

Being the mother of a disabled child in children's literature between the 19th and 20th century

Essere madri di un figlio con disabilità nella letteratura per l'infanzia tra Otto e Novecento

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ABSTRACT

Children's literature, ever since folk tales, presents numerous characters with disabilities, many of them in childhood; in these cases, the relationship with the mother figure is often placed at the centre of the narrative. The paper aims to examine how such experiences have been represented by investigating children's literature as a historiographical source to reconstruct the collective imagery and attitudes, between acceptance and refusal of the different. The maternal characters are the object and subject of sorrow, judgment and the attribution of blame; nonetheless, the mothers often take care, almost exclusively, of the child with disabilities. The narratives reveal a complex experience, intensely linked to the profound meaning of motherhood.

KEYWORDS

Motherhood, disability, children's literature, folk tales, collective imagery.
Maternità, disabilità, letteratura per l'infanzia, fiabe popolari, immaginario collettivo.

La letteratura per l'infanzia, sin dalle fiabe popolari, presenta numerosi personaggi con disabilità, molti dei quali in età infantile; in questi casi, al centro della narrazione spesso vi è il rapporto dei protagonisti con la figura materna. Il contributo intende esaminare la rappresentazione di tali esperienze indagando la letteratura per l'infanzia in quanto fonte storiografica per sondare l'immaginario collettivo e gli atteggiamenti condivisi, tra accettazione e rifiuto del diverso. I personaggi materni sono oggetto e soggetto di pena, giudizi e attribuzione di colpe, in una cura, spesso esclusiva, del figlio con disabilità. Le narrazioni prese in esame consentono la restituzione di un vissuto complesso e intensamente legato al profondo significato di maternità.

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1. Introduction

Since the historiographical innovations introduced by the movement of the “Les Annales”, historical-educational research has embraced and developed a new fact-finding sensibility. The research has explored unprecedented thematic paths and, through atypical methodologies and sources, has reconstructed the educational relations taking into account “both social diversities and gender identity of the subjects involved in them” (Covato, 2010, p. 96).

Emotional life and educational relationships represent a privileged place of transmission, mostly implicit, of dominant social models and roles, as well as of desired values and behaviours. Thus, literary works, despite their counter-factuality (Cantatore, 2020, p. 27), represent valuable historiographical sources (Ascenzi, 2002) to advance into “dimensions filled with implicit and unspoken that belong to the sphere of the pedagogical subsoil, to the unconscious present in educational actions, to the flow of mentalities in everyday life” (Borruso, 2019, pp. 217-218).

What has been established so far is even more true in the case of children’s literature since it is characterised by a dual nature, narrative and formative *in unum* (Bacchetti, 2013), and widely used as a tool for disciplining consciences and constructing social and civil identity, especially between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in Italy (Blezza Picherle, 2002); furthermore, the theme of the family has always represented one of the “central nodes” (Boero, 2014, p. 27) of the editorial tradition for children and young people. Therefore, children’s literature can be an excellent tool to grasp the evolution of family relationships (Trisciuzzi, 2018) and the feeling of maternal love about childhood and disabled childhood.

The paper aims to examine how Italian children’s literature represented the relationship between mother and child with disabilities between the second half of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century. Storytelling of such complex experiences allow us to reconstruct a collective imaginary deeply rooted around social constructs – such as those of disability and motherhood – and the educational and power relations, culturally and historically defined, at a time of vast social metamorphoses (Borruso, 2014).

2. The woman and the mother

Since the 18th century, there has been a widespread tendency to emphasise the value of the maternal role, supported by doctors, hygienists, educators and philosophers who enhance early childhood care practices and the importance of breastfeeding (Cambi, Ulivieri, 1988). Enlightenment and Romanticism contribute to revitalising the equation between nature and female destiny, body and motherhood. Contextually to the “discovery of childhood”, the female body assumes an unprecedented symbolic and salvific dimension (Badinter, 1981; Shorter, 1982) for the regeneration of society and customs.

Jean Jacques Rousseau in the book *Emile* (1762) contributes to this new exaltation of motherhood and the affirmation of moral imperatives and desired qualities for women, to maintain the family balance and the existing arrangements, such as: kindness, obedience, oblation (Covato, 2014, pp. 9-10). At the same time, however, this celebratory rhetoric also leads to an increasingly rigid condemnation of female behaviour of evasion from those tasks considered as dictated by nature; this background creates a “symbolic prison” (Ulivieri, 1995; D’Amelia, 1997). Above all, the woman must “be a mother, giving rise to a myth that will still be very much in vogue two centuries later: that of the maternal instinct, or the spontaneous love of every mother for her child” (Badinter, 1981, p. 146).

This cult of motherhood – with its imposed prescriptions and norms – represents a very significant phenomenon, destined to change the educational experiences (Becchi, 1990) and experiences of women (Covato, 1999), and a necessary frame of examination for the topic of the paper, since this context also influences strongly the representations of *special motherhood* within children’s literature.

2.1 Disability and motherhood in children’s literature

Gender and disability are categories of analysis for the power structures that define societies and family relationships¹. Just as the role of the mother is “relative and three-dimensional” (Badinter, 1981, p. 13), in the same way, disability can only be considered as a social construct and a “prismatic” category (Linton, 1998, p. 118; Oliver, 1990) defined about an idea of the norm (Malaguti, 2011, p. 8) from which, moreover, feminine also deviates (Polenghi, 2019, p. 10).

1 From an intersectional perspective, the integration of gender and disability studies contributes to analysing the processes of the cultural construction of a-normal identities (Garland-Thomson, 2002, p. 4).

Between the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, consistent with the historical and social context (Boero, De Luca, 1996), Italian children's literature restore an image of female characters with disabilities as marginal and subject to dominant symbolic violence². The mothers of young people with disabilities, however, occupy an even more liminal position: they are not disabled and yet they experience strong forms of disablement on their skin (Ryan, Runswick-Cole, 2008); this condition, between acceptance and rejection, make their motherhood markedly different from the others (Canevaro, 2004).

Nineteenth-century children's literature is characterised by predominantly didactic tones and strong educational aims with extensive instrumental use of characters with disabilities (Grandi, 2020; Lachal, 1974; Pacelli, 2023). Mothers are predominantly portrayed as the exclusive reference point for the care of their disabled children and, in line with the tendencies highlighted in the first paragraph, they perform this task with extreme dedication and predetermined resignation. On the other hand, if we turn away from this "authoritarian" literature (Blezza Picherle, 2002, p. 79), intentionally dedicated to childhood, and examine the folk tale collections, we come across many representations that refer to preconceptions and folk experiences of past eras, still alive beneath the surface (Brauner, 2002; Faeti, 1997). Below are presented some depictions that highlight these tendencies.

2.1.1 Sacrifice, care and social exclusion

In the short story *Rocchino* by Felicita Morandi (1869), a young "cripple" lives surrounded by his mother's affection and care until she dies and the son is placed in foster care by a guardian and his family, but they isolate him and cruelly exploit him. Throughout the story, Rocchino appears marginalised: he is only accepted by his mother, so devoted to him that he even attracts the jealousy of his brothers.

Also, Giulio Tarra in *La forza dell'esempio* [The power of example] (1871) introduces the character of a mother who, despite having two daughters, devotes all her time to caring for Clarina, the "wretched" and "poor" sister, to the point of sacrificing herself completely for her care. As the title emphasises, the educational aspect is central in the story: the mother, with her "pious" example of caregiving, transmits to the other daughter the fundamental value of sacrifice and, when the mother becomes old, she takes care of her renouncing even at her own life. The author exalts such virtuous attitudes and helps to perpetuate an imagery of the female figure completely dedicated to caring roles within the family³.

Women appear devoted to the domestic dimension of life and represent the only salvation for their frail children; the identities of the characters coincide with their maternal role. As a result of the social changes highlighted above, women are under increasing pressure from a moral imperative: they have to devote themselves to their tasks, in order to correspond to a cultural norm of "intensive mothering" (Hays, 1996, X) which requires mothers to dispense extraordinary resources and which seems to be perceived in an even more pressing form in the presence of children with disabilities⁴.

"The infant and the child become the privileged objects of maternal attention. The woman accepts to sacrifice herself so that her child may live, and live better beside her", writes Badinter (1981, p. 146). In this sense, the disabled infant, considered an extreme symbol of fragility and dependence, emblematically represents childhood's need for care and the maternal characters appear as exemplary icons to convey the value of sacrifice for the family, the norms of sexual identity and "stem the transformations of social life perceived as dangerous and threatening to existing structures" (Covato, 2014, p. 14).

This is also the case in Sofia Bisi Albini's short story *I tre lumini* (1887). The author is well aware of the educational weight her writings exert on young readers: since becoming a mother herself, she writes, "I seem to put myself into a serious, almost solemn thing, as if the success of my child depended on every line I write" (p. II). Also in this narrative, a mother sacrifices herself completely for the care of her favorite daughter, who has become an invalid after a severe rheumatic fever. The young girl spends her days isolated at home, cared for by her mother: the woman is always described with a tired expression on her face, she ages prematurely because of the pain for her daughter who had once been her greatest pride and whom she now keeps almost hidden away at home.

Sense of shame for the abnormal child, sorrow and social isolation are combined with the exclusive educational and caring role entrusted to the mother; her responsibility and extreme fatigue designate a destiny that is immutable and determined. Bisi Albini, particularly sensitive to the subject, dedicates an entire novel to this complex relationship between mother, disabled child and society in the book, with the emblematic title, *Il figlio di Grazia* [Grace's son] (1898). The mother reveals her worries: she fears that because of her son's condition, extraordinarily

2 On the concept of symbolic violence, see Bourdieu, 2014 and Schianchi, 2019.

3 Studies on the division of roles within the family show that it is still women who are mainly responsible for caring for children and those with frailties in the family (Saraceno 2011; Porterfield, 2002).

4 It has been highlighted that mothers still perceive particular social pressures and judgements in the case of children with disabilities (Scott, 2010).

robust for his age, they will be laughed at and isolated by everyone. Her fears become reality: “the friends, as if ashamed for Grazia, did not turn their heads to look at her or looked sideways” (p. 21). Grazia is also a victim of the fate of exclusion expected of people with disabilities and chooses to keep her son at home to avoid stares and comments.

The author, in a significant passage, metaphorically conveys all the burden that mothers are subjected to: “he [the son] sucked even her blood, and she had become haggard, white, so weakened that the slightest thing was enough to frighten her and make her cry. At night she slept an agitated sleep, always having such fearful dreams that she woke up in a sweat. And it was always her big son who also appeared to her in dreams. Sometimes she saw him grow taller, wider, as if he swelled up so much that she felt oppressed by him, as if she were crushed by him” (p. 17).

Also, in *Sette piedi in cerca di Tuli* [Seven feet looking for Tuli] (Vaj Pedotti, 1951), the mother takes care of her lame son with gentleness and affection, but in several scenes, she puts her hand on her heart, grieving for his condition. Later in the story, she falls ill and everyone is convinced that it is because of the pain and burden of her disabled son.

In almost all 19th century plays, it is exclusively the mother who takes care of the disabled character and when it is the father who takes care of him, it is only because he is widowed. The maternal characters are aware that society has entrusted and delegated to them the exclusive care of their socially excluded son and they are also aware that after their death the disabled sons are destined to an unfortunate fate of abandonment, like that of the tale Rocchino. This concern also transpires in the words of one of the maternal characters who “wept in tears thinking of the fate of her creature. How could she earn her bread? As long as she lived, Radichetta would not go hungry (...) but then what?” (Capuana, 1908, p. 291).

2.1.2 Rejection and conflictual experiences

Motherhood is, however, also a very complex sentimental universe, not immune to attitudes of delegation, emotional ambivalence and even rejection. If in the realistic tales the authors tend, as pointed out, to use the presence of the disabled child mostly to promote values and models of good behavior, in the folk tales emerges very different experiences: these reveal folk visions strongly rooted in the collective imaginary and related to “dream reservoirs” (Camporesi, 1980, p. 165) in an unstable balance between the real and fantastic worlds and between high and low culture. A disabled child is an uncomfortable and perturbing presence, a “check to life” (Canguilhem, 1976, p. 239), even stronger because it is generated from the female body (Shildrick, 2002) and, therefore, doubly associated with the mother figure who ends up embodying, in this case more than ever, society’s hopes and fears.

Emma Perodi in her collection *Le novelle della nonna* [Grandmother’s novels] (1892) restores this imagery in particular in two of the tales. In *Monna Bice e i tre figli storpi* [Monna Bice and the three crippled children], a woman, married to a violent and cruel man, gives birth to three children, all of them with physical deformities. The woman and her children are repudiated and she is accused of witchcraft and forced to flee and hide with them. Only after a magical healing of the children, the three boys and the woman are accepted again by the man and the society. Similarly, in *Il ragazzo con due teste* [The Boy with Two Heads] (Perodi, 1892), the birth of a deformed child provokes rejection by the community and especially by the mother, who is unable to look at him or touch him. She is so upset by her son that she takes refuge in her childhood home. The young man, entrusted to a midwife, grows up and returns to his village to get revenge on his parents who abandoned him; his mother, as soon as she sees him, dies instantly with fright.

In both cases, it is unforgivable for the mothers to have generated such “monsters”: in the first case, Monna Bice, although deeply distressed, suffers a forced estrangement, while in the second tale, it is the woman herself who elude society out of shame and fear.

3. Conclusions

The representations of the mothers of disabled children in Italian children’s literature between the 19th and 20th centuries move between the promotion and exaltation of an extreme attitude of maternal care and caretaking and the survival of folk experiences that refer to images with more conflicting and disturbing tones. In the first strand, we can trace a didactic intent aimed at making women the guardians of the family and childhood, as an alternative to, or in opposition to, paths of cultural and social emancipation, in line with a female education that is increasingly projected and prescriptive in this sense (Covato, 2010). In all the representations, however, emerge one constant: the social exclusion to which the young person with disabilities is destined and, necessarily, also the woman who gave birth to him and to whom he is entrusted.

The exaltation of motherhood, on the one hand, and the isolation, suffering and attribution of blame, on the

other, overall contribute to reconstructing a more prismatic and real female interiority, “pervaded by confusion and lacerating conflicts: between loving feelings and angry feelings; between a protective attitude towards her son – when he is perceived as fragile, needy and dependent – and the desire to get rid of him, when the weight of his pressing and reiterated demands is felt most” (Bartoli, 2006, p. 233).

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