



Shame and the Literary Configurations of Queer Masculinities in Ivan Mrak's *Ivan O.**

Abstract: The relationship between queer identity and shame is one of the key themes in queer theory, with shame sometimes becoming a fundamental aspect of identity for individuals within the queer community. This article focuses on literary representations of shame in Slovenian literature, particularly in connection with queer masculinities. It examines the work of Ivan Mrak, specifically his autofictional novel *Ivan O.*, which is the first autobiographical literary work with a queer theme in the Slovenian context. The article discusses the complex nature of shame and its impact on the protagonist's life experience, exploring how shame influences processes of identification and self-representation in society while attempting to outline the trajectory of decentering queer shame throughout the novel.

Keywords: shame, queer masculinities, Ivan Mrak, autofiction, queer theory, Slovene literature

Literary Masculinities and Queer Shame

The exploration of male sexuality, particularly homosexuality and its cultural and social implications, has been a significant focus in scholarly research. Studies in this area have illuminated how same-sex desire challenges conventional constructs of masculinity and disrupts heteronormative assumptions.

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A foundational work in this field, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Between Men*,¹ introduces the concept of homosociality, non-sexual same-sex bonds characterized by emotional intimacy and loyalty. Sedgwick's analysis demonstrates how literature employs homosocial relationships to interrogate male desire, even when such desire is not overtly sexual. While Western literary studies have extensively examined male sexuality, the same focus has not been mirrored in Central European context(s). Nevertheless, scholars such as M. Filipowicz, T. Tomasik, W. Śmieja, M. Eck² have highlighted the intricate portrayals of masculinity and sexuality in the literatures of this region. Despite these advances, a significant gap persists in the study of male sexuality within Slovene and broader South Slavic literary traditions. This study seeks to address this oversight, contributing to a deeper understanding of how masculinity and queer sexuality are represented in these underexplored literary systems.

This study employs the concept of literary configurations of masculinity rather than the more static notion of representations. This concept is central to the works of prominent masculinity studies scholars Toni Tholen and Stefan Horlacher, who underscore its value for analysing gender dynamics in literature. Drawing on Toni Tholen's insights,³ the study of configurations of masculinity in literary texts moves beyond identifying fixed or isolated depictions of men. Instead, configurations are dynamic and multifaceted, operating as intersections where various projections, perspectives, and images converge to construct and challenge gender identities. Tholen argues that male literary figures often embody contradictions, fragility, and fluidity, shaped

1. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).

2. Marcin Filipowicz, "Panowie, bądźmy Czechami, ale nikt nie musi o tym wiedzieć..." *Wzorce męskości w kulturze czeskiej XIX wieku* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 2013); Tomasz Tomasik, *Wojna – męskość – literatura* (Słupsk: Akademia Pomorska w Słupsku, 2013); Wojciech Śmieja, *Hegemonia i trauma: literatura wobec dominujących fikcji męskości* (Warszawa: Instytut Badań Literackich, 2016); Wojciech Śmieja, "Antynomie męskości i erotyczne spojrzenie na męskie ciało w *Agnieszce, Córce Kolumba* Wilhelma Macha," *Wielogłos* 4, no. 38 (2018); Wojciech Śmieja, "Studia o męskości – poszerzanie pola teoretyzacji," *Teksty Drugie* 6 (2020); Wojciech Śmieja, "Polityka i erotyka w *Martwym morzu* Emila Zegadłowicza," *Teksty Drugie* 1 (2021); Wojciech Śmieja, *Nie/podległości i transformacje. Szkice o studium męskiego niepokoju 1918–2018* (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2023); Matthias Eck, *Masculinities in Austrian Contemporary Literature: Strategic Evasion* (London: Routledge, 2020).

3. Toni Tholen, *Männlichkeiten in der Literatur: Konzepte und Praktiken Zwischen Wandel und Beharrung* (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2015).

by the multiplicity of projections from other characters, male and female alike. For example, a male character might be portrayed as embodying heterosexual masculinity in one context while exhibiting homosexual tendencies in another. The concept of flexible configurations of masculinity provides a valuable framework for examining how gender identities are constructed, deconstructed, and transformed within literary texts. It allows us to trace the shifts and complexities within and across depictions of men, steering clear of reductive categorizations. Tholen warns that analyses centred solely on fixed images or enduring myths of masculinity risk reinforcing oversimplified, binary gender stereotypes.⁴ By contrast, the framework of literary configurations highlights the dynamic interplay of diverse perspectives, emphasizing the fluid, evolving, and contested nature of masculinity as represented in literature.

The complex entanglement of queerness and shame has been central to queer theory from its earliest formulations. Much of this scholarship interrogates the pride-shame binary, in which shame is cast as an affect to be transcended while pride is elevated to the status of a desired emotional and political strategy.⁵ This critical reassessment aims to make visible the limitations of such oppositions, deconstruct them, and highlight the deeper affective dynamics through which queer subjects negotiate identity, visibility, and resistance. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick observes that, for some members of the queer community, shame is not merely a baseline experience but a fundamental component of their identity.⁶ She states, however, that shame generates and legitimates “the place of identity – the question of identity” without creating an essential and stable identity, but rather queerness that is intimately tied to creativity.⁷ Using queer shame as an analytical tool through this lens provides us with a framework for understanding the influence of this queer identity “as to-be-constituted”⁸ on creative practices and their transformative potential. The stigma and shame surrounding homosexuality often profoundly shape personal narratives, appearing almost predetermined as they intertwine with

4. Tholen, *Männlichkeiten in der Literatur*.

5. David M. Halperin, Valerie Traub, “Beyond Gay Pride,” in *Gay Shame*, ed. David M. Halperin, Valerie Traub (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 3–40.

6. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 44.

7. Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching*, 63; Margaret Morrison, “‘Some Things Are Better Left Unsaid’: The ‘Dignity of Queer Shame.’” *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature* 48, no. 1 (2015), 18.

8. Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching*, 64.

both actions and the core of one's being.⁹ Warner posits that shame constitutes a foundational element of queer identity, shaping not only individual subjectivities but also the social formations that emerge around them. He suggests that one of the most powerful strategies for negotiating shame and stigma is the creation of radically heterogeneous communities, which function as spaces in which people, drawn into unexpected forms of intimacy by their shared experience of exclusion and abjection, gather in what he calls a queer "salon des refusés." In such assemblages, shame is neither denied nor erased but transformed into a basis for solidarity, resistance, and alternative modes of belonging.¹⁰ Consequently, it becomes essential to critically examine the politics of emotion, particularly the transformative potential of emotional experiences as depicted in literature, and to analyse the dynamics and mechanisms of shaming and shame.

This calls for an examination of how shame is portrayed in literature and an inquiry into the ways it embeds itself within the mind and finds expression in the bodies of those who challenge societal expectations. This study aims to investigate how shame is represented in literary works and autobiographical narratives, shedding light on the intersection of the politics and poetics of shame. By doing so, it seeks to elucidate how these dynamics shape literary configurations of queer masculinities, offering a nuanced understanding of the interplay between emotion, identity, and literary representation.

In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre extensively employs the concept of shame to explore the phenomenological dimensions of existence. His analysis underscores the relationship between shame and same-sex experiences, suggesting that shame becomes so deeply ingrained in non-heterosexual individuals that it impedes their ability to cultivate solidarity and mutual support with other marginalized individuals in the same community. Furthermore, Sartre posits that shame functions as a divisive force, isolating homosexuals from broader social connections.¹¹ In contrast, Sally Munt proposes that shame possesses a transformative political potential, capable of challenging and subverting dominant norms by fostering "communities of shame." These communities, in turn, can reframe and reimagine identity through shared experiences of

9. Michael Warner, *The Trouble with Normal: Sex Politics and the Ethics of Queer Life* (New York: Free Press, 1999), 28.

10. Warner, *The Trouble*, 35–36.

11. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Saint Genet: Actor and Martyr* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 41.

marginalization.¹² Munt's work delves into the dual nature of shame, which simultaneously drives social alienation and reinforces interpersonal bonds. This duality operates not only outwardly, influencing relationships with others, but also inwardly, affecting one's relationship with the self. Shame can manifest as self-alienation, where individuals distance themselves from aspects of their identity perceived as shameful. Conversely, it can also lead to the reclamation and celebration of these same traits, transforming them into sources of pride and integral components of a positive identity.

These contrasting perspectives on shame significantly influence the lived experiences of queer men within society, offering a methodological lens for examining literary representations of masculinities and homosexuality. This analysis seeks to challenge the perception of deviant sexualities as inherently shameful by exploring their connection to the emancipatory potential found in the subversion of shame within queer literature. By doing so, it aims to move beyond the restrictive frameworks that have traditionally confined discussions of sexuality to the metaphorical "closet." As Hellen Lynd argues, a direct engagement with shame has the capacity to transform it from a hidden, destructive force into a powerful and illuminating experience.¹³ According to her reasoning, fully acknowledging and confronting aspects of identity or behaviour perceived as negative can lead to outcomes that are both constructive and enlightening. This approach underscores the potential of queer literature to reimagine and redefine the dynamics of shame, enabling it to become a catalyst for empowerment and self-discovery.

Ivan Mrak, Homoeroticism and Autobiographical Writing

Although Ivan Mrak (1906–1986) produced an exceptionally extensive body of work and is a unique figure in the Slovenian literary scene, he remains on the fringes of the national literary canon. The Slovenian literary and cultural community largely ignored Mrak for decades. Critical analysis of his work only started to appear seriously in the late 1960s, nearly forty years after his debut, with more thorough and objective assessments coming

12. Sally Munt, *Queer Attachments: The Cultural Politics of Shame* (London: Routledge, 2007), 4.

13. Hellen Merrell Lynd, *On Shame and the Search for Identity* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1958), 20.

only after 2000. The most significant institutional recognition of his work happened in 2006, marking the hundredth anniversary of his birth, through a symposium organized by the Slovenian Theatre Museum. This event led to the publication of a comprehensive collection of papers the next year. Mrak's peripheral position in the literary canon can partly be attributed to the status of drama, which was the main focus of his creative output, within the hierarchy of literary genres. That said, his dramatic works did receive occasional attention. In the late 1990s, there was a renewed interest in "The Arc Light That Is Being Born" (*Obločnica, ki se rojeva*, 1925), and more recently, his Roman trilogy (1939–1945) received positive reviews when it was staged at the Slovene National Theatre Drama in Ljubljana in 2023. While parts of his dramatic work were published during his lifetime, his autobiographical writing, diaries, autofictional texts, and homoerotic stories only started to appear in the 1990s. This delay is undoubtedly linked to the broader social shift from socialism to a more open cultural climate, which allowed greater openness to queer topics in both society and literature.

The key concepts essential for understanding Ivan Mrak's unique position as an artist, as well as for understanding his opus are his devotion to art, especially hymnal tragedies,¹⁴ God, and, most notably, homosexuality, the latter being the central theme of this analysis. While the majority of Mrak's published oeuvre consists of dramatic works, his creative output also spans short prose, poetry, essays, and autobiographical texts. Despite his focus on fiction, his works maintain a significant connection to real events and personal experiences. This is particularly evident in his plays, which range from the early hymnal tragedies *The Face of Karla Bulovec* (*Obraz Karle Bulovčeve*, 1929) and *Anton Aškerc – The Tragedy of Slovenian Liberalism* (*Anton Aškerc – Tragedija slovenskega liberalizma*, ca. 1930) to later works such as *The Revolutionary Tetralogy* (*Revolucijska tetralogija*, 1970) and *Confession to the Brothers of Light* (*Spoved lučnim bratom*, 1972). Although these plays take creative liberties with historical facts, they remain deeply rooted in historical realities. Mrak selects the most tragic elements of history, using them as tools for dramatic expression and artistic reflection.¹⁵ Beyond his dramatic works, another

14. Janez Vrečko, "Problem (himnične) tragedije pri Slovencih," *Slavistična Revija* 54, no. 4 (2006).

15. This connection is not limited to historical events and figures from European and Slovenian history but also extends to Mrak's personal relationships and the history he himself lived through. For this reason, even though Goran Schmidt rejects the notion that a work of art can be fully explained through the author's life, he acknowledges that the strikingly narrow range of

significant part of his oeuvre falls under the category of broadly defined autobiographical discourse, encompassing autofiction and diaries.

One of his most prominent contributions to this narrative tradition is the work *Ivan O.* (1991), which Taras Kermauner conditionally describes as a novel,¹⁶ but is more accurately classified as autofiction¹⁷ due to its unique interplay of autobiographical facts and their artistic reimaging. At the far end of this autobiographical spectrum are his diaries, described as a unique portrayal of Ljubljana and its inhabitants from the end of the First World War to the late 1970s.¹⁸ These diaries, published in three volumes between 2005 and 2006, provide invaluable insight into Mrak's creative process, the contextual and genealogical origins of his works, and his reflections on interpersonal relationships, sexuality, and the mundane aspects of daily life.

Although the themes of queer masculinities, same-sex desire and homoeroticism appear in several of Mrak's dramatic works such as *The Arc Light That Is Being Born* (1925), *Escape from Hell* (*Beg iz pekla*, 1962), *Van Gogh's Saint Vitus' dance* (*Van Goghov vidov ples*, 1970), and *Chrysippos* (1976), this article focuses on Mrak's autofictional novel *Ivan O.* while also addressing his broader engagement with homoeroticism and its significance for interpreting his oeuvre. As Kermauner aptly observes, admitting one's own homoeroticism and even homosexuality was something outrageous and audacious during Mrak's time.¹⁹ Nevertheless, Mrak boldly took this step in his avant-garde play *The Arc Light That Is Being Born*, performed in 1925. This act stands as a remarkable milestone in the Slovenian literary space, demonstrating a modernity and contemporaneity that aligned with broader European developments.

motifs in Mrak's literary oeuvre inevitably draws attention to his biography. See more in Goran Schmidt, "Sub Specie Mortis," in *Izbrano delo: proza, drame, dnevniki*, by Ivan Mrak (Ljubljana: Mladinska Knjiga, 1998), 244–245.

16. Taras Kermauner, "Ivan Mrak – življenje v skladu z brezpogojno terjatvijo," in *Ivan O.*, by Ivan Mrak (Ljubljana: Prešernova Družba, 1991), 186.

17. "The various processes of transformation of autobiographical material speak in favour of the post-structuralist thesis of the impossibility of direct self-representation in the text. For this reason, the term autofiction is now commonly used instead of autobiographical novel, which emphasises the problematic mimetic status of autobiography." Andrea Zlatar Vilić, "Avtobiografija: teoretski izzivi," in *Avtobiografski diskurz. Teorija in praksa avtobiografije v literarni vedi, humanistiki in družboslovju*, ed. Alenka Koron, Andrej Leben (Ljubljana: Založba ZRC, ZRC SAZU, 2011), 26.

18. Schmidt, "Sub Specie Mortis," 259.

19. Kermauner, "Ivan Mrak – življenje," 175.

The 1920s marked a period of emerging public discourse on homosexuality across Europe, exemplified by the work of Magnus Hirschfeld and his Institute of Sexology, founded in 1919, which later contributed to the creation of the World League for Sexual Reform in 1928. Similarly, in the broader Central European space the Czechoslovak queer scene coalesced around the magazine *Hlas sexuální menšiny* (*Voice of the Sexual Minority*), published between 1931 and 1934. In Slovenia, however, Mrak's contributions represent a strikingly isolated exception, paralleled only by the 1926 Slovene publication *Homosexuality*, written under the pseudonym Vindex, which summarized Hirschfeld's ideas.²⁰ Mrak's works thus not only reflect his individual artistic vision but also situate him within a broader European context of queer cultural and intellectual history.

The internal structure of homoeroticism in Ivan Mrak's work warrants particular attention, especially as Mrak himself frequently highlighted this theme in his diaries – a point emphasized in various analyses of the queer aspects of his life and oeuvre.²¹ Central to this structure is Mrak's glorification of the Greek *erastês-erômenos* relationship, which he regarded as the pinnacle of erotic and aesthetic experience. As Andreas Leben observes, Mrak approached homoeroticism as an aesthetic philosophy²² that informed his worldview and artistic production throughout his life. He was firmly convinced that, with rare exceptions like his wife and life companion, sculptor Karla Bulovec, women were incapable of achieving artistic greatness. Consequently, he valued male homosexual relationships more highly than heterosexual ones, to the extent that he perceived his bond with Karla Bulovec as homoerotic in nature.²³ This highlights the masculinist worldview prevalent in modernist avant-garde circles²⁴ and aligns Mrak's perspective with an affir-

20. Roman Kuhar, "Istospolniki in podobna bitja," in *Ideologije v slovenskem jeziku, literaturi in kulturi: zbornik predavanj*, ed. Aleksandar Bjelčević (Ljubljana: Znanstvena Založba Filozofske Fakultete, 2012), 70.

21. Peter Kovačič Peršin, "Dialektika smeri in protismeri," in *Ivan Mrak (1906–1986): Simpozij ob stoletnici rojstva in dvajsetletnici smrti slovenskega trageda Ivana Mraka v Slovenskem gledališkem muzeju leta 2006*, ed. Mojca Kreft, Ivo Svetina (Ljubljana: Dokumenti Slovenskega Gledališkega Muzeja, 2007), 119–120; Brane Mozetič, *Grmade, parade in molk: Prispevki k neheteroseksualni zgodovini na Slovenskem* (Ljubljana: Škuc, 2014), 59.

22. For more on this, see Kovačič Peršin, "Dialektika smeri in protismeri."

23. Andreas Leben, "Gendered Perspectives on Sexuality, Body, and Aging in Slovene Autobiographical Literature: Mrak – Zupan – Kovačič," in *Aging in Slavic Literatures: Essays in Literary Gerontology*, ed. Dagmar Gramshammer-Hohl (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2017), 169.

24. Rita Felski, *The Gender of Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).

mative stance toward the traditional concept of the masculine artistic genius.²⁵ A particularly revealing moment in Mrak's diaries underscores the aforementioned (masculine) age-disparate dynamic. As Kovačič Peršin notes, the diaries begin with a dramatic account of a love confession by the sixty-two-year-old Mrak to a young man.²⁶ This entry point into his autobiographical narrative holds heightened semantic significance, marking it as a crucial indicator of the emotional and affective undercurrents in his work.

Ivan O. and the Overcoming of Shameful Masculinity

The autofictional novel *Ivan O.* was published in 1991, five years after Ivan Mrak's death and over six decades after its completion. This substantial delay in publication postponed key insights into the early stages of Mrak's life and creative development, largely due to the novel's sensitive and unconventional content. The published version was assembled from several manuscript variants selected by Miran Kavšek, who also prepared the text for publication. Taras Kermauner, a close friend of Mrak, contributed a comprehensive commentary.²⁷ *Ivan O.* belongs to Mrak's early creative period,²⁸ evident in its narrative exploration of artistic self-discovery, a topic closely tied to adolescence. The narrator and the narrated subject are deeply interconnected, reflecting an introspective attempt to both process and articulate past experiences. Notably, the narrative does not reject or distance itself from the earlier self, suggesting a continuity of perspective rather than a later-life repudiation of past ideas or actions. The novel serves as both a personal and artistic coming-of-age story or a bildungsroman, while also critically examining the contradictions of the bourgeois class to which Mrak belonged. It explores themes of rebellion through unconventional life choices and creative expression.²⁹ The delayed publication and reception of *Ivan O.* can be attributed to its challenging blend of bourgeois values, religiosity, and queer experience. Although *Ivan O.* provides valuable insights into Mrak's life and creative process, this article focuses

25. Christine Battersby, *Gender and Genius: Towards a Feminist Aesthetics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989).

26. Kovačič Peršin, "Dialektika smeri in protismeri," 119.

27. Denis Poniž, "Ivan Mrak: Ivan O.," 2000: *Revija za krščanstvo in kulturo* 59/60 (1992), 234.

28. Poniž, "Ivan Mrak: Ivan O.," 244.

29. Vlado Šav, "Ivan Mrak, kot ga je zbudil Ivan O.," *Primorska srečanja* 18, no. 140 (1993), 28.

on the narrative of queer shame at the intersection with the literary configurations of masculinity. Written in an era when such themes were rarely explored in Slovenian literature, *Ivan O.* stands as the first Slovenian personal confessional novel to feature a first-person narrator addressing queer identity, making it a groundbreaking work in its time.

In *Ivan O.*, shame emerges as a multi-faceted emotion experienced by the protagonist in diverse contexts and for various reasons. It is deeply woven into the narrative structure, becoming apparent from the opening chapter, where the father instils profound doubts about the protagonist's identity. "It happened countless times that he called me in a nice way, without any reason accessible to me, understandable to me. He grabbed me and looked at me intensely, suffering unspeakably in the process. [...] And he had already blown me away roughly, 'Get lost, you bastard!'"³⁰ This moment leaves Ivan questioning why his mother does not intervene to defend or comfort him, perhaps, he reasons, because she is ashamed and believes the accusation to be true.³¹ Here, shame is tied to a fundamental disconnection within the family, marking Ivan as an outsider not only by birth but also ontologically, estranged from both his family and especially his father. This episode, labelled as "dad's funky idea," prompts additional flashbacks that explore the foundational differences and the mutual resentment between father and son. The initial shame of not belonging to one's family expands into a broader sense of alienation that pervades Ivan's relationship with his environment. This moment establishes the deep instability of his sense of identity, particularly in relation to his family. It propels him first into solitude and, later, into a search for others who mirror his experience. In this trajectory, he turns to artistic creation as a means of forging a community of the shamed.

Another prominent layer of shame in the novel is tied to class identity. Similar to familial shame, class-based shame is linked to the father and is, in many ways, inherited from his experiences. In the twelfth chapter of the first part of the novel, Ivan observes and narrates his father's financial struggles, focusing on the losses suffered during and after World War I, the decline of the bourgeois class in Ljubljana, and the rise of the nouveaux riches, who fail to appreciate the distinctions between refined and inferior tastes – for

30. Ivan Mrak, *Ivan O.* (Ljubljana: Prešernova Družba, 1991), 13. The work analysed here has not been translated into English, therefore all the translations were made by the author of this paper.

31. Mrak, *Ivan O.*, 13.

instance, in the case of wine.³² The father's financial difficulties and the shame they bring are not solely his own; they resonate with Ivan, who identifies as part of the bourgeois class and feels the dissonance between its expectations and his family's financial reality.

The relationship between shame and masculinity is particularly poignant, as it is implicitly tied to the protagonist's inability to fulfil the role envisioned for him by his father. The father's contemptuous outbursts and emotional withdrawal mark Ivan as ontologically alien, severing the bond between father and son and embedding a sense of failure and inadequacy in the protagonist. This failure is not merely personal but is tied to a broader, patrilineal transmission of expectations and shame, where the father's own struggles and financial, social, and existential frustrations are projected onto the son.

In this context, our primary interest lies in exploring how shame in the novel intertwines with the experience of non-normative, queer masculinity and the role it plays in conveying this experience. Ivan's first same-sex encounter is profoundly marked by shame, which is also reflected in the narrative itself:

This boy invited me to his place for Sunday. [...] That afternoon, he hardly spoke, and what he did say came with difficulty. Well, we studied the secrets of the human body—. Just enough to dare to look each other in the eyes. Outside, it was a lush and sunny day; the whole earth exhaled the splendour of autumn, and above it all stretched the sky, clear and elastic. [...] When parting, we didn't even shake hands.³³

Here, the notable lack of explicit detail regarding what transpired between the two boys reveals an intriguing narrative strategy. The shift in perspective and the abrupt transition from recounting the encounter to describing the natural setting and atmosphere outside the fateful room demonstrate a technique of sublimating the erotic experience. This narrative approach both signals the shame that the act provokes and seeks to divert attention from the shameful deed, while paradoxically drawing attention to itself through the unexpected discontinuity in the storytelling. This early episode plants the seed of shame tied to stepping out of the safe and innocent domain of childhood, marking Ivan's transition into a new phase of life. This shift becomes evident when Ivan, for the first time, feels ashamed of his nudity in front of the caregiver who

32. Mrak, *Ivan O.*, 62–63.

33. Mrak, *Ivan O.*, 45.

had previously assisted him with bathing.³⁴ The encounter with another body and its mysteries underscores the connection between corporeality and sexuality, activating a shameful awareness of sexuality that continues to intensify throughout the novel.

The subsequent chapter presents Ivan's affective attachment to the student Igor, who provides private lessons to him and his sisters. Ivan is initially captivated by Igor's beauty, but his feelings soon shift to jealousy as Igor directs more attention toward his sisters: "My cheeks are burning. My eyes glitter with the hidden fire. I'm full of memories of unknown sweets. I'm ashamed. I don't know where to hide, I don't know who to confess to and trust."³⁵ Overwhelmed by his conflicting emotions, Ivan fails to answer any of Igor's questions during the lesson, prompting the instructor to call Ivan's father. The resulting scene involves Ivan being beaten and insulted as a "bastard."³⁶ This moment represents the convergence of three distinct sources of shame: shame arising from Ivan's feelings for a man, shame tied to his unstable family identity, and class shame stemming from his father's act of beating him in front of a lower-class individual, Igor, or even because of Igor's presence, further intensifying the masculine hegemony in which Ivan cannot find his place. This complex layering of shame ultimately leads Ivan to make the decision to leave home and distance himself from the oppressive environment of his family. The scene of his departure further underscores the emotional weight of this moment. Boarding a train that moves too slowly for his inner turmoil, Ivan remarks: "I put both feet on the opposite side of the compartment to force the train to a faster speed, corresponding to my thoughts (and my intentions?)."³⁷ This framing of space and its physical properties not only reflects Ivan's inner agitation but also suggests that shame transcends the physical home, propelling Ivan away from the heteronormative and repressive space. In this context, shame operates as a narrative force that drives the plot forward. It is not merely a passive emotional state but an active and central affect that shapes Ivan's decisions and movements, catalysing his journey, both literal and metaphorical, away from the confines of his familial and societal expectations of hegemonic masculinity.

The second part of the novel, consisting of eleven stories, continues the narrative of Ivan O's youth and delves deeper into themes of queer

34. Mrak, *Ivan O.*, 47.

35. Mrak, *Ivan O.*, 50.

36. Mrak, *Ivan O.*, 50–51.

37. Mrak, *Ivan O.*, 53.

shame and otherness. The opening story, titled “Romulus Augustulus,” is particularly significant for exploring the protagonist’s marginalized position within the homosocial environment of a student dormitory. The narrator vividly expresses his sense of alienation: “Only young boys, without any worries, without any inhibitions, and I, my nanny Johana’s darling sweetheart, in the middle of them, all cranky and frightened, but at the same time full of great lofty-mixed ideas about my own purpose and, above all, of course, about the meaning of me.”³⁸ Here, masculinities are differentiated based on the narrator’s perception of his peers’ carefree and uninhibited demeanor, contrasting with his own introspective and “lofty” nature. This contrast underscores his sense of shame for being different, as his complex inner world sets him apart. His otherness is further exacerbated by harassment and ridicule, with his shyness and formal way of speaking marking him as distinct. Ivan attributes these traits to his upbringing among his sisters and his immersion in reading.³⁹ The narrative reaches a pivotal moment in Ivan’s first encounter with masturbation, which encapsulates his otherness and internalized shame.

Ivan’s narration of his encounter with adolescent sexuality offers a strikingly illustrative and daring portrayal for the time in which the novel was written, especially within the framework of Slovene autobiographical discourse.⁴⁰ The detailed scene unfolds as follows:

— Once, when I went into the shower in the evening, there were two comrades, naked of course, playing some strange, completely incomprehensible game to me—. When I asked them, they laughed at me—.

I’m learning the French ‘Our Father,’ I’m repeating it quite automatically. I’ve got my head full of it, there’s a hidden corner in the garden. The classroom is almost empty, all the pupils have scattered around the garden—.

I step into that magic corner, unfortunately, it’s not empty, that spindly boy, he’s supposedly two years older than me. He calls my name; he is so manly.

Wait, I’ll show you something. I’m all red with shame. He is forcefully swift—.

38. Mrak, *Ivan O.*, 101.

39. Mrak, *Ivan O.*, 101–102.

40. Already in the *Memoirs* of Janez Trdina, written between 1867 and 1868, there is a moralistic condemnation of exploration of adolescent sexuality: “Without any shame they take their shameful organs into their rude hands, and squeeze them, rub them and stroke them: irritated nature spills out the source of life, they force the emissions themselves!!” Janez Trdina, *Zbrano delo. Št. 1* (Ljubljana: Državna založba Slovenije, 1946), 146.

Suddenly I have a feeling of whole new worlds, new insights around me, I feel like I have wings, I would fly—.

I look with astonishment and awe at that white, such spontaneous jet! I was saved from something strong, oppressive, as if I had started to live a new, as yet unknown life!⁴¹

This passage reveals the disruptive narrative function of shame, which emerges in the form of a sudden shift in focus when Ivan encounters a (homo) sexual act. The narrative diverts its attention to religious content, with Ivan thinking about mechanically reciting the French “Our Father” as if attempting to neutralize the perceived transgression. The force of shame becomes especially palpable in this moment of narrative interruption, where religion functions as a symbolic mechanism of purification, allowing Ivan to disavow the scene he has just encountered. This gesture can also be read through Michael Warner’s claim that escaping sexual shame would require abandoning sexuality itself,⁴² which reveals the paradox at the heart of modern sexual subjectivity. The narrative thus performs a subtle act of erasure, diverting attention away from the sexual event. In doing so, it exposes Ivan’s incapacity to confront the shame directly, displacing it instead through a culturally sanctioned rhetoric of spiritual cleansing.

However, desire proves to be an even stronger force, as the narrative immediately resumes its focus on adolescent sexual practices. For Ivan O., this moment is transformative, a revelation of new realms of self-awareness and a sense of liberation. In contrast, for the other boy, the act is reduced to a transient, utilitarian experience, a mere precursor to “true” sexual awakening with a woman: “But this is nothing! It’s just for emergency use only. With a woman, you will only realize what it is—! he brags manly and proudly—.”⁴³ This distinction between the two boys highlights the implicit demarcation between Ivan’s subordinate, introspective masculinity and the hegemonic masculinity embodied by others in the narrative. For the other boy, sexual experimentation with another male is a fleeting step on the path to normative heterosexual maturity. For Ivan, however, the experience signifies a deeper understanding of his own identity and a realization of his marginal position within the prevailing structures of masculinity. Crucially, this scene underscores Ivan’s recognition that his masculinity will never align with hegemonic

41. Mrak, *Ivan O.*, 102.

42. Warner, *The Trouble*, 3.

43. Mrak, *Ivan O.*, 103.

norms. Instead, he must forge a unique masculinity that resonates with his inner world. The experience marks a moment of transcendence, where shame, initially overwhelming, transforms into an active and affirming force, propelling Ivan toward a reimagined sense of selfhood.

From this point onward, the motifs of homoeroticism and queer sexuality cease to be framed as deviant or disruptive elements within the narrative. Instead, they are presented as integrated and ordinary aspects of the protagonist's experiences, subtly woven into the storyline. For instance, in the chapter entitled "Lorenzo," Ivan O. walks through a forest with the titular Lorenzo – a figure in whom Taras Kermauner identifies Vladimir Bartol⁴⁴ – and expresses a desire to kiss him on the lips.⁴⁵ In another instance, the novel explores the fluidity of gender expression. Ivan O., captivated by the feminine appearance of a Russian actress, experiments with makeup and dresses in her likeness.⁴⁶ In regards to the time of the novel's creation, this episode represents the first instance of drag in Slovenian literature. However, even this performative expression of gender is accompanied by shame, as Ivan fears being reprimanded by his mother.

Ivan O.'s growing attachment to Ilze, a Russian émigré ballet dancer, draws him into a small circle of displaced aristocratic women whose anachronistic rituals evoke a kind of decayed medieval court. Inspired by this milieu, he conceives of a public cultural event, a Slavic Bohemian Evening, through which he hopes to gather these figures of exile and transform their marginality, alongside his own, into a meaningful artistic community. He implores Madame Ilze and a Russian singer, whose physical beauty and strikingly hairy chest exert a powerful erotic fascination, to appear at the event. In this act, Ivan attempts to fashion his own "salon des refusés," a counterpublic of dispossessed others. Yet this vision collapses. None of the invited émigrés attend, leaving Ivan alone onstage to perform for a packed venue. The failure exposes a crucial misrecognition: although Ivan senses a kinship between his queer marginality and the social displacement of the Russian émigrés, he ultimately conflates distinct forms of otherness. Their exile is not his queer abjection, and the community he imagines cannot be summoned through sheer performative will. This breakdown operates simultaneously on the public level, especially if we read the episode autobiographically, given that Mrak himself

44. Kermauner, "Ivan Mrak – življenje," 173.

45. Mrak, *Ivan O.*, 119.

46. Mrak, *Ivan O.*, 121.

organized such an event in Ljubljana, an act that further stigmatized and marginalized him, and on the intimate level, revealing the fragility of Ivan's identificatory projections. Heather Love's observation is instructive here: "In thinking through the political potential of shame, it seems important to consider the possibility that some aspects of queer experience and queer culture may not be useful or productive."⁴⁷ It is precisely the uselessness and non-productivity of Mrak's endeavor, its refusal to cohere into a successful event, community, or identity, that becomes epistemologically significant. Rather than overcoming shame, Ivan's failed project exposes shame's intractability. Its persistence marks the limits of queer world-making and suggests that the only viable response is not eradication but acceptance: shame cannot be destroyed, only acknowledged and inhabited.

One of the final chapters introduces another significant queer moment. After failing to perform at a public event he organized, the Slavic Bohemian Evening in Ljubljana, Ivan travels to Zagreb. Facing financial hardship, he begins associating with prostitutes. His search for a "salon des refusés" briefly finds an unexpected echo in Zagreb, where the brothel madam allows him into her establishment and, for a fleeting moment, he experiences a sense of belonging he has not felt elsewhere. Yet this fragile illusion collapses when the madam attempts to sexually assault him, transforming what seemed like a space of inclusion into one of violation and disillusionment. The narrative then transitions to a pivotal scene where Ivan meets a German-speaking gentleman. They share dinner, exchange a kiss, and ultimately spend the night together.⁴⁸ Notably, Ivan's account of their time together conveys no shame regarding the intimacy they share. The sense of humiliation only emerges after their encounter ends, when the German man presses money into Ivan's hand. Here, the shame is not tied to queer desire or actions but rather to class-based shame, reflecting Ivan's financial vulnerability and the power dynamics it entails between the young and the older man. This decentering of queer identity-related shame and a focus on shame rooted in class distinctions underscore the narrative's intricate engagement with societal hierarchies, personal desires, and the formation of identity. By structuring the story around the gradual accumulation of lived experiences, in which queer shame functions both as a thematic element and a narrative device, the text fosters a heightened

47. Heather Love, "Emotional Rescue," in *Gay Shame*, ed. David M. Halperin, Valerie Traub (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 257.

48. Mrak, *Ivan O.*, 160–161.

sensitivity in both the protagonist and the reader. This narrative approach not only deepens the portrayal of the protagonist's evolving self-awareness but also contributes to the broader normalization of queer experiences. However, this process of normalization should not be read as the formation of a coherent identity or the overcoming of shame. Rather, it underscores the way shame becomes foundational to the very constitution of the self, yet in a paradoxical manner, functioning simultaneously as a force of individuation and of destruction.⁴⁹ Rather than positioning queerness as a deviation or an isolated struggle, the novel integrates it seamlessly into the protagonist's multifaceted process of identity formation, demonstrating how gender, sexuality, and class intersect in shaping individual subjectivity.

Conclusion

In *Ivan O.* by Ivan Mrak, the narrative represents a complex relationship towards shame, that is read through both thematic content and narrative structure. The autofictional novel innovates Slovenian literature by enriching it with motifs and themes that challenge normative structures. While it may not yet hold a place in the Slovenian literary canon, it undoubtedly deserves recognition within the queer literary subcanon for its groundbreaking exploration of queer themes as lived experiences that are narratively analysed and reflected upon by the protagonist. This article focused on the role of queer shame in the novel, demonstrating that it operates not in isolation but in conjunction with other forms of shame, such as family, class, and gender shame. However, queer shame remains distinct in its interaction with other types of shame. Religiosity, as a recurring motif, amplifies queer shame, often manifesting through narrative interruptions that signal the protagonist's internal conflict.

A pivotal moment in the novel is Ivan O.'s first sexual experience, which acts as a turning point in the dynamics of shame. This experience disrupts the dominance of shame in Ivan's masculinity, introducing the principle of pleasure as a counterbalance. In this scene, Ivan's sense of self-sufficiency emerges strongly, an essential element in overcoming shame, which functions primarily as a mechanism of social control. This self-sufficiency is countered

49. Michael Warner, "Pleasures and Dangers of Shame," in *Gay Shame*, ed. David M. Halperin, Valerie Traub (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 289.

by Ivan's repeated attempts to surround himself with the other marginalized people, which proves unsuccessful. A new relation to masculinities and the masculine takes shape, presenting not only a source of frustration and the feeling of inadequacy in comparison to other men, but also a space for exploring alternative modes of gendered existence. By the novel's conclusion, queer shame no longer dominates Ivan's emotional landscape, particularly in the context of same-sex experiences. This transformation reflects a successful acceptance of a queer identity and a decentering of shame.

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