

«Once upon a time, there was a lady who did not have a baby...»

Once upon a time there was a plastic baby...

Motherhood and childhood in the stories by Donatella Ziliotto

«C'era una volta una signora che non aveva un bambino...».

C'era una volta un bambino di plastica...

Maternità e infanzia nelle storie di Donatella Ziliotto

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ABSTRACT

Maternity is the term that the human being invented to define she who with her body, is able to generate life and that we call *mother* for this reason, emphasizing the creative dimension of an act that, as Martin Heidegger tells us in his fable of care, is closely linked to the *humus*, the earth, or to the substance of all things, because it is from it that care has molded it, and strongly moved by desire (for what one does not have, but could have), which is vulnerability. Reasoning about motherhood by linking it to this creative and generative dimension also means inevitably, expanding the concept to include, in addition to natural motherhood, 'other' forms of motherhood. Children's literature, among other literature, especially that written by women, offers itself as a metaphorical place where the traces of this reflection sediment, stratified and latent. The object of analysis in this contribution will be *Il Bambino di Plastica*, by Donatella Ziliotto, a collection of short stories in which the writer explores, among others, precisely this dimension of the maternal, between autobiography and literary fictio.

KEYWORDS

**Motherhood, childhood, Donatella Zilotto, children's literature, autobiography.
Maternità, infanzia, Donatella Ziliotto, letteratura per l'infanzia, autobiografia.**

Maternità è il termine che l'essere umano ha inventato per definire colei che, con il suo corpo, è in grado di generare la vita e che per questo chiamiamo *madre*, sottolineando la dimensione creativa di un atto che, come ci racconta Martin Heidegger nella sua favola della cura, è strettamente legato all'*humus*, la terra, ovvero alla sostanza di tutte le cose, perché da essa, appunto, la cura lo ha plasmato, e fortemente mosso dal *desiderio* (di ciò che non si ha, ma che si potrebbe avere), che è *vulnerabilità*. Ragionare di maternità collegandola a questa dimensione creativa e generativa significa anche, inevitabilmente, espandere il concetto, ampliandolo fino a comprendere, oltre a quella naturale, forme "altre" di maternità. La letteratura per l'infanzia, tra le altre letterature, specialmente quella scritta dalle donne, si offre come luogo metaforico ove si sedimentano, stratificate e latenti, le tracce di questa riflessione. Oggetto di analisi nel contributo sarà *Il bambino di plastica*, di Donatella Ziliotto, una raccolta di racconti nella quale la scrittrice esplora, tra le altre, proprio questa dimensione del materno, tra autobiografia e fictio letteraria.

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1. What is a mother? Reading motherhood between children's literature and reality

Childhood and motherhood: the reflection that will be proposed in the following pages begins with these two “generative” and closely related terms. Motherhood is the term that human beings invented to define the condition of being a mother, that is, of the one who, with her body, is able to generate life. To be a mother means to be connected to the substance of all things, which is *humus*, earth, and therefore, to what in archaic cultures is called the “Great Mother”. Precisely from the *humus*, according to the ancient fable of the cure told by Martin Heidegger (2005), was born the human being, who would belong to the latter forever because it had shaped him, precisely, from the earth. Mother is she who, as the generative *humus* of life, inhabits the *threshold*, that *thin dark line* along which life and death brush against each other and which demarcates the boundary between reality and its “shadow zone”, where “alien” creatures are wont to transit: the wolves, who are its guardians; the boys and girls, who by their very nervous system live in continuity with the animal and plant universe and, above all, with the forces that pass through it; and, finally, the mothers. Mothers that, according to an ancient Inuit fairy tale, found their children by digging in the earth and immediately afterward were no longer the same, and not only because they had become, precisely, mothers, but because they had gained access to a further, more mature condition. Kakuarshuck, the protagonist of this fairy tale recently collected by Angela Carter (2020), was, in particular, a barren woman and – the story goes – spent all her time digging. She dug and dug without ever being able to find anything, until, thanks to a shaman, she found the exact point of junction with the other side of the world. Here the demonic trolls who inhabited it subjected her to an initiatory rite that, by tearing her flesh with claws and whipping her chest and groin, caused her to awaken back home, but with a child in her arms. The breast and groin are those parts of the female body that, symbolically and otherwise, refer to life because they generate and nurture it. The initiatory rite will allow the woman to overcome the simple condition of desire – which even from the psychoanalytic point of view is linked to the term “motherhood”, indicating the need to survive and procreate consubstantial to being – to give life and concreteness to another body, that of the child she will hold in her arms (Alga, Cima, 2022).

The idea of the naturalness of the act of procreation and childbirth, so strongly ingrained in the collective mindset, therefore, does not exhaust all possible ways of being a mother and, – the other side of the coin – denies women the legitimate possibility of not desiring motherhood, or even of renouncing it in certain situations, so as not to deprive their child of the sacrosanct right to life.

To read motherhood as a condition that is not solely affective, but as a social behavior with primarily social connotations means learning to read its history as a complex fact, which requires an equally complex approach of study and analysis (De Serio, 2009).

What is a mother? It is from this essential question that it is necessary to start and to investigate it, recourse will be made to what is considered, to all intents and purposes, a source for the reconstruction of educational and formative processes and of the very history of childhood (and therefore also of motherhood, which cannot be separated from it): children's literature. This will be done with all the caution determined by the awareness of the fact that writings intended for children, rather than being historical sources, can be considered “signs” of the historical reality and the collective imagination around a given issue and that therefore they, as first highlighted by Antonio Faeti, can be read as significant testimonies of the material conditions of behaviors, attitudes, widespread sentiments, and collective mentality, but also of the way of life and interpretations that have historically been given of the issue under consideration, thus as devices with a strong heuristic potential for a broader and more incisive understanding of the cultural, educational and formative processes of different historical epochs and, therefore, for reconstructing the “scenarios of meaning” (Faeti, 1972; 1977) that have passed through them. The children's book possesses, layered, two levels of reading and understanding: the first, superficial, has to do with the narrative and pedagogical dimension; the second, profound, concerns the more subtle and secret meanings and therefore the less obvious and more universal implications; those that make up its deep semantic substance and therefore lurk in the “underground” (Cambi, 1996). They concern ideology, culture, anthropology, and finally, the philosophy of fruition; therefore, children's literature can be considered, to all intents and purposes, a “source” for grasping the ideals and educational models conveyed in the abstracts by the texts, for defining the role that this literature has exerted concerning the processes of enculturation, the relationship between ruling and subordinate classes, as well as its function for the construction of an individual and collective imaginary around childhood, motherhood, and the same educational practices elaborated by the adult world for the new generations and their evolution over time (Ascenzi, 2013). It is in this direction that one can speak of it as something that “communicates experience” (Ascenzi, 2002, p. 17)¹ and that, precisely as such, can serve as a magnifying glass to grasp and interpret the traces that a given category or phenomenon has left in the course of history, and that, fixed through writing, can consti-

1 Anna Ascenzi writes, “The short story and the novel, for example, not unlike the mass media, exert an incisive role in the socialization processes of the younger generations because they interpret in a concrete form, experiential precisely, and therefore potentially very convincing the universe of values, behaviors, and themes dear to a social group” (p. 17).

tute useful paradigms for investigating them, especially when it comes, as in the case of children and women, to subjects left on the margins of traditional historiography. Children's literature, among other literatures, especially those written by women, offers itself as a metaphorical place where the traces of this reflection, which often begins, with that *imagined child body* that is formed in a mother's mind even before accessing the experience of motherhood and which often clashes with the difference of the *child body generated* and delivered to life, settle, layered and latent.

What is a mother, then? First and foremost, a *desiring body*, which if it cannot or does not want to conceive life biologically, can do so on a purely imaginary plane: "The power of the mother's imaginations is as strong as nature", writes Rosi Braidotti (2005, p. 30), evidently in the sign of an "other" definition of maternal and filiation, capable of contemplating all possible declinations of the generative act.

All this can become the subject of writing only for those courageous women writers who decide to narrate what Elisabetta Musi calls "the third way", that is, the way that works in the "interstices", in the zone of "between" to narratively construct the "space of encounter" (Musi, 2014) between genres and generations. The difference is made, in the construction of this symbolic space, by the words used to narrate.

2. The plastic baby and other tales

"Once upon a time there was a lady who did not have a baby, and so she lived in a very clean house with shiny furniture, and when she wanted to make an appointment on the phone there was always a sharpened pencil ready there because no one had taken it away from her. All the ladies who came to visit her and who had a child would tell her, 'Blessed are you that you don't have a husband'. And they would tell her that newborn babies cry at night and want to eat every four hours, and then they poop themselves" (Ziliotto, 2009, pp. 5-6).

The short story *The Plastic Baby*, written by Donatella Ziliotto in 1979, begins here: from a lack that, barely hinted at in these opening lines, will become, as one proceeds with the reading, increasingly significant.

The lady's body is a body that is *non-deserving* of the experience of the maternal: the more her friends told her that one-year-olds "start running, they fall, and you have to disinfect them" (Ivi, p. 6), they always break under their knees, "teethe and drool, or get sick and have snot or yawn at the latest show at the movie theater under the house" (*Ibidem*); that three-year-olds don't like the snack their mother makes for them, they bring it back untouched, and then their mother doesn't know what to do anymore, while on the other hand, four-year-olds are always too skinny and pale "and then you have to make them orange juice, but they spill it in the sink" (*Ibidem*), the more the desire to *not-become-mothers* grew.

Those were, the years of the feminist revolution; those were the years when young women claimed their rights to freedom from the patriarchal and phallus-logocentric culture that had dominated them until then, and for that, they took to the streets. And freedom could also be that of not conceiving, radically refuting the woman-mother axiom. Just in 1978, after the passage of the divorce law (1970) of the family law reform (1975), the law on the voluntary interruption of pregnancy had been passed.

The lady, who was pleased with her own condition and with the fact that she could keep, intact her porcelain cats, when she heard at eight years of age that children were just at a good age; that "they give satisfaction: they have become quieter, neater, and one can even talk to them" (Ivi, pp. 6-7), he began to consider procuring a child, which he purchased at the Technical Fair, in a specialized pavilion where one could buy "children of the preferred age [...] undeformable, indestructible, indestructible, do not soil, do not disobey, do not argue. On the high shelves stood lined plastic babies from one year old, two-year-old, and three-year-old, all a little greenish, but patient, with their good mechanical stomachs with guaranteed digestion, an electric brain for studying, and a record that said, 'Yes, Mommy', 'Thank you', 'You're welcome'. The fancy models also said, 'I love you Mom', 'I'll give you a seat', 'Oh never mind, that's perfectly fine too'" (Ivi, p. 8).

The purchase of a completed eight-year-old plastic and metal child refers to the act, typical of science fiction literature, of becoming a mother without conception: an extra-uterine birth that thematizes the existence of "representations of alternative systems of procreation and birth" (Braidotti, 2005, p. 44): a transcending of the condition of an embodied motherhood that in certain reflections of feminist philosophers even unties the experience of the maternal from the female body.

The lady had prepared for the plastic child a room of his own, with colorful Legos and third-grade notebooks for school. That child was exactly what she had imagined: polite, quiet, and obedient just right.

"Meanwhile, time passed. Her friends would tell her about rejection, rude responses, running away from home, and the lady in her heart would gloat, because instead, her fancy-type child would not forget a single day to tell her, 'I love you, Mommy!' However, her friends also told her about little gifts their children had manufactured for them, showed her postcards from their travels, one had even written poems. 'And you, pumpkin, always in the third!' she caught herself saying to him one day. She would have immediately bitten her tongue. But the plastic

child, his voice a little arched with time, answered her, ‘Oh never mind, that’s perfectly fine too’ (Ziliotto, 2009, p. 9).

At this point in the narrative, the lady realization of her own condition, while her friends’ children were growing up, working, and having children of their own, her plastic child remained always still, motionless in her eight years, body of plastic and metal, *body-human* and *body-machine*; she had conceived a *monster*, a presence that perturbed and disquieted her, to the point that she decided to abandon it: “The lady considered for a long time the porcelain cats lined up forever, motionless in their palace. Then she stared at her real eight-year-old boy. And because he was really indestructible and wouldn’t fit in the garbage can, she locked him in a sack with a stone and threw him off a bridge into the river at night. ‘Thank you’, gurgled the plastic child as he plunged into the water” (Ivi, p. 10).

What, then, is a mother? First and foremost, a woman who is able to indulge her own desire *not to become* biologically so in order to creatively and autonomously choose other forms of motherhood, which disengage the child, the fetus, the embryo, and even the eff from her own body.

The ending of the story lends itself to two levels of reading: on the side of the maternal and on the side of the *machine-child*.

The first has to do with a claim by the lady-who, in the narrative, is never given a name- of the right to freely choose not to be a mother, overcoming any essentialist definition of motherhood, especially if it is understood as the only sign of the growth of female freedom (Braidotti, 2005).

The second has to do with childhood: the plastic child, co-protagonist of the story, condemned to obsessively repeat the same phrases and, above all, to never grow up, is finally killed, as has historically always happened to other childhood: he dies drowned, moreover thanking his mother for the extreme gesture. This is a narrative choice that could be the author’s attempt to save the most authentic part of childhood, rescuing it by death from the “black pedagogies” of the adult world. Supporting this argument is Ziliotto herself, when, commenting on the books in her *Gl’Istrici* series, she declared that nothing was censored from her young readers, no themes, in order to put them in a position to defend themselves through reading, that is, to accustom them «to become critical of a reality that attempts to suffocate them», starting with their own parents (Ziliotto, 2007).

And indeed, the collection of short stories of which *The Plastic Child* is a part delivers to the reader’s gaze a veritable gallery of childhoods who, each with their own, highly personal strategy, attempt to survive their parent’s attempts to dominate and conform.

Thus, we have, for example, “the child who plays with sand in white gloves” (Ziliotto, 2009, p. 19) because of his mother, who fears he might contract some nasty disease, but who eventually, thanks in part due to the support of the little neighbors, manages by a ruse to touch the mailman who had gone to knock on his door for a delivery and who was really not well that day, and to get sick in turn with measles. This was the enormous disappointment of the mother, who obsessively asked the child and the babysitter, and, by implication, the reader as well, how such a thing could have happened.

We have, again, Ti-To, who “[at] three years old broke his music box with a lullaby, at four a much-loved toy car, at five his personal highchair, at six his family broke up: his mom and dad decided they were no longer good together and went to live one on one side, one on the other” (Ivi, 2009, p. 35) and, again, Pitia, also the child of separated parents and forced to endure the arrival of his mother’s new partner, and many more childhoods.

To all these *childhood monsters* – monsters because they are forced into a false self by the adults who look after them – Ziliotto offers a chance for redemption, which they often find in a renewed relationship with their parents: the child who plays with white gloves, at one point in his illness, is finally “seen” again by his mother, who “For the first time since he was born, embraces and kisses him» (Ivi, p. 23), Ti-To, ‘split in half’ between mom and dad at one point realizes that, «he, as he was, would keep his dad and mom united in him forever; and not only as they were now [...] but also as they had been as children when they had found each other likable and had decided that when they grew up they would marry” (Ivi, p. 38). Finally, Pitia, with the magical powers that in children’s literature only a child can possess, by coloring and scribbling with a green marker a photograph of Mama with her partner, manages to get her wish to come true, that is, for Mama to look at the man with different eyes and to decide, in the end, that “[A] man like that I just can’t marry him” (Ivi, p. 44).

For the adult world, on the other hand, even in those stories where there would seem to be a glimmer of hope, there seems to be no escape, nailed as it is to its responsibilities to a childhood it cannot understand because it does not have the time to stop and listen. Emblematic in this sense is the story *That Particular Tone of Gray* (Ivi, pp. 14-18), where a bank manager, upon entering the office, discovered a child sharpening pencils. “He had scattered them in front of him on the floor, many curls of wood had caught in the weave of the carpet, and many broken mines were rolling lightly on the linoleum. The child had the hair of the Director General’s son, same eyes, same stature, ‘What do you do here?’ ‘I make pencil tips’, he replied shyly. As a child, the Director General had also loved sharpening his daddy’s pencils. But then his father had made it clear to him with righteous firmness that he was not to play with his firm’s working tools, and so, albeit reluctantly, he had stopped and had become the sober and tidy General Manager that everyone esteemed. ‘You must stop messing with my stuff’, he said, ‘I

don't want my son to become a waffler', said the child with dignity, 'and I'm not your son either'" (Ivi, pp. 15-16). That son he had always seen "like a fog" because at home he used to take off his glasses so as not to tire his eyes too much. At some point it turned out that the child sharpening was the child-self: "It's that particular tone of gray [...] when you happen to get it, it reflects oneself as a child" (Ivi, p. 16), the Director-child replied. To no avail were his attempts not to be erased: "you can still become different, if only you remember!" (Ivi, p. 17), the little boy told him before he was repainted white by the painters until he disappeared.

Those who, like Donatella Ziliotto, on the other hand, have never forgotten their childhood and continue to carry it within them, end up, like her, revealing themselves not only as a writer but also as a woman, revealing their own "being by seeking themselves through words" (Ulivieri, 2019, p. 36) and always on the side of her "paper" children, always on the side of childhood, starting with the memory of her own: "I myself experienced a difficult condition in my family since my mother did not accept to see me as different from how she wanted me", she recounted in one of her last writings (Ziliotto, 2007, p. 170).

Sublimated through writing, her motherhood, but also her childhood, becomes an opportunity to experience to the full that condition of vulnerability (Lopez, 2009) as many characteristics of the maternal as of childhood, which, if meditated upon, can lead to change, simply because it makes one discover, starting from and beyond one's *embodied bodies*, passing through a necessary conflict, ethics of ties on which to base the construction of new forms of community, more equitable and sustainable, in which there is space for all subjectivities (*Ibidem*), starting with the maternal – and the childhood linked to it – in all its possible declinations.

"I have written, and I write for all children who need to save themselves from adult overpowering", Ziliotto recounted, "in that certain dangers inherent in their state need to be pointed out to them, so that they become critical of themselves or if nothing else of their parents. When I think of *The Plastic Child* I feel that the transmission of his idea had then the urgency of a warning. [...] The children who are the protagonists of my books are capable of thinking and fantasizing, they like to make fantastic speeches, think about the issues of life, make interesting speeches, to elaborate critical thoughts about life. But above all, they are brave and rebellious, in the sense that they have the strength to revolt against conformist and respectable adults and against a world that wants to overwhelm them and not listen to them" (Ziliotto, 2007, pp. 173-179).

Once upon a time, there was a plastic baby...

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