baby's death, the divorce - partly a male ego thing" (Lamb 1998: 431). Even a subsequent relationship with Joy, who shares his desire for childlessness, solidifies his commitment to this new romantic interest (433). Yet, despite these efforts to escape fatherhood, Dominick's innate protective instincts persist. He channels this paternal energy into caring for his troubled brother, Thomas, whom he views as a perpetual child in need of protection. This role intensifies after promising his dying mother to safeguard his twin (612). Tragically, Thomas's subsequent death denies Dominick the opportunity to fulfill this paternal duty, leaving him a victim of a seemingly inescapable cycle of loss and longing.

A third opportunity for fatherhood arises when Joy becomes pregnant. Confident of his vasectomy's effectiveness, Dominick grapples with the ethical implications of fathering a child that he did not conceive. Initially considering a charade as the child's biological father, he ultimately rejects this path, haunted by the specter of repeating Ray's role. As he contemplates, "And I was supposed to just live out this charade with her? Act the part of the chump and pretend I was this baby's father? Become Ray, the substitute dad I'd hated all my life?" (496), Dominick asserts agency, informing Joy of the child's true paternity and ending the relationship.

Fate intervenes, providing an unexpected path to fatherhood. Ray's declining health necessitates a caregiver, a role thrust upon Dominick. This reversal of roles fosters a reevaluation of their complex relationship, culminating in forgiveness and acceptance. Their shared watching *The Little Mermaid*, a children's film, symbolically encapsulates the shift in dynamics, as Dominick assumes paternal duties (853).

Concurrently, Dominick reunites with Dessa and learns of Joy's terminal illness – AIDS - and her desire for her former partner to adopt her daughter, Tyffanie (868). This presents a renewed opportunity for fatherhood alongside Dessa, offering a chance to redefine the role and surpass the negative paternal models of his past.

5. Conclusion: Rewriting the fatherhood narrative

The novel's conclusion offers a profound sense of resolution, as Dominick achieves a previously unattainable peace. The discovery of his Native American heritage, symbolized by the visit to his father's grave, proves pivotal in this transformation (879). By incorporating this third cultural element into his identity, Dominick constructs a more complete and harmonious self-image. This newfound wholeness, as he terms it (822), allows him to transcend the limiting narratives imposed by his Italian and American upbringings.

The novel underscores the potent influence of culture in shaping familial relationships and individual identities. The patriarchal structures inherent in both Italian and American societies contribute to the oppressive dynamics within the family. Dominick's recognition of this power imbalance, exemplified by his grandfather's tyrannical behaviour, marks a crucial step towards personal liberation (897).

This is a lesson that applies to Domenico as much as to Ray, whose oppression of his family had made its members distant and scared of him, but had also frustrated his attempts at being a father for a long time. So, the cultures of the two men makes them different - because, as stated by Beynon (2002: 2), masculinity is not biological, but cultural - but definitely not when it comes to considering their oppressive tendencies. Yet, as stated in the opening of this conclusion, and according to the author of the novel, rewriting one's own narrative is possible, despite the traumas and the obstinate mental constructions of childhood. Dominick's admission is that being willing to think "beyond sperm and egg" he is definitely not fatherless at all, because "if one defined one's father as the male elder who attended one's passage from childhood to adulthood" then his father was definitely Ray, the one who had been there all along and borne witness (Lamb 1998: 845), and this goes way beyond either biology or culture.

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