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Italianness in selected works of fiction by Maeve Binchy, Elizabeth Spencer, and William Trevor

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DECLARATION OF AUTHENTICITY

I confirm to have conceived and written this paper in English all by myself. Quotations from other sources are all clearly marked and acknowledged in the bibliographical references either in the footnotes or within the text. Any ideas borrowed and/or passages paraphrased from the works of the authors are truthfully acknowledged and identified in the footnotes.
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1. Introduction

The following thesis aims at focusing on various aspects of Italianness in selected works of fiction by Maeve Binchy, Elizabeth Spencer, and William Trevor. It examines the different reasons for which the stories’ characters are attracted by the Italian country, its culture, and its lifestyle and shows how just these factors reflect and influence a character’s personality. Due to the fact that the term Italianness is rather unsure, it is very difficult to concretely define it and to connect it further with the authors’ descriptions. Nevertheless, it is possible to trace specific features linked with Italy and its people and to familiarise others with the literary representations of it. As the term Italianness is rather diverse only a limited range of aspects will be considered in this thesis.

In order to provide a detailed understanding of the short stories in relation to Italianness, a short introduction of the plot, the setting, and the stories’ most important characters will be given, before turning to the analysis of term Italianness. The features of Italianness will be analysed and demonstrated on the basis of the stories’ plots and characters. In the case of Maeve Binchy’s novel, however, the chapter focuses in some detail on the features of Italianness rather than on the individual characters.

All the narratives are at least partly located in the Italy of the 20th or 21st centuries. They therefore address diverse aspects of the country at different historical eras. The view of Italy through several eyes additionally allows a differentiated as well as varied view of Italy, its culture, and its lifestyle. The individual protagonists’ focuses are as varied as the country. Quite an interesting aspect results from the fact that all protagonists seem to remember pleasantly their stay in Italy and that only in a few exceptional cases negative emotions are associated with.

Finally, it has to be mentioned that it is very interesting to consider the impact of the experiences of an (unknown) country on a character’s personality. One will see that in nearly all stories the characters undergo some kind of change of attitude. This is due to the fact that they are able to see certain events from a completely new perspective. Far away from home they are usually able to see an apparently unsolvable problem from a different perspective which further implies that there are completely new ways to solve
it. The influence of the easy-going Italian approach to life soon is mirrored in the positive attitude to the country and everything that is related to it.
2. Italianness

2.1. What is Italianness? - A Definition of Identity

Defining the word identity is not an easy task as there are many disciplines of humanities who pay much attention to this phenomenon and who have each worked out and defined their own explanation regarding the term and the idea that is connected to it. The term identity can be said to be in the centre of attention of psychology, sociology, ethnology, and the humanities. It is possible to distinguish between personal, collective, ethnic, national, linguistic, and even medial identity. Identity is always in a permanent state of change and can be seen as the result of a balance between the continuity of (self-) perception and change. (Boaglio, 42-43)

There is a strong focus on its ethnical character especially in areas where more than one specific section of population is resident, which, as a consequence, causes a rigid competition concerning language, economy, and culture. The relationship between language and identity is also something that is very difficult to describe and define. Right from the moment in which a language is fully developed it contributes to the creation of nations and identities and can furthermore even be used as an instrument of political rule and power. (Boaglio, 43-44)

When it comes to language and nation in the context of Italy, one must keep in mind that Italy represents quite an atypical example. Austria, as having been a hegemonic power of Italy, has for a long time played a very important role as far as language is concerned in relation to the history of the origins of the Italian national identity. Defining national identity as the product of discourse and the imaginary idea of a nation, it cannot be denied that the German language also has been quite influential in building up the Italian national identity in several areas in the North to a certain degree. (Boaglio, 45-46)

Identity can, nevertheless, also be seen as the number of experiences, occurrences, and spaces through which a human’s personal socialisation took place over the years. Identity, in this case causes a slow entrenchment in a society, but is to a certain extent also subject to the plan and supervision of rather elitist circles. Relating to this, the Italian historian Ernesto Galli della Loggia writes:

“L’identità nazionale e il suo sentimento non esistono in natura. L’una e l’altro
In other words, this means that national identity and the feeling which is related to it do not exist naturally. The one and the other are products of ideological and cultural elites, which are generally integrated in a state's institution. (Boaglio, 47-48)

Finally, when it comes to the definition of identity the term ‘collective memory’, which was coined by Maurice Halbwachs, has to be mentioned. According to Halbwachs, a collective memory is a collection of chosen events, which people of a nation do not experience directly, but is constituted by what they hear or experience through the media. In the case of Italy, this term certainly has a quite different significance as well as importance than in most other countries of Europe. As medial experience is strongly correlated and influenced by politics, one has to be careful when it comes to defining and describing Italy’s ‘collective memory’. (Boaglio, 49)

As one can clearly see from this passage, finding a reliable definition of the term identity in general is quite hard as it is influenced by many disciplines and can be split up into numerous categories which may contain further sub-categories. When it comes to defining Italian identity, it soon turns out that this task is even harder as Italy has a very long history.

2.2. Italy, a special case!?  

2.2.1. The ‘nation’ Italy

When it comes to nationalism it is important to keep in mind that the most basic assumption of a nation is that it is something unique and independent. Furthermore, it must be possible to isolate this idea from others which forces a kind of determination of various groups as for example ‘culture’ or ‘race’. Generally, one can distinguish between four major areas of nationalism (Dickie, 20):

2.2.2. Production of a Narrative

Telling a nation’s story which may contain everything from its birth, its struggles, and

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1 Halbwachs, Maurice. *Das Kollektive Gedächtnis*. 390.
its triumphs. This aims at it remaining the same even though time goes by and changes may occur. When going one step further, this can also be done by means of a so-called before-and-after story. In this case, a patriotic narrative is told. (Dickie, 20)

2.2.3. Investment in Symbols

When it comes to symbols, one can, for example, distinguish between official and unofficial ones as well as public and private ones. Regarding the earlier (official and unofficial symbols), flags or even the pizza fall in this category, regarding the latter (public and private symbols), sport teams or a favourite poem can be categorised. The more things there are to symbolise a nation, the greater is the chance that there is some object by which the nation symbolises itself. (Dickie, 20)

2.2.4. Imagining the Nation as a Geographical Space

Imagining the nation as a geographical space and filling it with connotative landscapes (the Colosseum or the Leaning Tower of Pisa, for example) helps the nation to work out a territory for their own which can, furthermore, either be redeemed or defended from invasion. This definition of a territory is very important for a national identity as it conveys a big amount of national self-esteem and aspiration. Thus, the geographical space represents a nation’s borders. (Dickie, 20)

2.2.5. Setting the Nation Against Things

The fourth and final major area of nationalism aims at the ability to separate the people or members of a nation against others (in this case outsiders or criminals). Others, who do not belong to the nation’s collective ‘we’ can be excluded and help to make the nation seem equally real. (Dickie, 20)

One thing these four areas clearly show is that nationalism is in each area defined by differentiation against others. Nonetheless, it is important for a nation to have ‘the other(s)’ in order to be able to define in a more or less explicit way what it is as well as what it is not. (Dickie, 21) Despite all these plausible explanations of how it is possible for a nation to receive a national identity in order to define itself, it seems that Italy,
probably due to several complex reasons, has not yet succeeded in defining itself as one nation. The aim of the following sub-chapters is therefore to elaborate some of the reasons for this failure and to explain them in a way that is understandable even to people who are not so familiar with Italy and its inhabitants.

2.3. Imaginary Geographies

2.3.1. Italy and Rome

In almost every nation-state, one can argue, there is one city which represents a kind of centre for many accounts. This may be due to the seat of the government, due to its concentration of population, or even due to being the hub of economy. Italy, nevertheless, does not seem to have a single centre. There is the city of Milan, which is the financial and commercial capital, Florence, which can be defined as Italy's heart regarding the language and its high culture, and the industrial triangle in the North between Genoa, Turin, and Milan. Furthermore, many tourists are attracted by the city of Venice as it is something unique which is nowhere else to be found on our planet. Rome, being the capital and the seat of government for many people represents the political and historical centre of Italy. Vice versa, Italians are regarded to be political enemies rather than of citizens by the government. (Dickie, 21-22)

2.3.2. Image and Reality of a Nation

In general, a nation is often set opposite to a state. Whereas the nation is related to the people who contribute to setting up a modern society, the state refers to the society's public institutions; and even though people making use of the language of nationalism often try to persuade others that nation and people are equal, it has to be made clear that there is a difference between the notion of nation and its reality. First of all, the people who live in one nation hardly ever have the same interest and, secondly, the term is often used to distance others from the national status. (Dickie, 22)

Mixing the terms nation and population up also means omitting the feelings as well as the way of thinking from the nationhood. To explain this argument further, it has to be said that it is not possible for a nation to exist in the minds of others without them having several ideas and emotions about it. Therefore, it is not enough to simply
describe and explain nations as imagined communities, as this concept apparently leaves out the factor of diversity. A group referred to as nation is not always seen as a mere group or community by others; thus, it may be given various kinds of attributes, bewilderments or embodiments. (Dickie 22-23)

Taking these considerations into account one may presume that a nation is basically a blend of something imaginary and something real. If this is true, however, does not this provide a blurred image as it suggests that reality is put above to the image created in the people's minds? Otherwise, it is the opinion of the people of a nation when it comes to the question as to which ethnic groups are to be considered part of the ‘nation’, and where the frontiers are. Furthermore, the language of a nation is an important issue; especially when it comes to problems and goals with regard to the relationship between a nation's peoples and its institutions. This is a sensitive issue in Italy, particularly because of the years after the Risorgimento. (Dickie, 23)

All in all, it can be said, that one must be cautious when referring to the image and stereotypes of a nation and national communities.

2.3.3. North and South

Since Italy's Unification in the year 1859, the South of Italy has always been a problematical area of the country. For over hundred years it has been the place of organised crime and of the reasons why the state-formation has more or less failed. The North, on the other hand, has always been regarded as the ideal, efficient, and economically successful area, relatively free of all this crime and corruption. When drawing boundaries to demonstrate and differentiate the ‘good’ from the ‘bad’ part of Italy, the problem becomes more complex. The South is a rather fussy term as it has quite flexible boundaries and it is still a matter of debate whether to include Rome, Sicily, and Sardinia. Nevertheless, the South is not only associated with crime and corruption, but also with exotic, diverse cultures which indicate “otherness” as opposed to the rest of the country. (Dickie, 26)

The negative image of Italy's South was inevitably created by the Northern part of Italy, as it was their task to govern the whole country after 1860. Unfortunately, they transformed their visions of how to rule their country without considering the special needs of South. As this did not work out the way they imagined it would, a crisis of understanding followed. As a result, the South was from that time on often regarded as
‘the Other’ which made it even harder to unite the nation. (Dickie, 26-27)

2.4. The Impact of Italy's Political History

When taking a closer look at the history of Italy as a state, which can be defined as a union of smaller social and ethnic groups, it has to be mentioned that in general it has been a history which several times has failed to form a unified nation. Therefore, it does not come as a surprise that Italy's people have hardly any sense of loyalty to the nation nor to the state or even to each other. (Dickie, 19)

Nearly 140 years after Unification, the level of education in Italy is now comparable with that in any other industrialized country. Italy is amongst the world's most powerful industrial economies. It has had universal adult suffrage for decades. Yet the impression that Italians are not 'Italianized' persists. (Dickie, 19)

Historical research has shown that there were grave economic differences between the North and the South during the time of the Risorgimento. At the time when Italy was unified, its Southern regions entered with economically as well as socially different conditions. The Southern part was much more disadvantaged, compared to the North. What kind of negative impact the unification may have for the South in the long run has never been taken into consideration. The hopes for a harmonious development and furthermore for a progressive expansion of wealth and order from the North to the South, which have always been in the centre of attention, have, nevertheless, been quickly destroyed. (Bagnasco, 33)

The underdeveloped South, which was mainly populated by small farmers, was contrasted to the industry and economic growth of the North. The North therefore soon became the industrial capital. As a result, many Southerners migrated to the North and gave up farming as they were able to earn much more money when working for the industry. Therefore, the South became even poorer whereas the North became even richer. Soon, farmers in the South were no longer able to live from the little money they got for their products and were even politically excluded from the right to vote in 1912. According to an act in 1912, all illiterate people were excluded from their right to vote. Thus, the farmers’ descendants were more or less forced to get better jobs which, in turn forced them to get a better educational system. However, there were only a limited
number of well paid jobs available, the resources were at some point exhausted. Again there were many poor people, even though they did have a good education. The vicious circle closes at the point where there were fights between the educated people to get a job, which again increased poverty and lack of education in the South. Rome denied Southerners a seat in the parliament, claiming that the South is still an underdeveloped agricultural area and the industrialised North would fit better in there. (Bagnasco, 34-44)
3. Maeve Binchy - “Evening Class”

3.1. Plot

The novel “Evening Class” by Maeve Binchy is the story about an Irish woman called Nora O’ Donoghue, referred to as Signora, who, in her younger years, went to Italy because of her love for an Italian man, who confessed to her, however, that he is forced by his parents to marry an Italian girl. She does not mind disappointing her family and friends and for many years lives in a small appartamento in a small Italian province town called Annunziata. Despite her lover's marriage to a girl from the town they continue their affair for many years. One day, however, when her lover dies, she is told by his wife to leave the town as the community no longer want to tolerate her. Therefore, she goes back to Dublin, Ireland and as her family still considers her behaviour a disgrace, she has no other option than to look for shelter at the house of a family she does not know. Soon, she is able to make friends and as time passes by, the Signora gives evening classes at Mountainview College, a down-at-the-heels secondary school on the seamy side of Dublin to earn a living. To her surprise, many people from very different backgrounds enrol for the class and they become a wonderful team and friends. As time goes by, the various reasons why the people have registered for the course in Italian are revealed. They have a shared passion for Italy. A journey to Italy, which they all undertake is the climax of the novel and becomes a crucial turning point in every character’s life.

3.2. Features of Italianness

3.2.1. Italy as a source of inspiration

In the novel, Italy is presented as a source of inspiration for two characters: Nora O’Donoghue also termed Signora and Aidan Dunne. Nora, who has spent quite a long time in Italy, is very fond of it and especially of the Sicilian village of Annunziata. Whether this is due to the fact that the village is the place where she can be – though not legally – together with her big love Mario, or, whether this is due to the village's scenic beauty or both cannot be clearly discerned.
That’s what they called her in Annunziata, just Signora. She had said she was a widow when she arrived. It was so like her own name Nora anyway, she felt she had been meant to be called that always. And even had there been anyone who truly loved her and cared about her life, how hard it would have been to try to explain what her life was like in this village. A place she would have scorned if it were back in Ireland, no cinema, no dance hall, no supermarket, the local bus irregular and the journeys when it did arrive positively endless. But here she loved every stone of the place because it was where Mario lived and worked and sang in his hotel, and eventually raised his sons and daughters, and smiled up at her as she sat sewing in her window. She would nod at him graciously, not noticing as the years went by. And the passionate years in London that ended in 1969 were long forgotten by everyone except Mario and Signora. (“Evening Class”, 56)

Still, it is Italy where she learns to live a rather submissive life as a foreigner, a stranger who is only tolerated by the locals, but of whom no one exactly knows the purpose for its stay.

Occasionally Signora asked herself was there any possibility that she could be mad, which was what her family at home thought and was almost certainly the view of the citizens of Annunziata. (“Evening Class”, 57)

After Mario’s death, when Signora is asked by his wife to leave the town for good, she decides to go back to Ireland, leaving behind not only all her belongings, but also all her wonderful memories of more than twenty years. Back in Dublin, Italy becomes a source of inspiration for Signora. She starts to set up an evening class for people who want to learn about Italy, its language, its cultures, and anything else they feel is connected to it. This, however, would not have been possible without the help of Aidan Dunne, an Irishman attending her class.

Aidan Dunne is the husband of Nell Dunne and father of two daughters and a teacher at Mountainview College in Dublin. He is troubled by the wish to become principal of his school, but there is another person, Tony O’Brien who is younger than him and his biggest competitor. According to Aidan, Tony does not qualify for the position of principal as he does not invest much time and effort in his job and in the school. However, Tony has evidently a weakness for young girls and is apparently addicted to cigarettes and alcoholic beverages. Reflecting upon his desire to become a principal and how this would change Aidan's life, he soon realises how much his life has actually changed in the recent years. His daughters have grown-up, his wife pretends to have a lot to do at work, and he is the only one to hold on to the happy memories of the days
Aidan was left in the sitting room looking at television programs that he didn’t want to see. Wouldn’t it be better if he had his own little place, somewhere he could feel at peace? He had seen a desk that he would love in a second-hand shop, one of those marvelous desks with a flap that came down and you sat and wrote on it as people were meant to do. And he would have fresh flowers in the room because he like their beauty and he didn't mind about changing the water every day, which Nell said was a bore. And there was a nice light that came in the window here during the daytime, a soft light that they never saw. Maybe he could get a window seat or sofa and put it there, and get big drapey curtains. And he could sit and read, and invite friends in, well, whoever there was, because he knew now there would be no life for him from the family anymore. He would have to realize this and stop hoping that things would change. He could have a wall with books on it, and maybe tapes until he got a CD player. Or maybe he would never get a CD player, he didn’t have to try to compete with Tony O’Brien anymore. He could put up picture on the wall, frescoes from Florence, or those heads, those graceful necks and heads of Leonardo da Vinci. And he could play arias to himself, and read articles in magazines about the great operas. Mr. Walsh thought he had a life. It was time for him to get this life. His other life was over. He would not be married to Mountainview from now on. (“Evening Class”, 21-22)

When Signora and Aidan meet they soon become enthusiastic about the idea that she could give evening classes in Italian in his school. This would not only make it possible for her to earn some money, but also possible for him to show how much he cares about the institution. Contrary to their fear that there might not be enough people to enrol for the course, it turns out to be a great success. The course is attended by many people from different social backgrounds. All of them seem to enjoy the class; they do not mind learning the vocabulary necessary for the next sessions and value Signora’s teaching methods as being effective which makes the class a big success. In the end, they like the Italian classes so much that they all decide to travel to Italy and visit Rome and Florence. Italy thus has become a source of inspiration for both characters and pupils, otherwise the journey would never have happened. Italy, its language, its culture and its lifestyle, has attracted them. The many wonderful memories of Signora motivate the pupils to go to Italy themselves.

3.2.2. The Impact of (Southern) Italian Traditions

“I would love to marry your daughter,” he had said, with his big dark eyes looking from her father to her mother backward and forward. “But sadly, sadly
it is not possible. My family want me very much to marry Gabriella and her family also want the marriage. We are Sicilians; we can’t disobey what our families want. I’m sure it is very much the same in Ireland.” He had pleaded for an understanding, a tolerance and almost a pat on the head. (“Evening Class”, 52)

One thing that can be well seen from the quote above is Italy’s, more specifically Sicily’s, tradition of prearranged marriages. Being a Catholic country, it was not allowed until the 1970’s for a married couple to be divorced. An Italian Civil Code, which was implemented in 1866, was seen as the basis for the regulation of legal and property relations. Unmarried women were seen as something threatening and something to be potentially dangerous or harmful to the community. Therefore, it was an important and common practice for parents to find a suitable suitor for their daughter(s); usually they preferred a man who came from the same region. The women in Sicily apparently had no other choice than accepting the arranged marriage as it was still a better option than remaining unmarried and laughed at.²

The tradition of arranged marriages terminated the love relationship between Mario and Signora. Even though their love was very strong, and even though they already lived together, Mario had to obey his family’s orders and marry a girl from his home town. The fact that he did not even know her and that he was in love with Nora at that time was never taken into consideration. When one looks at the consequences this decision brought with it, one can probably argue that it would have been better for Mario to have stayed with Signora. Nevertheless, he obeyed his parents and Nora decided to move to Mario’s hometown in order to be able to live close to him. She then became his mistress until his death. Her assumption that nobody would wonder why an Irish lady should stay for such a long time in this small village in Sicily, was naïve:

The years passed and by sheer grit Signora became a part of the life of Annunziata. Not really accepted, because nobody knew exactly why she was there and her explanation that she loved Italy was not considered enough. (“Evening Class“, 58)

All in all, one cannot say whether Mario’s decision was right or wrong, but in the given cultural context he had no alternative. The role of convention and traditional values in Sicily made Mario and Nora on effect ‘star-crossed’ lovers.

3.2.3. The Change of Attitudes Through the Journey to Italy

3.2.3.1. Laddy

For many of the characters described in “Evening Class”, the journey to Rome and Florence marks a change in life in one way or the other. One of the most anxious characters when it comes to the trip is probably Larry. He was largely raised by his sister until her premature death. He cannot be regarded as a very intellectual person, but always willing to learn Italian in order to be able to talk with the guests who come to his nephew’s hotel in which he was working. When an Italian family named Garaldi invite him to visit them in Italy, he can no longer wait to visit their country:

“I’ve asked Signora to write the letter to the Garaldis for me,” Laddy said. “She said she'd explain everything.” Maggie and Gus exchanged glances. Surely Signora would realize how casual the invitation had been to Laddy, the exuberance and gratitude of a warm-hearted family touched at the honesty of an Irish porter. They’d never expect him to take it so seriously, to go to Italian classes and to expect a huge welcome. Signora was a mature woman who would understand the situation, wasn't she? Yet there was something childlike about the woman in the coffee and lilac dress, the woman at the festa that night who was so innocently thrilled with the success of the lessons and the support that had been given to her evening class. She was an unworldly sort of person, perhaps she would like Laddy and think that the Garaldis were waiting with open arms for someone they must have well forgotten by now. But nothing would let Gus and Maggie take from Laddy's excitement. He had his passport in the hotel safe, and he had changed money into lire already. This trip meant everything to him, not a shadow must be allowed to fall on it. It will all be fine, Gus and Maggie told each other, willing it to be so. (“Evening Class”, 470-471)

Although most members of the evening class do not consider it a good idea of Laddy to visit a family he hardly knows and who may have invited him merely out of courtesy or because he had brought them the money they had accidentally left at his nephew's hotel to the airport, they do not talk about it directly and hope that he will sooner or later find out himself. Laddy manages to find out where the Garaldi’s live and, as a consequence, causes great confusion in the group as all of them think Laddy has gone lost:

Aidan put his arm around Laddy’s shaking shoulders and let Signora begin. The explanation, and he could understand most of it, was clear and
unflustered. She told of the man who had found their money in Ireland a year ago, a man who had worked hard as a hotel porter and had believed their kind words of gratitude be an invitation to come to Italy. She described the efforts he had made to learn Italian. She introduced herself and Aidan as people who ran an evening class and how worried they had been that due to some misunderstanding their friend Lorenzo had believed there was a message for him to call. They would all go now, but perhaps out of the kindness of his heart Signor Garaldi and his family might make some affectionate gesture to show they remembered his kindness, and indeed spectacular honesty, in returning a wad of notes to them, money that many a man in many a city including Dublin might not have felt obligated to return. (“Evening Class”, 495)

It turns out that the Garaldi’s are indeed very hospitable and to their surprise, the whole group of forty-two people is invited to dinner in the beautiful villa of the Garaldi’s:

Signor Garaldi and his wife exchanged glances. “Why don’t you all come here on Thursday, for a drink and a celebration.” “There are forty-two of us,” Signora said. “These houses were built for gatherings like that,” he said with a little bow. (“Evening Class”, 497)

In the end, Laddy’s attitude towards life changes as he learns that Italians can be very warm-hearted and hospitable people for whom a friend always stays a friend. He also learned that when you are willing to work hard, you can reach so much even if you do not come from an educated background. Although he is quite a lucky guy, his life has been full of hardships. But because of his warm and friendly character, he is definitely a person who deserves to be lucky; and he is thankful for whatever gift comes his way.

3.2.3.2. Conny

If there had not been a sequence of events that confirmed Constance O’Connor’s strength and calmness, she would probably never have been part of the evening class at Mountainview College. She would, furthermore, never have gone on a trip to Italy with forty-one other people whom she had never met before. Nevertheless, it all turned out differently. In order to understand why she did so, it is probably best to consider her past. When still a girl, Connie’s mother always told her to keep in shape, because this is the only thing men want: slim and fit women. As a teenager, she met the love of her life but discovered that it was not easy for her to let herself yield to her lover and make love to her husband-to-be. However, they got married and hoped that one day she will be
able to overcome her frigidity, but, unfortunately this was not the case. Given so, Costanza, as she is called by Signora and the other participants of the evening class, manages to get pregnant from her husband and bear him four wonderful children. However, her husband is not able to cope with her frigid sexuality and begins a liaison with Siobhan Casey who, is his secretary and becomes his mistress. Costanza does not mind apparently, and stays at home with the kids, often waiting for her husband to return from work even though he did not come home every day. Thanks to Costanza’s discipline and moral strength, the family manages to overcome a crisis which was caused by her husband’s attempt to defecate money from his successful firm’s clients. Even though Conny never visited a university, she was wise enough to put some money aside on a separate bank account over all these years to be prepared for a heavy.

She couldn’t really remember the day. It was like trying to put together the pieces of a horror movie that you have covered your eyes for, or a nightmare that won't go away. There was some of it set in the lawyer’s office, where the terms of the trust she had set up for her children's education were explained to him. The money had been well invested. There was plenty. The rest had been equally well placed for her. Constance Kane was a very wealthy woman. She could see the scorn the solicitor had for her husband. He hardly bothered to disguise it. Her father’s old friend T.P. Murphy was there, silent and more silver-haired than ever. His face was set in a grim line. There was an accountant and an investment manager. They spoke in front of the great Harry Kane as they should before a common swindler. In their eyes, this was what he was. This time yesterday morning, Connie reflected, those people would have treated her husband with respect. How quickly things changed in business. (“Evening Class”, 329)

This was a turning point in her life and she decided to do something for herself and enrolled in the evening class. Although most of the other participants wondered why this beautiful woman in her luxury car has chosen the shabby Mountainview College to take an Italian course, they soon discovered that she was a nice person who gave some others a ride back home when necessary:

When it rained, she would give people a lift home, but she didn't do it regularly in case she became an unofficial taxi service. But she had a soft spot for Lorenzo, who had to take two buses to get back to his nephew’s hotel. This was where he lived and worked as an odd-job man and night porter. Everyone else went home to bed or television or to the pub or a café after class. But Lorenzo went back to work. He had said that the lift had made all the
difference in the world, so Connie made sure she drove him. (“Evening Class”, 341)

When the whole class goes on the journey to Rome and Florence, everyone knows that Costanza could afford a better hotel or a single room, but obviously she does not mind being equal to all her companions who are not so well-off. After a few days in Rome the hotel's housekeeper, Signora Buona Sera, handed her a letter which frightened her a lot:

She heard a gentle knock at the door. Signora must be back already. But no, it was the small bustling Signora Buona Sera. “A letter for you,” she said. And she handed her an envelope. It was written on a plain postcard. It said: You could easily die in the Roman traffic and you would not be missed. (“Evening Class”, 491)

Reflecting on it over and over again, Connie has no idea who could have written such a letter to her. Nevertheless, she decides to wander around with caution Rome trying all the time to be as close as possible to shop windows and not to the street. Sitting alone in a restaurant, eating pizza and drinking wine all by herself, the mystery is solved all by itself. Her husband’s mistress Siobhan Casey suddenly turns up having followed her all the way from Dublin to Rome. Furiously, she begins to talk with Connie about her husband, but thanks to Connie’s calmness her anger gradually dies down:

“I won’t do anything to you,” Siobhan said in a small voice.
“Well, it would sure be a pity for you to have to go in one door of the jail as Harry is coming out another,” Connie said, as casually as if they were talking about shopping for souvenirs.
“How did you get to be so cool?” Siobhan asked.
“Years and bloody years of loneliness,” Connie said. She wiped an unexpected tear of self-pity from her eye and walked purposefully toward the waiter. She gave him lire that would cover the bill.
“Grazie tante grazie, Signora,” he said.
Signora! She would be back now surely, and Connie wanted to give her the surprise. It all seemed much more real to her than the sad woman sitting in this pizza house, the woman who had been her husband’s mistress for most of her life, who had come to Rome to kill Connie. She glanced at Siobhan Casey briefly, but she didn't say good-bye. There was nothing more to say. (“Evening Class”, 519)

Connie’s life and attitudes on the journey to Italy have changed insofar, as she becomes aware that she now lives her life in the way she likes it. She is no longer dependent on her mother's comments or her husband's financial support. Her children, who are
already grown-up, are perfectly able to manage their lives all by themselves and there is no longer anyone who expects anything from her. With the unexpected arrive of Siobhan she also learns that it is not worth worrying too much about men and their money, and that a woman’s life moves on way too fast, and that all this is not worth bothering about. At the end of the novel, it appears that Connie has developed from a submissive housewife into a strong and independent woman who knows what she wants and how she can get what she wants.

3.2.3.3. Aidan

During the narrative Aidan Dunne constantly undergoes changes of attitude and in thinking. At the beginning, he seems to be sad about so many things; sad that his grown-up daughters no longer admire him, sad that the relationship to his wife is no longer as it used to be, and sad that he did not get the job as a principal of his beloved Mountainview College. He, furthermore, does not understand why this post is given to someone who has not nearly put so much effort in the school as Aidan has done. He has had so many plans to renovate the shabby school, but others feel that he has such a wonderful life, which should not be destroyed by his time-consuming job:

He had been teaching other people’s children since he was twenty-two years of age, over twenty-six years now, yet he did not know how to respond to a man who was trying hard to help him; he had only managed to annoy him. The principal was looking at him intently. For all that Aidan knew, Mr. Walsh might be able to read his thoughts, recognize the realization that had just sunk into Aidan’s brain. “Come on now, pull yourself together. Don’t look so stricken. I might be wrong, I could have it all wrong. I’m an old horse going out to grass, and I suppose I just wanted to cover myself in case it didn’t go in your favour.” Aidan could see that the principal deeply regretted having spoken at all. “No, no. I greatly appreciate it, I mean you are very good to tell me where you stand in all this . . . I mean . . .” Aidan’s voice trickled away. “It wouldn’t be the end of the world, you know . . . suppose you didn’t get it.” “No no, absolutely not.” “I mean, you’re a family man, many compensations. Lots of life going on at home, not weeded to this place like I was for so long.” Mr. Walsh had been a widower for many years, his only son visited him but rarely. (“Evening Class”, 17)

When Aidan sets up the Italian evening class with Signora, he appears to be motivated by the wish to strike a blow against the new principal Tony O’Brien. The huge success of the project seems to give his personality a boosting for he feels that he is able to put
an idea into practice if he just wants to. He also discovers that Tony is not as bad as a principal as he had assumed and that generally the school's shabbiness is about to improve. With regard to Signora, it is to be mentioned that she and Aidan become more closely attracted to each other. However, they do not yet express their feelings openly to each other. She cannot do so due to her difficult and complex past, and Aidan because of his marriage. While the other participants begin to speculate whether there is something going on between them, they both regard their relationship as merely as friendship or a platonic one.

On the journey to Rome, Aidan, by coincidence, learns about his wife's affair with another man and for some time he seems to be quite upset. Eventually, in Rome his feelings for Signora suddenly become much more intense:

“Signora was telling me the other day that you had made the dream of her life come true. She said she never felt of any importance until you gave her this job.” Mr. Dunne didn't respond, not as she [Fiona] would have liked. “That was before she met all these Sicilians.” “She said it again today at lunchtime,” Fiona lied. „She did?” He was like a child. “Mr. Dunne, could I speak to you frankly and in total secrecy?” […]

“Well, there's been a bit of unfortunate behaviour. You see she’s friendly, rather overfriendly actually, with Barry’s father. And Barry's mother, she took it badly. Well, very badly. She tried to kill herself over it all.” […]

“So why are you telling me if no one is to know and no one is to get upset about it?” “Because . . . because I want you and Signora to be happy, I suppose, Mr. Dunne. I don't want you to think that you were the one to make the first move cheating on your wife. I suppose I wanted to say that the cheating had started and it was open season.” (“Evening Class”, 523)

Even though Aidan seems to be rather shocked at first, one can argue that it is probably this information that makes him change his mind and his attitude to the marriage and to his wife. The distance from home enables him to look at the whole situation from a different perspective. Shortly after this scene one can see more clearly that Aidan certainly feels something for Signora. When having his speech in the restaurant on the last evening, he seems to be worried that Signora will not be there to listen to him, as she has to care for different matters. Although he never explicitly mentions his affection for her openly, it is obvious that he cares for her very much. At first it seems that Aidan simply does not want to accept his feelings, given that fact that he is married and thinks he still loves his wife. However, because of to the new circumstances he no longer worries about his wife anymore and rather aims at impressing the woman that made him
change his life in a way he always wanted to do. In the end he regards the journey as one of the best things that could have happened to him, as it brought about a significant change in his life. Rome’s romantic scenery as well as the easy-going Italian lifestyle contribute to Aidan’s change of behaviour and make the love between him and Signora appear to be the most natural thing in the world. Aidan’s sadness about the changes in his life disappears. He turns to the future and no longer worries about things passed. He is no longer confused about his and Signora’s relationship and feels happy all around:

They sat apart from the others on the train, Aidan Dunne and Signora in a world of their own with a future to plan. (“Evening Class”, 536)

3.2.3.4. Signora

For years, yes years, when Nora O'Donoughe lived in Sicily, she had received no letter at all from home. She used to look hopefully at il postino as he came up the little street under the hot blue sky. But there was never a letter from Ireland, even though she wrote regularly on the first of every month to tell them how she was getting on. (“Evening Class”, 51)

This statement, which is also the first statement about the so-called Signora in the story, best illustrates the attitude of Nora O'Donoughe's family and friends to her decision to follow her lover to Italy though she will never be able to marry the man she loves. It further discloses the life she has lived for so many years; alone as a stranger, in a little Italian town she has never heard of before, and all this just because of a young man who explained that his parents do not allow him to marry a non-Italian woman. Nora’s love for this young man is so strong that she decides to leave her home town Dublin and to follow him to Italy to live there. Nora does not mind watching her love getting married, raising children, and living a life of which she is only a hidden and neglected part. When Nora, after twenty-six years of residence in Annunziata, is forced to leave the ‘one-horse town’ (“Evening Class”, 53) she is completely shattered at first, but decides to take up the challenge and move back to Dublin. As she does not want to stay with her family, or with friends, she searches for a small apartment and, by coincidence, moves in at the place of a waitress family.

During her stay at the family's house and in Dublin in general, Nora hardly talks about her time in Sicily and never mentions her real name. Instead, she does not mind being
referred to by Signora. People surrounding her become suspicious and wonder why she makes such a mystery of herself and her past, but accept her – even though again only as a stranger. To earn a living, Signora sets up an Italian class at Mountainview College together with Aidan Dunne, a post she gets more or less by coincidence. Contrary to her and Aidan’s expectations the class becomes a huge success and appeals to people from different economical and social backgrounds. Even though Signora has never before taught a class, or at a school, the participants in the course are very fond of her teaching skills and enjoy their evenings together. The plan for a journey together to Italy is born and Signora gives her full support and is sure that the trip will become a unique experience for everybody. Much is revealed about the participants, their lives and attitudes and it can be said to be Signora’s task to deal with all the problems and unexpected incidents during the trip. All in all, the journey changes her attitudes to Aidan and she accepts her feelings for him. The journey finally paves the way to happiness for Nora and Aidan. There is no longer the need to hide her feelings for the first time in her life. Having lived a Cinderella-like-life in the past, Signora no longer cares about money or wealth and simply enjoys whatever comes her way. And love is rewarded by fate in the end, by finding happiness with Aidan:

And for some reason, the others were all quiet and the train wasn’t making any of its noises, so everyone heard. For a second they exchanged glances. But the decision was made. To hell with discretion. Celebration was more important. And the other passengers on the train would never know why forty people wearing badges saying Vista del Monte cheered and cheered and sang a variety of songs in English including “This Is Our Lovely Day,” and eventually ended up in a tuneless version of “Arrivederci Roma.” And they would never understand why so many of them were wiping tears quickly away from their eyes. (“Evening Class”, 537)

All in all, one can argue that Nora changes her attitudes to love. She develops from a twenty-four year-old young woman and outsider without self-confidence, into a lady who learned to fight hard and does not mind the circumstances any more. She opens up more and more and realises that it is not her task to care about others. On the contrary, she learns that she has the right to put herself in first place and not to mind what others think about her. She no longer cares about secrecy or social propriety. In a way she has worked hard enough in her life, and is convinced is convinced that she deserves to be.
There are several laces of cultural interest in the novel that evoke specific aspect of “Italianness”. When taking a closer look at the buildings that are mentioned during the group’s visit of Rome, it appears that they simply visit monuments popular with tourists. There is, first of all, the church of Santa Maria Maggiore, which the group passes though they do not have the time to go inside. Santa Maria Maggiore is an ancient Roman Catholic basilica, and one of the most important Christian sights in Rome. Tradition has it, that the church was built on a hill in honour of the Blessed Virgin Mary who ordered people to do so because of a miracle. This is incidentally the only Christian monument that is referred to on the course of the journey in the novel. The group apparently neither visits the famous St. Peter’s Cathedral, nor any other of Rome's impressing churches or sacred sites. The group is obviously more interested in ancient Rome, and the Italian lifestyle and culture than in Christian monuments. Furthermore, not all members are interested in visiting the Vatican Museum. Some group members rather prefer to go to other places or take a little break and eat a snack or have a drink. Thus the Christian heritage of “Italianness” is definitely not at the centre of the novel.

Other sites which are visited include the Fountain of the Four Rivers, the Piazza Navona, the Trevi Fountain, the Bocca della Verità and the Spanish steps. The Fountain of the Four Rivers represents four major rivers of the world; the Nile in Africa, the Danube in Europe, the Ganges in Asia, and the Plate in the Americas. The rivers consequently represent the four continents on which the papal authority as spread. The Fountain of the Four Rivers is thus also linked with Roman Christianity. But even though the fountain had been built in honour of the papal authority, is has not been built in honour of a celebrity of the Roman Catholic Church. It represents the most important rivers of the four continents known at the time it was built, namely around 1650. The Fountain of the Four Rivers is also the central monument of the Piazza Navona, which was built on the first century. Apart from the fountain, the Piazza Navona also accommodates other monuments such as the Stabilimenti Spagnoli, the Palazzo de Cupis, the Palazzo Torres Massimo Lancelotti, the Church of Nostra Signora del Sacro Cuore, the Museo di Rome, and the Sant’Agnese in Agone. The Piazza has been modified several times over the centuries, it is today a major city square. Like the Fountain of the Four Rivers, the Piazza is linked to the Roman Catholic Church. (Huse, 1-10)
The Bocca della Verità, which is also mentioned in the novel, is a round sculpture made of stone featuring the face of a man with his mouth wide open. It is quite a famous tourist attraction. It is assumed that the sculpture would bite-off the hand of a liar. The Spanish Steps are referred in passing, but this will not be commented on here in detail as this has already be done in the *Features of Italianness* chapter of Elizabeth Spencer's “The White Azalea”.

The Irish visitors see a number of sites in Rome, some dating from the Christian era, others from ancient classical heritage. However, Nora often stresses the fact that the journey’s main purpose is social rather than cultural and historic.
4. Elizabeth Spencer


4.1.1. Plot

“The White Azalea” by Elizabeth Spencer is a short story about a woman called Miss Theresa Stubblefield, who, after the very night of her father’s funeral, decided to leave for Rome. Impressed by Rome’s annual display of azalea plants, she receives two letters (one by her Cousin Emma Caraway and one by her brother George) in quite a mysterious way. Her Cousin Emma’s letter apparently managed to find her even though it only had ‘Miss Theresa Stubblefield, Rome, Italy as well as Piazza di Spagna?’ scrawled across the envelope. Still impressed as well as surprised by it, she begins to read the letters. Both, Cousin Emma and Theresa’s brother George, report about the funeral of Cousin Alexander (who is also referred to as Cousin Elec in the course of the short story); a fact that does not necessarily interest Theresa very much as she feels she is claimed guilty for not having been there and not being at home to help solving several family issues. Nonetheless, after reflecting on the letters and its content, the protagonist decides to tear them in two and covers them in the earth of an azalea pot which had just been put beside her on the Spanish Steps by two Italian workmen. In the end, even though she feels guilty for having handled the letters in such a careless manner, she decides that this was her way of burying her family, which she considers most appealing and quite considerate.

4.1.2. Time

In the course of the short story “The White Azalea” by Elizabeth Spencer, the author only gives one reference as far as the time setting is concerned.

This was her first day in Rome and it was June. (“The White Azalea”, 203)

Apart from this fact, neither the protagonist Theresa nor the narrator give any further indication regarding the time of the story. It is therefore impossible to make any
assumptions about an exact date as well as about the year the story is set.

4.1.3. Location in Italy

Locating the protagonist Theresa Stubblefield’s current position in “The White Azalea” is not a very difficult task at all. Several hints are given which do explicitly state that the place of action is Rome:

This was her first day in Rome and it was June. (“The White Azalea”, 203)

Rome is known for its many important cultural monuments and sights – some of which are referred to by Theresa.

So here it was, here was Italy, anyway, and terribly noisy. (“The White Azalea”, 204) Theresa climbed the splendid outdoor staircase that opened to her left. The Spanish Steps. (“The White Azalea”, 204) In Rome, all over Europe, she intended to move very slowly indeed. (“The White Azalea”, 204)

While the protagonist Theresa is on vacation in Rome to reflect on her and her family’s past, her relatives live in different cities in Alabama, which is located in the South of the United States of America3.

4.1.4. Characterisation

4.1.4.1. Miss Theresa Stubblefield

Miss Theresa Stubblefield is the main character in “The White Azalea”. From the salutary address in the story as well as on the letter(s) she receives one can infer, that she is not married. However, no explicit statement about her age is given. As regards her brother’s marital status (married, one daughter) one may draw tentative conclusions about her age which is probably between thirty and forty.

Already during the first lines of the short story one learns quite a lot about the

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protagonist. Apparently it was her destiny to care about several sick family members which gave her the time to read a lot.

Moreover, nursing various Stubblefields – her aunt, then her mother, then her father – through their lengthy illness (everybody could tell you the Stubblefields were always sick), Theresa had a chance to read quite a lot. England, France, Germany, Switzerland, and Italy had all been rendered for her time and again, and between the prescribed hours of pills and tonics, she had conceived a dreamy passion by lamplight, to see all these places with her own eyes. (“The White Azalea”, 203)

What can also be seen from this quotation is that the permanent nursing of her family members enabled her to read many books, which evoked in her the desire to travel to Rome. Nevertheless, when she arrived in Italy, already two letters were waiting for her; letters by other family members who apparently cannot leave Elizabeth alone. The protagonist, in her manner, seems to realise this very quickly as it is not something totally new to her. She therefore decides not to let herself be disturbed by anything that is going on at home, but to simply enjoy Rome and its flair, to tear the letters to pieces, and to make a family funeral she considers beautiful and considerate.

*Well, it certainly is beyond a doubt the most beautiful family funeral of them all!* thought Theresa. *And if they should ever object to what I did to them,* she thought, recalling the stone giantess with her dagger and the gouts of blood hanging thick and gravid upon it, *they’ve only to read a little and learn that there have been those in my position who haven’t acted in half considerate a way.* (“The White Azalea”, 209-210)

4.1.4.2. George Stubblefield

George Stubblefield is the protagonist’s brother and married to Anne. He and his wife have a daughter who is called Rosie and who is, according to the short story, still in high school. As with Theresa Stubblefield, neither George’s nor Anne’s or Rosie’s age is mentioned in the short story. One can assume that he too is in his thirties or forties, but these are again only vague assumptions. According to the story’s description, George is the family darling who always did everything right.

Poor George! The only boy, the family darling. Together with her mother, both of them tense with worry lest things should somehow go wrong, Theresa had seen him through the right college, into the right fraternity, and though
pursued by various girls and various mamas of girls, safely married to the right sort, however much in the early years of that match his wife, Anne, had not seemed to understand poor George. Could it just be, Theresa wondered, that Anne had understood only too well, and that George all along was extraordinary only in the degree to which he was dull? (“The White Azalea”, 205)

While his sister Theresa is on vacation in one of Italy’s most beautiful cities, Rome, her almost perfect brother cannot refrain from bothering her with family issues, this time regarding their Cousin Emma.

“Of course [George’s letter continued], there are practical problems to be considered. Cousin Emma is alone in that big old house and won’t hear to parting from it. […] A new bathroom would certainly have to be put in. The wallpaper in the back bedroom is literally crumbling off….“ (Theresa skipped a page of details about the house.) “I hope if you have any ideas along these lines you will write me about them. I may settle on some makeshift arrangements for the summer and wait until you return in the fall so we can work out together the best…” (“The White Azalea”, 206)

All in all, one may argue that even though George always seems to have done the right thing this does not mean that he can cope with difficult situations on his own. In the end he still seems to be dependent on his sister, her ideas and her opinion. His wife does not seem to be a helping hand either; even though one does not know whether she is not able to support him or she just simply does not want to get too much involved in the matters of her family-in-law.

4.1.4.3. Cousin Emma and Cousin Alexander (‘Elec’) Carraway

Cousin Emma and Cousin Elec, brother and sister – unmarried, devoted, aging, had lived next door to the Stubblefields in Tuxapoka from time immemorial […]. (“The White Azalea”, 205)

This probably describes the protagonist Theresa Stubblefield’s cousins best. Furthermore, the protagonist also narrates an episode in which the whole Stubblefield family had to come to their door at one o’clock in the morning due to a call of Cousin Emma. The reason for this was that Cousin Elec had a cramp in his long, clenched foot which he could not get rid of and so everybody was watching and tried their best to make the situation more bearable for him.
They all surrounded him, the family circle, Theresa and George as solemn as if they were watching the cat have kittens, and Cousin Emma running back and forth with a kettle of hot water which she poured steaming into a white enamelled pan. “Can you think of anything to do?” she kept repeating. “I hate to call the doctor but if this keeps up I’ll just have to! Can you think of anything to do?” “You might treat it like hiccups,” said Papa. “Drop a cold key down his back.” (“The White Azalea”, 206)

After Cousin Elec’s death, for which no cause is given in the short story, the whole family thought about Cousin Emma’s future and did not mind even bothering Theresa on her vacation with the issue.

Theresa Stubblefield, still holding the family letters in one hand, realized that her whole trip to Europe was viewed in family circles as an interlude between Cousin Elec’s death and “doing something” about Cousin Emma. (“The White Azalea”, 207)

All in all, neither Cousin Emma, nor the rest of the family seems to understand how important the trip to Europe is to Theresa. Apparently they think they do her a favour writing letters to her and telling her in detail all the problems that they had at home. In some case it also seems that her family and relatives are not able to cope with the whole situation without her, as she is the one who had never done anything different than nursing sick people for her whole life. Even if they would never say it directly, Theresa’s family blames her for taking a time-out and not being there when they again need her; they can just not see that the literature she was able read enabled her to see the world with its facets in a different perspective than they do. For this reason, they consider Theresa egoistic as well as egocentric rather than happy because she has succeeded in making her dreams come true.

_The problem is, Theresa thought, that while everything that happens there is supposed to matter supremely, nothing here is supposed even to exist. They would not care if all of Europe were to sink into the ocean tomorrow. It never registered with them that I had time to read all of Balzac, Dickens, and Stendhal while Papa was dying, not to mention everything in the city library after Mother’s operation. It would have been exactly the same to them if I had read through all twenty-six volumes of Elsie Dinsmore._ (“The White Azalea”, 207)
4.1.5. Features of Italianness

Although the story about Theresa Stubblefield's visit to Rome is not a very long one, it nevertheless offers several aspects of Italianness. Right at the beginning the beautiful cityscape is described in a way that makes it possible for everyone imagining Rome's powerful appearance:

An enormous sky of the most delicate blue arched overhead. In her mind's eye – her imagination responding fully, almost exhaustingly, to these shores peculiar powers of stimulation – she saw the city as from above, telescoped on its great bare plains that the ruins marked, aqueducts and tombs, here a cypress, there a pine, and all round the low blue hills. Pictures in old Latin books returned to her: the Appian Way Today, the Colosseum, the Arch of Constantine. She would see them, looking just as they had in the books, and this would make up a part of her delight. (“The White Azalea”, 203)

As stated in the quotation, Rome looks like the pictures from Theresa's old Latin books. Walking through Rome's city means to pass by the great history of ancient Roman tradition. Therefore, it is not hard to imagine how the city may have looked centuries ago. Remembering the pictures from her old Latin books, Theresa feels like a bird that is able to see the city from above. Such a telescoped view certainly reinforces the initial impression of Rome's impressive city with its ruins, aqueducts, and tombs. Apart from Rome's magnificent sights and landscape there are also several descriptions about how noisy the city is, and about people and their attitudes.

So here it was, here was Italy, anyway, and terribly noisy. (“The White Azalea”, 204)

One must admit that it is more or less common knowledge that Italian cities, especially the metropolis, are generally regarded as louder with respect to other European cities. Due to the Italians' temperament, they do not mind shouting or making noise which in other parts of Europe would be regarded as impolite or even rude. In the story, nevertheless, the protagonist seems to enjoy all the noise and the many people. She likes watching them and their behaviour and thinks about it all on her own:

I really shouldn’t have smoked a cigarette so early in the day, thought Theresa, it always makes me sick. I’ll start sneezing in a minute, sitting on these cold steps. She got up, standing uncertainly for a moment, then moving aside to let
go past her, talking, a group of young men. They wore shoes with pointed toes, odd to American eyes, and narrow trousers, and their hair looked unnaturally black and slick. Yet here they were obviously thought to be handsome, and felt themselves to be so. (“The White Azalea”, 207)

This statement about young men who certainly looked handsome, and yet strange to visitors who were not used to such a way of clothing, shows another feature of Italianness in this short story. There are, of course, big cultural differences between the United States of America and Europe, or, to be more precise, between Tuxapoka and Rome, but, it is interesting to see how the American protagonist considers the Italian style of clothing. To her, the group of young men appears like a group of flesh Harries and their behaviour is way too excessive and self-regarding. Apparently, the protagonist cannot understand why young men prefer tight trousers and shoes with pointed toes to baggy jeans and sneakers; and this is probably the point where it can be documented that Theresa is having her first real cross-cultural experience.

Generally, it can be said that Italy is a country from which many fashion trends have originated. With its many fashion brands and designers, Italy’s fashion is known and esteemed all over the world and certainly dominates the fashion market in many parts of the world. Furthermore, as opposed to England and France, Italy does not only have a single so-called fashion capital, but several. Milan is probably the best known one, but also cities like Rome, Florence, and Palermo are places that contribute many ideas and set new fashion trends. Even though there are also fashion brands coming from the United States, which are also influential in the international fashion market, there is a vast difference in style between Italian and American taste. The Americans certainly prefer commodity to style when it comes to clothing whereas for the Europeans, and, especially for the Italians, style is the so-called sine qua non when it comes to fashion; and this is probably the real reason, why Italian fashion is known and respected all over the world. (Buono Hodgart, 382)

Furthermore, Italian fashion can be said to have two tendencies; one classical and the other progressive. There are many Italian fashion designers whose style is famous all over the world. Armani, Valentino, Cavalli, Ferragamo, and Trussardi are only a few who contribute to fashion being one of the most important export factors of Italy. (Balboni & Daloiso, 60)

In the course of the story the protagonist mentions the annual display of azalea plants and the fact that there are many azaleas round the Spanish Steps, the place where she is
sitting while reading the letters from home. The azalea plant is not necessarily a bush which is immediately associated with Italy or Rome in the first place. Therefore, it is not necessarily a feature of Italianness. Nevertheless, when taking into consideration that in Chinese and Japanese culture the azalea is referred to as the “thinking of home bush”⁴ and when further considering the white azalea as a symbol important for the story, one can argue that it is also linked to Italianness.

Theresa Stubblefield, still holding the family letters in one hand, realized that her whole trip to Europe was viewed in family circles as an interlude between Cousin Elec’s death and “doing something” about Cousin Emma. (“The White Azalea”, 207)

When reading the story, one gets the impression that Theresa’s primary reason to travel to Europe, or Rome in this case, is not to get to know new cities and cultures and to enjoy new experiences, but to escape from home where everything has become too much for her to bear. The protagonist probably regarded her trip to Europe as a trip to find her identity and to attain a new self-awareness, far away from everything that is expected from her at home. She manages to escape her home and her family physically, but not emotionally. Right at the beginning of the story she already wonders how the letters managed to get to her, even though they had not even been properly addressed. In the course of the story she seems to be dogged by the azalea plants which symbolise her incompetence to wash all her sorrows from home away and just concentrate on the beauty of a country yet unknown to her. Moreover, Theresa symbolically even seems to be unable to escape the problems and negative thoughts, which is shown in the scene where the workmen start to arrange a new row right at the place where she is sitting:

She became aware that two Italian workmen, carrying a large azalea pot, were standing before her and wanted her to move so that they could begin arranging a new row of the display. (“The White Azalea”, 208)

Nevertheless, the fact that the azaleas are white may be interpreted symbolically that she is able to make peace with her home and her life so far. In the end, it is to say that probably the combination of Rome, a city completely different to her home town Tuxapoka, and the new impressions and insight she gained during her trip gave her the strength to quit her bad feelings. Theresa realises that there was nothing wrong in the

way she had done things and that it was now her turn to live her life and to not always think about the others. It can therefore be said that Italy helps her to manage to overcome the former attitudes. She summons up so much strength from the new environment that she does not accept any more why she should always obey other people’s (especially her family’s) wishes:

And if they should ever object to what I did to them, she thought, recalling the stone giantess with her dagger and the gouts of blood hanging thick and gravid upon it, they’ve only to read a little and lean that there have been those in my position who haven’t acted in half so considerate way. (“The White Azalea”, 210)

This final statement of the short story probably shows best how Theresa has managed to change her attitudes and way of life during her stay in Italy. It appears that the city of Rome has inspired her so very much that she is able to overcome the feeling that she cannot make it right for anybody; instead she now lives her life the way she thinks it is appropriate and she considers the rest of her family as making her want to feel bad just because they would not know how to act differently in such a situation.
4.2. “The Light in the Piazza”

4.2.1. Plot

“The Light in the Piazza” by Elizabeth Spencer is a short story about a woman called Margaret Johnson who is on vacation in Italy with her mentally retarded daughter Clara. One day they get to know a local Florentine guy called Fabrizio Naccarelli who soon seems to have a crush on Clara. Even though the relationship between Fabrizio and Clara appears to be nothing but a romantic holiday love affair at the beginning, it slowly becomes much more serious and tragic in the course of the narrative. All of Margaret’s attempts to make her daughter forget about the nice Italian boy fail and so she is forced to give in, to make her daughter feel happy again. However, the serious consequences of an accident in the past as well as dark family secrets and deception are revealed. Additionally, the conflict between a mother’s love for her daughter who is quite different from others and the consequent responsibility Margaret feels for Clara becomes one of the central themes. Furthermore, Clara becomes for the first time in her life aware of her awakening sexuality as well as of her sensual desires and emotions.

4.2.2. Time

Throughout the short story, several hints – direct as well as indirect ones - at the time the story is located in are given. When it comes to the season of a year, for example, one can already find one concrete statement right at the beginning of the story: “On a June afternoon at sunset […].” (“The Light in the Piazza”, 258)

Apart from this, there are also various other statements in the text which indicate that the action is set in the summer: “There went the straw hat she had bought in Fiesole.” (“The Light in the Piazza”, 259)

Buying a straw hat during the holidays is clearly an indication that the sun is burning from the sky. In Italy, the months where the sun is most aggressive, are from June to August. Especially when one is not used to the temperatures the sun can cause in these months, it is advisable to find a remedy in buying cooling accessories, like, for example, straw hats.

The park had been refreshed by the rain, and the sun sparkled hot and bright
on the pool. They swam and bought ice cream on sticks from the vendor, and everyone smiled at them obviously acknowledging a good sight. (“The Light in the Piazza”, 246)

Once again the heat is described in detail. It seems that although it had just rained, the sun heats the air again quickly so that it soon becomes sticky and hot and one way to escape this situation is to buy cooling ice cream. Such weather conditions therefore indicate that the story is set during the summer term.

It seemed that twice a year, and that by coincidence during the tourist season, Florentine custom demanded that titled gentlemen should wedge themselves into the family suit of armour, mount a horse and ride in procession, preceded by lesser men in striped knee breeches beating drums. (“The Light in the Piazza”, 267)

Regarding a concrete date, the saint’s day of San Giovanni, which in Florence is on the 24th of June⁵, is mentioned.

“Domani festa,” he noted. “I say tomorrow is a holiday, a big one for us here. It is our saint’s day, San Giovanni. Have you perhaps seen in the Signoria, they are putting up seats. Do you go?” (“The Light in the Piazza”, 267)

In Italy, the saints’ days are often celebrated with bright parades; many people are out on the street watching and enjoying these. For strangers, the streets may seem especially crowded these days, but still these parades are always worth looking at:

So the next afternoon they were guided expertly through the packed, noisy streets of the festa by Fabrizio, who found them a choice point for watching the parade of the nobles. (“The Light in the Piazza”, 267)

When it comes to determining a concrete year the story is set in, it nevertheless becomes a bit more difficult as no direct reference is given to it. Taking into consideration that the story by Elizabeth Spencer was published in 1960, and regarding furthermore, that the story’s protagonists pay in the former Italian currency lira, one can assume that it probably takes place in the 1950’s.

Now Clara had taken out all her store coins, the aluminium five- and ten-lire

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pieces that amused her, and was setting them on the table in little groups, pyramids and squares and triangles. (“The Light in the Piazza”, 263)
She was drawing a five-hundred-lire note from her purse, when, having wrapped the reins to their post in the carrozza, the object of her charity bounded suddenly down before her face. (“The Light in the Piazza”, 275)
“Due mila, signora!” repeated the driver, and thrusting his devil’s face into hers, he all but danced. (“The Light in the Piazza”, 275)

One further important fact for establishing the time the plot is set can be found later in the short story:

Other resentments sprang easily to his mind when touched on this sensitive point. Americans had had to fight two awful wars to get Europeans out of their infernal messes. He had a right to some sensitivity, anyone must admit. In the first war he had risked his life; his son had been wounded in the second; and if that were not enough, he could always remember his income tax. (“The Light in the Piazza”, 295)

When summarising the facts that the story was published in 1960 and that the Second World War is over, it is reasonable to suppose that the action is set in June in the 1950’s.

4.2.3. Location

The location in which the story is set is explicitly referred to: Florence. Right at the beginning of “The Light in the Piazza” there is a direct reference to the Italian city in which Margaret Johnson and her daughter Clara are on vacation:

On a June afternoon at sunset, an American woman and her daughter fended their way along a crowded street in Florence and entered with relief the spacious Piazza della Signora. (“The Light in the Piazza”, 258)

Additionally, several places and landmarks of Florence are mentioned. For instance the Palazzo Vecchio, the Piazza della Repubblica, the Pizzale Michaelangelo, there are also references to carrozza drivers and the festa of San Giovanni. These references will be discussed in the chapter on “Features of Italianness” (see 4.2.5.).
However, the city of Florence is not the only location Margaret Johnson and her daughter visit on their vacation. At some point in the story, when Margaret tries to make Clara forget Fabrizio, they travel to Rome:
To the traveller coming down from Florence to Rome in the summer-time, the larger, more ancient city is bound to be a disappointment. It is bunglesome; nothing is orderly or planned; there is a tangle of electric wires and tramlines, a ceaseless clamor of traffic. The distances are long; the sun is hot. And if, in addition, the heart has been left behind as positively as a piece of baggage, the tourist is apt to suffer more than tourists generally do. (“The Light in the Piazza”, 281)

As quoted in the statement above it is hard to enjoy Rome if your heart has already been left behind in another Italian city – for whatever reason. Thus, it is interesting to see how Clara and her mother experience Italy’s capital, another issue that will be considered in section 4.2.5. “Features of Italianness”.

4.2.4. Characterisation

4.2.4.1. Mrs. Margaret Johnson

Mrs Margaret Johnson is an American woman who goes on vacation to Florence with her daughter Clara. She definitely enjoys her holiday in a city which allows her to “lose her sorrows” (“The Light in the Piazza”, 258) and just relax:

Margaret Johnson, lighting a cigarette, relaxed over her aperitif and regarded the scene that she preferred before any other, anywhere. She never got enough of it, and now in the clear evening light that all the shadows had gone from – the sun being blocked away by the tight bulk of the city – she looked at the splendid old palace and forgot that her feet hurt. More than that: here she could almost lose the sorrow that for so many years had been a constant of her life. (“The Light in the Piazza”, 258)

When it comes to her physical appearance, she still seems to be a very attractive American woman. She cares about her looks and aims at representing not just a stressed mother, but a woman who is self-confident and proud of herself.

Mrs. Johnson, though blond, had the kind of skin that never quite lost the food tan she had once given it, and her figure retained its trim firmness. She showed what she was: the busy American housewife, mother, hostess, cook and civic leader who paid attention to her looks. She sat on a bench near the pool, drying in the sun, smoking, her smart beach bag open beside her, watching her daughter, who swam like a fish, flashing here and there in the pool. She plucked idly at the wet ends of her hair and wondered if she needed another rinse. (“The Light in the Piazza”, 264)
Moreover, she is also very concerned about her daughter. When Margaret realises that Clara fell in love with the young Florentine Fabrizio, she tries to act in a discrete manner only in order to avoid any disappointment for her beloved daughter:

We must certainly leave for Rome tomorrow, Mrs. Johnson thought. She heard herself thinking it, at some distance, as though in a dream. She entered thus from that day a conscious duality of existence, knowing what she should and must do and making no motion toward doing it. The Latin temperament may thrive on such subtleties and never find it necessary to conclude them, but to Mrs. Johnson the experience was strange and new. It confused her. She believed, as most Anglo-Saxons do, that she always acted logically and to the best of her ability on whatever she knew to be true. And now she found this quality immobilized and all her actions taken over by the simple drift of the days. ("The Light in the Piazza", 265-266)

When she finds out after some time that Fabrizio’s love for her daughter is as real as Clara’s for him, she does not mind changing her mind and tries everything to convince her husband as well as Fabrizio’s parents of her daughter’s potential and abilities:

“So you ran away,” he [Fabrizio’s father] said, “upset. You could not bear the thought. You think and think. You see the signorina’s unhappy face. You could not bear her tears. You return. It is wise. There should be a time for thought. This I have said to my wife, to my son. But when you come back, they say to me, ‘but if she leaves again?’ But I say, ‘The signorina is a woman who is without caprice. She will not leave again.’”

“I do not intend to leave again,” said Mrs. Johnson, “until Clara and Fabrizio are married.” ("The Light in the Piazza", 289)

To conclude the characterisation of Mrs. Johnson, it can be said that one gets the strong impression that Italy’s lifestyle which is strongly related to the way the Italians act in certain situations helps her to overcome her deep feeling of guilt and responsibility for Clara. Even though she never considers to leave her mentally retarded daughter behind in Italy, married to an Italian, she accepts the situation as it is and acts in the way that seems best for Clara. So to say, she seems to be positively influenced by the Italianness experienced in Florence.

4.2.4.2. Clara Johnson

Clara Johnson is Mrs. Theresa Johnson’s daughter and 26 years old. Clara seems to be a
beautiful girl, but she is mentally retarded due to an accident which had already happened many years ago.

Indeed, she could be remarkably lovely when pleased. The somewhat long lines of her cheek and jaw dropped when she was downhearted, but happiness drew her up perfectly. Her dark-blue eyes grew serene and clear; her chestnut hair in its long girlish cut shadowed her smooth skin. Due to an accident years ago, she had the mental age of a child of ten. But anyone on earth, meeting her for the first time, would have found this incredible. (“The Light in the Piazza”, 260)

On her vacation in Florence she meets an Italian guy by coincidence, with whom she falls in love. Together, they spend a wonderful time and so they get closer and closer every day. However, Clara’s mother attempts to separate Clara and Fabrizio, by undertaking a journey to Rome, which, however, makes Clara sad and upset:

Mrs. Johnson saw this clearly in her daughter’s face. To make things worse, Clara never mentioned Florence or Fabrizio. Mrs. Johnson had only to think of those flowers to keep herself from mentioning either. They had come to see Rome, hadn’t they? Very well, Rome would be seen. (“The Light in the Piazza”, 281)

In the end, however, Clara and Fabrizio’s love triumphs and even manages to overcome quite fundamental differences such as age and religious beliefs. Their marriage, which was a surprise to some relatives, can be seen as an indication that they will spend the rest of their lives together happily.

4.2.4.3. Fabrizio Naccarelli

As seen by Mrs. Johnson, Fabrizio Naccarelli can be described as a stereotypical, 23-years-old, Italian guy:

He had been very kind … very kind … yes, yes, very, very, kind …. But Fabrizio Naccarelli, whether Margaret Johnson had cared to master his name or not, was not to be underestimated. He was very much at home in Florence, where he had been born and his father before him and so on straight back to the misty days before the Medici and he had given, besides, some little attention to the ways of the stranieri who were always coming to his hometown. It seemed the next few days that he showed up on every street corner. (“The Light in the Piazza”, 261)
Thus, during the course of the story one finds out that this first impression was anything but right and that he is only a young man, who has deeply fallen in love with the American girl who came to his hometown for vacation. In order to convince his family and Mrs. Johnson of his true feelings, he even threatens to kill himself if he can no longer be with Clara. His parents as well as Clara’s mother soon realise that their love is more than some kind of holiday flirt and, after having coped with several difficulties, accept a marriage between them.

Fabrizio’s easy going way of handling a difficult situation may be seen as a typical feature of Italianness. The first impression, which is the one of a stereotypical Italian gigolo, is soon revised. He additionally also shows, that real love and passion does not leave much space for differences and cross-cultural difficulties. According to him, real love dominates over age and religious differences.

4.2.4.4. Signor Giuseppe and Signora Franca Naccarelli (Fabrizio’s parents)

Signor Naccarelli spoke English very well indeed. Yes, it was a bit rusty perhaps; he must apologize. He had known many Americans during the war, had done certain small things for them in liaison during the occupation. He had found them very simpatici, quite unlike the Germans, whom he detested. (“The Light in the Piazza”, 266)

Giuseppe’s wife [signora Naccarelli] was a slender girl with black hair cut in the new fashion called simply “Italian.” She had French blood, though not as much as she led one to believe. She smoked from a short ivory holder clamped at the side of her mouth, and pretended to regard Giuseppe’s armours – of which he had been known to boast in front of her, to the distress of his mama – with a knowing sidelong glance. Sometimes she would remind him of one of his failures. Now she took a place near Fabrizio and chatted with him in a low voice, casting down on him past the cigarette holder the eye of someone old in the ways of love, amused by the eagerness of the young. She looked occasionally at Clara, who beamed at her. (“The Light in the Piazza”, 270)

These two statements about Fabrizio’s parents provide a good portrayal of Signor and Signora Naccarelli. Both of them are a typical Italian couple; he is very hospitable, but not free from prejudices against other cultures, and she is a kind, but shy and submissive housewife who sees her job in raising the children, preparing meals for the family, and caring for her husband. Franca Naccarelli appears to like Clara and is probably the first who approves of the idea of her son to get married to the American girl. Therefore, she
tries to convince Margaret what a nice and well-brought-up son she has:

“Mio figlio,” she pronounced slowly, è buono. Capisce?”
Mrs. Johnson nodded encouragingly. “Si. Capisco.”
“Non lui,” said the signora, pointing at Giuseppe, who glanced up with a wicked grin – he was delighted to be bad. The signora shook her finger at him. Then she indicated Fabrizio. “Ma lui. Si, è buon. Va in chiesa, capisce?” She put her hands together as if in prayer.
“No, ma Mamma. Che roba!” Fabrizio protested.
“Si, è vero,” the signora persisted solemnly; her voice fairly quivered.
“È buono. Capisce signora?”
“Capisco,” said Mrs. Johnson.
(The Light in the Piazza”, 272)

When it comes to Italianness with regard to Franca and Giuseppe Naccarelli there is one scene in the short story that almost stereotypically resembles the conservativeness of his parents, or, in other words, the conservative way of thinking prevailing in Italy at that time. The different religious denominations of Clara and Fabrizio do not seem to be a very big issue for them. It is the age difference between Clara and her son that, in their view, is a problem that cannot be overcome:

“Can it be possible! But you must have understood! My son Fabrizio is twenty years old, no more. Whereas, your daughter, I see with my two eyes, written in the passport today in the office of the parroco – twenty-six! Six years difference! It cannot be. (“The Light in the Piazza”, 303)

Fortunately, it turns out that the difference in age between Margaret’s daughter and Fabrizio is only three years – a fact clarified by Fabrizio’s father – which means that nothing any longer stands in their way and everybody is happy in the end.

One further feature of Italianness concerning Giuseppe Naccarelli is the fact that he, after having spent a wonderful evening in a bar with Mrs. Johnson, apparently has fallen a bit in love with Margaret. To outsiders of the Italian culture he might appear as the Italian macho who is born with a gene for the seduction of beautiful women. Nevertheless, this short romance does not really affect the course of the short story and in the end the major focus is on Clara’s and Fabrizio’s marriage anyway.

4.2.4.5. Noel Johnson

Noel Johnson is Margaret Johnson’s husband and Clara’s father. Because of his job he
was not able to join his wife and his daughter on their vacation to Italy. In the course of the short story he only once plays an important role, namely when Margaret has to consult him concerning the love of Clara and Fabrizio. In some way, he has to play the strict parent part, because his wife is not prepared to break their daughter’s heart by telling her that she must not marry the young Italian. Nevertheless, in the situations when his wife is reflecting on him, he is characterised as a husband who is a bit naïve and credulous:

[...] Noel Johnson was in his own and everybody else’s opinion a good man. Meaning exactly what? Well, that he believed in his own goodness and the goodness of other people, and would have said, if asked, that there must be good people in Italy, Germany, Tasmania, even Russia. On these grounds he would reason correctly that the Naccarelli family might possibly be as nice as his wife said they were. (“The Light in the Piazza”, 294)

Taking a closer look at his marriage with Margaret, it can be seen that she is quite an independent woman who nevertheless does not show this off to her husband. To him, she pretends to be the American housewife-next-door who willingly asks her husband if she needs serious advice, even if, in reality, she is perfectly able to cope with harsh situations on her own. Still, he appreciates her behaviour of which he seems to know only little and feels needed and ready to be there for everyone.

4.2.5. Features of Italianness

When it comes to features of Italianness in this short story, it can be said that these are largely represented by Florence, as well as general features of Italy which lead to a change of attitudes in people’s minds. As far as Florence is concerned, there are a number of typical characteristics referred to in “The Light in the Piazza”. Many famous places, buildings, and artists are described right at the beginning of the story:

On a June afternoon at sunset, an American woman and her daughter fended their way along a crowded street in Florence and entered with relief the spacious Piazza della Signoria. They were tired from a day of tramping about with a guidebook, often in the sun. The café that faced the Palazzo Vecchio was a favourite spot for them; without discussion they sank down at an empty table. (“The Light in the Piazza, 258)

The Piazza della Signoria is one of the biggest central places in Florence, and probably
also one of the most famous places in Italy. During the time of the republic the Piazza was, together with the Palazzo Vecchio, the political and social centre of the city. Its name derives from the so-called “Signoria”, which was the city’s republican government. The Palazzo Vecchio was the centre of mundane power in the fourteenth century. It was originally called Palazzo della Signoria, but renamed when the administration under Duke Cosimo the first moved from the house of the Medici into the Uffizi. (Pagnottini Sebastiani & Rossi Giacobbi, 71)

A couple of tired German tourists, all but harnessed in fine camera equipment, sat at the foot of Cellini’s triumphant Perseus, slumped and staring at nothing. (“The Light in the Piazza”, 258)

“The Perseus” is a bronze statue and it was originally called “Perseus with Medusa”, or Perseus with the head of Medusa. It was created by Benvenuto Cellini in the sixteenth century and is said to be one of his major works. Additionally, it is probably one of the most famous statues of the Italian Renaissance. Benvenuto Cellini was an Italian goldsmith and sculptor who was born in 1500 in Florence and died 71 years later in the same city. One of Cellini’s famous colleagues is also mentioned in the story:

“Well, the statue over there, the tall white boy, is by Michelangelo. You remember him. Then – though it isn’t a very happy thought – there was a man burned to death right over there, a monk.” (“The Light in the Piazza”, 259)

Michelangelo Buonarroti as is his full name, was an Italian painter, sculptor, architect, and poet. He was born in 1474 in a town called Caprese in the Tuscany and died in 1564 in Rome. Michelangelo is one of the most important and significant representatives of the Italian High Renaissance. His most famous works are probably the statue of David which is regarded as one of the most renowned of the Renaissance, and the frescoes of the Last Judgement to be seen at the Sistine Chapel. (Pagnottini Sebastiani & Rossi Giacobbi, 164)

Apart from the Piazza dell Signoria another famous place mentioned:


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The Piazza della Repubblica was the city centre of Florence in Roman times. Today, it still is a right-angled place which represents a typical example of the efforts Florence has put in its redevelopment during the short period in which it was the Italian capital (1865-1871). Furthermore, in the course of the story the Piazzale Michelangelo as well as several famous Italian artists like Galileo, Dante Alighieri, Boccaccio, Macchiavelli, Donatello, Amerigo Vespucci, Leonardo da Vinci, and Petracco are mentioned to emphasise the glorious cultural heritage of Florence.

One additional feature of Italianness is the reference to the saint’s day of San Giovanni. June 24 is the saint’s day of San Giovanni Battista, who is one of the most prominent Christian saints. Many Italian cities, including Florence, remember the saint with parades as well as festivities all day long.

In many of Elizabeth Spencer’s short stories the main characters travel to Italy for various reasons. In this story the two protagonists also seem to undergo a change of attitudes. One can not explicitly say whether this happens because of the atmosphere of the city or because of the Italian way of life. Somehow, tourists get the impression that life in Italy is more relaxed and easy. Italians are not always in a hurry and they apparently have more joy in life, or rather, they know better how to enjoy life in all its facets. They do not consider every matter as something one has to think about for hours and hours, but they rather prefer to live every day as if it was the last day of their lives, and they make the best out of every situation. Italy’s mild climate, as well as wonderful scents of food in a combination with exotic flowers evoke an atmosphere that is unique. Luckily, as a stranger or tourist one easily adapts to this way of living and therefore one is likely to enjoy a holiday in any Italian city or town. This can also be said about Margaret and her mentally retarded daughter Clara. Margaret often worries about Clara’s state of health and well-being, which often causes troubles. In Florence, however, it seems that Margaret learns to let go. Though Margaret is still over-protective and cautious with regard to the love relationship between Clara and Fabrizio, she soon finds out how good he is to her and decides to accept whatever is going to happen. She is even willing to accompany Clara through all the stages of the love relationship. Margaret does not mind sitting at the pool watching her daughter play

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around with Fabrizio in a manner only couples who have just fallen in love with do. She does not mind meeting Fabrizio’s parents, although this first meeting can be considered a culture clash for both sides. Margaret even tries her best to convince Clara that Fabrizio may just be a summer love, but she soon gives in when she realises that it is meant to be more than that. All in all, Italy’s relaxing atmosphere seems to affect Margaret so that she is able to let go and act in a different way than she would have done back home:

The Latin temperament may thrive on such subtleties and never find it necessary to conclude them, but to Mrs. Johnson the experience was strange and new. It confused her. She believed, as most Anglo-Saxons do, that she always acted logically and to the best of her ability on whatever she knew to be true. And now she found this quality immobilized and all her actions taken over by the simple drift of the days. She had, in fact, come face to face with Italy. (“The Light in the Piazza”, 266)

It has to be noted that it is not only Margaret who is influenced by the Italian way of life, but also her daughter Clara. Being mentally retarded she appears to be strongly bound to and influenced by her mother at the beginning of the story. Even though she may have her own will already, it hardly ever becomes manifest, or, if it does, it is not accepted and respected by her mother. This is not necessarily a bad aspect as one can be sure that her mother always wants the best for her daughter; thus, it can be seen that her attitude changes in the course of the story. After she has met Fabrizio, Clara has fallen in love head over heels. She enjoys every minute she is able to spend with him and for the first time becomes more independent from her mother. She slowly starts living her life the way she wants to and enjoys the newly won freedom. At the point where her mother no longer welcomes the new love because she does not trust in the young Italian, Clara for the first time protests successfully against her mother. When separated from Fabrizio in Rome, Clara openly shows her sorrow and in this manner convinces her mother that it is Fabrizio who makes her happy and it is pointless to fight these feelings. Clara is so much devoted this young Italian that in the end she decides to marry him. She is willing to give up the life she had lived so far in order to become independent and loved in a way she had never been loved before:

Clara saw her mother: they waved to each other. Fabrizio was made to wave, as well. Over everybody’s head a bronze fountain in the piazza jetted water into the sunlight, and nearby a group of tourists had stopped to look. Clara and
Fabrizio were driving off. So it had really happened! It was done. (“The Light in the Piazza”, 309)

Another important feature of Italianness is religion and honour, which also has an impact on the relationship between Clara and Fabrizio. Most Italians are practicing Catholics and often put God and the Christian church above anything else in their lives. (Balboni & Daloiso, 40) Whereas this fact may not be obvious when one comes to the country as a tourist, it becomes evident in a love relationship. The love between Fabrizio and Clara does not appear to be at first:

When they spoke of a painting, Clara admired it. It was of course a Madonna and Child, all light-blue and pink flesh tones. Clara had developed a great all-absorbing interest in these recurring ladies with little baby Jesus on their laps. (“The Light in the Piazza”, 271)

One could argue that this quotation indicates how important and ever-present religion is to Italian people in everyday life. In the given scene of the story, Clara and her mother Margaret pay a visit to the Naccarelli’s, Fabrizio’s parents, for the first time. After some small talk, they immediately begin to talk about history and culture and quickly focus on the painting of the Madonna and her child. This painting is placed in the room in which the family stays most of the time. The purpose of having such a picture in this room is probably to remind oneself everyday of the presence of the saints and to start the day with dignity and thankfulness.

The following scene provides an example of social conventions and of the way these influence people in certain situations. One can see that, apart from religion, the convention sense of propriety may cause some difficulties and that it is not at all an easy task to always act according the rules of convention.

“It is too much,” went on Signor Naccarelli. “Two, three years, where there is love, where there is agreement, I say it is all right. But, no, it is too much. It is to make the fantastic.”

“You?” she repeated.

“Can it be possible! But you must have understood! My son Fabrizio is twenty years old, no more. Whereas, your daughter, I see with my two eyes, written in the passport today in the office of the parroco – twenty-six! Six years difference! It cannot be. In that moment I ask myself, What must I say, what can I do? Soon it will be too late. What to do? I make the excuse, an appointment. I see often in the cinema this same excuse. It was not true. I have lied. I tell you frankly.”
“I had not thought of her being older,” said Mrs. Johnson. Weak with relief, she stopped walking. When she leaned her elbow against the parapet, she felt it trembling. “Believe me, Signor Naccarelli, they seemed so much the same age to me, it had not entered my mind that there was any difference.”

“It cannot be,” said Signor Naccarelli positively, scowling out toward the noble skyline of his native city. “I pass an afternoon of torment, an inferno. As I am a man, as I am a Florentine, as I am a father, as I long for my son’s happiness, as –” Words failed him. (“The Light in the Piazza”, 303)

What can clearly be seen is the prejudice that the marriage between Fabrizio and Clara is bound to fail due to their difference in age. As Clara is apparently six years older than Signor Naccarelli’s son, this constitutes such a huge problem to Signor Naccarelli that he thinks cannot be overcome. With regard to the quotation above Signor Naccarelli’s intention is to make his son happy and protect him from any mischief that might occur. He acts according to the convention sense of propriety trying to be a good husband and father. In this special case, nevertheless, he does not see a chance for his son and his family to be happy as it is a break in convention if a younger man gets married to a woman by several years her husband’s senior. At this point, one can see Signor Naccarelli’s progressiveness with regard to the way he is used to act in certain situations. Due to the fact that he is well aware of his son’s love for the American girl, he is prepared to an age difference of two or three years. However, six years are too much in his view and would not make his son happy. One could, of course, argue that Signor Naccarelli’s progressiveness is just pretended and that six years would not make more or less difference than two or three years, even so this suggests his willingness to overcome any standing convention. The reason this may be considered as relevant with regard to Italianness is that the statement in the final sentence of the quotation where Signor Naccarelli once more stresses the fact that he is a man, a Florentine, and a father and therefore wants to make his son happy. Another reason is that Fabrizio does not mind the consequences of such a decision. As it is well known it is the father’s task in Italy to preserve the family’s honour, because only a family considered honourable by society can be honourable in front of God. Moreover, it is every family’s will to be honourable in front of God and therefore one always has to act in a manner that can be justified in front of God. (Buono Hodgart, 333) In this case, one can well see that even though Signor Naccarelli knows that his son would not mind the age difference between himself and Clara, Signor Naccarelli could not justify such an unusual step in front of society. He probably is afraid that the local society might exclude the honourable
Naccarelli family from the town’s social life. Therefore he seems to act in a manner that is certainly not best for his son, but best for the Italian notion of the family. Thus Signor Naccarelli does not care if his son is sad, but about a happy society and about God’s satisfaction.

One further important aspect with regard to the importance of Catholicism and religious tradition in the short story is the fact that Signor Naccarelli obviously is more tolerant and unconventional when it comes to Margaret. He does not mind being a married man and kissing a married woman. Being well aware about his feelings for Margaret, Signor Naccarelli can be said to act in a macho-like manner:

And to keep down the taste of success, she [Margaret] bit hard on her lip (so lately kissed). If he [Signor Naccarelli] let me out so easily, it means he doesn’t want to risk anything. It means he wants this wedding. He wants it, too. (“The Light in the Piazza”, 306)

One can not explicitly explain why Signor Naccarelli risks to kiss a married woman in public with whom he will probably never be able to have a relationship. It has to be considered that a married Italian man does not necessarily destroy his family’s honour by simply kissing another woman who is not his wife. Thus, it can be argued that Signor Naccarelli has apparently double standards and does not mind. On the one hand he plays the caring family father and husband whose only task is to represent and protect the family’s honour to society, on the other hand he himself does not mind doing things which a married man should not do.

To sum up, it is apparent that propriety and convention and a sense of honour are very strong features of Italianness. Italians are strongly influenced by the belief in God and a moral life according to Catholic ethics. Society in this case seems like God’s watching eye; it convicts you when you do not act according to God’s commands, but it also praises you when you live your life the way you should do. Nevertheless, the presence of double standards is widespread in Italy.
4.3. “The Cousins”

4.3.1. Plot

The short story “The Cousins” by Elizabeth Spencer is about Ella Mason, a widow who has just turned fifty, who travels to Florence in order to meet Eric, one of her many cousins. Meeting after a long time again in Florence they begin to recall the wonderful memories of a summer-trip through Europe which they have done about thirty years ago. They reflect on cousin Ben, cousin Jamie Marshall, and a lesser cousin called Mayfred who have joined them on their trip as well as about the cities they have visited, some events that have happened during the journey and their various impressions during that time. Additionally, they also reflect on the probably most delightful event of their trip, which is the little affair they started to have in Florence. Now, thirty summers later, both are widowed; a matter of fact that brings them once again a bit closer together which both seem to enjoy very much.

4.3.2. Time

The time frame of the story is, as is explicitly stated in the course of the story, thirty years.

I could say that on the train from Milan and Florence, I recall the events of thirty summers ago and the curious affair of my cousin Eric. (“The Cousins”, 223)
So I came alone to Italy, where I had not been for thirty years. (“The Cousins”, 224)

Even though it can be said that there are two plots (the one about the reunion of Ella and Eric in Florence, and the other one about their trip to Europe), the action is set in the summer season:

From the point of that glimpsed white village, spreading outward through my memory, all its veins and arteries, the whole summer woke up again, like a person coming out of a trance. (“The Cousins”, 224)
Walking in Florence in the late afternoon, wondering where I was, then catching on. The air was still and warm. (“The Cousins”, 225)
There is no specific reference to the time in which the action is set. There are only two hints which allow some assumptions:

Next day she [Mayfred] couldn’t rest till she got Jamie to change the francs into traveler’s checks, U.S. (“The Cousins”, 236)
Then we had to find somebody, a slim Italian boy as it turned out, to snap us for a few hundred lire. (“The Cousins”, 243)

Taking into consideration that on their journey through Europe the cousins still paid in francs and lire (which is the old currency of France and Italy), and regarding furthermore that hundred lire are equivalent to five Cents in contemporary European currency and that Ella and Eric meet again after thirty years, one can assume that the summer-trip part probably is set in the 1950’s or 1960’s, whereas the reunion part is set in the 1980’s or 1990’s.

4.3.3. Location

As the story has two plots, it also has several locations. One place of action is Florence, Italy, where Ella and Eric meet again after thirty years, other locations are various cities in Europe, as for example, Monte Carlo, Florence, and Rome. Additionally, the two main characters also report about several events and memories from their hometown Martinsville, Alabama, in the United States of America.

To all these places wonderful memories are attached. Coming to Florence, for instance, Ella wonders whether the city is still as beautiful as she remembers it from their trip through Europe. For her this city evokes the feeling of her first kiss with Eric which she enjoyed very much. Soon, nevertheless, she has to admit that almost nothing has changed and that the city is still as enchanting as it was for her thirty years ago:

For a while in Milan, spending a day or so to get over jet lag, I wondered if the country existed anymore in the way I remembered it. Maybe, even back then, I had invented the feelings I had, the magic I had wanted to see. But on the train to Florence, riding through the June morning, I saw a little town from the window in the bright, slightly hazy distance. (“The Cousins”, 224)
Even out so short a distance from the center, Florence could seem the town of thirty years ago, or even the way it must have been in the Brownings’ time, narrow streets and the light that way and the same flowers and gravel walks in the gardens. Not that much changes if you build with stone. (“The Cousins”, 225)
In Ella’s memories of thirty years earlier, Florence’s outer appearance was more characterised by its narrow streets and the balustrades along the river Arno. Thus, it was in this Italian city where she felt for the first time that something between her and her cousin Eric’s feelings has changed:

After Monte Carlo, we left France by train and came down to Florence. The streets were narrow there and we joked about going single file like Indians. “What I need is moccasins,” said Jamie, who was always blundering over the uneven paving stones. At the Uffizi, the second day, Eric, in a trance before Botticelli, fell silent. Could we ever get him to speak again? Hardly a word. Five in number, we leaned over the balustrades along the Arno, all silent from the weariness of sightseeing, and the heat, and there I heard it once more, the ticking of something hidden among us. Was it to deny it we decided to take the photograph? We had taken a lot, but this one, I think, was special. I have it still. It was in the Piazza Signoria. (“The Cousins”, 234)

More of Ella’s memories of Florence are then also summarised at a later point in the story.

Memories: Eric in the empty corridor of the pensione. How Italy folds up and goes to sleep from two to four. His not looking back for me, going straight to his door. The door closing, but no key turning and me turning the door handle and stepping in. And he at the window already with his back to me and how he heard the sliding latch on the door – I slid it with my hands behind me – heard it click shut and turned. His face and mine, what we knew. Betraying Ben.

:Walking by the Arno, watching a white-and-green scull stroking by into the twilight, the rower a boy or girl in white and green, growing dimmer to the rhythm of the long oars, vanishing into arrow shape, the pencil thickness, the movement without substance, on….

:A trek the next afternoon through twisted streets to a famous chapel. Sitting quiet in a cloister, drinking in the symmetry, the silence. Holding hands. “‘D’ is for Donatello,” said Eric. “‘D’ for Della Robbia,” I said. “‘M’ for Michaelangelo,” he continued. “‘M’ for Medici.” “‘L’ for Leonardo.” “I can’t think of an ‘L,’” I gave up. “Lumbago. There’s an old master.” “Worse than Jamie.” We were always going home again.

:Running into the manager of the pensione one morning in the corridor. He’d solemnly bowed to us and kissed my hand. “Bella ragazza,” he remarked. “The way life ought to be,” said Eric. I thought we might be free forever, but from what? (“The Cousins”, 248)

Even though Ella’s memories of Florence do not seem to be coherent, every single one means something special to her. When reading through them carefully, one can see that all these memories are in some way connected to Eric. However, she also remembers
some characteristics of Florence like the river Arno, famous artists, and the Italian manner in general. These will be referred to in more detail in the “Features of Italianness” section of this chapter.

4.3.4. Characterisation

4.3.4.1. Ella Mason

When telling the story as a first-person narrator, Ella Mason is a good-looking woman, who just turned fifty. She is widowed to a man called Howard, who got killed in a jeep accident out on his cattle ranch, and divorced to her second husband with whom she had only been married for six months and who is described as a wild Californian boy ten years younger than her. With Howard she had two sons, who are in their twenties at the time the action is set. Ella Mason comes from a town called Martinsville in Alabama and has many cousins as she belongs to one of the three most influential and important families from Martinsville who are all descendents from a famous Confederate general. In her memories, Ella nevertheless describes herself as a nineteen-year-old girl who spends a lot of time with her cousins Eric and Ben. It is also because of them that she joined the trip to Europe, because originally she would have preferred to stay at home during the summer holidays and help her father in his law office. Furthermore, in order to keep up with them, she even begins to read Poe and Wallace Stevens:

It is time I talked about Ben and Eric, about how it was with me and with them and with the three of us. When I look back on pictures of myself in those days, I see a girl in shorts, weighing a few pounds more than she thought she should, lowest, with a womanly cast to her body; chopped-off reddish hair and a wide, freckled, almost boyish grin, happy to be posing between two tall boys, who happened to be her cousins, smiling their white tentative smiles. Ben and Eric. They were smart. They were fun. They did everything right. And most of all, they admitted me. I was the audience they needed. I had to run to keep up. I read Poe because of Ben’s thesis, and Wallace Stevens because Eric liked his poetry. I even, finding him referred to at times, tried to read Plato. (Ben studied Greek.) But what I did was not of much interest to them. Still, they wanted me around. Sometimes Ben made a point of “conversing” with me – what courses, what books, et cetera – but he made me feel like a high-school student. Eric, seldom bothering with me, was more on my level when he did. To each other, they talked like a gallop. Literature turned them on; their ideas flowed, ran back and forth like a current. I loved hearing them. (“The Cousins”, 238)
As it is possible to see from the citation above, Ella and her cousins Eric an Ben have been very good friends through all their childhood and teenage years. Nevertheless, their stay in Florence during their journey to Europe effects a change in their relationship. One day, when they manage to hide from the others in one of Florence’s many palazzos, Ella and Eric kiss each other for the very first time:

Then with a strong hand (I remembered tennis), he pressed my face against the stone face and held it for a moment. The stone bit into my flesh and that was the first time that Eric, bending deliberately to do so, kissed me on the mouth. (“The Cousin”, 247)

Somehow, this kiss and the curious affair that followed it can be said to be the reason for Ella and Eric meeting each other in Florence again after thirty years. Even though, soon after their trip, both decided to go different ways and do not consider these events as very important, it seems as if there had always been a permanent love between them that made them find each other in a situation that fits perfectly for them.

4.3.4.2. Eric

By the time Ella Mason tells the story, her cousin Eric has become a widower too. He lives in an apartment in Florence with a view at the river Arno. As already mentioned above, Eric, Ella, and Ben have been very good friends during their teenage years when Eric is described as being “about twenty-five […], just finishing law school, having been delayed a year or so by his army” (“The Cousins”, 227). Regarding his physical appearance, Ella remembers that

Eric had sandy hair, softly appealing and always mussed. He didn’t bother much with his looks. In the day they [Eric and Ben] scuffed around in open-throated shirts and loafers, crinkled seesucker pants, or short; tennis shoes when they played were always dirty white. At night, when they cleaned up, it was still casual but fresh laundered. But when they dressed, in shirts and ties with an inch of white cuff laid crisp against their brown hands: they were splendid. (“The Cousins”, 240)

Apparently, their trip through Europe also changed his feelings for cousin Ella in some way or the other with their first kiss being the highlight of it. When he, nevertheless,
gets to know that he has failed his final law exam at the law-school of Emory, he is very sad and Ella becomes a source of consolation.

Thirty years later, when Eric meets Ella in Florence again, she gets to know that Eric had been married to a woman who was part Sardinian, but who had already died and left him the legacy. According to Ella, Eric now leads a “regular Italian life” ("The Cousins", 237). All in all, during the meeting of Ella and Eric it seems that all the old feelings come to the surface again. Even though they both have lead different lives and did not keep in touch, it seems that now their path is free for a future together.

4.3.4.3. Ben

Ben is a cousin of Ella and Eric too and can be seen as the reason for the meeting of them as he mentioned the idea during a lunch with Ella in New York. He can also be said to be the one who has invested much time in planning the trip. Back then, he had just finished a master’s at Sewanee and was going on to Yale after the summer. Furthermore,

Ben was dark. He had straight, dark-brown hair, dry-looking in the sun, growing thick at the brow, but flat at night when he put a damp comb through it, and darker. It fitted close to his head like a monk’s hood. He wore large classes with lucite rims. ("The Cousins", 240)

Even though the protagonist shortly mentions that she was for a short time torn between feelings for Ben and Eric more, it seems that there was something about Ben that did not convince her about him. All in all, they were just good friends, nothing more and nothing less.

At the end of the short story, one gets the information that, thirty years later, Ben is married and became a “big professor” in literature:

Ben married his Sylvia, with her pedigree and family estate in Connecticut. He’s a big professor, lecturing in literature, up East. ("The Cousins", 257)

4.3.4.4. Jamie

Jamie is younger than the rest of the cousins even though his age is never explicitly mentioned. Furthermore, he is said to be Ella’s uncle Gale’s son and about to be grown-
up. The most vivid memory regarding the Europe trip is the one from Monte Carlo, a
city which Jamie had wanted to visit. In Monte Carlo all the cousins went to the casino,
and Jamie was very lucky that day. He won a lot of money, which induced especially
Mayfred to get him away:

It was Mayfred who made him stop. It seemed like she had an adding machine
in her head. All of a sudden she told him something, whispered in his ear. When he shook his head, she caught his hand. When he pulled away, she grabbed his arm. When he lifted his arm, she came up with it, right off the
floor. For a minute I thought they were both going to fall over into the roulette
wheel.

“You got to stop, Jamie!” Mayfred said in the loudest Alabama voice I
guess they’d ever be liable to hear the side of the ocean. It was curdling, like
cheering for ‘Bama against Ole Miss in the Sugar Bowl. “I don’t have to
stop!” he yelled right back. “If you don’t stop,” Mayfred shouted, “I’ll never
speak to you again, Jamie Marshall, as long as I live!” (“The Cousins”, 235-
236)

What Mayfred could and did not know at that time was that Jamie was secretly in love
with her. He apparently made and tried everything just to satisfy her and so it happened
that he even accompanied her to Rome in order to make sure that Mayfred got her right
plane back home. At that moment, possibly blinded by love, he did not mind having to
stay alone in a city he did not even know. Even though Mayfred never returned his
affection, simply because she was apparently interested in men, Jamie did not mind
doing everything just to make her happy.

Thirty years after the journey the protagonist tells that Jamie married a Catholic girl, has
many kids and works in his father-in-law’s firm:

Jamie married a Catholic girl from West Virginia. He works in her father’s
firm and has sired a happy lot of kids. (“The Cousins”, 257)

4.3.4.5. Mayfred

Mayfred is a lesser cousin to Ella, Eric, Ben, and Jamie and she seems to be a pretty
wild girl. When she accompanies the four of them to Europe, she quasi out-of-the blue
tells that she is married to a man called Donald Bailey.
Mayfred had a boyfriend named Donald Bailey, who came over from Georgia and took her out every Saturday night. He was fairly nice-looking was about all we knew, and Eric thought he was dumb. (“The Cousins”, 229)

Mayfred and Donald had actually got married across the state line in Georgia two weeks before. Mayfred didn’t want to discuss it because, she said, everybody was so taken up with talking about Europe, she wouldn't have been able to get a word in edgewise. (“The Cousins”, 231)

Although in the course of the short story it is suggested that Mayfred just married Donald in order to do something wild and crazy without thinking about its consequences, it soon comes out that this assumption is wrong. As soon as she hears that her husband has been taken to a hospital due to some grave illness caused by a brain tumour, Mayfred cuts the trip short and flies back home in order to support her sick husband. Nevertheless, it turned out that the entire situation was not as tragic as assumed and that there was no need to worry.

Thirty years later Mayfred is no longer married to Donald and lives in New York, working for “a fashion house”:

Mayfred went to New York after she left Donald and works for a big fashion house. She's been in and out of marriages, from time to time. (“The Cousins”, 257)

4.3.5. Features of Italianness

When reading the story one becomes aware of the fact that apart from the description of various important buildings and places of Florence and Rome, the probably most important feature of Italianness in the short story is, once again, the change of attitudes effected by the Italian way of life in the foreign visitors to Italy. Like in Elizabeth Spencer’s short story “The Light in the Piazza”, the protagonists stay in Florence for a while. Many important buildings, places, and works by artists are mentioned. The Piazza Signoria as well as the Uffizi and the Perseus of Cellini are named. As they have already been explained in Elizabeth Spencer’s other short story, it is not necessary to repeat these here. Some other important things which are mentioned in the story and which need to be explained in some detail are the following:

At the Uffizi, the second day, Eric, in a trance before Botticelli, fell silent. (“The Cousins”, 243)
Sandro Botticelli, originally named Alessandro di Mariano Filipepi, was an Italian painter of the Early Renaissance. One of his most important works, is a self portrait, now at the Uffizi in Florence. (Pagnottini Sebastiani & Rossi Giacobbi, 158)

Five in number, we leaned over the balustrades along the Arno, all silent then from the weariness of sightseeing, and the heat, and there I heard it once more, the ticking of something hidden among us. (“The Cousins”, 243)

The river Arno is 270 kilometres long and flows through the northern part of Tuscany. It Apart from the Tiber, the Arno is the most important river of central Italy. (Pagnottini Sebastiani & Rossi Giacobbi, 71)

One feature of Italianness that is also mentioned in Florence is the breakfast at a café in the Signoria:

I dressed and went out with him for some breakfast, cappuccino and croissants at a café in the Signoria. (“The Cousins”, 245)

Obviously, people over the world have different breakfast habits. In Italy breakfast is rather a snack compared to the breakfast meals in other countries. The most important meal for Italians is dinner, because the whole family will come together to have dinner, at which usually three courses are served. For breakfast, on the other hand, Italians have little and they do not spend much time to enjoy it. Italians just drink a cup of coffee or tea accompanied by a croissant or some cookies. Some Italians, especially the children, enjoy soaking their “zwieback” or cookies in the warm drinks as they think it can be digested more easily. It has been said that because of the substantial dinner Italians do not feel hungry at breakfast time. Moreover, because of the climate in Italy, it is not advisable to stuff one’s stomach with so much food already at breakfast. When describing the second stop in Italy, Rome, there is one statement in the short story that best demonstrates the features of Italianness:

We got off the train feeling small – at least, I did. Ben was standing there, looking around him, tall, searching for us, then seeing. But no Jamie. Something to ask. I wondered if he’d gone back with Mayfred. “No he’s running around Rome.” The big smooth station, echoing, open to the warm day. “Hundreds of churches,” Ben went on. “Millions. He’s checking them off.” He helped us in a taxi with the skill of somebody who’d lived in Rome for ten years, and gave the address. “He’s got to do something now that Mayfred’s gone. It’s getting like something he might take seriously, is all. Finding out
According to this quotation there are at least three features of Italiness referred to the city of Rome. Firstly, Rome encompasses not only the Vatican, but also numbers and numbers of churches throughout the city. All in all, there are more than nine hundred churches in Rome. Many of the churches and the seat of the Pope do have a special importance and a grand ecclesiastical history. Most important are the seven churches of the pilgrims, then the four Basilicae maior as well as three further churches which will be visited by most pilgrims on a pilgrimage to Rome. Furthermore, there are many other historically and architecturally significant church buildings from the early Middle Ages to the present. Many of them play an important role as tituli for the cardinals or as as a centre for religious orders. It may therefore be easy to understand that it is not easy to find someone who got lost in Rome just because of the fact that one knows that s/he is interested in churches. (Pagnottini Sebastiani & Rossi Giacobbi, 79)

Secondly, the problem of crime and especially pickpockets is mentioned in the story. Considering the size of the city, Rome’s crime rate is not particularly high. However, there are many pickpockets as well as beggars and scammers in and around the city. Their presence is especially high in the typical tourist areas like, for example, the Termini station and the Vatican. Pickpockets and thieves are especially on the lookout for crowds of tourists who are often tired and inattentive. Apart from famous tourist attractions and sites, one should also be cautious when making use of public transport like busses, trams, and the metro. The biggest problem is probably that pickpockets are not easy to spot as they could appear in form of gangs, of gypsies, or even in form of well-dressed men or women. Additionally, there are also gangs of apparently poor children who provoke sympathy in order to systematically empty pockets and bags. It is therefore important not to be distracted by crowds or scenes like a musical performance. Bag-snatchers on mopeds are another dangerous and well known problem in the streets of Rome. These gangs especially look out for elderly and weak people in order to tear away the bag hanging loose off one’s shoulder while passing by with their motorcycles. With regard to pickpockets and bag-snatchers it is probably the best advice not to carry too much money around in your wallet while passing through the cities and to be always attentive when standing in a crowd or walking in a narrow street.

With regard to the third issue referred to in the quotation above, namely “falling in
love”, two different kinds of falling in love are associated with Rome. On the one hand, falling in love with the city of Rome. The beautiful historical buildings and the unique atmosphere create a fascinating ambiance which is probably never to be found anywhere else in the world. On the other hand, one could fall in love with Rome’s beautiful girls, women, and men. Italian ladies are said to belong to the most beautiful ones in the world. It may for some men be very hard to resist their dark, often long hair and their fascinating brown eyes.

Apart from the churches, there is also one reference to Italian buildings in general:

I said he might be sick, and I guess they could read my face, because I was guided by a porter in a blue working jacket and cloth shoes, into a labyrinth. Italian buildings, I knew by now, are constructed like dreams. There are passages departing from central hallways, stairs that twist back upon themselves, dark silent doors. (“The Cousins”, 249-250)

When it comes to Italian architecture, several architectural styles were developed in different epochs and different regions. Italy is well-known for the introduction of innovations in architectural constructions like, for example, arches and domes. Some of the works regarded as most important in Western architecture are therefore the Colosseum, the Duomo of Milan, the Duomo of Siena, the Cathedral of Florence, and the designs of the buildings of Venice. (Buono Hodgart, 379-380) The quotation refers to the magnificence of the construction of several architectural sites.

One further feature of Italianness refers to the change of the characters’ attitudes effected by the visit of an Italian city. In “The Cousins” this is especially noticeable when it comes to the relationship between Ella and Eric. Due to the fact that it is never explicitly stated since when the characters seem to feel more than just friendship for each other, one may only draw the vague assumption that the beauty and spirit of romance of the Italian cities was the reason for both to kiss each other and to become aware that their feelings for each other more than just platonic friendship. Ella and Eric first kissed each other in Florence, which suggests that there is something especially about this city. The unique flair of this Italian city is likely to have had an influence on the development of Ella’s and Eric’s love. Additionally, one has to keep in mind that it is especially the city where Ella and Eric kissed for the first time and where they meet again after more than thirty years; and they still enjoy the unique atmosphere of memories of Florence.
4.4. “The Visit”

4.4.1. Plot

The short story “The Visit” by Elizabeth Spencer is about the married couple called Judy and Bill Owens who travel to Italy in order to meet someone referred to as Thompson, who appears to be a very important person in relation to Bill’s current field of study. Via a letter by Professor Eakins, Bill’s mentor in graduate school, he and his wife are invited to Thompson’s villa in the mountains near the Italian city Genoa. After a quite exciting ride up the mountains, the Owens’ are welcomed by Thompson and his whole clan who talk to them in a lively manner and guide them around in their house and the garden. After a vegetarian lunch they no longer care about their guests’ presence and start doing the things they usually do. Thompson’s daughter, who is married to the Prince of Gaeta, takes a bath in the sea and Thompson himself takes some time per riposarsi, which is the Italian equivalent to the Spanish siesta. All in all, the visit turns out to be very disappointing and embarrassing for Bill who has apparently had high hopes in it.

4.4.2. Time

As for the time, in which this short story is set, there are several references in the text indicating the early 20th century:

Bill and Judy Owens had arrived in October; now it was June (“The Visit”, 211)
At last, in May, just when it seemed that nothing would happen, a letter arrived from a Professor Eakins, Bill’s mentor in graduate school. (“The Visit”, 212)
“It was in 1927 [the summer when Thompson met Eakins in Paris], the summer Eugene, your secretary for ten years, had died at Cologne of pneumonia on the last day of February. You decided to bring three articles later called ‘Some Aspects of the Renaissance’.” (“The Visit”, 218)
Bill was disappointed to the point of despair by his visit, which had yielded him only a scant half-hour with Thompson and a dusty monograph, published in 1928. (“The Visit”, 222)

Taking these citations into consideration it is obvious that Bill and Judy already had stayed in Italy for eight months and that it was during the month of June when they
visited Thompson in his villa. As to the year the action takes place, there are no concrete references. Nevertheless, there are references to events in 1927 and 1928. Thus the narrative must be set between the 1920s or even the early 1930s. One further evidence for this is the fact stated by Thompson’s wife who tells that his secretary had died of pneumonia, which is an illness which is no longer fatal.

4.4.3. Location

The action is for the most part set in the mountains near the Italian city of Genoa. Bill and Judy travelled there in order to visit Thompson who lives in a villa which originally belongs to his son-in-law. Furthermore, there is a reference in the story that Bill and Judy were located in a village near to the mountains where Thompson's villa is:

From Genoa, in June, Bill and Judy had gone straight to the village in the mountains nearest to Thompson’s villa. This village was the usual take-off point for people who went to see Thompson. Judy had pointed out that another village nearby had, according to the guidebook, a more interesting church, with a cosmatesque cloister and a work in the baptistery attributed by some to Donatello (Judy loved Donatello), but Bill decided that this was no time for anything unorthodox. So they went to the usual village. (“The Visit”, 213)

The description of Thompson’s villa, suggests that it is situated high up in the mountains which also means that the way up there can be quite exciting to visitors who are not so familiar with the conditions to mountain streets.

Instead of driving their own car up to the villa, they took a taxi, as the proprietor of the pensione advised. He said that the way was extremely steep and dangerous. There were falling rocks, sharp curves, few markers. Their tires might be cut to pieces on the stones. Their water might boil away out of the radiator. They might lose the way entirely.

“How symbolic can you get?” Bill remarked. “Besides, his brother probably owns the taxi.”

But all the proprietor said proved to be literally true. Bill and Judy were flung against each other several times on the curves. As the road threaded higher and higher, they dared not look out of the window. (“The Visit”, 214)

The trip turned out to be dangerous, but apparently was worth all the stress and strain. Thus, the villa is indeed impressive and picturesque:
The road flattered; a green plateau appeared before them, and set in it, at a fair distance, the villa. It looked like a photograph itself. The tawny, bare façade was facing directly toward them. A colonnade ran out toward the left like a strong arm; it broke and softened the long savage drop of the mountain behind and framed in a half-embrace the grassy courtyard. There, in the background, a hundred yards or so behind the villa, hung the ruin, the old castle. Rough and craggy, it was unused except artistically, as a backdrop, or to show people through (some visitors had reported being shown through), or perhaps for children to play. (“The Visit”, 215)

Furthermore, the beautiful first impression is even topped by the fact that the Prince of Gaeta cultivates roses in his garden even though these flowers are very hard to cultivate in Italy.

All in all, the villa appears to be not only picturesque, but also huge and built like some labyrinth from which it is hard to find a way out. This is especially a fact that Judy gets to know when she is at some point left alone by Thompson and gets lost for some minutes:

She was left to lose her way alone.
Corridors, wrongly chosen, led her to a room, a door, a small courtyard, a stretch of gravel, a dry fountain. She walked halfway to the fountain and turned to look back at the façade, which like the other was sunburned and bare. It was surmounted by a noble crest, slightly askew – the prince's doubtless. (“The Visit”, 221)

To sum up, one can unfortunately not explicitly find out much about the villa's architectural details, but it is definitely very large with many rooms, a big library, and is decorated with Thrace mosaics, which are of special interest for Bill.

4.4.4. Characterisation

4.4.4.1. Judy Owens

Judy Owens is Bill Owens wife and mother of a nine-year-old son called Henry, who had to be left at home, and who is momentarily cared for by his aunt in the United States. She seems to be a very nice wife as she accompanies her husband to Italy and as she types for him the books he is working on. Therefore, she seems to have quite a good knowledge about his field of studies which currently seems to be on ancient Roman portraiture. Another fact that is revealed during their stay in Italy is that Judy’s Italian
has improved quite a lot so that she is able to answer the waiter's question in a restaurant in rather fluent and good Italian.

At Thompson’s villa she feels a bit overdressed and this is something noticed also by her husband:

“Doubtless. He has a taste for pretty girls. You overdid it, dressing so well. Did he chase you through the upstairs ballroom? That’s what it’s used for nowadays.” (“The Visit”, 222)

All in all, Judy is a source of inspiration and consolation for Bill. They both seem to trust each other in a very confidential and honest manner, so they have a wonderful marriage that nowadays many couples would probably dream of. Moreover, Judy is well educated and she is very interested in her husband’s work and books. She has already acquired a lot of knowledge in this field. Even though there is not much stated about her physical appearance she seems to be an amiable and attractive woman.

4.4.4.2. Bill Owens

Bill Owens is married to Judy Owens and a scholar currently working on a book about ancient Roman portraiture. He therefore had to travel to Italy where he is invited to a person named Thompson whom Bill seems to admire. Thompson is a prominent person not least because he is the owner of a house accommodating the famous “Thrace mosaics”:

Judy often thought that Bill had an “and-then” sort of career. Graduate courses, a master’s degree. A dissertation, a doctorate. A teaching appointment, scholarly articles. And then, and then. Promotion, the dissertation published, and clearly ahead on the upward road they could discern the next goal: a second, solidly important, possibly even definitive book. A grant from the Foundation was a natural forward step, and Bill then got his wife to Italy for a year. In Italy, as all knew, was Thompson. (“The Visit”, 211)

Bill was always thorough – he was anything but aimless, but in this matter he became something he had never been before: he grew crafty as hell. He plotted the right people to write and the best month for them to receive a letter. He considered the number of paragraph which should go by before Thompson was even mentioned. In some cases Thompson’s name was not even allowed to appear; yet his presence (such was Bill’s skill) would breathe from every word. Pressure could be brought to bear in some cases: Bill had not been in the academic world fifteen years for nothing; and everything in American life
is, in the long run, as we all know, competitive. He poked fun at his scheming mind – yet the goal was important to him, and he pressed forward in an innocent, bloodthirsty way, as if it were a game he had to win. (“The Visit”, 212)

On arrival at Thompson’s villa, Bill seems to be quite impressed at first; however, this attitude changes after some time when Bill is left alone in the library whereas Thompson takes his rest after lunch. In the end, the conversation that lasted hardly half an hour, was very disappointing for Bill who originally praised and liked Thompson very much:

Bill was disappointed to the point of despair by his visit, which had yielded him only a scant half-hour with Thompson and a dusty monograph, published in 1928. Even the subject matter – Greek vase painting – was not in Bill’s field. (“The Visit”, 222)

4.4.4.3. Thompson

Thompson is an American born immigrant to Italy who has become very influential and important in the academic world. Being invited by him is seen as a mark of honour and rather rare:

To be invited to see Thompson was, for almost anyone in the academic world, the token of something superior; but in Bill’s particular field, it was the treasure, the X mark on the ancient map. (“The Visit”, 211)

Thompson lives in a villa in the mountains near Genoa and more or less regularly invites guests to see him. He also knows Bill's mentor Professor Eakins even though he states that he is not particularly fond of him. In the course of the whole story one does not learn much about Thompson except that his little rest after lunch seems to be very important to him; so much that he does not mind appearing impolite by leaving his guests wait until he decides to get up again and to continue playing the role of the host. In Bill’s view, Thompson is “an organized disappointment” who cannot compete with the academic world any more:

“He’s an organized disappointment,” Bill complained, “and not very well organized at that. He didn't want to talk to me because he can't compete any more. He’s completely out of the swim.” (“The Visit”, 222)
Taking all these facts into consideration, one could say that the visit of Thompson Bill was so much looking forward turned out to be a complete.

4.4.5. Features of Italianness

When considering the features of Italianness in the short story, in comparison to the three other stories analysed in the preceding chapters, one will realize that it differs significantly.

Right at the beginning of “The Visit” the word riposarsi is mentioned and explained:

Before she had come to Italy, Judy thought that siesta was the word all Latins used for a rest after lunch, but she had learned that you said this only in Spain. In Italy you went to riposarsi, and this was exactly what the great man had done. (“The Visit”, 211)

A “riposarsi” can be defined as the Italian equivalent of the Spanish siesta. Due to the hotter climate in the Southern States of Europe, a break after lunchtime is considered healthy. Like Spanish people, many Italians take a rest after lunch for about two to three hours. Many shops are closed during that time and re-open at about three or four in the afternoon. During the summer the temperatures rises at lunchtime and this makes working nearly impossible. The people’s way to adapt to the climate is to take a rest and work longer in the evening when it is no longer that hot. The riposarsi is something popular with children, pregnant women and elderly people as it allows the body to cool down and relax.

Another feature of Italianness referred to here is the artist Donatello.

Judy had pointed out that another village nearby had, according to the guidebook, a more interesting church, with a cosmatesque cloister and a work in the baptistry attributed by some to Donatello (Judy loved Donatello), but Bill decided that this was no time for anything unorthodox. (“The Visit”, 213)

Originally, he was called Donato di Niccolò di Betto Bardi, and he was an Italian artist and sculptor who lived from 1386 to 1466. He was born and died in Florence, and was famous for his development in perspectival illusionism which were very significant in the 15th century. (Pagnottini Sebastiani & Rossi Giacobbi, 156)
A further feature of Italianess mentioned in the story is the city of Genoa and the mountains surrounding it. Genoa is located in northern Italy and is the capital of the Province of Genoa as well as of the region of Liguria. It has one of the most significant seaports not only of northern Italy, but also of Europe. The city's population is about 608,000, the urban area including the suburbs has a population of about 900,000 people. In 2004 Genoa was the Capital of Culture of Europe, due to its rich art, music, gastronomy, architecture, and culture and in 2006, part of the old city of Genoa was entered on the UNESCO World Heritage List. The city is one of the country's major economic centres and is part of the so-called industrial triangle Milano-Turino-Genova of north-west Italy. (Pagnottini Sebastiani & Rossi Giacobbi, 56)

One significant features referred to in the story is the frequent use of Italian words, such as riposarsi. The frequent use of Italian words gives the whole story a narrative touch, which makes it interesting to read. Sometimes it is not an easy task to translate the Italian terms used in the story, but these Italian words and phrases tend to emphasise the authenticity of the Italian setting. However, the use of Italian terms might also be just a display of the author's linguistic skills. Even though it is never explicitly stated if Thompson and his family have ever learned the English language, one gets the impression that they would not have a problem, but rather appear to be too lazy and conceited to make use of their knowledge of English.

With regard to the change of attitudes concerning the protagonists it can be said that they do change their attitudes, but in a manner that appears to be completely different compared to the protagonists of other short stories by Elizabeth Spencer. Whereas the protagonists of “The White Azalea”, “The Light in the Piazza”, and “The Cousins” seem to regard their trips to Italy as adventures on which they have learned something about the cities and for themselves, the protagonists of “The Visit” simply appear to be disillusioned. They never concretely mention any feelings, but somehow one gets the impression that they blame Italy and the whole world for Thompson's impolite behaviour. Somehow, they have put so much effort in the whole project and they are now disillusioned that they had to completely change their lives in order to become disappointed by a selfish, old man living in the hills near Genoa. They are further disappointed by the way he has treated them as guests and that he puts his own needs before the ones of his guests. However, it is important to bear in mind that he is not a native Italian, but an American immigrant.
5. William Trevor

5.1. “Running Away”

5.1.1. Plot

“Running away” by William Trevor is a short story about Henrietta, a forty-three-year-old woman who decides to go to Italy after having found out that her husband, to whom she had been married for more than twenty years, had been unfaithful to her with one of his students called Sharon. During her stay in Italy, she reflects on potential reasons which led to the betrayal as well as on her husband’s Ron affair. Thus, only after a short period of time Henrietta manages to accept things as they are and enjoys her life in an Italian small-town. Supported by some money which her husband still regularly pays into her bank account, the protagonist makes the best of her sad situation and begins to cope with the new circumstances. After a few months in Italy, though, Henrietta is called back home to England as her husband has been confirmed to hospital after a heart attack. Confused and surprised at the conditions at home, it seems that the real challenge still waits for Henrietta. As Roy is left by his new girlfriend Sharon, it is Henrietta’s turn to decide how to move on with her life.

5.1.2. Time

In the short story, William Trevor does not state a time frame explicitly. Nevertheless, in the course of the story, there are several hints at the time setting. The first hint makes it possible to refer roughly to the decade in which the story takes place:

Henrietta shops in a greengrocer’s that in the Italian small-town manner has no name, just Fiori e Frutta above the door. The shy woman who serves there, who has come to know her, adds up the cost of fagioli, pears and spinach on a piece of paper. ‘Mille quattro cento.’ Henrietta counts out the money and gathers up her purchases. (“Running Away”, 972-973)

Given the amount of money (one thousand four hundred) Henrietta has to pay for vegetables at the greengrocer’s, one can assume that the actual currency in the story still is the “lira” and not yet the “euro”. The “lira” was the legal currency in Italy until 2002. As in many other countries of the European Union, it got replaced by the “euro”, thus
the time must be before 2002. As the story was first published in 1978, and there are references to “The Orange People”, who stand in relation with the Hare Krishna movement, the time must probably be the 1970s.

Three other hints reveal the season(s) of the year the story is set:

It is May. On the verges of the meadows and the wheat fields that stretch below the town pale roses are in bloom. Laburnum blossoms in the vineyards, wires for the vines stretching between the narrow trunks of the trees. It is the season of broom and clover, of poppies, and geraniums forgotten in the grass. (“Running Away”, 973)

In the August of that year, when the heat is at its height, Signora Falconi approaches Henrietta in the macelleria. She speaks in Italian, for Henrietta’s Italian is better now than Signora Falconi’s rudimentary English. (“Running Away”, 975)

In the evening she sits on her balcony, drinking a glass of vino nobile, hearing the English voices, and the voices of the Italians in and around the fattoria. But by October the English voices have dwindled and the only costumers of the fattoria are the Italians who come traditionally for lunch on Sundays. (“Running Away”, 976)

Taking into consideration the citations presented, one can assume that the time frame of the action is about seven months, from April to November, as the protagonist for the first time reports about Italy in May and for the last time in October. The time-span of the plot, however, is more than 20 years.

5.1.3. Location

In the short story it is never explicitly mentioned where the protagonist Henrietta lives or rather in which city or village she stays. Nevertheless, there are a few hints that make it possible for the reader to make guesses about it. In the first part a ‘summer house’ (“Running Away”, 967) is mentioned and some time later Henrietta refers to ‘her sister’s house in Hemel Hempstead’ (“Running Away”, 973) which is a town in the south-east of England, in Hertfordshire, 24 miles to the north west of London.

[...] she packs her clothes into three suitcases; she is in her sister’s house in

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Hemel Hempstead. That was the worst of all, the passing of the days in Hemel Hempstead, the sympathy of her sister, her generous, patient brother-in-law, their children imagining she was ill. (“Running Away”, 973)

As it is never stated that the protagonist had to take a coach or even a plan to go to Hemel Hempstead, one can argue that the first as well as the third and final part of the story’s action may take place in a city or town near her sister’s place in England. Thus, these are only tentative assumptions.

As far as the second part, the one that plays in Italy, is concerned, two quite important facts about Henrietta’s location are given:

1) In the cantina of the Contucci family the wine matures in oaken barrels of immense diameter, the iron hoops that bind them stylishly painted red. She had been shown the cantina and the palace of the Contucci. She has looked across the slopes of terracotta roof-tiles to Montichiello and Pienza. (“Running Away”, 974)

2) Later that day she walks to the Church of San Biagio, among the meadows below the walls of the town. (“Running Away”, 975)

Given the fact that the palace of the Contucci family is located in Montepulciano\(^\text{11}\) in the district of Siena and that from there it is possible to walk to the Church of San Biagio, as it is only about one kilometre south west of Montepulciano, one can assume that Henrietta stays in the south of Tuscany region. The mentioning of several other places in and around Montepulciano (which will be referred to later in this chapter) further supports this assumption.

5.1.4. Characterisation

5.1.4.1. Henrietta

Henrietta is a woman of forty-three who has been married for more than twenty years. After her husband’s break-up due to an affair with one of his students, Henrietta is upset and can not understand how this could have happened.

‘And I know you’re working hard, my dear. I know you’ve turned over a new leaf.’ The trouble is that the leaf has been turned, absurdly, in the direction of

\(^{11}\) Cf. http://www.contucci.it/ (08/03/2011)
Henrietta’s husband. (“Running Away”, 964)
Henrietta, who dresses well and maintains with care the considerable good looks she possesses, can understand none of it. (“Running Away”, 965)

She begins to reflect about their life together and tries to find reasons how everything could have come the way it finally came.

They had married when Roy was at the very beginning of his career, seven years older than Henrietta, who at the time had been a secretary in the department. She’d been nervous because she didn’t belong in the academic world, because she had not had a university education herself. (“Running Away”, 966)
Not having children of their own has affected their relationship in ways like this. They look after one another, he in turn insisting that she should not Hoover for too long because Hoovering brings on the strain in her back. (“Running Away”, 966)

After her husband’s life-turning confession, Henrietta leaves her home and goes to Italy, where in the course of time she gets more and more happy and already feels at home.

She is happy because she is alone. She is happy in the small appartamento lent to her by friends of her sister, who use it infrequently. She loves the town’s steep, cool streets, its quietness, the grey stone of its buildings, quarried from the hill it is built upon. She is happy because the nightmare is distant now, a picture she can illuminate in her mind and calmly survey. She sees her husband sprawling on the chair in the garden, the girl in her granny glasses, and her own weeping face in the bathroom looking-glass. Time shrinks in order of events […]. (“Running Away”, 973)
The Falconis seem concerned that she should be on her own so much and invite her to their meals occasionally, but she explains that her discovery of solitude has made her happy. (“Running Away”, 976)

As time goes by, Henrietta becomes more and more independent.

Her husband pays money into her bank account and she accepts it because she must. There are some investments her father left her: between the two sources there is enough to live on. But one day, when her Italian is good enough, she will reject the money her husband pays her. (“Running Away”, 974)

Sometimes, nevertheless, she wonders if the breakdown of their marriage is her fault.

Guilt once consumed her, Henrietta considers. She continued to be a secretary in the department for six years after her marriage but had given it up because
she’d found it awkward, having to work not just for her husband but for his rivals and his enemies. He’d been pleased when she’d done so, and although she’d always intended to find a secretarial post outside the university she never had. She felt guilty about that, because she was contributing so little, a childless housewife. (“Running Away”, 974)

Thus, such moments are rare and in general seem to contribute positively to her independence rather than taking her down for too long. By the time, Henrietta becomes more and more self-aware and self-secure and knows that it would no longer have been worth living a life which obviously was not the one she thought it would be.

‘I want to stay here.’ She says it aloud, pouring herself more acqua minerale, not eating for a moment. ‘Voglio stare qui.’ […] Quella mattina il diario si apri alla data Ottobre 1917: how astonished he would be if he could see her now, childishly delighting in The keys of the Kingdom in Italian. (“Running Away”, 975)

Nevertheless, although Henrietta seems to quickly re-organise and manage her new life, it seems that probably the hardest challenge waits for her back home. After a call from her husband’s affair and new girlfriend, she is forced to go back home.

A damp coldness, like the fog that hangs about the garden, touches Henrietta’s flesh, insinuating itself beneath her clothes, icy on her stomach and her back. The girl had been at the hospital, called there because Roy had asked for her. (“Running Away”, 978)

Confronted by all the new circumstances at home, Henrietta once again seems to have to make a proper decision concerning the way her life should continue.

The dog is no longer in the house. Ka-Ki has eaten a plastic bag, attracted by slivers of meat adhering to it, and has died. Henrietta blames herself. No matter how upset she’d felt it had been cruel to walk out and leave the dog. (“Running Away”, 977)

She [Sharon Tamm] did not say then that she was with someone else. (“Running Away”, 978)

He [her husband Roy] cries and is unable to cease. The tears fall on to the egg she has poached for him and into his cup of Bovril. ‘Sorry,’ he says. ‘Oh God, I’m sorry.’ (“Running Away”, 978)

5.1.4.2. Roy

Henrietta’s husband Roy is “a man of fifty” (“Running Away”, 971) who teaches at an
English university and is apparently fond of Hesselmann and dairy products.

He is a man who sprawls over chairs rather than sits in them. He has a sprawling walk, taking up more room than is his due on pavements; he sprawls in cinemas and buses, and over the wheel of his car. His grey hair, of which there is a lot, can never acquire a combed look even though he combs it regularly and in the normal way. His spectacles, thickly rimmed and large, move about on his reddish face and often, in fact, fall off. His suits become tousled as soon as he puts them on, gaps appearing, flesh revealed. The one he wears now is of dark brown corduroy, the suit he likes best. A spotted blue handkerchief cascades out of an upper pocket, matching a loose bow tie. (“Running Away”, 967)

Even though he and Henrietta seemed to be the perfect couple, he cannot resist one of his students' attractions and betrays his wife after more than twenty years of marriage. When Henrietta one day confronts him with the visit of his affair Sharon Tamm at their house, he begins to sweat, gets nervous, and confesses everything.

‘It’s a thing that happened. Nobody did anything.’ Red-faced, shame-faced, he attempts to shrug, but the efforts become lost in his sprawling flabbiness. He is as unattractive as the girl, she finds herself reflecting: a stranded jellyfish. (“Running Away”, 971)

Nevertheless, the love with his affair does not last longer than a few months and Roy quickly seems to realise the mistake he has made. When taken into hospital, he bids Sharon to call Henrietta in Italy and make her come home again. All in all, he feels very sorry for what he has done to his wife in the end: ‘I’m sorry,’ he says, when she brings him a try. ‘Oh God, I’m sorry about all this mess. (“Running Away”, 978)

Although one may argue that Roy is egoistic leaving is wife for a girl who is about thirty years younger than him, one must also consider that he is the main reason for Henrietta re-structuring her life. Without his confession of the affair Henrietta probably would have lived in an illusion for the rest of her life. Only the change of circumstances caused by Roy and Sharon could open her eyes and make her look at the world from a new perspective.

5.1.4.3. Sharon
Sharon Tamm is a girl of twenty and a student of Henrietta’s husband Roy. In the course of the story, she is often referred to as an ‘unattractive girl’ who is moreover ungrateful. Apparently, Sharon’s physical appearance is not very attractive as can be seen from the way she is described by Henrietta several times:

Again the head is shaken, the lank hair flaps. Granny spectacles are removed and wiped carefully on a patchwork skirt, or perhaps a skirt that is simply patched. Sharon’s loose, soiled sandals have been kicked off, and she plays with them as she converses. She is sitting on the floor because she never sits on chairs. (“Running Away”, 964)

Sharon seems to have been a close friend to the family for quite some time. Therefore, Henrietta and Roy know a lot about her past with the Orange people as well as about the relationship of Sharon and her family:

The Orange People offer a form of Eastern mysticism about which Henrietta knows very little. Someone once told her that the mysticism is an excuse for sexual licence, but explained no further. (“Running Away”, 964) That is impossible, his tone suggests. They cannot forget all that Sharon Tamm has told them about her home in Daventry, about her father’s mother who lives with the family and stirs up so much trouble, about her overweight sister Diane and her brother Leslie. The world of Sharon Tamm’s family has entered theirs. (“Running Away”, 969).

The way Sharon is described during the course of the story makes the reader consider her an immature and carefree young girl who seems to have found a father-figure substitute in Roy. She apparently falls in love with him, she is referred to as Roy’s ‘menopausal fling’. Consequently, Sharon’s love for Roy does not last very long and she later also seems to be completely overtaxed with Roy’s bad health. All in all, her character traits indicate that she is too young to yet think about possible consequences her behaviour may have for persons around her. She seems to take whatever she can get just to give it up if she is no longer attracted by it. Whether this attitude has developed out of her family affair or out of her membership with the Orange People remains open to discussion.

5.1.5. Features of Italianness
5.1.5.1. Seeking for a new identity

When it comes to features of Italianness in William Trevor's short story „Running Away“, it can be said that for the protagonist Italy represents a refuge. It does not only trigger a change in her life, but also provides a source of inspiration as well as a place where she is able to think about her life. Despite her age, she discovers things she apparently enjoys very much and of which she has not been aware of so far:

She is happy because she is alone, She is happy in the small appartamento lent to her by friends of her sister, who use it infrequently. She loves the town's steep, cool streets, its quietness, the grey stone of its buildings, quarried form the hill it is built upon. She is happy because the nightmare is distant now, a picture she can illuminate in her mind and calmly survey. She sees her husband sprawling on the chair in the garden, the girl in her granny glasses, and her own weeping face in the bathroom looking-glass. Time shrinks the order of events: […] („Running Away“, 973)

Due to her rather spontaneous decision to leave her home town and emigrate to Italy, Henrietta’s future is quite uncertain. However, staying in the small Italian town, she does not mind the uncertainty and gives up worrying about her future. Henrietta enjoys living for the moment and she opens up for everything that may cross her way advance her life and her future:

How has she not guessed, through all those years of what seemed like a contented marriage, that solitude suits her better? It only seemed contented, she know that now: she had talked herself into artificial contentment, she had allowed herself to become a woman dulled by the monotony of a foolish man, his sprawling bigness and his sense of failure. („Running Away“, 975) There is a loggia in one of the villas that would be Henrietta's, a single room with a balcony and a bathroom, an outside staircase. And the Falconis would pay just a little for the cleaning and the changing of the sheets, the many details explained. The Falconis are apologetic, fearing that Henrietta may consider the work too humble. They are anxious she should know that women to clean and change the sheets are not easy to come by since they find employment in the hotels of the nearby spa, and that there is more than enough for Signora Falconi herself to do at the fattoria. It is not the work Henrietta has imagined when anticipating her future, but her future in her appartamento is uncertain, for she cannot live for ever on strangers' charity and one day the stranger will return.

'Va bene,' she says to the Falconis. 'Lo faccio.' („Running Away“, 976)

In this case, the short story’s protagonist opens up in a way she would probably never
have done at home. She accepts a job as a cleaning lady and does not mind that, in reality, she is overqualified for it. On the contrary, she is pleased that the Falconis offer her a job that helps to support her and make plans for the future. As it is the protagonist’s intention to stay in the country she had not known before, she accepts the offer of a job as a new beginning. She is about to begin a life at a place she has come to love more and more with each day.

5.1.5.2. Language and Clothing

One part of Henrietta’s quest for a new identity is the immersion and the adaptation into the Italian culture. On the one hand Henrietta adapts herself as far as clothing is concerned.

She is dressed less formally than she thought suitable for middle age in England. She wears a denim skirt, blue canvas shoes a blue shirt which she bought before the weekend from Signora Leici. („Running Away“, 973)

On the other hand Henrietta also adapts in terms of language. Surrounded by the new, unknown environment the protagonist quickly learns Italian without problems. In order to improve communication with the local residents she even takes language lessons. This fact is already obvious in the short story’s first scene which plays in Italy, where Henrietta pays the amount of money that the woman at the greengrocer’s charges from her in Italian. Throughout the short story it can also be seen that more and more Italian words and phrases are used, which suggest that the protagonist already begins to think of certain items in Italian:

Her Italian improves a little every day, due mainly to the lessons she has with the girl in the Informazioni. They are both determined that by the winter she will know enough to teach English to the youngest children in the orphanage. (“Running Away”, 973)

In the August of that year, when the heat is at its height, Signora Falconi approaches Henrietta in the marcelleria. She speaks in Italian, for Henrietta’s Italian is better now than Signora Falconi’s rudimentary English. (“Running Away”, 975)

Regarding these facts, it can be said that Henrietta seems to be very fond of Italy; otherwise she would have probably not put so much effort in integrating herself by
means of language and clothing. What can, furthermore, be noticed in the course of the short story’s part that plays in Italy, is that slowly, the protagonist also adapts to the Italian lifestyle, which is, to people not familiar with it, quite a remarkable achievement.

5.1.5.3. Italian Lifestyle

Italy is a country to which a person borne down by care, or overworked by business, should resort. Its climate will serve as an anodyne to induce the required response; and the happy faces that on every side present themselves, will dispose cheerfulness. […]. To live, is here so positive an enjoyment, that the usual motives and incentives to study and usefulness are forgotten, in the enervating and dreamy enjoyment to which the climate gives birth. (Blessington, 296)

Given this quotation one can well see the differences between the Italian and the English lifestyle. Italy’s warm climate and the presence of the sun most of the time is by many strangers regarded as one of the most welcoming motives for visiting the country at all. Nevertheless, the hot climate, especially during the summer months, requires a distinct way of managing one’s resources; this means that lunch breaks and more working during night time is one of the results. The so-called riposarsi, to which this paper will refer in greater detail in the chapter dealing with Elizabeth Spencer’s short story “The Visit”, is therefore an essential part for most Italians¹². It is, thus, also something the protagonist Henrietta takes note of when strolling through the narrow streets of the Italian town:

The fat barber sleeps in his costumers’ chair, his white overall as spotless as a surgeon’s before an operation. In the window his wife knits, glancing up now and again at the women who go in the Malgri Moda. It is Tuesday and the Jollycaffè is closed. The men usually sit outside it are nowhere to be seen. (“Running Away“, 973)

In the course of the story it can also be noticed that Henrietta has adapted to the Italian way of life. Soon she lunches in the way Italians do, and soon she enjoys life the Italians do.

Frusta means whip, and it’s also the word for the bread she has with Fontina for lunch. („Running Away“, 974)

In the cool of the _appartamento_ she lunches alone. With her _frusta_ and _Fontina_ she eats peppery radishes and drinks _acqua minerale_. (“Running Away”, 974)

In the evening she sits on her balcony, drinking a glass of _vino nobile_, hearing the English voices, and the voices of the Italians in and around the _fattoria_. (“Running Away”, 976)

To conclude, one can well see that even for English people, who are considered to be cold and reserved, it is easy to get in touch with the Italian way of life and to enjoy it. The so-called ‘Dolce far’ niente’ is a way of living Italians are famous for all over the world. It is, therefore, not even for Henrietta a big deal to become affected by this wonderful way of living and to adapt it in a way that seems suitable to her.

5.1.5.4. Landscape

Throughout William Trevor’s short story, the beautiful landscape of the Italian town the protagonist travelled to is described. As the story is set in the Tuscany, the reader soon gets a wonderful impression of its rolling countryside and the ancient buildings, which attract so many tourists year after year.

It is May. On the verges of the meadows and the wheat fields that stretch below the town pale roses are in bloom. Laburnum blossoms in the vineyards, wires for the vines stretching between the narrow trunks of the trees. It is the season of broom and clover, of poppies, and geraniums forgotten in the grass. Sleepy vipers emerge from the crevices, no longer kept down by the animals that once gazed these hillsides. Because of them Henrietta has bought rubber boots for walking in the woods or up Monte Totona. (“Running Away”, 973)

She has been shown the _cantina_ and the palace of the Contucci. She has looked across the slopes of terracotta roof-tiles to Monticchiello and Pienza. (“Running Away”, 974)

Later that day she walks to the Church of San Biagio, among the meadows below the walls of the town. Boys are playing football in the shade, girls lie in the grass. She goes over her vocabulary in her mind, passing by the church. She walks on white, dusty roads, between rows of slender pines. _Solivare_ is the word she has invented – to do with wandering alone. (“Running Away”, 975)

Reading these quotations makes it easy to imagine the landscape’s impressiveness. It is full of flowers in bloom which spread a wonderful scent. The roof-tiles made of terracotta are unique and a symbol for which the Tuscany is famous all over the world. Walking on dusty roads below the walls of the town the landscape creates an impression
that one pleasantly remembers.

3.1.5.5. Montepulciano

Even though the Italian small-town mentioned in the story is never explicitly named, one can infer from the hints given throughout that it is Montepulciano, a city located in the Val di Chiana, province of Siena in Tuscany. The city is built on the rounded hilltop of the Monte Poliziano and is an ancient Etruscan city which was under control of Florence in the Middle Ages, but which had been conquered by Siena in 1260. Montepulciano's main street is about twelve kilometres long and one of its most famous buildings is the church of the Madonna di San Biagio, which was planned by Antonio da Sangallo. Furthermore, the cantina and the palace of the Contucci family is mentioned in the story. Both are, again, located in Montepulciano. The palace was designed by Sangallo and there are tours offered for tourists to visit the Contucci wine cellars.

In the protagonist's description of the landscape, it appears that the weather is fine all the year around and that she enjoys the environment. This feature of Italianness helps Henrietta to forget her sorrows and to overcome the mortification of her husband's adulterous relationship with Sharon at home.

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5.2. “The Smoke Trees of San Pietro”

5.2.1. Plot

The protagonist of the short story “The Smoke Trees of San Pietro” by William Trevor is a boy, whose name and exact age is not given. His weak physical condition in the years of his childhood propels his mother to travel with him from their hometown Linvik, in Norway, all the way to San Pietro al Mare, in Italy, by train. They stay in a hotel called ‘Villa Parco’ for about two months in July and August, and they undertake this journey every summer. In their third summer, the protagonist and his mother make the acquaintance of Signora Binelli and her daughter Claudia from Genoa in Italy as well as with a certain Monsieur Paillez from Lille, in France, who apparently stays there in order to visit his mentally ill wife living in Triora. The protagonist as well as his mother seem to enjoy their stay at the ‘Villa Parco’ even though they do it for a different reason. Whereas the boy is very fond of swimming and the smoke trees, his mother, though married to his father, seems rather attracted by Monsieur Paillez. Thus, it does not take long for the protagonist and the other hotel guests to find out that Monsieur Paillez and the boy’s mother have an outer-marital relationship. In the end, the protagonist finds out that the marriage between his mother and his father is broken and that his mother only continued to undertake the journey in order to meet Monsieur Paillez.

5.2.2. Time

Determining the time of the action in the story is a difficult task. At the beginning of the short story the protagonist talks about the two most vivid memories of his early childhood. However, there is no reference to either a year or a season or rather a month to date these memories. As far as the time span of the plot is concerned, there are, however, four statements that make it possible to make interferences:

[...] he [Monsieur Paillez] appeared at the Villa Parco for the first time during our third summer, [...]. (“The Smoke Trees of San Pietro”, 1036)
I was eleven the summer Monsieur Paillez arrived at the Villa Parco. (“The Smoke Trees of San Pietro”, 1038)
When I was sixteen and seventeen we still returned to San Pietro. (“The Smoke Trees of San Pietro”, 1046)
As I grew older, my mother and I no longer had adjoining rooms. (“The Smoke Trees of San Pietro”, 1047)

Given the fact that the protagonist was eleven years old during the third summer (which was the first time Monsieur Paillez appeared at the Villa Parco), he must have been nine years old when he and his mother travelled to San Pietro al Mare for the first time. As he also mentions that they still travelled to Italy when he was sixteen and seventeen years and even older, one may infer that the time span of the plot is about ten years.

Regarding the season and the month(s) the boy and his mother travelled to Italy, two explicit facts are given:

It was because of my delicate constitution that my mother first took me to San Pietro al Mare, initiating a summer regime that was to continue throughout my childhood. (“The Smoke Trees of San Pietro”, 1035)
We always left Linvik on a Tuesday and stayed, en route, at the Hotel Kronberg in Hamburg and the Belvedere in Milan: we always remained for July and August at San Pietro. (“The Smoke Trees of San Pietro”, 1036)

Given these hints one may argue that the protagonist reports his summer memories of the months of July and August over a time span of about ten years but, there is no concrete reference regarding the actual historical context of the time.

5.2.3 Location

Like the short story “Running Away”, “The Smoke Trees of San Pietro” is located in two European countries. The first one is the protagonist’s home in Norway where he lives with his parents in the town of Linvik which is located in the south of Norway and which is referred to several times in the story:

I was taken to watch my father jumping as a member of the military team in Linvik when I was five years old. (“The Smoke Trees of San Pietro”, 1034)
‘A town called Linvik,’ my mother said, and two ladies in the garden listened while she described it. (“The Smoke Trees of San Pietro”, 1037)
My mother had [heard of the town Lille] and when he [Monsieur Paillez] questioned her again she mentioned Linvik, repeating the name because Monsieur Paillez had difficulty in understanding it at first. (“The Smoke Trees of San Pietro”, 1039)
That night I had a nightmare. My father and I were in the rector’s house in
Linvik. (“The Smoke Trees of San Pietro”, 1043)
On the way back to Linvik – in Hamburg, I believe it was – my mother said: […] ("The Smoke Trees of San Pietro", 1045)
In Linvik my father had other women. (“The Smoke Trees of San Pietro”, 1047)

The second location is in Italy, more specifically San Pietro al Mare. Furthermore, Triora is also mentioned. Monsieur Paillez’s ‘mad’ wife lives there and the boy and his mother once take a day trip to this town:

From the moment the train had begun to slow down for San Pietro I’d felt exhilarated. ("The Smoke Trees of San Pietro”, 1035)
‘I have a little business to conduct in Triora,’ Monsieur Paillez said. (“The Smoke Trees of San Pietro”, 1039)
‘There is a fine Deposition in Triora,’ Monsieur Paillez said on the lawn after breakfast. ‘You might find it worth the journey.’
My mother answered as though she’d been expecting the suggestion. She answered quickly, almost before Monsieur Paillez had ceased to speak, and then she turned to me to say a visit to Triora might make an outing. (“The Smoke Trees of San Pietro”, 1044)

Concerning the locations of San Pietro al Mare and Triora it is important to add that Triora is a real city in Liguria, whereas San Pietro is a fictional name of place. For the protagonist, the locations’ atmosphere is new and impressive. The Mediterranean climate makes him feel exhilarated and it is something he likes and enjoys very much. Also, the smoke trees function as something exotic and unknown as the main character has never seen them before.

5.2.4. Characterisation

5.2.4.1. Protagonist

The protagonist of “The Smoke Trees of San Pietro” is a boy whose name is never revealed. He is the first person narrator and reports about his childhood memories, about his father, his mother, Dr Edlund, and the journeys to San Pietro al Mare:

I was taken to watch my father jumping as a member of the military team in Linvik when I was five years old. […]. I remember the applause and his saluting, and my mother’s fingers tightening on my arm.
That is the most vivid memory of that early time in my childhood. We drove
away from the stadium and then there was my first dinner in a restaurant, my mother and father on either side of me, red roses in a vase, a candle burning in a wooden candlestick that was painted blue and green.

[...].
There is another one [a memory of the early childhood]. In his surgery Dr Edlund probed my eyes with the beam of a torch that was as slim as a pencil. The disc of his stethoscope lingered on my back and chest, my reflexes were tested, my throat examined, my blood gathered in a capsule, the cavities of my body sounded. (“The Smoke Trees of San Pietro”, 1034)
We went by train and because of my delicate constitution more time was devoted to the journey than might otherwise have been considered necessary. (“The Smoke Trees of San Pietro”, 1035)

The boy's weak physical constitution is the reason why he and his mother travel to Italy as the mild climate there is supposed to be good for him:

And afterwards, when weeks had passed, it was declared that I was not strong. Tiredness in future was to be avoided; I must canter more gently; becoming hot was not good. ‘He will be different from what we imagined,’ my father said. ‘That is all.’ I did not, then, sense the disappointment in his voice. (“The Smoke Trees of San Pietro”, 1034)

During the holidays at San Pietro al Mare the protagonist regularly writes a postcard to his father, on which his mother always adds a few lines on the boy’s state of health:

‘We must complete our postcard,’ my mother would say on the way in to dinner or during the meal itself, and afterwards we would do so before dropping the postcard into the letter-box in the hall. Sometimes I made a drawing on it for my father, a caricature of a face or the outline of a shell we’d found, and from my mother there would always be a reference to my health. (“The Smoke Trees of San Pietro”, 1036)

The protagonist seems to enjoy the holidays very much as he is impressed by people speaking Italian as well as San Pietro’s wonderful flowers yet unfamiliar to him:

Beyond that the garden of the Villa Parco was spread with flowers that were quite unfamiliar to me: burgeoning shrubs of oleander and bougainvillaea, and trees called smoke trees, so my mother said. In the hotel I loved the sound of Italian, the mysterious words and phrases the chambermaids and the waiters called out to one another. (“The Smoke Trees of San Pietro”, 1036)

To the boy, Italy is a place of joy and relaxation until one day he is old enough to find out why his mother also likes the place so much and is happy to be able to return to San
That was the moment my childhood ended. It is the most devious irony that Dr Edlund’s bluff assurances – certainly not believed by him – anticipated the circumstance that allows me now to look back to those summers in San Pietro al mare, and to that summer in particular. It is, of course, the same circumstance that allows me to remember the rest of each year in Linvik. I did not know in my childhood that my mother and father had ceased to love one another. I did not know that it was my delicate constitution that kept them tied to one another; a child who had not long to live should not, in fairness, have to tolerate a family’s disruption as well as everything else. (“The Smoke Trees of San Pietro”, 1046)

5.2.4.2. The Protagonist’s Mother

According to the protagonist’s statements in the short story, his mother seems to be a very beautiful woman who is happily married to her husband.

My mother was the most beautiful woman I have ever seen.

[...] I wondered which feature it was that in particular made my mother’s beauty so remarkable. One moment it seemed to be the candlelight gleaming on her pale hair, the next the blue of her eyes, and then her lips and the tiny wrinkle on her forehead, and then the graceful way she held her head. (“The Smoke Trees of San Pietro”, 1034)

Due to her son’s delicate constitution, she devotes much time to the journey to San Pietro al Mare, but obviously she does not seem to mind the job. Having arrived in Italy, his mother seems to be nervous at first, but as time goes by, she makes friends with several other guests at the hotel:

The ladies were Italian, Signora Binelli and her daughter Claudia. They came from Genoa, thy told my mother, which was a city renowned for its trade associations and its cuisine. (“The Smoke Trees of San Pietro”; 1037) That was the beginning of Monsieur Paillez’s friendship with my mother. The following morning, when we were resting after breakfast on the lawn, he did not pass our table but again dropped into conversation and then inquired if he might sit down. (“The Smoke Trees of San Pietro”, 1040)

Soon, the protagonist’s mother seems to become more than a friend to Monsieur Paillez:
When the door unexpectedly opened I closed my eyes, not wishing my mother to know I was frightened of sleeping. She came softly to my bedside, stood still, and then re-crossed the room. Before she closed the door she said: ‘He is sleeping.’ Monsieur Paillez’s voice replied that that was good. (“The Smoke Trees of San Pietro”, 1044)

Nevertheless, she apparently does not want her son to mention a word about Monsieur Paillez at home; a behaviour that may show that the mother wants to hide something from her husband:

She read it [the postcard] carefully, but did not immediately add her own few sentences. She would do that later, she said, placing the postcard in her handbag. (I afterwards found it, torn into little pieces, in the wastepaper basket in her room.)

[…] ‘I shall not say much about Monsieur Paillez,’ my mother said, ‘in case I stupidly divulge a little secret. When you talk about a person you sometimes do so without thinking. So perhaps we should neither of us much mention Monsieur Paillez.’ As I listened, I knew that I had never before heard my mother say anything as silly. (“The Smoke Trees of San Pietro”, 1045-1046)

In the end, the roles of the protagonist and his mother seem to change. Whereas she was the one who had a so-called duty to take her sick son to Italy at first, it is the protagonist who later has the duty of accompanying his mother to San Pietro al Mare as this has become “the very breath of her life” (“The Smoke Trees of San Pietro”, 1046):

What had begun for my mother as a duty, taking her weakling child down through Europe to the sun, became the very breath of her life. Long after it was necessary to do so we continued to make the journey, our roles reverse, I now being the one inspired by compassion. The mad wife of Monsieur Paillez, once visited in compassion, died; but Monsieur Paillez did not cease to return to the Villa Parco. (“The Smoke Trees of San Pietro”, 1046)

All in all, one can say that the protagonist’s mother is one of the central figures for his perception of Italy. Whereas he really seemed to have loved the change from his everyday life in the beginning, Italy also represents the country that made his childhood end; and this was obviously a painful experience.

5.2.4.3. Monsieur Paillez

Monsieur Paillez is a man from Lille in France who for the first time appears at the Villa
Parco in San Pietro al Mare during the third summer of the protagonist and his mother. He is described as “a thin, tall, dark-haired man in a linen suit” (“The Smoke Trees of San Pietro”, 1036) who stays in the hotel, because he has business to conduct in Triora, which is just an excuse for visiting his mentally ill wife.

‘I have a little business to conduct in Triora,’ Monsieur Paillez said. (“The Smoke Trees of San Pietro”, 1039)

‘Monsieur Paillez visits his wife,’ my mother said. ‘It is his manner of speech to call it business.’ (“The Smoke Trees of San Pietro”, 1040)

The man from Lille soon makes friends with the protagonist and his mother, with whom he apparently also quickly begins to have an affair. More than that, the protagonist’s mother sees in him “the breath of her life” and thus he becomes the reason for her to return to San Pietro al Mare every year long after her son's poor health had been overcome. He also does so after his wife has died.

5.2.4.4. Signora Binelli and her Daughter Claudia

In “The Smoke Trees of San Pietro”, Signora Binelli and her daughter Claudia are two Italian ladies from Genoa.

Signora Binelli was very stout. She had smooth white skin, very tight, that seemed to labour under so much strain as her silk dresses did. She knew, […], not to wear over-bright clothes. There was always some black in them – in the oak leaves that patterned dark maroon or green, behind swirls of blue or brown. […]

Signora Binelli’s daughter, Claudia, was not at all like that. She was a film star we were told, and certainly she presented that appearance, many of her fingers displaying jewelled rings, her huge red lips perpetually parted to display a glistening flash of snowy teeth. Her eyes were huge also, shown off to best effect by the dark saucers beneath them. Her clothes were more colourful than Signora Binelli’s, but discreetly so. My mother said Claudia had taste. (“The Smoke Trees of San Pietro”, 1037)

Even though the two ladies do not have a major role in the short story, they represent Italy in some way. They love to talk about their home town Genoa, being of the opinion that it is a place that represents Italy in a very positive way:

They spoke of formidable grey stone and formidable palaces, stirring in the
false impression that the palaces had been carved out of the side of an immense grey mountain. A passenger lift went up and down all day long between the heights of Genoa and its depths, making its passage through the mountain rock. This information the Italian ladies repeated, remarking that the lift was a great deal larger and more powerful that the one that conveyed us from the garden of the Villa Parco to the bathing place. The palaces of Genoa were built of rectangular blocks and decoratively finished, they said, and the earlier imprecision was adjusted in my mind. (“The Smoke Trees of San Pietro”, 1037)

In this passage, Signora Binelli and her daughter Claudia address many important factors of Genoa. They talk about Genoa’s glorious past, its cultural heritage and its impressive architecture. Furthermore, they speak of Genoa’s palaces, the way they are built and all features that are special about them. Listening to Signora Binelli’s and Claudia’s description of Genoa makes it possible for the protagonist to adjust his earlier imprecision in his mind. The image of Genoa described is very impressive and remains vivid in his memory.

5.2.4.5. The Protagonist’s Father

The protagonist’s father is called Johan. In the course of the short story one does not learn much about the father, except for the few facts that he was a great horseman, that he once took his son and his wife out for dinner after he had been jumping as a member of the military team in Linvik, and that also he seemed to have had other women back home in Norway. Additionally, by the time the protagonist’s childhood had ended, the father sometimes got drunk in the evenings. Even though the protagonist admires his father at the beginning and for several years after his early childhood, it seems that later he blames himself and his delicate constitution for having caused feelings of guilt to their parents which furthermore did not allow them to show that they no longer love each other.

In Linvik my father had other women. After my childhood ended I noticed that sometimes in the evenings he was drunk. It won’t be long, he and my mother must have so often thought, but they were steadfast in their honourable resolve. (“The Smoke Trees of San Pietro”, 1047)

5.2.4.6. Dr Edlund
Even though Dr Edlund is only mentioned twice in the short story, he seems to be accused by the protagonist for the separation of his mother and his father in one way or the other. He also makes the protagonist feel guilty for his mother having to devote so much time for the journey to Italy which could have been done much more quickly. Nevertheless, Dr Edlund causes excitement when recommending that the child should go on a journey to Italy because of the mild climate. In the end, however, the protagonist blames Dr Edlund for being one important reason why his parents’ marriage failed:

That was the moment my childhood ended. It is the most devious irony that Dr Edlund’s bluff assurances – certainly not believed by him – anticipated the circumstance that allows me now to look back to those summers in San Pietro al Mare, and to that summer in particular. It is, of course, the same circumstance that allows me to remember the rest of each year in Linvik. ("The Smoke Trees of San Pietro", 1046)

To conclude, all characters are according to the protagonist very important figures in the protagonist’s memory. In his eyes, they all contribute in some way or other in ending his childhood prematurely.

5.2.5. Features of Italianness

5.2.5.1. Landscape

Like “Running Away”, the protagonist of “The Smoke Trees of San Pietro” is impressed by Italy's beautiful landscape, and, especially the exotic flowers and trees which he had so far never seen at home.

Glass doors which stretched from the ceiling to the floor were thrown wide open to a terrace with a decorated balustrade – coloured medallions set among its brief, grey pillars. Beyond that the garden of the Villa Parco was spread with flowers that were quite unfamiliar to me: burgeoning shrubs of oleander and bougainvillaea, and trees called smoke trees, so my mother said. ("The Smoke Trees of San Pietro", 1035) The water was of tranquillity and a clear blueness that made it seem more like a lake than the sea. The rocks were washed white, like smooth, curved bones that blissfully held your body when you lay on them. ("The Smoke Trees of San Pietro", 1038)
Due to the fact that the climate is much milder in Italy than in Norway, the protagonist is impressed by the different kinds of flowers and the vegetation, especially by the smoke trees. All in all, the impressions gained are completely new to the main character. The vegetation appears exotic and wonderful. The way the rocks are washed by the water is something he apparently has not yet seen before.

5.2.5.2. The Smoke Trees of San Pietro

The “smoke tree” is a genus of two species which grows in the temperate climate of the Northern Hemisphere. Its leaves are simple and oval; in spring, it blossoms green and then bursts into ‘smoke’, a spectacle that may even last up to two months during the summer.

According to the description in the story, the “smoke tree” spreads a wonderful scent in the evening hours. Moreover, it seems to be very hard to draw a smoke tree as it consists of so many little flowers and branches that this can become a real challenge:

‘The scent in the air is the evening scent of the smoke trees,’ Monsieur Paillez said. (Afterwards – over dinner – my mother confessed to me that she had only been aware of the familiar scent of bougainvillaea, and had never before heard that smoke trees gave off a perfume of any kind.) (“The Smoke Trees of San Pietro”, 1040)
‘Tell me what you like best to draw,’ Monsieur Paillez invited me, ‘here in San Pietro.’

I could not think what to reply – the rocks where we bathed? The waiters? The promenade when we sat outside a café? Claudia or Signora Binelli? So I said:

‘The smoke trees because they are so difficult.’ It was true. Try as I would, I could not adequately represent the misty foliage or catch the subtlety of its colours.
‘And no drawing of course,’ my mother said, ‘could ever convey the smoke trees' evening scent.’ (“The Smoke Trees of San Pietro”, 1042)

The protagonist is especially fond of Italy’s landscape and its beautiful flowers. When taking into consideration that he actually lived in the little town called of Linvik in Norway all his life, one may probably better understand that the first impression of Italy is a wonderful and positive one.

5.2.5.3. La Dolce Vita

From the moment the train had begun to slow down for San Pietro I’d felt exhilarated. I was supposed not to carry heavy luggage but I had done so none the less, assisting the porter at the station to pack our suitcases into the taxi while my mother was at the Cambio. We had driven by palm trees – the first time I had ever seen such trees – and beyond them the sea was a shimmer of blue, just like the sky. Then the taxi turned abruptly, leaving behind the strolling couples on the promenade – the men in white suits, women in beach dresses – and the coloured umbrellas that offered each café table a pool of shade. For a very short time, no more than half a minute perhaps, the taxi climbed a hill which became quite steep and then drew up at the Villa Parco. The palm trees and the promenade were far below, the limpid sea appeared to stretch for ever (“The Smoke Trees of San Pietro”, 1035).

From this passage one can well gain an insight into the Italian way of life. It is not hard to imagine the pleasant atmosphere that is present in the little town named San Pietro; an aura that spreads through the whole countryside. When the sky is blue and the sun is shining Italian people enjoy going to the beach (given the fact that there is one nearby), sipping ice cold drinks and having a good time. The cliché of the dolce vita is reinforced by the beautiful landscape which is dominated by palm trees which do not grow in northern areas. For visitors of Italy, the first impression of the country, its people, and the dolce vita lifestyle is often magnificent and something one may dream about even back home.

5.2.5.4. “Amore”

The topic of love comes up two times in the story. Firstly, when the protagonist feels that he has a little crush on Signora Binelli’s daughter Claudia, and, secondly, when the protagonist’s mother starts having an affair with the Frenchman Monsieur Paillez. However, the amore of the protagonist for Claudia is rather to be regarded as a teenage crush or a kind of summer love, whereas the amore between Monsieur Paillez and the protagonist’s mother has serious consequences and is probably adulterous.

When referring to the feelings the protagonist has for Claudia, it can be said that he apparently looks at her in a way other people probably do not do.

Claudia’s swimming bag hung from the arm of her chair; sunglasses obscured her magnificent eyes. A yellow-backed look, Itinerario Svizzero, was on the
table beside the ashtray; she smoked a cigarette. ("The Smoke Trees of San Pietro", 1037)

Even though the protagonist never explicitly mentions that he has a crush on Claudia, one can see that he does when reading several passages. He describes many things she says or does in a very detailed way and it also appears that he watches for and after her most of the time. One can, of course, argue, that a crush on an a girl that is older has nothing to do with real amore, but it is an amorous affair after all.

The affair between Monsieur Paillez and the protagonist's mother, it is to say that it is not without serious consequences. One can notice that due to the circumstances of loneliness and a marriage crisis on both sides, Monsieur Paillez and the protagonist's mother are in a way star-crossed lovers. Nevertheless, the attraction quickly changes into passionate amore despite the fact that both of them are legally married to other partners.

As can be seen from the examples of the story given above, amore makes people act differently and in an uncontrolled manner. Whether this is to be judged as good or rather bad is everyone’s own decision.

5.2.5.5. French vs. Italian People

The French and Italians get their priorities right: good art, good love, good sex, good food – in any order, as it comes. This is what they want – which isn’t the same as this is what they get. The French and Italians love to communicate, love to live on the outside. They are fearless in pleasure. They enjoy a greater freedom in their bodies and emotions than do the British. Art is freedom; sex and touch are freedom. (Fallowell, 306)

Given this quotation it is not hard to see that one can draw many parallels between the French and Italian behaviour and way of thinking. The relationship between French and Italian people can be compared to the relationship of cousins. They always quarrel who the better cheese and winemaker is and who the better lover is. In general, they like each other, but they would never admit to do so. When it comes to the Italians in the short story, the protagonist gets the following impression:

In the hotel I loved the sound of Italian, the mysterious words and phrases the chambermaids and the waiters called out to one another. ("The Smoke Trees of San Pietro", 1035)
He is apparently very fond of the Italian language, especially if it is spoken by the Italians. Even though he describes the words as somehow mysterious, he is in no way afraid of it.

When it comes to Monsieur Paillez, the Frenchman, on the other hand, it is obvious that the protagonist seems to be unsure whether to like him or not. At the beginning he is very happy that his mother has found a friend she obviously likes very much, but later in the story, after he has found out that they are having an affair he does not like him any more. The protagonist accepts the new circumstances when he also finds out that the marriage between his mother and his father has already failed for quite a long time.

That the protagonist’s memories of Italy are somehow ambivalent. He likes being in Italy as this country appears to him and effects a change in his everyday life. Furthermore, he enjoys watching Italians, listening to their language and observing the countryside and landscape with its many palm trees and flowers unknown in Norway. Nevertheless, his memories of Italy are always clouded by the discovery that his parents no longer love each other. Therefore, he regards Italy as the country that terminated his childhood. This represents a major step in his development as Italy made develop grow from his wonderful childhood into a teenager whose life is no longer that free of care and worry:

That was the moment my childhood ended. […]. I did not know in my childhood that my mother and father had ceased to love one another. I did not know that it was my delicate constitution that kept them tied to one another; a child who had not long to live should not, in fairness, have to tolerate a family’s disruption as well as everything else. (“The Smoke Trees of San Pietro“, 1047)
6. Conclusion

The aim of this thesis has been to provide a study about Italianness and all features of it becoming manifest in selected works of English fiction by Maeve Binchy, Elizabeth Spencer, and William Trevor. These texts provided a basis for the analysis and different insights on how the protagonists responded to Italy's country, its culture, and its lifestyle. External sources helped to compare and support arguments given in the texts and made it possible to refer to Italianness from various extensive perspectives. All textual and text-external sources combine to provide a complex picture of “Italianness” and its impact on perception of Italy by the characters. By applying an imagological approach, aspects of Italy and the cross-cultural interactions of Italy and its visitors could be made manifest.
7. Bibliography

Primary Sources


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9. Appendix

A short review on the authors

Maeve Binchy, daughter of a lawyer and a nurse, was born on 28 May 1940 in Dalkey, Dublin. She was educated in Killiney, a town near Dalkey, at the Holy Child Convent and graduated from the University of Dublin, earning herself a degree in History. After her graduation she began working as a teacher at a Jewish school. Some years later her parents presented her with a journey to Israel which she enjoyed so much that she stayed there for several months, working in kibbutzim. During her stay, Maeve regularly sent letters to her parents telling about her life and the war in Israel. Moved by its content, Maeve’s parents decided to sell the letters to the Irish Times.

From 1969 she worked as a columnist for the Irish Times, a post that she still holds today. Besides, Maeve Binchy also wrote short stories, publishing her first collection of short stories in the mid-1970s. Her first novel “Light a Penny Candle” becomes her first, huge success in 1982. Later she continues writing short stories and, inter alia, a television drama winning the “Jacobs Award” and the “Prague Television Award for Best Script in 1979” for “Deeply Regretted By”. Maeve Binchy is one of the most successful bestseller-author in England, the USA, and in Germany and has sold over six million books. She lives with her husband Gordon Snell and two cats in Dublin, near the house in which she spent her childhood.

Elizabeth Spencer was born on 19 July 1921. After graduating from J.Z. George High School in North Carrollton, Mississippi, she attended Belhaven College in Jackson in 1938. Five years later, she attended Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee, earning her degree. Before she became a reporter of the Nashville Tennessean, she worked as a teacher of English in schools. After that, Elizabeth Spencer taught traditional English courses and creative writing at the University of Mississippi. In 1953, she left Mississippi for Italy, where she met her husband John Rusher of Cornwall. After the marriage, Elizabeth Spencer and her husband lived in Canada before again returning to Italy. Finally, in 1986, they settled at Chapel Hill, North Carolina, where Elizabeth Spencer even lives after her husband’s death in 1998. Currently, she is retired.

Elizabeth Spencer has received the “Award of Merit Medal for the Short Story” from the
American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters. She has further been awarded the “Cleanth Brooks Medal” by the Fellowship of Southern Writers as well as the “North Carolina Award for Literature”. All in all, Elizabeth Spencer is the author of nine novels, many short stories, and the novella “The Light in the Piazza”.

**William Trevor**, son of a bank manager, was born on 24 May 1928 in Michelstown, County Cork, Ireland. After his education at St Columba’s College in County Dublin and Trinity College in Dublin, he worked for a short time as teacher and later as copywriter in an advertising agency. He married his wife Jane Ryan in 1952 after having been forced to settle in England due to Ireland’s depressed national economy. With Jane Ryan he had two sons. In 1965, he began working as a writer. Besides, he was a passionate sculptor exhibiting from time to time in Dublin and London. The number of his novels and short stories is big.

For his services in literature he was awarded an honorary “Commander of the Order of the British Empire” in 1977 and in 1994 he became a Companion of Literature. In 1999 William Trevor was awarded the David Cohen British Literature Prize by the Arts Council of England in recognition of his work. In 2002, he was knighted. William Trevor is a member of the Irish Academy of Letters and was awarded the Bob Hughes Lifetime Achievement Award in Irish Literature in 2008. He lives in Devon.
German Abstract


interessanter Aspekt ergibt sich aus der Tatsache, dass alle Protagonisten den Aufenthalt in Italien als durchaus angenehm empfinden und nur in den seltensten Fällen mit negativen Emotionen in Verbindung setzen.

Abschließend ist zu betonen, dass es durchaus interessant zu beobachten ist, inwiefern sich die Erlebnisse in einem (meist unbekannten) Land in der Persönlichkeit eines Charakters widerspiegeln. In so gut wie allen Geschichten kann nämlich beobachtet werden, dass viele Charaktere einer „Change of Attitude“ untergehen, da sie bestimmte Ereignisse aus einer komplett neuen Sichtweise betrachten können. Fernab von zu Hause wird auf ein scheinbar grundlegendes Problem nur mehr von oben herab geblickt, was demnach impliziert, dass sich völlig neue, bis jetzt unbekannte Lösungsmöglichkeiten auftun. Die Übernahme der italienischen Leichtigkeit bezüglich des Lebens birgt damit viele Vorteile in sich und spiegelt sich insofern auch in der positiven Einstellung gegenüber dem Land und alles was es mit sich bringt wieder.
Lebenslauf

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