Ethnic Identity and Cultural Catholicism in Pietro di Donato’s "Christ in Concrete"

Peter Kvidera

MELUS

Published by: Oxford University Press on behalf of Society for the Study of the Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States (MELUS)
https://www.jstor.org/stable/25750719
Page Count: 25

Topics: Catholicism, Immigration, Italian Americans, Ethnic identity, Cultural identity, Religious identity, Sacraments

Download ($49.00)
Save
Cite this Item

PREVIEW

Preview not available
Di Donato's characters spoke to themselves and to each other in an elegant English that reflected a literal translation of their native Italian. "Is it not possible," reads one character's thoughts, "to breathe God's air without fear dominating with the pall of unemployment and the terror of production for 'Boss, Boss and Job'? To rebel is to lose all of the very little. To be obedient is to choke. Oh, dear Lord, guide my path." A worker whose leg has been mangled in an accident cries, "Nurse -- nurse, I sense badly nurse -- doctors, I sense badly doctors. Life is treachery. Art is where we reexamine suffering. Pietro di Donato's first novel, Christ in Concrete is a mirror to the injustice that Southern Italian immigrants and their children were subjected to in surviving an America on the brink of the Great Depression. Driven by a raw, uncompromising narrative, the reader is submerged into a brutal New York City-esque world bound between tenement housing and Job. That's Job with a capital 'J.' a punishing master, and seemingly unavoidable fate in the lives of working men. Throughout his novel Christ in Concrete (1939), Pietro di Donato invokes and explores the role of Catholicism in his Italian immigrant characters' lives. This novel focuses on Paul, the son of Italian immigrants who is forced into manhood when his father is killed in a construction accident. Through such ritual, in fact, di Donato's characters act out a cultural identity that combats destabilizing forces that often render them impotent and inarticulate in America. Catholicism emerges not only as cultural articulation, but also as a performance by which they simultaneously retain tradition and create new standards for coping with tragedy and disappointment.