

# The Emptiness and Boredom of Affluent Life – Cesare Pavese’s Novel, *Among Women Only*\*

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Cesare Pavese (1908-1950), one of the most famous Italian writers who was born precisely one hundred years ago, wrote the novel, *The Lonely Women*, in 1949. It describes the superficiality of relationships and the isolation of the individual. The unmarried Clelia Oitana from an impoverished background has worked her way up to become a successful couturière and is supposed to open up a fashion house in Turin for her Roman company. Through her work she comes into contact with many people from the upper classes. In a laconic, matter-of-fact style, Pavese sketches a spectrum of female portraits, women full of a weariness with living who try to divert themselves with luxury, a hectic pace and conversations about literature and theatre. The questionable character of this unfulfilled way of living is unmasked by the attempted suicide by Rosetta, one of the more sensitive among these women. Clelia herself, liberated from the idleness of the other women through work, takes pleasure on the side from receptions, artists’ parties, excursions and occasional affairs. She is self-sufficient, enjoys being alone and tries to give Rosetta, too, something to live for, but is unable to save her. A year after the novel was published, Pavese, whose relationships with women were full of disappointments, took his own life.

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To go into more detail, the first person narrator, Clelia Oitana, arrives in Turin during carnival. She doesn’t call anybody, and nobody knows that she is staying in this hotel. She offers the maid the option of going home early. When the maid suddenly asks, after a few attempts at conversation on the part of Clelia, whether she could go now, Clelia thinks that once again she has talked too much. Clelia

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takes a bath and recalls her father who, through his death back then, prevented her from celebrating carnival. And that, on that evening, she had discovered that

*“If I want to do something, if I want to achieve something in life, I must not tie myself to anybody, be dependent on anybody, like I was bound to this burdensome daddy”.* (p. 7 all page references in the following to the German edition, Cesare Pavese, *Die einsamen Frauen* Berlin 2008)

The telephone rings and a man asks to speak to her. She puts him off to the next day, slips into her dressing gown and opens the door slightly where, in the corridor, she sees a crowd of people. Two men in white coats are carrying a stretcher out on which a young woman is lying. She had been found dying (poisoned).

The next day, Clelia receives a bouquet of flowers, the first daffodils from her boyfriend, Maurizio, in Rome. She gets dressed and goes out. Turin seems to her like a city that has just been built. Nobody simply goes for a stroll. Everybody seems busy. Back at the hotel she finds her acquaintance, Morelli, who had left his visiting card for her the previous day. She asks him to tell her about the scandal yesterday with the young girl in the hotel. He does not ask what she is doing in Turin. In the evening they go to a ball together.

It disturbs him that, dressed in overalls, she supervises the painters in the new premises of her company. Before the ball, Clelia goes to the hairdresser’s and to the part of town where she once lived, in Via della Basilica. She tells Morelli something about all this at the ball.

*“The people who are dancing and getting drunk here come from the better circles. They have grown up with servants, nannies, staff. With the freshness of summer and privileges. That’s no great achievement. Who among them would have managed to work hard and climb from out of nothing, out of a backyard that is nothing but a hole, to this ball?”.* (19)

A corpulent lady asks her about the condition of the young woman on the stretcher. They say that she is out of danger, Clelia replies. They say that she probably had been drunk and had taken an overdose.

Morelli notes that Clelia has prejudices, even with respect to winning the lottery. She wants to achieve everything through her own powers. Over the next few days, Clelia goes to Via Po, where the store is situated whose opening she has to organize, and which is still being converted. Someone summons the head of the workers, Becuccio, to her, who conducts her through the premises and shows her the work they have done. He is burly, has curly hair and shows his teeth when he smiles. He calls the site manager for Clelia. Clelia tells them that they want to open for business at the end of the month. Then Clelia goes away, through the streets of Turin. She always preferred experiencing carnival in the alley-ways.

*“I was always so unbound, my own person, free to wander through Turin and to do with tomorrow as I like”.* (29)

She is no longer young and knows what a man, even the best of them, is worth.

In the evening, Morelli takes her along to a salon. They all give her their hands very seriously, or unwillingly, and wait for somebody to say something. She consoles herself with the thought that she can cope with everything in the world very well alone, and that these were people whom she would never see again anyway. Loris is a painter and starts speaking about a planned stage production of a theatre group. It is not a matter of imitating old theatrical methods, but of presenting the naked word of the text. The conversation about the stage production then ebbs.

Mariella assures Clelia that she wants to see her again, to speak with her and ask her to assist the group with the stage production. They talk about Rosetta Mola, who had tried to kill herself. Mariella

thinks that she is recovering, but that she did not want to see anybody. She was only asking to see her girl friend, Momina. Clelia takes her leave.

A few days later, Mariella extends an invitation to her and picks her up in Via Po. They meet Loris and Nene, a young woman with a fringe and erratic behaviour. They start talking about her affairs and about people whom Clelia does not know. Clelia thinks that these people only speak in such a complicated way just for the hell of it. Then everything starts to turn again on the performance and the question whether, after the episode with Rosetta, they can still do a suicide on stage. Momina, her friend, who arrives after some time, is against it.

Domineering, bad tempered and with a sour expression, she comes in and immediately dominates the conversation, hopping effusively from one subject to the other, dancing attendance upon Clelia, wanting to enchant her, but she does not come back to the subject of the theatre play. She then takes Clelia back to Via Po. On the way there they have a cocktail and talk about Turin and Rome. Momina behaves coldly and dismissively, speaking of family ties in a deprecatory way.

They spend the next evening together again. To get rid of a man at the wine fair, she dances with Momina.

*"I find it repulsive to dance with a woman. But I wanted to dissipate a suspicion, and that is always the fastest way to do so". (55)*

But Momina seems to no longer want to do so, is only a bit over-excited. They visit Morelli at his home. They speak about having children. Momina says,

*"It's a matter of a woman, when she has a child, no longer being herself. She has to accept so many things, has to say yes. And is it worth saying yes?". (57)*

One day Clelia goes again to her old haunt. There she meets an old girl-friend, Gisella, in a shop. They tell each other about their past lives. Clelia used to say often that her aim was to be successful, to come back to these alley-ways of her youth and be admired. But the faces of the ordinary people have all disappeared. Clelia recalls that she ran away from her mother just in time, and that she had always said that men were a *"sorry affair"* (63), not bad, but stupid.

To Clelia, only the hours spent in Via Po don't seem to be wasted. The bricklayers and painters have finished their work. Now she has to take on the most difficult task, the interior design. Clelia negotiates with the architect, Febo. She takes him to bed without further ado.

*"But Febo was red, stubborn and hairy, and he obviously had decided that I was his type". (67)*

He wants to know what Clelia thinks about all her acquaintances – Mariella, Nene, Loris, Morelli and Momina. Then they choose curtains at an exhibition where all these people are and they agree to undertake an excursion to a cabin in the mountains.

Momina, Rosetta and Clelia stop in front of one of the painter's villas at the foot of the mountains. The others will wait for them later in Saint-Vincent. Today Rosetta is wearing a skirt and tennis shoes. Her mother also pops up. Momina asks her how Rosetta is and urges her to make Rosetta come back to Turin. Everybody was already asking about her, she says. Then they meet the others in Saint-Vincent. While the others are in the gambling room, they go to the bar. The conversation turns to the stage production and its connection with Rosetta's attempted suicide. Rosetta says that it has no meaning. Momina questions Clelia about how Rosetta looked that night. But she reports that she was scarcely disfigured on the stretcher. Rosetta makes a remark to Clelia:

*"Afterwards you feel worse than before. That is what is so horrible". (74)*

Nene tries to hug and kiss Rosetta, but she puts an end to the fuss. They go with Febo to another bar where he encourages Rosetta to drink and to talk about her past friendship. Then they take her to

her mother. Back in the hotel, Febo is completely drunk and grabs Clelia, who lets it all happen without showing any emotion.

The next morning they stroll through the town. Momina is questioned about Rosetta's affair with Loris. She says that she had taken painting lessons with him, but suddenly stopped. He had constantly been at their home. Momina asks Clelia whether she knows why Rosetta tried to kill herself and describes her own horror about living. Then they all travel back to Turin. Before that, Clelia has a moment alone with Rosetta, who takes her to a place where she often retired into seclusion to read. They talk about knowing and deceiving oneself about people. Clelia thinks that when working together, one can only be badly disappointed and thinks that Rosetta and Momina didn't know what work was because they had never had to work for their evening meal. Clelia goes back to Via Po to inspect the work, where she meets Becuccio and reproaches him about delayed deliveries. When they inspect the crystal items, she suddenly feels his hand in the straw. Laconically she says that he should take care because these goods are precious, and that he should stop immediately.

The fashion salon is supposed to open mid-March. The people in Rome want the change cabins and the salon on the first floor to be redesigned in the company's own style. Clelia travels briefly to Rome for clarification. Madame proposes to her to completely take over the store in Turin. Back in Turin, Clelia looks for an interior designer who understands something about baroque, in which style the shop is to be furnished. Febo, the architect, tries to kiss her. Instead she offers him her hand. Then she goes through the antique stores with Morelli. When they do not find anything there, she proposes that they go to Donna Clementina to see her porcelain collection.

In the evening they go back once again to listen to a violinist. On the whole, Clelia is bored. The violinist then wants to treat them all to a drink, which means stopping in front of the cafes, negotiating and then going on further. Clelia says to Rosetta that there are too many people celebrating, too many puffed-up artists in Turin. Momina asks Rosetta to tell her how she had ended up in the hotel and taken the overdose. Rosetta's eyes fill with tears. Momina does not notice and keeps on pressing. She says that she only wanted to help and that she understood when somebody wanted to kill themselves, but then properly, so that it works. Rosetta, by contrast, she said, gave her the impression of a jilted little seamstress. Rosetta stutters breathlessly that she hates Momina, who in turn asks her what she is accusing her of, since after all, they are friends. Clelia asks whether they had slept together, to which neither of them responds.

Rosetta claims that she is not angry with anybody. She says at that time she had simply turned out the light and did not want to see anybody. In the hospital she woke up again. The next day she visits Clelia in Via Po. They go for a walk. She says to Clelia that she is envious of her, that it is a fine thing to work like she does. Then, during the course of the conversation, she admits that she herself doesn't know why she went to the hotel that morning. For a long time she had had a horror of the night. The thought of having finished another day, to be alone with her disgust was unbearable for her. And then she took the Veronal. Momina, she says, is the only friend she has. Years ago she was her first love. Now, she claims, they are just friends.

They make a date to see each other again soon. Together with Febo, Clelia looks around Milan for some glass furniture. When he wants to touch her again, she gives him a black eye. She says that she does not have affairs with work associates. But he asks her to be his woman that evening. They go to various bars. Febo asks Clelia about her background and she answers that she comes more or less from the milieu of the down-and-out customers in the pub. Then she wanted to get out and thought that in other cases she had consoled herself with the position she had achieved.

Becuccio also wants to have a word to say about the matter of the antique furniture. He had heard of a cabinet-maker whom he visits together with Clelia. But the cabinet-maker declines with the argument that it is a shame to put beautiful furniture in a shop. Later on, Clelia goes to an auction exhibition with Morelli, who admonishes her for only ever working and never taking a vacation. Clelia remarks that there was one person who was serious: Rosetta Mola. When Clelia thinks about drinking her coffee in the morning, not knowing anybody and making plans, and then building up the

business occurs to her, she sees that they are the only beautiful moments in Turin. Her real vice, she says, was her pleasure in being alone.

Days later Rosetta turns up again. Clelia asks her whether she was no longer painting and she replies,

*“Only activities to which one is forced by hunger are those that one does not give up”.* (114)

The next day, she shows up again and asks Clelia whether she reads a lot and admits that she herself has read a lot and had been to university. She says that as if she were ashamed of it. Momina, she says, was aristocratic and had been married. Rosetta claims to be like Momina. Then they all undertake an excursion to the Riviera, with a villa above Noli as destination.

Rosetta relates that a year ago she wanted to become a nun but that they did not want her. Nuns had to be virgins. After breakfast they all go down to the sea. Mariella takes Clelia aside and asks her to help Rosetta, to distract her. Clelia emphasizes once again that Rosetta had tried to kill herself because she was sick of Momina, the stage production, Mariella and all the others. Then the group wants to travel on to San Remo, but Nene gets car-sick.

Clelia asks Momina whether she only likes women. She replies that neither she nor Rosetta is interested in women. It had been three years ago. Momina had been there with someone in the hotel. Rosetta had come upon her by surprise and wanted to play the courageous one. Then they all travel back to Noli, passing through the little village of Savona. There a conversation develops about work, and Rosetta remarks that to work in an office also means to sell oneself. She says there are many ways to sell oneself and that she does not know which one was the most senseless. And turning to Clelia she adds that she must not think that she despises prostitutes. They, too, only wanted to survive. Then they finally drive back to Noli.

In a conversation with Clelia, Rosetta remarks that men made everything dirty, like children did. Clelia asks about the role of women. Rosetta avers that she is not lesbian.

*“But love as such is a dirty affair”.* (133)

They make an arrangement to meet at Loris’ party. Beforehand, Clelia calls Momina who says that she is exaggerating about Rosetta. Clelia replies that Rosetta would do better not to listen to Momina’s cutting, scornful remarks.

One evening Clelia asks Becuccio whether he had a girl-friend. He keeps that in the dark and she says that whenever he wanted to spend time with her and wanted to go somewhere with her, that she would be glad to do so. Becuccio asks whether men will also be admitted to the fashion shows because he would find it a pity to only be there during the work of setting-up. Clelia promises to invite him to the opening. He feels her offer of wanting to spend an evening with him as a gift. They agree to be on first-name terms and go dancing. Clelia is satisfied and feels warm inside. Becuccio remarks that women are so temperamental, but that once you have them in bed they went along with everything. But when he puts his arm around her waist, she says no, she also likes being alone. He tries to kiss her, and she lets him. He wants her to go with him. She goes with him with the words that it is a gift for tonight, and that he should keep that in mind.

Becuccio is a Communist and had fought in the war. Clelia goes back to her hotel alone. She thinks that by Sunday when the store will be ready, she will see him again, but at the same time she does not allow herself the thought because she is already sensing a ‘too much’. She rings the store and wants to speak to Febo. Becuccio answers the telephone and calls her Signorina. Then she goes to the Chiesa delle crocetta where she finds Rosetta and her mother. When she asks Rosetta whether she loves her mother she says,

“I suppose so, yes”. (146)

In the afternoon Clelia sees Becuccio again. She blushes, but he stays composed. They go to drink a Martini, but he no longer reacts to her personal allusions. Clelia meets Rosetta and Momina in the evening at the painters’.

*“It was as if I knew all the faces. They were the same ones as in the hotels, the salons, at the fashion shows. Nobody cared about the paintings”.* (147)

To Clelia’s question to Rosetta about whether she loves music, she replies that she doesn’t, but that it is something, perhaps only suffering. Then they take Rosetta home. At a certain hour, the father also arrives,

*“A man with steel-grey colouring ... and a thick-set, somewhat flabby figure. But in the depth of his eyes he resembled Rosetta. His gaze was stubborn, full of impatience”.* (151)

At an attempted cuddle, Rosetta turns her head away. Clelia sees,

*“That he was an old man, that he was tolerated, but that for the women only his labour counted. I also grasped that he knew it and was grateful that they let him talk”.* (152)

Rosetta asks Clelia,

*“Show me how to earn a bit of money and get to California. They say that you don’t die there”.* (153)

Clelia thinks that she would have liked to

*“have heard the advice which father and mother had given to their only daughter who was so crazy and alone”.* (154)

Clelia asks Rosetta whether she had any girl-friend apart from Momina, but she responds with the question, what a girl-friend was. Not even Momina was her girl-friend, she said. They are viewing Turin from the hills. Momina claims that the world would be beautiful,

*“if only we were not here”.* (155)

Clelia says that you just had to keep everything at a distance. The next day the people from Rome were to arrive. Becuccio assists Clelia with the preparations. When she suggests to him that they have a snack, he turns it down. But they go nevertheless, and when he says that they had time for a trip to Val Salice, where they had been that one evening, she says that such things do not succeed twice. She invites him to the party at Loris’, the painter’s, but he responds that it’s better for him not to go beyond the middle class, that it’s a waste of time. Then he leaves without molesting her.

Clelia is at Loris’ party where they are igniting schnapps with loud shouts. She discovers Rosetta in the semi-darkness with a cat in her arms. She talks to someone with a slight hunchback about Africa, that blacks had been killed there, that they had been left to die of cold, of hunger, that they had been shot, and that she asked why. Why not, the hunchback replies, grinning. Rosetta drinks a lot, is gloomy. Clelia sees that she has been crying. Then they all go to a hookers’ bar in a poor part of town.

But everybody complains that they can’t see anything from where they are. Clelia is ashamed of her acquaintances’ uncouth behaviour. Rosetta is called a *“Red Cross sister”* (167) and a *“naive one for soldiers from the front”* (167). She reacts in a constrained and composed way with the remark that tomorrow is another day.

The next day is an empty, useless Sunday. Clelia invites Febo and Becuccio to the hotel for dinner. It is the last time that she speaks with Becuccio. She invites him to visit her in Rome. Then she goes back once again to her old haunt. Madame from Rome and her associates cause chaos throughout

the hotel. The opening is set down for Easter. One day Clelia asks herself what Rosetta was doing and rings Momina.

“I don’t know what I should think of this, the stupid girl has killed herself once again”. (171)

Clelia says to Momina that she is to blame, even if the suicide turns out not to be really true. Momina avers once again that they did not have a relationship. They look for Rosetta everywhere. Rosetta’s words and gestures in the past occur to Clelia. Could she have been stopped? In the evening she calls Rosetta’s parents again. The maid tells her that Rosetta has been found. In a sub-let room. She was being brought home. She had poisoned herself again.

*“The remarkable thing was to rent a painter’s studio, to put an armchair in it, and nothing else, and to die in this way at the window with a view of Superga. A cat betrayed her. It was with her in the room and the next morning it meowed so long and scratched at the door until someone opened it to let it out”.* (174)

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In his novel, which was filmed in 1955 by Michelangelo Antonioni under the title *Le Amiche* (*The Girlfriends*), Pavese tells Rosetta’s story in a series of episodes in which the brittleness of the neo-realist narrative structure becomes visible. The loss of coherence and stabilizing traditions opens up new perspectives for the two main characters, Clelia and Rosetta. For Clelia it is the social climb from a poor background to head a fashion salon in the glamorous big city, with its money and the venality of all things. She works consistently and with perseverance on her social success and is not completely free of envy of the nouveaux riches and their privileged life-styles.

*“The people who are dancing and getting drunk here come from the better circles. They have grown up with servants, nannies, staff. With the freshness of summer and privileges. That’s no great achievement. Who among them would have managed to work hard and climb from out of nothing, out of a backyard that is nothing but a hole, to this ball?”.* (19)

Rosetta’s ideas about life are marked by sadness, inhibition and the inability to build up relationships on her own initiative. Rosetta is also a reflection of her parents, who spoiled her as an only child and had kept her dependent, instead of encouraging her to expand and to transcend limitations through her own efforts. In search of her female identity, she is like someone driven and comes to grief on the fear of reality, because she cannot free herself from her parental dependency.

All paths end in failure. The abundance of affluence does not give her any satisfaction. The relationship to her only – cynical – girl-friend, Momina, who depreciates all plans for life, also does not achieve any liberation. Even falling back on the dwindling powers of a dying institution, by becoming a nun in a convent, is doomed to failure, unless she had been a virgin.

Completely in contrast to the active Clelia, who takes the initiative, who enjoins the tradesmen to finish their work on the fashion salon in time, Rosetta resorts for a second time to a solution in suicide by swallowing pills. That is the final and successful attempt, instead of pushing toward productive solutions to overcome her parental ties and her false childhood development in dealing with herself and the world.

Viewed through the eyes of Freud, it is a matter here of two solutions to the same problem: the transformation of narcissism, on one hand, in the case of Clelia, into creativity, into joy in taking action and joy in participating in the world in a sensuous way. In contrast to this, Rosetta *wastes* her opportunities to take advantage of her privileges and to shape her narcissism. However, since she is affectively bound to her parental *imagines* through feelings of guilt, and her parents also do not

release her through the necessary minimum of denial of narcissistic feed, her path to independence is blocked. Psychically she responds to this situation of distress with recurring episodes of depression.

Her first attempt is planned in such a way that she will be discovered. The second attempt succeeds.

*“The remarkable thing was to rent a painter’s studio, to put an armchair in it, and nothing else, and to die in this way at the window with a view of Superga. A cat betrayed her. It was with her in the room and the next morning it meowed so long and scratched at the door until someone opened it to let it out”. (174)*