

Da lei, tutto: Female Relationships in the Narratives of Matilde Serao

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ABSTRACT

PIA BERTUCCI: *Da lei, tutto*: Female Relationships in

the Narratives of Matilde Serao

(Under the direction of Dino Cervigni)

My study delves into the incredible literary career of Matilde Serao. This study of Serao's female-centered narratives explores the predominant themes of solidarity, alienation, power, sacrifice, collective memory, and social consciousness.

The first chapter, "The Language of Passion," explores the unique language Serao employs to depict passionate love.

The second chapter, "Martyrdom and Marginality," ponders the grim fate of marginalized women and girls who, without the support and comfort of their female comrades, are unable to successfully navigate what is ostensibly a man's world.

Chapter Three, "Da lei, tutto," examines the mother-daughter relationship and Serao's overall treatment of motherhood.

Chapter Four, "Chorality and Collective Memory," investigates Serao's choral studies, and their essential connection with collective memory.

The predominant objective of this work has been to illustrate the depth, incisiveness, and inspired genius of Serao's literature, and to rehabilitate her stature to that which her contemporaries esteemed.

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Introduction

The literary and journalistic career of Matilde Serao was as diverse as it was prolific. From the time of her first publication, a short novel entitled *Opale*(1878), there would be only three years in which Matilde Serao would not produce annual publications (Gistucci 15-21). By the time of her death in 1927, she had founded four newspapers, and she had also written 165 short stories, 17 novels, innumerable essays, and collections of reportage.¹ During her lifetime, and for decades afterwards, many of her short stories and novels were adapted for the theater and the cinema, some of which she adapted herself (Gistucci 525-32). Her newspaper articles ranged in theme and format from advice, fashion and travel columns, to serious pieces that covered social and political issues, concerning Italy and other countries as well. Serao was passionate about social causes in Naples, her home from the age of four, and would write many compelling articles revealing that city's various social ills and demanding justice for its destitute and forgotten people.² At the same time, as a journalist, she visited many other European cities and countries throughout the world.

Matilde Serao's literature was diverse as well. Although she explored *veristic* themes, of which many were set in Naples, Serao also produced many successful sentimental novels, hagiographic/mystical or spiritual literature, Gothic mystery novels,

¹This tally is from Gistucci. Although many bibliographies of Matilde Serao's works show a larger number of novels, many of these are novels that had been previously published under different titles. Gistucci lists each novel or collection with its different titles.

² The most poignant and celebrated example of this is *Il ventre di Napoli* (1884).

and specialty pieces on such far-ranging topics as botany.³ Because of the far-ranging diversity and the sheer volume of these works, there is some critical debate over which ones merit consideration.⁴ Perhaps the broadest consensus lands on *Il paese di Cuccagna*, and *Mors tua* as Serao's masterpieces, the latter earning her a Nobel Prize nomination before it was rescinded and given to her Sardinian compatriot Grazia Deledda for political reasons.⁵ While not all of her works were critically acclaimed, Matilde Serao in her varied literary career received accolades from such eminent Italian literary figures as the philosopher, critic, and historian Benedetto Croce, who praised her "penetrating intelligence" as well as her depiction of female passion (Amoia 108). The poet Giosuè Carducci once toasted her as "la più grande prosatrice d'Italia," and the legendary and masterful writer Gabriele D'Annunzio, a close friend of Serao's, dedicated his *Giovanni Episcopo* to her in 1892 (Gistucci 497). In 1902 Serao founded *La settimana*, a weekly literary review that featured contributions from D'Annunzio and Croce, as well as other illustrious authors such as Luigi Capuana, Giovanni Pascoli, Luigi Pirandello, Edmondo DeAmicis, and Antonio Fogazzaro (Amoia 106).

³ The veristic narrative does not indulge in sentimentality or fantasy, but strives to realistically and objectively portray the common people of the time and their milieu. These stark and austere depictions of the common people spring from the *verismo* movement made famous by Luigi Capuana and Giovanni Verga. Matilde Serao's form of *verismo* is in the same class as that of other Southern Italian writers of her time, such as Salvatore Di Giacomo from Naples, and Federico De Roberto from Sicily. (Bondanella 534) This type of *verismo* has been described by Bondanella as characterized by "its insistence on regionalism and on economic factors. This insistence was contingent upon the reality of newly united Italy with its enormous problems of civil and industrial development as a modern nation [...]". (533)

⁴ For representative works of the genres mentioned, respectively, see the following: *Il romanzo della fanciulla*, 1885; *Fantasia*, 1883; *San Gennaro nella leggenda e nella vita*, original publication date 1909; *La mano tagliata* 1912; *L'anima dei fiori*, Milano; 1903.

⁵ Matilde Serao's anti-war sentiment as expressed in several of her articles and her last book, *Mors tua*, allegedly caused Mussolini to block her nomination. References to Serao's political stance can be found in many works, for example see Anna Banti, *Matilde Serao*, 284.

Through literary salons as well as her own media publications, Serao mingled with literary greats from Europe and the United States. During Serao's lifetime her fiction, rooted in the tradition and style of the great French authors of the era, was read by French and English-speaking audiences as well as Italian. Henry James called her "the she-Zola of Italy," and "a wonderful little burly Balzac in petticoats" (Edel 396). Paul Bourget compared her to Zola and Maupassant (Gistucci 206). During this period, the ultimate goal of the literary elite was to be known and published in France. Count Gegé Primoli, a close friend of Serao's, introduced her to the inner literary circles, and with his help and that of Georges Hérold, Serao certainly achieved this goal, selling tens of thousands of copies in France (De Nunzio Schilardi 47).

During this period many other Italian women writers were emerging on the Italian literary scene. Serao experienced intense competition with some contemporaries such as Grazia Deledda, but also collaborated on literary and journalistic endeavors with such notable authors as Neera, in whose honor she dedicated a literary conference in 1920, Sibilla Aleramo, Gemma Ferruggia, and Contessa Lara (Evelina Cattermole).⁶ She also esteemed these women's friendship, writing about them frequently in her journalistic pieces (Amoia 109), even when the public tide of criticism was not favorably disposed towards certain women writers: Serao defended Contessa Lara's reputation after her murder by a much younger lover became the topic of a media scandal (Alexander 185), and wrote in defense of Sibilla Aleramo's lesbian love affair with Lina Poletti (Amoia 109). Among her female literary friends, Serao also counted Annie Vivanti, the poet and

⁶ Rivalry between the two prominent writers has been documented as fierce, particularly after Serao was passed over for the Nobel Prize in favor of Deledda. It was in this time period that Serao is reported to have commented about the young Sardinian with "delle grandi arie": "Alla sua età io avevo già capolavorato." (Banti 285-6)

celebrated writer of several notable works of fiction such as *I divoratori*. According to an account by De Caro, Serao may have inspired Vivanti to write fiction.⁷

Beyond Serao's aforementioned contemporaries, the body of secondary literature on Matilde Serao can essentially be divided into two camps: those by scholars (mainly Italian) who primarily focus on the historical and biographical data, and those who stress literary criticism. Included in the former group would be Anna Banti, Giancarlo Buzzi, Tommaso Scapatucci, and Gianni Infusino. Marie Martin Gistucci presents a thorough and tightly organized compendium of Serao's works and their respective key motifs. Wanda De Nunzio Schilardi's recent study of Serao probes into fascism, feminism, and poverty in late-nineteenth century Naples and other political and social issues, without further treatment of literary analysis. Ursula Fanning and Laura Salsini focus more on literary analysis, and Fanning illuminates some social issues found in the texts. I examine additional texts beyond those selected by Fanning and Salsini as well as three areas they have not investigated: Serao's language, Marxist alienation and martyrdom, Irigaray's post-Freudian concept of "fusion" — a more positive mode of interpreting a close mother-daughter relationship — and finally, chorality and collective memory.

In Chapter One, "The Language of Passion," I examine the uniqueness of Serao's language. Language is a concept that is fundamental to deconstructing Serao's narrative. The distinctiveness of Serao's language is due to several different conflating factors: regional and academic influences on her command of Italian, the search for an appropriate linguistic mode to express love in particular, and, in general, the search for an

⁷ According to De Caro's account, Serao was hosting a lunch for Vivanti and Carducci when Serao suggested that Vivanti try her hand at fiction: "[...] devo dirti che la tua vena poetica è veramente fresca e zampillante. Brava ! Però, ricordati, la poesia non dà pane ; il romanzo invece, sì. Perchè non ti dai alla narrativa?" (21)

appropriate linguistic mode for the early woman writer, or what might be called, *la questione della lingua della donna*.

The issue of “literary paternity,” to use Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s metaphor (3), has induced anxiety and conflict for women writers throughout literary history. As Jane Austen’s Anne Elliot in *Persuasion* notes, “men have had every advantage of us in telling their story. Education has been theirs in so much higher a degree; the pen has been in their hands” (qtd. in Gilbert and Gubar 7-8). Matilde Serao embarked on her writing career during a period in which the reading public in Italy was expanding to include the lower or working classes, and more importantly, women. As Letizia Panizza and Sharon Wood point out, this increase in literacy was due to “a large-scale literacy program largely carried out by poorly paid women teachers” (7). The genre that attracted this new reading public was the novel, usually serialized in the French tradition of the *feuilleton*, or the original English medium made famous by Charles Dickens (Lepschy 177). In Italy the serialized novel was known as the *romanzo d’appendice*, because the installments were placed in the appendix of city newspapers (Lepschy 177). Serao herself regularly published her novels in installments in her own papers. This movement also propelled women writers to the forefront of the Italian literary scene.

The invasion of women writers on previously male-dominated territory produced some anxiety in male writers. Luigi Capuana, in his review “Letteratura femminile,” negated the cause for concern. Perpetuating the idea of a “literary paternity,” Capuana proclaimed that the output by women writers indicated more “quantity” than “quality,” and, as for originality, women were destined to “repeat what men have created before

them.”⁸ Many critics, including Lucienne Kroha, refute this notion. According to Kroha, women writers’ inferior education actually led them to create a literature that was more accessible to the female public, a rapidly growing reading public. Rather than fashioning their narrative after classical models, Italian women writers of this period looked to contemporary French writers (Kroha 166). Letizia Panizza and Sharon Wood emphasize that these conditions caused these early Italian women writers “to be particularly responsive to the desires and requirements of their market and adapt accordingly,” but that their lack of formal education also “freed them to experiment in form and style, in that they were not bound by the constraints of canonical expectations” (7). This freedom of form and style naturally led to the creation of a “new, popular, literary language,” as Croce reluctantly acknowledged (qtd. in Kroha 166). Among select, regional women writers, this language was enriched by, and firmly rooted in, the cultural traditions of the region, as well as the dialect itself. In her enlightening study of Italian women writers of the Fascist era, Robin Pickering-Iazzi elucidates the development of this language and its significance:

An equally important part of this project concerns experimenting with linguistic models in order to fashion a literary language suited to expressing the writer’s particular perspective to a broad audience, without sacrificing evocative power. Rejecting esoteric, rhetorical models, the women’s novels craft metaphors and symbols belonging to the literary prose tradition, yet increasingly make use of constructions and vocabulary common to conversational Italian. (141)

Serao’s unique brand of language found its fullest expression in her narratives that explore love and desire. Serao employs the act of writing, as well as aesthetic media such

⁸ The paraphrase is actually from Kroha, “The novel, 1870-1920” in Panizza and Wood, 166. Originally cited in Luigi Capuana, “Letteratura femminile,” in *Luigi Capuana* 19, ed. G. Finocchiaro Chimirri (Catania, 1988).

as music, to capture the ineffable quality of passionate love. To better understand the significance of Serao's use of language, I will examine the following narratives in Chapter One: *Cuore inferno* (1881), *Fantasia* (1883), *Addio amore* (1890), *Castigo* (1893), *Gli amanti*, "L'ultima lettera" (1894), and *Ella non rispose* (1914).

In Serao's narratives, heterosexual love is a condition that afflicts both men and women, transforming them psychically as well as physically: both sexes undergo gender inversions, as evidenced by the language used by the afflicted or abandoned lover, and women's identities become fragmented or subsumed. Invariably, Serao's jilted heroines take their own lives in a manner that suggests selflessness or self-sacrifice — the leitmotif of many of Serao's female-centered narratives.

The second chapter, "Marginality and Martyrdom," ponders the grim fate of women and girls who find themselves stripped of close, personal or familial ties. The female characters in these stories, ranging in scope from a displaced nun to a lonely spinster ballerina to a child flower peddler, are marginalized and forgotten. In each of these cases profound sorrow and suffering immediately follow the sudden and tragic loss of their mother, sisters, friends, etc. They find themselves tragically alone, and, without the support and comfort of their female comrades, unable to successfully navigate what is ostensibly a man's world.

Furthermore, without fitting within the parameters of expected female behavior, i.e., someone's wife or mother, these characters are marginalized and invisible to the rest of the world. However, their significance is not to be underestimated. The common current running through these novels is that of self-negating, sacrificial characters, who suggest Christlike figures. The works I will examine in this chapter are: *Piccole anime*:

“Una fioraia,” “Canituccia,” “Nebulose”(1883), *L’anima semplice: la Ballerina* (1899), *L’anima semplice: Suor Giovanna della Croce* (1901), and *Storia di due anime* (1904).

In the first two chapters I focus on Serao’s heroines — the abandoned, disenfranchised, marginalized, and martyred — who personify self-sacrifice. The ultimate representation of sacrifice for Serao, however, was found in her portrayals of motherhood. Chapter Three, “Da lei, tutto,” explores the mother-daughter relationship, and Serao’s overall treatment of motherhood. Throughout her life and career, Serao’s conception of motherhood evolved from a rather idealized and almost sacred vision in her early works, to a more realistic depiction by the time she wrote her last novel, *Mors tua*.⁹

Despite her shift in perspective, Serao never abandoned portraying the mother figure. The mother remains paramount in Serao’s works and epitomizes the ideal of completely self-sacrificing love. The relationship between mother and daughter in Serao’s narratives has been viewed as negative by critics such as Salsini and Fanning. I challenge this interpretation, by using textual analysis as well as Irigaray’s defense of the mother-daughter bond in her essay “The Forgotten Mystery of Female Ancestry.” Regardless of their social or economic station, mothers are usually the proverbial glue that holds fragile familial structures together. I will examine the following texts in this chapter: “Silvia” (1879), *Il ventre di Napoli* (1884), “Terno secco” (1888), “O Giovannino o la morte” (1888), *Il paese di cuccagna* (1891), *Il delitto di via Chiatamone* (1908), *La mano tagliata* (1912), and *Mors tua* (1926).

These works are representative of Serao’s different authorial phases, as well as her shifting point of view. “Terno secco” is a poignant story told from the daughter’s

⁹ Fanning points out that Serao’s point of view shifted from her early idealized narrative, told from the daughter’s point of view, to her later, more grounded narratives told from the mother’s point of view. (68) I would add that these two different phases reflect Serao’s own shift in roles from daughter to mother.

perspective, while “Silvia” is related through the eyes of a first-time mother. “O Giovannino o la morte” is an acerbic narrative in which the machinations of an evil stepmother actually reinforce the sanctity of the maternal bond through the memory of the deceased mother. *Il ventre di Napoli* is not a work of fiction, but rather a collection of articles that originally appeared in the newspaper *Il Fracassa* (Gistucci 577). I will be considering *Il ventre di Napoli* for two reasons. First, Serao develops several of *Il ventre di Napoli*'s characters in *Il paese di cuccagna*.¹⁰ Second, although mothering is not the overt theme of the articles in *Il ventre di Napoli*, nor in *Il paese di cuccagna*, both works are replete with the hardships, sacrifices and the solidarity of impoverished mothers. *Il delitto di via Chiatamone* and *La mano tagliata* are Gothic mysteries in which the spirit of the deceased mother continues to exert tremendous influence and power over her daughter. *Mors tua* considers many different types of mother-child relationships and is a powerful tribute to all mothers. Furthermore, this Nobel prize contender is a complex novel that is resplendent with many compelling social themes and arguments, and deserves further investigation into these areas as such.

In Chapter Four, “Chorality and Collective Memory,” I examine *Mors tua* as well as the following social masterpieces penned by Serao: *Il ventre di Napoli* (1884), *Il romanzo della fanciulla*: “Nella lava,” “Non più,” “Per monaca,” “Telegrafi dello stato,” “Scuola normale femminile” (1886), *Saper vivere* (1900), *Sterminator Vesuvo* (1906), and *San Gennaro nella leggenda e nella vita* (1908). Serao's empathy of the hardships of low to middle class working women is vociferously expressed in these novels and short stories.

¹⁰ I am indebted to Ursula Fanning for this observation (74).

Serao was a pioneer of *novelle sociali*, short stories that delineate sociological and topical themes, and her works must be examined as such. Her realistic sketches of adolescent girls and women not only provide a candid representation of their milieu, but also valuable insight into the socialization of women who lived in Naples at the turn of the century, what roles they played, and what issues they faced. Furthermore, the stories that constitute *Il romanzo della fanciulla* are choral studies in which there is no one protagonist, but rather an entire group of young women communally fulfill that role. In her preface to the aforementioned work, Serao presents her choral studies as factual transcriptions of her memory. The confluence of memory and social commentary is one of the most significant features of Serao's narratives.

Il romanzo della fanciulla, as well as the other aforementioned works, through narrative descriptions of ceremonies and rites of passage, presents a social memory of women, particularly the illiterate lower-class, of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Naples. The preservation of collective memory for this milieu is significant because it represents the creation of an "oppositional history" (Connerton 15), or the history of oppressed and marginalized people (in this case, Neapolitan women) whose discourses had traditionally remained muted. Again the key element to Serao's achievement is language. Serao's blend of Neapolitan and occasionally imperfect Italian with traditional grammar constructions and literary conventions provides a bridge between the poor, illiterate and the educated upper classes.

In their study of social memory, Fentress and Wickham stress that language is "a medium of preservation," as well as a "natural *aide-mémoire* [that] organizes our knowledge in conceptual categories that are immediately available for articulation" (28).

Examining the pivotal studies of linguists and sociologists, Fentress and Wickham also underscore the significance, as well as the distinctive differences in how women's social memory is structured. The significance of women's records of social events is explained thus:

Women in most societies run many or most of the key moments of the life cycle (characteristically birth and death). It is not only because they often have little experience outside the family environment that they structure their recollections around such moments, but also because such moments are in their hands, rather than those of men. Moreover, in most Western societies, women, rather than men, have the responsibility of encapsulating (sanitizing, moralizing) accounts of the experienced past for young children, as part of the process of socialization: images of "the way we were," recounted by a line of female narrators can stretch back for generations. This type of commemoration of experience is identifiable by its tenses (more imperfect, fewer past or perfect). (142)

Fentress and Wickham's conclusion suggests that women's memory narratives are characterized by their own distinct grammar. A recent study of social memory by sociologist Isabelle Bertaux-Wiame supports this idea. Bertaux-Wiame's research of memory transmission through generations of French bakery workers revealed that

the language with which French men and women told their stories was fundamentally different. Men would place themselves at the center using the active "je" [. . .] while women tended to speak through the collective "on" or "nous". (qtd. in Leyersdorff, Passerini, Thompson 2)

However, external factors also shape the preservation of social memory by women.

Fentress and Wickham cite the following as examples of these factors: "[. . .] levels of male tolerance of female points of view," "different economic roles for women," and "different levels of women's mutual cooperation or 'complicity with men'" (137). These

concepts can be found at the heart of Serao's narratives. It is the solidarity of women — whether as schoolmates, co-workers, nuns, or friends — that ensures their chances of survival as well as the documentation of their histories. The lives of men and of children in Serao's era had traditionally been recorded by men, while those of women received scant historiographical attention. Therefore, Serao's recording of social events and crises serves a vital historical function. Serao's emphasis on solidarity and chorality among women in her narratives is actually characteristic of the mode of social memory preservation among women as studied by modern social scientists.

One such social scientist is Luisa Passerini, whose study of *Fiat* factory workers in Fascist-era Turin revealed very diverse memory transcription between men and women. Male factory workers generally tended to stress the “enthusiasm of creation,” while the female workers' memories reflected “factory-floor powerlessness” (qtd. in Fentress and Wickham 143).

These contemporaneous yet dissimilar histories among male and female workers cited by Passerini are analogous to Serao's accounts of working women. Serao wrote at a time when women were working many of the same jobs as men. Her account of the *telegrafiste* in the short story, “Telegrafi dello stato,” provides insight into the social conditions of working women at the time.

The socioeconomic reality for Italian women during Matilde Serao's lifetime was paradoxical: under the Codice Civile of 1865, married women effectively had no independent legal claim to money or property (Fanning 17). However, until 1927, when the Fascist government severely decreased the types and number of jobs available to them, women were a vital part of the workforce, and often were the principal supporters

of their families (J.W. Scott and L.A. Tilly 173). The types of jobs that were available to women were few and their educational opportunities were sorely lacking especially vis-à-vis vocational training. Women often worked long, arduous hours and in return received harsh treatment and lower pay than men (Fanning 118). Furthermore, although women had no legal claim to their children, they were the primary caregivers of their own children, a practice that has continued until contemporary time.

Serao's interest in stories that focus on women and children is due in part to the fact that these oppressive, dire circumstances were consistent with Serao's own upbringing. Five years after the young Matilde immigrated to Naples from her birthplace of Patras, Greece, with her Greek-born mother and Neapolitan father, he all but disappeared from the picture. Serao's mother, who suffered from fragile health, supported her daughter and herself on her meager earnings as a private language instructor until her untimely death in 1879.¹¹ Serao described herself as a lazy child who had still not learned to read before the age of nine. However, according to her account, it was at this age, and during one of her mother's more prolonged and profound spells of infirmity, that the young Matilde taught herself to read, from an illustrated edition of Shakespeare in translation, at the foot of her mother's sickbed (Gisolfi 52). Matilde Serao herself only went as far as the secondary level of schooling, at that time called the *Scuola Normale*. Although Serao had the opportunity to engage in a series of examinations to become a teacher, financial exigency following the death of her mother led her to take a grueling, low-paying job at the State Telegraph office until she eventually broke into journalism. It was during those years at the State Telegraph that Serao filled her spare moments writing fiction.

¹¹ The chronology in this study, unless otherwise noted, is taken from Gistucci.

As a successful journalist and fiction writer, Serao achieved what few women were able to at that time. As a director of her own newspapers, Serao enjoyed a position of power and a level of accomplishment that no other woman in Italy had achieved thus far. Furthermore, Serao's personal life transcended the rules, conventions and mores of her time. Serao continued to heed her professional obligations even after the births of her four sons with Edoardo Scarfoglio. In 1903 Serao separated from her husband, a pathological philanderer, and moved in with her friend and lover, the attorney Giuseppe Natale, with whom she would later have a daughter at the age of 48. However, in her journalistic pieces, she neither celebrated her own career accomplishments or liberated lifestyle, nor did she encourage other women to follow in her stead. Serao's articles typically reinforced the traditional values of humble domesticity and motherhood espoused by the Roman Catholic Church. Serao spoke out against the futility of suffrage, railed against divorce, and essentially encouraged all women to stay at home and raise their children.¹²

Contrary to the staid domestic woman Serao idealized in her newspaper columns, in her fiction Serao depicted strong female characters who break out of this conservative mold. These indomitable women spotlight instead a world in which mutual cooperation among women enhances their chances of survival. Furthermore, breaking away from this interdependence, whether through marriage, illicit love affairs, or the forcible removal from a convent, would result for women in misery or even death.

¹² Many critics have explored Serao's ostensible misogyny, particularly as it concerned decisive political issues concerning women at that time. For further reading on the subject, see Harrowitz 1994, Arslan 1986, and De Nunzio Schilardi 1986. Amoia interprets Serao's opposition to divorce within a historical and sociological context, indicating that divorce would leave more women vulnerable or victimized rather than emancipated (109).

It is these relationships among women that set Serao apart from previous European writers and from many of her contemporaries and enhanced her appeal and enigmatic stature as an author. My study will concentrate on these relationships and how this community helped women endure the oppressive patriarchal society of late nineteenth/early twentieth-century southern Italy. Furthermore, I maintain that the autocratic stature of men, whether in the household or in society at large, was illusory. Women who banded together and provided mutual support and assistance were the dominant ones.

Matilde Serao wrote in a period when women were on the brink of redefining their roles in a changing society. In this respect, even eighty years after her death, Serao's writings continue to have a topical interest, as women today are constantly reinventing and redefining themselves. Matilde Serao's innovative explorations into the multifaceted female psyche, her bold reportage of social concerns and her treatment and emphasis of female-female relationships were instrumental in the formation of a canon of Italian women writers.

Chapter One:
The Language of Passion

Throughout the different phases and genres that mark Matilde Serao's career, love figures prominently. Serao's narratives explore all of the classical types of love, *agape*, *philia*, and *eros*. It is this last category that is perhaps the most problematic for Serao. Romantic love for Serao is a pervasive and dominant theme that by its nature is fraught with difficulties. Heterosexual love inevitably ends in disaster, or even death. At the very least, the love one feels for another is often unrequited, and a futile search is thus launched by the one in love not only for a return on that love, but for a way to cope with their consuming passion, and a means to express it. Serao's method of amatory expression is complex and sets her narratives apart from other writers of her era. There are several contributing factors to the uniqueness of her style. In part Serao's narrative style springs from the solitary and obscure nature of love itself. The endeavor to find a suitable language of love has been the focus of several eminent scholars. Julia Kristeva in her *Tales of Love* explores the incommunicability of love:

The language of love is impossible, inadequate, immediately allusive when one would like it to be most straightforward; it is a flight of metaphors — it is literature. [. . .] At the very moment when the individual discovered himself to be intensely true, powerfully subjective, but violently ethical because he would be generously ready to do anything for the other, he also discovered the confines of his condition and the powerlessness of his language. Are not two loves essentially individual, hence incommensurable, and thus remote? [. . .] Vertigo of

identity, vertigo of words: love, for the individual, is that sudden revelation, that irremediable cataclysm, of which one speaks only *after the fact*. Under its sway, one does not speak *of*. [. . .] Even the love letter, that innocently perverse attempt to subdue or revive the game, is too much engulfed in the immediate fire and speaks only of “me” and “you” or even a “we” resulting from the alchemy of identifications, but not of what is really at stake *between*. (1-4)

The love letter is a significant mode of expression because even if it is eventually reciprocated, the organic letter of the amorous to his or her beloved is by its nature solitary, and is capable of expressing all the hopes, desires, and fears of the person writing it. In this sense, this one-sided perspective is not grounded in reality but is implanted in a utopian existence. Matilde Serao employs the medium of the love letter, as well as music and body gestures, to convey love and passion in her 1914 novel, *Ella non rispose*. Serao explains it thus in the preface to her work:

Nessun uomo, il più austero, che non abbia mai lacerato con mano tremante di ansia, la busta di una lettera, di *quella* lettera; nessun uomo, il più aspro e il più rozzo, che in un giorno memorabile della sua vita, non si sia curvato sopra un foglio di carta e non vi abbia, insieme alle convulse parole, versato anche le sue rare e brucianti lacrime: nessuna donna che non abbia affrontato, audacemente, un pericolo mortale, scrivendo una lettera di amore, destinata a essere smarrita, ritrovata da un giudice o da un carnefice; nessuna donna che abbia saputo, mai, resistere alla lettera di amore di un uomo, a cui pure, avea resistito, quando egli le parlava. La ragione, e la logica, e la saviezza, tutte queste forze della mente e della coscienza, sapendo che la lettera è tutto l'amore, sapendo che per la lettera, gli uomini e le donne si amano, sono presi, travolti e perduti, queste forze morali interiori, con le loro rigorose suggestioni, cercano indurre la donna, cercano persuadere l'uomo a non scrivere e a non leggere lettere d'amore. È invano!
(VIII)

Serao then goes on to cite an ancient motto, “scripta manent,” which conveys the power of the love letter and the justification for the story she is about to tell. For Serao, although the love letter may be a solitary discourse, the fact that the “writing will remain”

is significant; all of the feelings of love expressed in the letter will be forever memorialized.

The relationship between modes of expressing love and the staying power of writing are essential to deconstructing Serao's representation of love and passion. In her introduction to the *Barthes Reader*, Susan Sontag emphasizes the value of literature to Roland Barthes, from which necessarily follows the value of language:

Barthes, too, might be charged with [. . .] treating literature as “everything” — but at least he made a good case for doing so. For Barthes understood (as Sartre did not) that literature is first of all, last of all, language. It is language that is everything. Which is to say that all of reality is presented in the form of language — the poet's wisdom, and also the structuralist's. (xx)

The most poignant exposition of this connection between language, literature and love is Barthes's *A Lover's Discourse*. In the chapter entitled “The Absent One,” Barthes defines absence as “Any episode of language which stages the absence of the loved object [. . .] and which tends to transform this absence into an ordeal of abandonment” (13). Barthes's idea of “amorous absence” can be found at the heart of any great love narrative. The concepts of absence and of the lonely, virtually incommunicable nature of love pervade *Ella non rispose*, a novel that is predominantly scripted in an epistolary form, with the exception of the last chapter.

Ella non rispose is one of the few Serao narratives that features a male protagonist, in this case the lovesick Paolo Ruffo. From the first scene, the nature of Paolo's love for Diana is framed within the defining parameters of courtly love. Consistent with the traditional code of behavior, Paolo loves Diana from afar, and expresses this love through letters. However, Diana remains virtually silent throughout

the narrative. Paradoxically, it is Diana's voice that first attracts Paolo, although it is not through speech. In a scene that fully evokes a courtly love setting, Paolo hears her singing from a window behind a balcony, which sits above an ample garden, the traditional *locus amoenus*. Before he has even seen her face, Paolo pledges his eternal love for Diana:

Qual voce! Grave, sonora, penetrante, toccante: talvolta elevantesi in una limpidezza cristallina, talvolta languente, velata e bassa, quasi sfiorita, quasi sfinita: una voce un poco triste, sebbene giovanile, per momenti, e, dopo, molto, molto più triste: una voce che si slanciava, come un grido di liberazione, che si smorzava, come in un sussurro di inguaribile malinconia: o Donna, tale una voce, evocatrice, invocatrice, che mi basta, qui, confusamente scriverne, per sentirmi struggere di amore. Voi cantavate la più nobile, la più espressiva, la più armoniosa *aria* che io abbia mai udita: l'*aria* in cui più il lamento di un cuore trafitto, è sublime nella sua dignità e nella sua misura: l'*aria* di Orfeo che piange, che chiede, così austeramente, così dolcemente la sua Euridice e in cui Gluck ha messo le purissime lacrime e l'inconsolata mestizia di chi ha perduto il suo unico amore. *Che farò, senza Euridice?*¹ [. . .] Così, ansiosamente, con uno slancio frenato dalla dolcezza, chiedeva, nel canto perfetto, la vostra voce, no, la vostr'anima dolente. *Dove andrò senza il mio bene?* domandava, con espressione di spasimo represso, la vostra voce vibrante del più alto ardore. . . . Allora, o Donna, io non ho saputo più nulla di me e del mondo: la mia vita si è chiusa nella vostra voce, si è chiusa nell'ansietà vostra misteriosa, si è chiusa nell'anima vostra palpitante, misteriosa. . . . La notte si fa alta, come è alto il silenzio, a me intorno. O Donna, io non vi conosco, non so donde veniate, dove andiate: non so se siate libera o prigioniera: non so niente di voi, Signora, ma voi mi avete vostro, o Signora, o Sconosciuta, vostro, o mia Signora, per oggi, per sempre, io, Vostro, io, lo Sconosciuto! (6-7)

Thus an additional mode of expression, music, is introduced within the existing medium of the love letter. Diana does not address Paolo, she is not even aware of his presence. Because of the open-ended and malleable nature of Diana's musical interlude, Paolo is

¹ The name "Gluck" refers to Christoph Willibald Gluck, the creator of the eighteenth-century opera, *Orfeo ed Euridice*. Paolo's quote in the letter, "Che farò senza Euridice," refers to Orpheus's reaction to Eurydice's death in the third act of the opera. For more information on this opera, see *The Simon and Schuster Book of the Opera* (62-64).

able to derive from, and attribute to the music his own linguistic meaning. The reference to the legend of Orpheus and Eurydice is significant as well. From this first “encounter,” Paolo undertakes the role of Diana’s protector and would-be liberator, although their respective roles are inverted: in the classical myth, it is Orpheus who possesses a lyrical and influential voice.

Other incidents of Diana “communicating” through her singing occur in the narrative. His life now consumed with his obsession, Paolo spends his days following his beloved from a safe distance, waiting for her to appear at her balcony window, or watching her on the street as she gets into a waiting carriage. Paolo, almost literally, lives for these moments when Diana makes an appearance, and on numerous occasions when she does not show, he falls into a suicidal despair. On one such occasion, after Diana has not emerged from her bedroom window or the house itself for three days, Paolo doubts he will have the strength to survive, until Diana communicates with him through another song, which he interprets as an explanation for her absence:

Avete cantato, mi avete parlato, mi avete risposto! Tre giorni di disparizione vostra, tre giorni senza luce e senz'aria, per me, tre notti senza sonno e senza riposo, tutto, tutto è cancellato dal mio cuore che palpita di una gioia piena, tutto è cancellato dai miei nervi esasperati e io sono in uno stato di fervore, di ebbrezza! Diana, stella del mio firmamento, stella dell'alba e del crepuscolo, voi vi siete degnata di parlare al vostro sventurato amatore, col vostro canto, perchè egli rinascesse alla vita, alla lietezza di vivere, alla felicità: io m'inginocchio, davanti a voi, immagine ideale della felicità, m'inginocchio per ringraziarvi, con quanto è in me di più puro, io mi prostro, in atto di devozione, dinanzi a voi, Diana, che mi avete parlato! [. . .] Cantavate, come la prima sera: cantavate con quella voce toccante che mi fa tremare di tenerezza, con quella espressione così intensa e così contenuta che mi ricerca quanto di più sensibile e di più fremente ha l'anima mia.... Cantavate, Diana, l'antica e amorosa e suggestiva melodia di Giambattista Pergolesi, [. . .] l'antica melodia di Nina, che è inferma, che pare dorma, che forse è morta! Dicevate nel bel canto italiano lento e soave, insieme: *Tre giorni son che Nina.... A letto se ne andò....* O amore mio incomparabile, voi siete stata malata, per tre giorni, come Nina, come la dolce Nina di Pergolesi, voi Diana, povera cara

inferma e io non l'ho saputo, io misero, io, ignorante, io non ho potuto saperlo, e sono stato infelice come non fu mai tanto creatura umana, non vedendovi, mentre voi pure soffrivate, per un malore misterioso e io vi ho torturata, con le mie lettere, Diana, perchè non posso vivere senza vedervi, senza udirvi. (43-45)

Thus Paolo affirms that these two senses, *vedere* and *udire*, sustain him. For Paolo, however, these are not passive actions on Diana's behalf, but active modes of communicating with her. In addition to Diana's singing, Paolo looks to her bodily gestures and facial expressions for a response to his amorous entreaties. Desperate for confirmation of rumors on Diana's betrothal to another man, Paolo asks her to inform him if it is too late:

Diana, se è troppo tardi, se è *veramente troppo tardi*, per il mio amore, per me, nella vostra vita: se questa fatal cosa, *troppo tardi*, deve recidere tutti i fiori della mia adorazione, se deve far inaridire tutte le sorgenti fresche limpide del mio amore, se deve distruggere quanto il mio amore e il mio sogno avevano creato, in me, attorno a voi, per voi, Diana, ebbene, siete voi che dovete dichiararmelo. Voi sola dovete dirmi: *uomo che m'ami, sappi che è troppo tardi, per amarmi*. Ho acquistato il disperato diritto di saperlo, da voi stessa: l'ho acquistato con questo sentimento violento e pure tenero di adorazione, per voi; l'ho acquistato per questa mia devozione immensa, a voi: l'ho acquistato col dono che io vi ho fatto, ciecamente, follemente della mia vita interiore e della mia esistenza mortale. Diana, rispondete! (55)

Paolo then requests that Diana verify this rumor by appearing on her balcony with a black scarf around her waist, a sign of her "grief" and "imprisonment" resulting from her engagement. The following day Diana "responds" as Paolo requested, wearing the same white dress she wore the first day he saw her, her waist bound with the black sash. Paolo interprets her response thus: "Eravate fasciata di lutto: e avete voluto dirmi che è tardi, che è veramente troppo tardi, per me" (57). Although Paolo signals that this is the end and he will go away, the announcement of Diana's imminent nuptials only fuels his fires

of passion and desperation. As a result of his almost complete consumption by grief, Paolo sends Diana a letter with an ultimatum: if she does not “come to him” by dawn, he will shoot himself. At this point the medium of bodily gestures is infused with more significance:

Alle quattro antimeridiane di questa notte, io ho guardato ancora il mio orologio, per la millesima volta: [. . .] Ero tranquillo, indifferente, gelido nel sangue e nell'anima: guardavo il cielo, donde mi dovea venir il termine fissato. A un tratto, i lievissimi chiarori dell' alba, appena appena percettibili all' occhio umano, salienti dall'orizzonte, laggiù, verso Roma bassa, hanno armata la mia mano decisa e ferma. *Chi*, in quell'istante, mi ha chiamato nella mia vita interiore? *Qualcuno* mi ha chiamato: e io ho interrotto il mio gesto, intento, attento, se, di nuovo, la voce che non risuona alle orecchie mortali, ma che vibra nell'anima, ancora mi chiamasse. [. . .] A quel minuto ultimo, un balcone del secondo piano, sull'angolo di villa *Star*, sporgente su via Sallustiana, si era soffuso di un mite chiarore, come per una lampada interna, non troppo lontana ma velata. [. . .] Il mio sguardo attirato da quella luce, con un'ansia misteriosa e crescente, il mio cuore che, quasi, non aveva più forza di palpitare, dopo tre notti di spasimo solitario, ha avuto come un sussulto di risurrezione: e io ho tremato, ho tremato come all'approssimazione di qualche grande cosa.... In quell'alone di luce, qualche cosa di più chiaro, di bianco, ma di più preciso, è apparso e si è venuto delineando, malgrado la lontananza: era la vostra alta e snella persona, vestita di bianco: era il vostro volto bianco: eravate voi, Diana, che mi siete così apparsa, che avete appoggiata la vostra fronte al cristallo nitido e che siete rimasta, così, qualche tempo, non so quanto tempo, innanzi al mio sguardo vinto e avvinto. Io non potea distinguere, se i vostri occhi fossero a me rivolti, se mi vedessero, mi guardassero: io non poteva distinguere la espressione del vostro viso: io era così lontano, voi così in alto, la notte era così oscura, [. . .] Come in un sogno, a un tratto, la visione vostra si è arretrata, è sparita: la luce si è fatta anche più fiavole, come se si allontanasse: è sparita. L'alba era sorta: e io era salvo dalla morte, per voi. Diana, io, ora, so che non mi amate: ma so che avete avuto di me una irresistibile pietà. (90-92)

Diana's simple bodily action of appearing at the window is thus capable of communicating both pity and absence of love. The end effect of this display, beyond resulting in a reprieve for Paolo's life, is that it effectively solidifies Paolo's state of abandonment. Ostensibly, Paolo's position has been one of abandonment from the onset

of the narrative. However, because the course of Paolo's romantic pursuit is filtered through his solitary discourse, the narrative reflects both moments of hope and of despair or abandonment. It is interesting to examine the shifts in language that express these oscillating emotions. Paolo's status as the abandoned one makes his character more vulnerable and emotionally effusive, qualities traditionally associated with feminine behavior. Barthes expounds this concept of the "feminization" of a man in love thus:

Historically, the discourse of absence is carried by the Woman: Woman is sedentary, Man hunts, journeys; Woman is faithful (she waits), man is fickle (he sails away, he cruises). It is Woman who gives shape to absence, elaborates its fiction [. . .] It follows that in any man who utters the other's absence *something feminine* is declared: this man who waits and who suffers from his waiting is miraculously feminized. A man is not feminized because he is inverted but because he is in love. (13-14)

Beyond Paolo's intense emotionality, one of the most interesting examples of this "feminization" is evidenced in Paolo's angry reaction to Diana's marriage to a wealthy and much older man. In an emotional outburst that is both maudlin and cynical, Paolo comments on the decadence displayed by the members of the bridal party:

Quanto può valere la veste di cresco roseo, coperta da una tunica di prezioso merletto bianco e stretta alla persona da un gallone orientale, d'oro e di argento, questa veste squisita e sontuosa con cui, ora, poc'anzi, donna Diana Sforza, è entrata, nell'Ambasciata inglese, per isposare, civilmente, *sir* Randolph Montagu e ne verrà fuori al suo braccio, fra poco, forse, diventata *lady* Diana Montagu? Quella veste non può costare meno di mille lire. E quel filo di perle che donna Diana Sforza aveva al collo, un sol filo di grosse perle, stretto sul soggolo di velo bianco che le copriva il petto e il collo e dietro, mi pare, fermato da una fibbia rotonda, uno smeraldo circondato di brillanti? Quel filo non può valere meno di otto o diecimila lire, insieme al fermaglio. E gli orecchini di smeraldi, circondati di brillanti, così larghi che pareva facessero curvare il bel viso, per il loro peso, quelli non possono costare meno di cinquemila lire. E ho visto luccicare, anche, sui guanti bianchi dei braccialetti

carichi di gemme preziose, come luccicava, anche, il pomo dell'ombrellino di merletto bianco, quell'ombrellino che ella, nella carrozza, teneva un po' abbassato, un po' troppo abbassato, per non farsi scorgere dalla gente, in via Venti Settembre.... Tutto ciò, braccialetti scintillanti, pomo d'ombrello luccicante, doveva valere, almeno, due o tremila lire. (97-99)

The minute attention to detail and material value that Paolo displays are qualities that are traditionally ascribed to women. Additionally, the overemotional language Paolo uses to convey his passion and desperation, for example, “io soffocavo d’emozione,” (22) suggest a feminine quality.

One could make the argument that because the narrative of *Ella non rispose* is engendered by a female author, it follows naturally that a male character’s voice would be tinged with femininity. However, in parts of the narrative in which Paolo gleans some hope of reaching Diana or of possessing her, Serao writes a convincingly male voice for his character. Paolo regains this masculine voice briefly upon the realization that Diana is entering this marriage not for her own benefit, but for that of her younger siblings, who are her sole financial responsibility since they were orphaned years earlier. What Paolo had mistaken as superficial motivations for marriage, he now recognizes as being virtuous and sacrificial:

Ma poche ore dopo, come in una mistica visione il vostro volto mi è riapparso, bianco come un petalo di rosa bianca, e i vostri cari occhi eran più oscuri e più tristi che mai, e come un fine nastro sanguigno, era la bocca vostra senza sorriso.... allora, allora, io ho sentito frangersi il mio cuore, nel mio petto, di tenerezza, di compassione, di rimorso e vi ho domandato perdono, prostrato dinanzi a voi, con l'anima riboccante di dolore, innanzi a voi, Ifigenia, Ifigenia, che rinunciate all'amore, che rinunciate alla gioia, che vi votate a un eterno sacrificio, voi vergine pura e voi madre dei vostri orfani fratelli, delle vostre orfane sorelle, voi che non conoscerete, mai, mai, nella vita, la soave carezza dell'amore e il bacio inebbriante della passione, o Ifigenia [. . .] Dio vi dette un gran sangue e un gran nome, ma per peccati che vi sono estranei, che voi ignorate, egli punì i vostri e voi, affliggendovi con la povertà: Dio vi donò una beltà

ammaliante e adornò la vostr'anima, rendendola fulgente come una gemma sacra, ma vi tolse vostro padre e vostra madre; Dio vi concesse una gioventù dolce e forte, insieme, ma vi affidò la sorte dei fratelli, delle sorelle, che a voi si volgono e voi chiamano e voi dovete condurli, nella vita, a un destino di bene e di gioia. (74-75)

After Diana's marriage, Paolo follows the newlyweds through various European cities.

Watching both Diana and her husband, Randolph Montagu from a close, but safe

distance, Paolo eventually makes a discovery about the true nature of their marriage:

Sono tre notti che, da mezzanotte in poi, sir Randolph Montagu viene alla sala da giuoco [. . .] egli è venuto a giuocare, egli è restato sino all'alba e che vi verrà, lo sanno bene, i croupiers, sino all'ultimo giorno. [. . .] E ho saputo, altrove, ho potuto sapere, al vostro albergo, o sposi novelli, che sir Montagu prende una doccia, rientrando all'alba, e che si ritira nella sua stanza, a riposare, la sua stanza che non è neppure vicina alla vostra e che solo alle undici e mezzo, è permesso al suo domestico di bussare alla sua porta.... O novella sposa, voi dormite sola, tutte le notti, voi dormite sola, e vi svegliate sola, e non rivedete lo sposo vostro che a mezzodì; ed egli, tutte le notti, va a giuocare, come prima, come sempre; va a giuocare, sino all'alba. O sposa novella, egli vi ha, voi siete sua, voi siete un fior di bellezza, voi siete giovane, e siete sua, sua, sua; egli vi ha voluta e vi ha sposata e vi ha condotta via, e la notte egli non è con voi, egli giuoca, egli rientra alla luce chiara, egli dorme nella sua stanza, come se voi non esisteste, sposa sua, donna sua.... egli vi ha, e non vi pensa, non vi desidera, non vi vuole, non vi prende.... ah, ah, sposa novella, lady Diana Montagu, sir Randolph Montagu non v'ama, non v'ama, non v'ama... (162-63)

This realization emboldens Paolo, and his character is effectively transformed from the role of abandoned suitor to active pursuer. Paolo thus returns to his original conviction that he is Diana's would-be protector and liberator, roles espoused as traditionally male, and his language reverts to its masculinized form as well.

Paolo retains this masculinized language through the end of the narrative. In his last letter, Paolo exercises his culturally endowed male prerogative and definitively ends this amorous quest by leaving Italy and Europe altogether. As he explains, to surrender his love for Diana, he must go to a place where there will be no traces of her. This action is a radical departure from the options that Serao invariably allows her female characters in love. The fact that Paolo is allowed to make this break, and essentially resume a normal life, reinforces the idea that he has not suffered any significant damage to his identity.

Conversely, when Diana Montagu's voice is finally heard, in the last chapter of the novel which serves as a sort of postscript, it is clear that she has not been as fortunate. The last scene of the narrative takes place after Diana's husband has died. (In keeping with his cool character that is devoid of passion, Montagu is fittingly killed by a snow avalanche.) It is now Diana who searches for Paolo, whose letters ceased coming ages ago, and whom, it is revealed, she secretly loved all along. As she lays on her deathbed, Diana asks her servant to do everything possible to find him, but he has vanished without a trace. Diana spends her last days completely consumed by her desire to explain to Paolo that she loved him, but she could not betray her vows to her husband. Diana dies with no other thought for herself or for any other earthly want or interest. Consequently, Diana's persona is revealed as one of self-sacrifice and sublime virtue.

The complete subsuming of Diana's identity, albeit briefly portrayed, stands in stark contrast to Paolo's integral preservation of self throughout his amorous escapade. In her *Tales of Love*, Kristeva examines the idea of "amatory identification," or the "assimilation of other people's feelings" which she explains in Freudian terms as *Einfühling* (24):

The identification that provides the support for the hypnotic state known as loving madness rests upon a strange object. This archaic identification, which is characteristic of the oral phase of the libido's organization where what I incorporate is what I become, where *having* amounts to *being*, is not, truly speaking, objectal. I identify, not with an object, but with what offers itself to me as a model. [. . .] On what ground, within what material does *having* switch to *being*? While seeking an answer to that question it appeared to me that incorporating and introjecting orality's function is the essential substratum of what constitutes man's being, namely, language. When the object that I incorporate is the speech of the other [. . .] I bind myself to him in a primary fusion, communion, unification. An identification. [. . .] In being able to receive the other's words, to assimilate repeat, and reproduce them, I become like him: One. A subject of enunciation. Through psychic osmosis/identification. Through love. (25-26)

Diana's assimilation and identification with all of the emotions expressed by Paolo in his letters, as well as the traits he ascribes to her, clearly illustrates this idea of *Einfühling*.

The idea of "amatory identification" and subsequent loss of personality or description of self is typical of Serao's female characters in love and is often realized quite literally, resulting in suicide. Certainly one who is on the verge of committing suicide could be classified as being in the ultimate stage of abandonment, which for men seems to lead to a "feminization" of their language, as in the case of Paolo Ruffo's character.

It is interesting to compare the gendered use of language in stories that feature men consumed by love as opposed to those that spotlight women in love. While Serao's jilted male characters tend to exhibit mawkish displays of feelings, Serao's female characters who are consumed by love, even when driven to suicide, articulate their grief in a more rational and even assertive manner.² Could it then be said that if a man prostrated by love becomes "feminized," that a woman suffering a similar fate becomes, at the hand of Serao, "masculinized"? To answer this question, one can see a close parallel to *Ella non*

² For another example of the "feminization" of Serao's men in love, see "Un suicidio" in *Gli amanti*.

rispose in “L’ultima lettera,” which is also written in epistolary form by an abandoned lover on the eve of suicide; but in this case the subject is a woman. “L’ultima lettera” is the last story of *Gli amanti*, in which the elements of *Einfühling*, epistolary expressions of love, and suicide all come together to form a very unique use of language.

The narrative features a young woman, Teresa, who is composing a suicide note, addressed to her rival, Angelica. Teresa’s motivations for ending her life are essentially passion and loss, but the language she uses to express these emotions is firm and reflects a cool sort of reasoning:

Voglio scrivere a voi, in quest'ora di morte. Non voglio mandare a mio padre, così amabile e così indifferente, così indulgente e così freddo, l'ultima mia parola: non a mio marito, tanto cortese e tanto crudele, voglio scrivere io, per dargli l'ultimo saluto. [. . .] No, no, ad essi non voglio scrivere nulla. Solo a voi, signora, mentre non vi conosco, mentre non mi conoscete, voglio dire che muoio, uccidendomi, voglio dire perchè mi uccido. (65)

As in *Ella non rispose*, the letter is addressed to a person the writer does not know, and is used to express the virtually inexpressible pathos of love. However, the language Teresa employs is radically different from that of Paolo Ruffo’s letters. Teresa’s motivations for ending her life are essentially passion and loss, but the language she uses to express these emotions is firm and reflects a cool sort of reasoning, as she lays out her argument for Angelica’s culpability:

Signora, vi odio. [. . .] Muoio a ventiquattro anni, lascio la mia famiglia, la mia casa, il mio paese dove è tanto sole e sono tanti fiori, me ne vado nella morte. [. . .] Se voi non foste, ora, non morirei: se voi non foste, Francesco Sangiorgio mi avrebbe amato. Era l'uomo del mio cuore, Francesco: era l'uomo dell'anima mia, destinato a me dalla legge arcana della passione e voi me lo avete tolto, per sempre. [. . .] Signora, signora, voi siete innocente: ma veramente, ve lo dico, voi

avete armato la rivoltella che mi deve uccidere e voi mi avete detto che debbo morire. Poichè, se voi non foste, egli mi avrebbe amata. Ci conoscevamo da tanti anni, siamo nati nello stesso paese e nello stesso anno, amiamo le stesse cose, abbiamo insieme desiderato un ideale di esistenza più buono, più semplice e più intimo. Mi avrebbe amata! (65-66)

Teresa's argument for suicide, while steeped in emotion, does not indulge in self-pity.

Rather, Teresa's overall tone borders on aggression, and suggests a masculinization of her language. The firmness and clarity that Teresa uses to direct this invective at

Angelica reveals a link between the two of them that is far more powerful and complex:

Scrivere a voi, significa scrivere a lui: voi siete lui. Gli leggerete questa lettera: la leggerete insieme. [. . .] Per voi muoio, signora: morire per voi, significa morire per lui: voi siete lui. [. . .] (65)

If examined within the context of Kristeva's definition of *Einfühling*, Teresa's statement of identification reveals a "fusion" of the two women. Through the "psychic osmosis" brought about by love, Teresa has already become "one" with Francesco. At the same time, Angelica's love for Francesco would entail the same process of union or fusion, and Teresa confirms this idea with the statement, "Voi siete lui." Extending a variation of the transitive theory to this equation, one could deduce the following: if Teresa is one with Francesco, and Angelica is one with Francesco, then it would logically follow that Teresa is one with Angelica.³ In other words, the two women are really two divergently different aspects fused into one woman.

The idea of the two different literary heroines as two parts of the same whole, or the female double, has been examined by several prominent critics, including Ursula

³ "In arithmetic, the property of equality is transitive, for if $A = B$ and $B = C$, then $A = C$." "Transitive law" *Encyclopædia Britannica Online* (2008).

Fanning. Fanning traces the source of this dualism to the stereotypes of “angel” and “monster” constructed by canonical male writers such as Milton, Goethe, Flaubert and Verga. An angelic female character in the traditional vein would represent idyllic and blissful domesticity and conform to conventional mores, while the monstrous *femme fatale* would be a character “who is firmly located outside the idyllic sphere of domesticity and gradually impinges on it as an invading force” (37). The two seemingly polar opposites of *donna angelicata* and *donna fatale* (50) represent two sides of the one organic being of woman. Fanning views Serao’s use of the female double as a vehicle for conveying subtexts of lesbianism and incest. However, I would maintain that Serao employs the double simply to expose the crisis of selfhood women of her milieu experienced. Margaret Higgonet underscores this crisis within the context of nineteenth-century literary suicides:

[. . .] in the nineteenth century the theme of female identity comes to focus on the disparity between individual aspiration and social actuality. [. . .] Selfhood, with its reflexive doubling, constitutes fragmentation of the self. Woman typically is just such a fragmented self, perceived in mirrors and through others. The feminization of suicide in the nineteenth century goes hand in hand with a — realistic yet disturbing — denial of woman's ability to choose freely. (111-13)

The fragmented aspects of angel and monster are convincingly delineated in the narrative scenario of “L’ultima lettera.” Teresa represents the traditional notion of the “monstrous,” while Teresa’s aptly named rival symbolizes the “angelic.” Angelica is described by Teresa as embodying the quintessential feminine characteristics of purity and vulnerability that men adore. Teresa, however, possesses a wild, untamed and passionate nature that challenges the traditional stereotype. These characteristics are

reflected in the two women's physical appearance as well as their respective temperaments:

I miei occhi sono neri e anche se l'amore m'ispira tutta la sua tenerezza, io non posso dominarne il fiero lampo: i vostri occhi sono azzurri, con un'espressione d'infantile candore. I miei capelli sono neri e si torcono in masse brune: i vostri biondi capelli vi mettono un'aureola dolcissima alla fronte e alle tempie. Io sono alta e non so piegarmi: e voi siete piccola, voi avete la piccolezza che piace all'amore, poichè l'amore dell'uomo vuol essere anche protezione. Io rido, sempre: voi sorridete, talvolta. Io mi nascondo, quando piango, per superbia: quando l'amore vi fa piangere, voi piangete innanzi a lui e Francesco non resiste al pianto di una donna. E mentre in me, in tutto quel che faccio, in tutto quel che dico, vi è l'orgoglio sterile della mia nascita e della mia tradizione, in voi vi è la infinita umiltà della donna che è semplicemente donna, che sa soltanto amare e immergersi in questo amore. Ah come io odio questi vostri capelli biondi e questi vostri occhi azzurri, come io odio il vostro tenue sorriso e la vostra profonda umiltà, [. . .] voi suonate il pianoforte, assai dolcemente — egli odiava il pianoforte, un tempo — ed egli vi ascolta, e vi parlate teneramente, soavemente, e quando egli è nei suoi periodi di collera, la vostra soavità è tale, che lo vincete. (67-68)

The idea of Teresa's character being masculinized is further supported by her decision to use a revolver, a weapon that has culturally been ascribed to males, to kill herself.

Teresa's chosen method of suicide stands in stark contrast to the traditionally gentler, or at least more passive, methods of suicide that literature has traditionally provided for its heroines: Madame Bovary poisoned herself with arsenic, Anna Karenina threw herself in front of a train, and Edna Pontellier drowned herself in the ocean.

If one applies the concept of the female double to Teresa and Angelica, then Teresa's suicide is effectively the death of the "monstrous" half of the pair, in this case, the half that is more masculinized. Furthermore, with Angelica bearing the burden of responsibility for Teresa's death, one could conclude that it is Angelica, or the feminine half that actively kills the masculinized, and hence culturally unacceptable one. This is

evidenced in Teresa's indictment of Angelica, "Signora, signora, [. . .] voi avete armato la rivoltella che mi deve uccidere" (66).

The motif of suicide itself bears special significance in the "Ultima lettera" because of the use of the double. Serao employs this strategy in four of her most celebrated and powerful novels, *Cuore Infermo*, *Fantasia*, *Addio Amore*, and *Castigo*. Besides the use of the double, these narratives also share a common trend: each concludes with the tragic, self-induced death of one-half of the "angel"- "monster" pair.

In *Cuore infermo*, the protagonist, Beatrice Manso, initially fulfills the role of "angel in the house" (Fanning 51), but this affected purity stems from a strange and pathological secret. Beatrice lives in the shadow of her mother who died from love: clinically the result of an infirm heart, but exacerbated by her husband's betrayal. Believing that she is genetically predisposed to this same fate, Beatrice deliberately withholds love from her new husband, driving him into the arms of another woman, the proverbial "monster," Lalla D'Aragona. Beatrice is aware of this affair, and endures it in virtual silence, unable to communicate her grief, at least in a conventional manner. As I had previously indicated, Serao employs music as a powerful mode of expressing love in *Ella non rispose* (Diana's singing), and "L'ultima lettera" ("voi suonate il pianoforte, assai dolcemente"), as well as writing. In *Cuore infermo* writing and music will play a vital role in rousing Beatrice from her indifference, and enabling her to understand, as well as communicate her feelings. In the first scene that illustrates music's power of expression, Beatrice plays the piano loud enough for the lovers, ensconced in a nearby villa, to hear. Lalla hears the music and identifies it as coming from Beatrice, as well as understanding its intention. Lalla explains it to the bewildered Marcello:

“È lei” disse Lalla, ritrovando il suo cattivo sorriso.
 Egli non le rispose. Ambedue ascoltavano ansiosi, quasi che quella musica dovesse ad un tratto trovar parole e rivelar loro un segreto mortale. Essa penetrava nella stanza e la inondava di suono.
 “È lei” ripetette Lalla.
 “Forse no...” rispose Marcello, cercando ingannare anche se stesso.
 “Ma sii franco. Come! Non senti che è lei, lei, proprio lei?”
 “Non ha mai suonato così, di sera...”
 “Ebbene, stasera ha inventato di suonare.” [. . .]
 “Ella non amava la musica.”
 “Che ne sai tu? Hai mai compreso quello che ella amasse?”
 La musica dette in uno scoppio subitaneo, quasi imponesse loro silenzio. [. . .]
 Ogni nota di quella musica, che si perdeva nell’aria, aveva prima battuto sulla loro anima. [. . .]
 “La duchessa non ha mai suonato in vostra presenza?”
 “No, mai.”
 “È strano” disse lei pensierosa. “Udite, udite quanta malinconia in questo ritmo! [. . .] Tua moglie è triste, Marcello.” (152-53)

Music thus serves as an instrument to communicate Beatrice’s feelings to Marcello, oddly enough, through Lalla’s interpretation. Beatrice still retains a passive role in the love triangle until a sequence of events characterized by music and writing transforms her.

The first episode is Beatrice’s discovery of a cache of love letters to her husband from an unknown woman. Beatrice has already, at this point, passively tolerated Marcello’s affair with Lalla, but somehow the expression of another woman’s love for her husband in writing has a deeper impact on her, and she begins to awaken from her torpor. In the second episode, Beatrice observes her husband escorting Lalla at the opera. Although their relationship is not a surprise, Beatrice is not able to fully absorb the significance of the situation until she perceives it on a more aesthetic level. The music of the opera, and the story of the tragic heroine Selika “dying of love and jealousy” for the

man she has lost to the other woman, Ines, communicates love to Beatrice in a language that is pure emotion and sensation (217).⁴

After the opera has ended, Serao captures the lingering sensory effect of the opera on the spectators, using language that evokes the staging of the opera itself:

Le ragazze borghesi avevano gli occhi pieni di visioni per tutte le fantasmagorie vedute, e già fantasticavano di volere anch'esse amare liricamente e selvaggiamente come Selika [. . .] sulle guance rimaneva ancora una traccia del calore fittizio del teatro; gli occhi erano ancora pieni di seduzione e di promesse; i fiori si appassivano, qualche foglia se ne staccava e cadeva. Qualche parolina veniva scambiata, passando. Una mano era stata presa nella folla e stretta. I saluti si incrociavano. Un ventaglio era caduto, per caso, ed era stato raccolto. Una damigella aveva perduto un guanto ed un giovanotto, naturalmente, lo aveva ritrovato. Per lo scalone di destra, scendendo al braccio di suo zio, Beatrice aveva visto suo marito discendere da quello di sinistra, dando il braccio a Lalla D'Aragona. (218)

The same night of the opera, Beatrice observes her husband through the keyhole to his room as he writes with a sense of urgency and intense pain. She realizes even before she confronts him that he is writing a farewell letter to her; he is leaving her for another woman. The power of music combined with the two acts of writing influence Beatrice in a way that no other form of language has previously done in the narrative. Serao's narrative design suggests that Beatrice's error had been in over-intellectualizing love.

The end result of the aforementioned scenes is that Beatrice sheds her prior feminine passivity and assumes more proactive and assertive qualities, characteristics traditionally associated with the masculine, in her marriage. After her discovery of the

⁴ Serao's choice of opera is interesting in terms of its storyline. Although not named within the narrative, the story of the two women vying for one man's love is from Giacomo Meyerbeer's 1865 opera, *L'Africaine*. In this story a Portuguese explorer, Vasco da Gama, bestows his affections on a queen of the Indies, Selika, after she saves his life. However, when da Gama is reunited with his true love, Donna Ines, Selika realizes that da Gama had stayed with her only out of gratitude, and steps aside for the two lovers. Selika then kills herself under the poisonous *Manzanillo* tree. For more information on this opera, see *The Simon and Schuster Book of the Opera* (241-43).

love letters, Beatrice confronts her husband's female admirer to prevent anything further from transpiring between the two. The effect of watching her husband write his farewell letter to her is even more significant. Sentiments and perceptions that heretofore had been tacitly understood or even verbally suggested by husband and wife are now brought to the foreground as Beatrice and Marcello communicate through the unfinished letter:

“Ma a chi scrivevi tu dunque?” domandò ella, ergendosi dinanzi a lui.
“...a te” balbettò Marcello. [. . .]
“Se voi partite, io rimango, Marcello.” [. . .] “Sono tua moglie. Non te ne ricordi più?”
“È vero che tu porti il mio nome. E poi?” [. . .]
“Che dirò alla gente che mi domanderà? Come giustificherò l'offesa che mi fai?”
[. . .]
“Ah! Tu vuoi saperlo? Ah! Tu sei mia moglie? Ebbene, te lo dirò io. Io ti risponderò. Quello che ti scrivevo, te lo dirò. Parto per te. Sei tu che mi rendi così profondamente infelice, tu hai infranto il mio cuore; tu hai desolata la mia vita; tu sei la fonte di ogni mio dolore. [. . .] M'hai respinto. Ebbene, ti amo come allora. Ti amo e parto. Ti fuggo. Parto con una donna che odio, che m'odia, legati nell'odio.” [. . .]
“Te ne supplico, non andartene. Se parti, ti seguo. Dovunque vai, vengo. T'amo, non lo comprendi? Sei mio, non ti lascio, non ti cedo. [. . .] Non lo vedi che t'amo?” Replicò ella affannosamente. “Sono io la tua Beatrice, la tua sposa; ho la mia veste bianca. T'amo.”
“O mio amore, o mia sposa, o mia donna adorata!” disse lui, premendola sul suo seno. (221-23)

Serao employs this same medium of communicating love through letters in “L'ultima lettera” and *Ella non rispose*. In the aforementioned narratives, as well as in *Cuore infermo*, two aesthetic conduits are instrumental in expressing love, as well as bringing it to fruition: writing and music. Beatrice is incapable of expressing or acting on her feelings of love until she perceives love through these artistic phenomena. Beatrice's spontaneous outpouring of love, however, proves to be too much for her inherited feeble heart, and she soon develops palpitations and other signs of infirmity.

Unbeknownst to her husband, Beatrice consults a doctor whose medical advice is unambiguous: “la quiete anzitutto, nessuna fatica, nessuna emozione, la maggiore tranquillità fisica e morale” (251). If Beatrice wishes to be spared her mother’s fate, she must return to her original state of detached indifference towards her husband. But the malady of passion proves more insidious than that of her heart; it proves to be more powerful than her fear of death:

Ma vi era un’altra cosa su cui s’imprimeva, ogni dì più, un carattere febbrile quasi disperato: ed era il suo amore. Non era più quell’amore biondo come l’oro [. . .] Era diventato un amore senza misura, senza regola, cupo nella sua forza, tetro nella sua condensazione, tumultuoso, selvaggio nella sua espansione. Beatrice non era più la innamorata gentile, il cui volto si colorisce nel roseo delicato del pudore alla parola dell’amore, che afferma nella sua figura tutta la pienezza della sua esistenza: era invece l’amante imperiosa, collerica, capricciosa, appassionata, gelosa, con l’anima sempre in sussulto, il volto sempre pallido, le labbra sempre assetate. [. . .] Quei cambiamenti bruschi, rapidissimi [. . .] animavano, fustigavano il loro amore [. . .]. Non conoscevano più il limite dove il dolore diventa un piacere ed il piacere un dolore. [. . .] Come i santi fanatici del cristianesimo, essi si consolavano nel vedersi consumare in un focolare ardente (253-54).

Passion is likened to both pathological illness as well as spiritual fanaticism. However, it is not the intoxicating influence of passion that ultimately leads Beatrice to disregard her doctor’s advice. The overriding motivation is Beatrice’s desire to make Marcello happy, and to spare him of the pain she had previously caused him. This is evidenced in the following scene in which Beatrice reproaches herself for a momentary lapse into indifference:

Quando egli era partito, allora ella ricominciava a vederlo addolorato, contristato, eppure soffocante le sue lagnanze. Ella si adirava con se stessa, si chiamava

cattiva, perfida, disamorata, crudele; egli solo era buono, era amabile, era cortese, era quattro volte buono! (255)

Beatrice's prioritization of Marcello's desires even at the risk of her own health suggests Kristeva's concept of "amatory identification." Furthermore, one could argue that Beatrice's willing participation in actions that she knows will prove fatal is tantamount to suicide, but it evokes a self-sacrificing brand of suicide in the classical sense. In her study of female suicides in nineteenth-century literature, Higgonet traces its origins to classical literature:

Classical instances of women's suicide are perceived as masculine: Antigone, Cleopatra, Hasdrubal's wife, and Arria, who stabbed herself to encourage her husband and said, *Paete, non dolet*.⁵ Charlotte Corday, the self-appointed Girondiste martyr of the French Revolution, is one of the last in this tradition. She was immediately perceived as a man [. . .]. (105)

In classical texts, suicide is read as heroic self-sacrifice, a trait that was traditionally associated with the masculine sphere. What is even more compelling is the use of language by Arria and another legendary female suicide, Lucretia.

Livy writes that rather than taint her reputation and dishonor her family, Lucretia submits to rape by Sextus Tarquinius, the king's son, to avert his threat to kill her and implicate her in an act of adultery with a slave. As the ultimate act to preserve her virtue, Lucretia kills herself, after gathering her family around and relating to them the story of

⁵ In his book on Martial, Fitzgerald summarizes the story of Arria and her husband, Paete: "Arria's husband, Caecina Paetus, had taken part in an unsuccessful revolt against Claudius and had resolved on suicide. When, at the last moment, he hesitated, Arria snatched his dagger, stabbed herself and gave the dagger back with the words *Paete non dolet*. The Arria poem is one of Martial's most celebrated and most imitated. [. . .] Arria is, in a sense, a wonder analogous to the tame lion. Her behavior goes magnificently against the natural order as she proves more manly than her husband and at the same time displays her wifely tenderness by (of all things passing the knife)" (81-83).

her defilement. Higgonet emphasizes the importance of Lucretia's language in this episode, as well as Arria's *Paete, non dolet*:

A woman may thus choose death after defilement, not to confirm her status as property, but to reaffirm her autonomy. The physical control of Collatinus and Tarquin is reinforced by their abuse of language. Lucretia has become a verbal boast; and if she does not submit to the rape she will be killed with a black slave, her reputation defiled. Against these verbal constructs of what she is as woman, Lucretia must set her own. She calls upon family and friends to hear her story and know her in her difference. Such use of language revolutionary: she calls on her family to avenge her and cast off the tyranny of the Tarquins. (110)

Lucretia's deed is clearly one of heroic self-sacrifice, particularly when viewed in light of the dramatic political change it helped to bring about. While Beatrice's motivations in *Cuore inferno* may not be as far-reaching, her preoccupation with Marcello's happiness is consistent with the classical idea of self-sacrifice. In the end, her selflessness proves fatal as her heart can no longer bear the undue strain of passion. The scene that portrays Beatrice's final moments eerily reinforces the idea of Lalla as Beatrice's double. Sitting in the park awaiting her husband's return, Beatrice feels her last reserve of strength ebbing. At that moment she notices a woman in the distance, who disappears almost as suddenly as she appeared in her line of sight. It is Lalla, and the imagery used to describe her appearance suggests an apparition. Beatrice cries out in vain for Marcello before she dies. Beatrice's anguish at her vision of Lalla, the woman who ultimately caused her husband nothing but grief, signals her horror at the survival of her monstrous half. In light of her previous pattern of selflessness, Beatrice's distress can be interpreted as fear for her husband's future, rather than simply an expression of her own personal emotional grief.

Beatrice's motivations that lead to her death differ from those of female protagonists in Serao's later works. In "L'ultima lettera," as well as three other significant romance novels that feature the female double, one half of the angel-monster dyad is driven to suicide as a result of unrequited love.

Two years after the publication of *Cuore inferno*, Serao composed *Fantasia*, a study of love, friendship, and the female double, that ends, like all narratives with the double motif, in a tragic suicide. Serao's depiction of passion-induced female suicide reflected a decisive shift from the classical models and influences that shaped her earlier narrative style. Higgonet identifies the shift in what she refers to as the feminization of suicide in nineteenth-century literature:

This nineteenth-century reorientation of suicide toward love, passive self-surrender, and illness seems particularly evident in the literary depiction of women; their self-destruction is most often perceived as motivated by love, understood not only as loss of self but as surrender to an illness: *le mal d'amour*. [. . .] The feminization of suicide in the nineteenth century goes hand in hand with a — realistic yet disturbing — denial of woman's ability to choose freely. (106-13)

In *Fantasia* the fragmented self is represented by two lifelong friends, Lucia and Caterina, who become embroiled in a bitter love triangle involving Caterina's husband, Andrea. Although it is clear that Lucia is the *femme fatale*, until the closing scene Serao portrays both women as equally consumed and tormented by love. It will be Lucia, the designated "monster," however, who will triumph in the end, running away with Andrea, and Caterina, abandoned by her husband and lifelong friend, who will self-destruct. Throughout the narrative, Caterina's character is delineated as exuding gentility and

placidity, but not passion. Although Caterina has musical ability, she plays the piano with the same lack of enthusiasm and sensitivity that define her character in general:

Caterina si mise al pianoforte e suonò le sue solite cose, poco difficili veramente, ma suonate con un certo garbo [. . .]. (122)

Lucia, on the other hand, is described as being sensitive to music, as well as possessing an irrepressible drive to write. These sensitivities are related early in the story while the girls are still in school, listening to a young woman sing a hymn in church:

Pure, quando Giovanna arrivò alle poetiche immagini che chiamano la Vergine porta del cielo, vaso di elezione, torre di Davide, un impeto nuovo trasformò il canto in un inno. [. . .] Lucia Altimare, senza far rumore, senza singhiozzare, piangeva. Le lacrime le scorrevano per le guance un po' scarse, dai pomelli sporgenti, le piovevano sul petto, sulla mani, si disfacevano sul grembiule — e lei non le asciugava. (6)

As Lucia's character matures so do her musical sensitivities. Serao relates these scenes in language steeped in sensuality:

Lucia suonava mediocrementemente e poco; ma quando trovava qualche amica filarmonica, la metteva al pianoforte, si distendeva in una poltrona viennese a dondolo, inclinava il capo, socchiudeva gli occhi e ascoltava. Era una delle migliori e più estatiche ascoltatrici di musica, assorbita, senza voce. (41)

Lucia's heightened sensitivity to music far surpasses her ability to produce it. Similarly, Lucia's limited vocal expression belies her rich command of language, which she expresses superlatively in her writing. Men are described as being entranced, or even being driven mad by the power of Lucia's prose. The first to fall victim to her charms

through writing is Lucia's history professor, Galimberti, who pursues her hopelessly, forsaking all others and eventually his career as a result of her power over him. Lucia, who is aware of Galimberti's affection, but dismisses him as a prospect because of his poor financial standing, nevertheless strings him along by daily writing him letters that abound in amorous imagery. Galimberti praises Lucia's narrative abilities, in a way that clearly betrays the hold she has over him: "La signorina Altimare scriveva divinamente" (34).

Eventually, Galimberti, having lost everything including any hope of winning Lucia's affections, goes insane and is institutionalized. By the time Galimberti is committed, Caterina's husband Andrea has also fallen victim to Lucia's charms, and envisions himself following the insane professor's example:

"Tanto più...tanto più che a ognuno può capitare il suo caso" disse lui, tanto piano, a se stesso, che ella non udì. E un terrore istantaneo gli si dilatò sul volto. (89)

Consistent with the profile of the *femme fatale*, Lucia exerts an almost mystical hold over Andrea, which prompts him on five different occasions to refer to her as a witch, even affectionately calling her, "strega mia" (132). The source of Lucia's power, Andrea realizes, as did Galimberti, lies in her love letters:

Lucia si abbandonava alle più passionate frasi, riempiendo un foglietto di baci, di parole ardenti, di baci ancora, di desiderii languidi, di desiderii feroci, di baci, di baci, di baci, sempre, sempre, sempre. Finiva così: *non senti tu le mie labbra morenti sulle tue?* — e Andrea le sentiva, e quelle parole scritte in caratterino minuto gli parevano proprio baci, e si metteva la lettera sulla bocca, provando un bruciore, provando una freschezza, col sangue che gli ribolliva: le rispondeva una lettera violenta, talvolta brutale di passione. (133)

Lucia's prose is thus revealed as being capable of evoking palpable expressions of passion and desire. The nature of their clandestine, extramarital relationship dictates that Lucia and Andrea communicate secretly. Consequently, their language of love is communicated almost exclusively in the form of love letters, which range from two-word affirmations of love to lengthier amorous disquisitions. The furtive element of their relationship serves to fuel their passion, and they become emboldened in their exchange of love letters often within plain sight of their respective spouses:

Poi, ora, si davano le lettere in cento modi, rischiando di essere scoperti ogni volta, ma riuscendo sempre, con una destrezza singolare: mettendo le lettere nei gomitoli, nei fazzoletti, nei libri, nel mazzo delle carte da giuoco, in fondo alla scatola del domino, nel quaderno della musica, sotto l'orologio del salone, sotto il piedestallo di qualche statua, sotto i vasi delle piante, nella fodera del cappello: insomma, dovunque si può nascondere un pezzetto di carta. (132)

Lucia's and Andrea's complete lack of discretion made their affair obvious to other objective bystanders such as the servants. However, Caterina and Alberto are completely blind to their respective spouses' betrayal until Lucia and Andrea run away together, leaving behind a painful paper trail. It is only through the mode of writing that Caterina and Alberto are able to perceive what should have been so obvious. Caterina is stupefied when she receives Lucia's farewell letter. Caterina is still incredulous when she goes to visit Lucia's infirm husband, Alberto, who presents her with Lucia's magnum opus: a diary of her affair with Andrea that she has been passing off as a romance novel in progress:

“Voi non capite, è vero, come io so tutto questo? Ve lo ricordate quel romanzo che stava scrivendo Lucia, ogni notte? Un'altra falsità. Non era un romanzo: era il suo giornale. Ogni giorno vi scriveva tutto quello che le accadeva, con tanti pensieri, con tante fantasie. Tutto l'amore vi è per filo e per segno, ogni sguardo, ogni bacio, ogni fatto. Oh vi sono brani magnifici di descrizione, vi sono cose bellissime, narrate lì dentro. È una lettura istruttiva, e interessante. Voi ne profitterete, se volete. Leggete, leggete, che vi divertirete.” (155)

Despite Alberto's ardent, yet sarcastic encouragement that she read the journal, Caterina cannot bring herself to do it, and she leaves Alberto and the journal behind. For Caterina the final *coup de grâce* comes later that night in a scrap of paper found by her illiterate servant. Bearing only two words, “ti amo,” Caterina finally perceives the truth about the object of her husband's affections, and she realizes that she has been abandoned. Caterina's reaction is stunning compared to that of her abandoned counterpart, Lucia's husband, Alberto. Caterina's understanding of the situation reflects calm reasoning, the opposite of the stereotyped feminine reaction of hysteria:

Così aveva vissuto Caterina Lieti, così la vita intiera le si svolgeva dinanzi, come una rappresentazione a cui assistesse, in quella notte d'inverno. I suoi ricordi erano chiari e precisi, come era stata chiara e precisa la sua esistenza. Ma con una pazienza tranquilla, ficcando gli occhi nel buio, volendo discernere meglio, ella ricercò qualche altro incidente, qualche cosa di singolare, di eccezionale che non rassomigliasse a quanto aveva ricordato sin'allora. Non vi era stato nulla, proprio nulla? Due volte rifece questo esame: non trovò niente. La sua coscienza era stata calma, tutta eguale, uniforme, riassunta in due costanti ed efficaci amori: Andrea, Lucia. Ebbene, ora intendeva tutto. La scienza della vita era arrivata di un colpo solo, ma aveva subito scacciato la ingenuità e la fede del suo cuore. La sua intelligenza si era aperta alla lezione violenta e selvaggia, applicata come una martellata. Si sentiva un'altra donna, fatta più grande, più solida, col giudizio acuto e freddo, con l'occhio indagatore e la coscienza implacabile. Non trovava più in sé nè indulgenza, nè pietà, nè illusione, nè bontà, ma trovava una giustizia inflessibile che esaminava persone, cose, avvenimenti. Ora intendeva tutto. (161)

Caterina's decision to take her life stems purely from her deep emotional wound, but her resolve is cool and steely. She methodically moves through each room in her house, and through each step of her plan, until she has entombed herself in a room with a fire burning and no ventilation. Having burnt both Lucia's contrite letter of intent and Andrea's surreptitious love note, Caterina decides that "non doveva fare più altro" and lies down on her bed waiting for death from carbon monoxide poisoning(170).

Caterina's reaction to being abandoned by her spouse is markedly different from that of Lucia's husband, Alberto.

Alberto is described from the onset of the narrative as tubercular; moreover, in a letter to Caterina, Lucia describes her decision to marry her sickly cousin as a supreme sacrifice. However, Lucia's abrupt departure accelerates her infirm husband's decline, and when Caterina visits him for the last time, Alberto shows visible signs of physical and emotional deterioration:

E sapete perchè li chiamo assassini, perchè dico che mi hanno ucciso? Ne ho ragione, per Dio! Il più odioso, il più crudele di tutto questo, è che per essi, pel loro dannato amore, io mi son preso questo malanno, che mi sarebbe stato risparmiato. In una notte fresca, per una notte intiera, Lucia è stata fuori al balcone e Andrea pure: io ho dormito una notte intiera col balcone aperto, con l'aria fredda che mi entrava nei polmoni, che me li ha infiammati, che me li ha fatti ammalare. Essi si guardavano, si chiamavano, si buttavano baci: io pigliava la tosse, che mi è durata due mesi e oggi mi ha fatto sputare rosso [. . .]. Io n'era innamorato, via, diciamolo, innamorato come una bestia. Non doveva farmelo, quello che m'ha fatto. Sapeva che ero ammalato, doveva risparmiarmi. Sapeva che sono solo, non doveva abbandonarmi. (155-6)

Alberto's analysis of the situation, that it was Lucia's responsibility to save him, reveals a feminization of his character. Conversely, Caterina rationalizes her plight with a detachment traditionally ascribed to the male sex. As in similar narratives, abandonment

in love results in an inversion of traditional expectations of gendered behavior. Both Caterina's and Alberto's lives have been, quite literally, destroyed; they are both depicted as having been equally consumed by passion. The differences lie in their respective levels of emotionality, as well as the extent to which each of them experienced complete amatory identification, or *Einfühlung*, to use Kristeva's term. Alberto's anger and bitterness at being abandoned stems from his view of Lucia's failed obligation to him; she was his caregiver, a sort of surrogate mother, without whom Alberto is left vulnerable and helpless like a child. In contrast, Caterina not only identified completely with her husband and thought only of his needs, but also with Lucia, who had been her best friend since childhood. Caterina reflects on this shortly before the end of her life:

Era vissuta fra loro due, per loro due, pensando sempre al modo di render loro gradevole la vita, preoccupandosi del loro spirito e del loro corpo, non avendo in mente che il benessere di queste due persone, in cui si riassumeva la sua vita.
(161)

Caterina's suicide, although driven by emotional grief, still reflects a degree of self-sacrifice.

The study of the female double, in *Cuore inferno* and *Fantasia*, reveals an interesting pattern: Serao ultimately seems to demonstrate a certain appreciation of the diabolical half of the pair. In both novels it is the "monster" who survives. This same trend is continued in the novel *Addio Amore!* and its sequel, *Castigo*. Similar to the relationship between the two female protagonists of *Fantasia*, the storyline involves a love triangle, this time, however, it concerns two sisters, Anna and Laura Acquaviva, who are competing for the same man, Cesare Dias, whose diabolical charms render him

as a sort of male counterpart to Lucia in *Fantasia*. Consistent with Serao's other novels that deal with passion, music plays a vital role in facilitating and expressing love. It is at the opera that Anna falls victim to Cesare's charms, enhanced by the power of the music:

Ma quando, fatalmente, Anna ritornava con l'occhio al palco numero quattro, di prima fila, dove Cesare Dias, torcendo macchinalmente il nero mustacchio, ascoltava la musica, senza punto volersi voltare alla sala, ella restava immobile: e i bruni occhi man mano pareva diventassero più vividi nella loro nerezza, una luce li allargava, e tutta la fisionomia, pur restando pallida, ne era irradiata. Ella stessa, forse, non misurava la forza di quel misterioso fascino che le si addensava intorno e a cui si abbandonava, senza tentare di difendersi; era qualche cosa di avvolgente che nasceva da quella dolce musica dove pur fremevano, dentro la dolcezza, tante malinconie, donde sgorgavano, dalla dolcezza, grida strazianti di cuori angosciati: nasceva dal dramma che si iniziava sul palcoscenico, sospirato, pianto nella musica, e da quel fulgore di sala che aveva visto tante cose, che aveva racchiuso tante emozioni, e da quella gente agglomerata, piena di segrete passioni; nasceva da una causa interna, ignota ancora, ma così dominante il debole cuore di Anna Acquaviva, che ella, senza combattere, vi si lasciava andare. Erano, intorno a lei, dei veli leggeri e sottili che scendevano, scendevano, come un fumo chiaro, come una chiara nuvola e che si affittivano, si affittivano, sino ad avere una densità impenetrabile: ondeggiava, sì, intorno a lei, la nuvola luminosa di quel fascino, ma ella era presa, Anna Acquaviva, ella era assorbita e pur non sapendo nè come, nè perchè, pur non vedendo nulla oltre quella nuvola, sentiva avvinghiata per sempre la sua volontà, senza tentativo di liberazione, tremando di gioia a quella cattività. (38-9)

Later in the narrative Anna marries Cesare, but, soon after their marriage, Cesare seduces Anna's sister, positioning Laura, ostensibly, as the "monster" in this rendition of the female double. However, the dynamic in this narrative presents an interesting twist. While Lalla and Lucia were proactive pursuers of their male prey, Laura's status as a helpless victim of passion is not all that different from Anna's. Fanning describes Cesare as a "Svengali-Dracula type," whom neither woman is able to resist on any perceptual or

sensory level (226). This is obvious in the following scene in which Anna witnesses her sister fall under Cesare's spell:

Cesare vedendo allontanarsi Laura, non aveva fatto nessun gesto per trattenerla, non l'aveva seguita, non si era levato neppure. Ma veramente, anche lui, inchiodato nel suo seggiolone, era turbatissimo, nel suo pallore crescente, nello sguardo diventato un po' duro, nel nervoso modo con cui arricciava il suo mustacchio: due o tre volte, quasi volesse soffocare la sua collera, si morsicò le labbra. Egli fissava Laura, di lontano, richiamandola a sè imperiosamente. Ella fece ancora qualche passo, esitando, vacillando, incerta, affascinata. Nella sua allucinazione, Anna avrebbe voluto, se avesse potuto parlare, muoversi, dare a Laura la forza di togliersi da quel fascino della passione, liberarla, e liberar sè da quella magia.–“Dio, Dio, dàlle la forza, dammi la forza...” pregò ancora Anna, nel suo sogno, nella sua follia. Ma Laura non ebbe la forza di andar via. (126)

Later, Anna confronts Laura after witnessing the two of them in a romantic embrace.

Laura's response is that Anna is equally guilty because Laura has always loved Cesare:

“Laura, tu sei l'amante di mio marito!” proclamò Anna, levando le braccia al cielo. [. . .]
“Tanto, l'hai visto: io amo Cesare ed egli mi ama” disse implacabilmente la fierissima fanciulla. [. . .]
Anna aveva rasciugate le sue lacrime: e quella voce di sua sorella, fiera del suo peccato, quelle parole orgogliose del peccato, le facevan perdere i lumi.
“Ma non hai inteso quel che facevi? Non senti che è una infamia? Non capisci quante cose, quante persone hai offese? Non sono io, tua sorella, che tu tradisci?”
“Io amavo Cesare, da prima: tu mi hai tradita” rispose tranquillamente Laura.
[. . .] “Ma la tua coscienza? Ma la religione che offendi? Ma il pudore femminile, macchiato da così atroce peccato?”
“Io non sono l'amante di tuo marito, lo sai tu stessa.”
“Ma lo ami! Ma fremi alla sua stretta di mano, ma lo baci! Ma gli dici di amarlo!”
“Ebbene, questo appunto significa non esser l'amante di tuo marito.”
“Il peccato è uguale.”
“No, non è uguale, Anna.”
“È un peccato mortale, solo ad amare l'uomo altrui.”
“Ma non ne sono l'amante; sii esatta.”
“Varietà di vocabolo: non varietà di colpa.” (131-33)

Anna thus maintains the moral upper hand, and retains the role of “angel,” thus sealing her character’s doom. In the end, Anna’s story plays out much like that of Caterina’s and she is doubly betrayed by her husband and sister who run off together. Although by this point in the narrative Cesare’s and Laura’s relationship is not a secret, clues of their affair in its incipient stages had eluded Anna, as evidenced in this earlier scene:

Veramente, Cesare le scriveva un paio di volte per settimana e non a lungo: ma nelle sue lettere vi era sempre, se non una frase d'amore, una frase gentile, sulla quale Anna viveva tre o quattro giorni, sino alla prossima lettera. [. . .] Anna, ogni volta che arrivava una lettera di Cesare, dava i suoi saluti a Laura e le leggeva la parola cortese, che vi si trovava sempre per sua sorella.

“Grazie” diceva Laura, senz'altro.

Però, anche Laura scriveva molto, da qualche tempo. Che scriveva? A chi scriveva? Era nella sua stanzetta sulla sua scrivania da fanciulla, [. . .] e quando qualcuno entrava ella cessava di scrivere, e senza far vista di nulla, metteva sullo scritto il foglio di carta asciugante; e restava a occhi bassi, silenziosa, giuocherellando con la penna. [. . .]

“Che scrivi?” le domandò un giorno Anna, vincendo la timidità per un misterioso impulso.

“Nulla che t'interessi — aveva risposto l'altra”. [. . .]

“Come sei chiusa! Come nascondi i segreti del tuo cuore! Ma perchè li nascondi?” aveva insistito affettuosamente Anna.

“Così” aveva concluso Laura, levandosi, uscendo dalla stanza, portando seco la chiave del cassetto. (106-07)

Again, the medium of writing comes into play, as Laura’s relationship with Cesare actually developed through their exchange of letters. Like Caterina, Anna was oblivious to the budding romance which was unfolding right before her eyes. Ultimately Anna learns that writing, for Cesare and Laura, was not only their necessary mode of communication but the very source of nourishment for their budding love. When Anna finally confronts Cesare and severely chastises him for his treachery, Cesare callously responds that she is not the “donna fatale” that she imagines herself to be, as evidenced in

her “rambling” letters (146). The implication is that Laura is everything Anna is not, a woman capable of evoking passion, even through her love letters.

In the end, writing frames the narrative: Anna’s story begins with a series of love letters to her first love, Giustino Morelli, and ends with a transfer of Anna’s emotions through another text. Finding temporary solace in the house of her devoted admirer, Luigi Caracciolo, Anna, newly abandoned by her husband, asks Luigi to copy out for her some verses from Baudelaire, *Harmonie du soir*, that he had read to her once before. No sooner has Luigi written out and read the first verse, “Valse mélancolique et langoureux vertige,” than Anna shoots herself in the heart (155). Anna utilizes writing to express what — Cesare has led her to believe — her limited imagination is incapable of expressing. Anna’s choice of this poem also serves as a dedicatory text. Higgonet refers to this narrative device as the “intertext,” employed to convey the sentiments or perspective of the hero or, more typically, heroine, about to commit suicide:

To embrace death is at the same time to read one's own life. The act is a self-barred signature; its destructive narcissism seems to some particularly feminine. Some choose to die in order to shape their lives as a whole; others fragment life to generate the energy of fission or elision. In their deaths, many are obsessed with projecting an image, whether to permit aesthetic contemplation or to provoke a revolution in thought. The desire to control one's own life may extend into manipulation of the lives of survivors — and women are thought to be particularly prone to this motive. The act may be dedicated, like a poem, to someone in particular. In order to limit the intrinsic ambiguity of the act, many suicides are doubled by explanatory texts. Cato reads Plato's *Phaedrus*. Madame Butterfly's intertext is a sword inscription: “Death with honor is better than life without honor.” Lucretia must explain her gesture to distinguish herself from other women: *nec ulla impudica lucretiae exemplo vivet*. Language becomes action; action becomes and yet requires language. (104)

Tragically, Anna's dedicatory text will have a greater impact on Cesare's feelings for her after her death than anything she had said or written to him while still alive. In *Castigo*, the sequel to *Addio Amore!*, the seemingly implacable Cesare Dias is moved by Anna's death to feel not only remorse for his emotional cruelty towards his wife, but love, compassion, and devotion. Thus transformed, Cesare endeavors to uncover what his wife experienced before her death. His search leads him to the location of her misdeed, the house of Luigi Caracciolo, whose relationship to his wife Cesare now anxiously contemplates. Cesare discovers the book of Baudelaire's poetry, as well as Luigi's unfinished transcription, which fuels Cesare's jealousy and imagination:

S'accostò a una piccola scrivania di legno rosa, dove vedeva delle carte; si sedette per scrivere a Luigi. Un libro vi stava schiuso, sopra, bene odorante nella sua guaina di cuoio di Russia, aperto: Il volume di Baudelaire, *Les Fleurs du mal*, alla poesia *Harmonie du soir* che, nella gran lucidità di ricordi, egli aveva udito tante volte, sottovoce, ripetere da sua moglie, in una lenta e bassa cantilena dove i morbidi versi tristi e malaticci prendevano il tono della più languida e della più malinconica musica; ed egli aveva sempre sorriso di scherno, udendola mormorare i versi a lei cari. Li avevano letti insieme, Anna e Luigi in quel giorno! La poesia di Baudelaire era stata copiata con la fine ma tremante scrittura di Luigi sopra un foglietto bianco, e la copia si arrestava al verso più bello: *Valse mélancolique et langoureux vertige* poi la penna pareva che fosse stata buttata via, sulla carta vi era un largo sgorbio, anche il tavolinetto era stato macchiato d'inchiostro, dalla penna rotolata via e nessuno dei due amanti avea pensato più a prendere la carta, a leggere i versi, Luigi aveva lasciato di scrivere, per prenderla nelle sue braccia, forse! Ma che si scrive, forse, quando si ha accanto una donna adorata: ma vi è forse poema che valga quello di stringerla fra le braccia e di baciarla? (29)

Thus the literary selection and the character of Luigi's handwriting itself serve to communicate to Cesare, as well as stimulate in him, profound feelings of love that could not be previously expressed nor felt between husband and wife. Cesare's feelings of impotent rage, essentially at himself for what he had done, lead him to seek out a duel

with Luigi, who kills him. Cesare's death succeeds in bringing about a reversal or at least alteration of the construct of the female double. Anna's sister, Laura, although married to Cesare in *Castigo*, lives in the shadow of her dead sister, an idealized and unconquerable competitor for Cesare's devotion. It is Laura now who will suffer the fate of the abandoned "other woman," having lost her husband and sister under tragic circumstances.

Although Serao's narratives modeled the nineteenth-century trend of passion-induced suicide, her rendering of the subject, as seen through the events set in motion in *Castigo*, reflects two aspects of the classical conceptualization of female suicide: self-sacrifice, and empowerment. Lucretia's death had the power to effect two profound changes not possible in her lifetime, emotional — her callous husband felt contrite — as well as political — the subsequent overthrow of the Tarquins by Lucretia's family. Likewise Anna Acquaviva is able to radically alter the course of people's lives, although not necessarily for the better, through her death, but not her death alone: it is poetry that serves as the mouthpiece to express the ineffable power of human emotions.

Both Kristeva and Barthes stress the deft ability of song and poetry to convey love. Kristeva, citing the "amorous speech" of the troubadours, explores the possibility of the song as an "image of love" (287) and declares, "The song is not a metaphor but, as the most direct inscription of jouissance, it is already a transference, a longing of effect for the absolute meaning that shies away" (282). Similarly, Barthes identifies the lyric composition as the ideal vehicle for expressing love:

Song is the precious addition to a blank message, entirely contained within its address, for what I give by singing is at once my body (by my voice) and the

silence into which you cast that body. (Love is mute, Novalis says; only poetry makes it speak.) (77)

Serao represents the nature of passion as virtually inexpressible through conventional human speech. Love and passion are portrayed as sublime, almost divine emotions that are often misconceived and misrepresented in the hands of mere mortals. Because ordinary utterances do not lend themselves to adequately capture the power of love, music or writing, or a combination of the two, are capable of facilitating the illusory lover's discourse. Furthermore, the lover's identity by its very nature undergoes a profound transformation that further confounds the issue. Kristeva affirms:

Indeed, in the rapture of love, the limits of one's own identity vanish, at the same time that the precision of reference and meaning becomes blurred in love's discourse. [. . .] Do we speak of the same thing when we speak of love? And of which thing? The ordeal of love puts the univocity of language and its referential and communicative power to the test. (2)

For Serao this confusion of identity manifests itself in complete loss of identity, or "amatory identification," the form of the female double, and inverted gender roles. However problematic the concept of *eros* may be for Serao's female characters, her conception and representation of *philia* and *agape* are infinitely more straightforward and uncomplicated, as I will examine in the next two chapters that explore woman's love as it is elevated on two sublime planes: the spiritual and the maternal.

Chapter Two: Marginality and Martyrdom

The solidarity of women figures prominently in most of Matilde Serao's literature. Serao highlights this solidarity in novels and short stories that focus on mother-daughter relationships, friendships, and camaraderie highlighted through choral studies. However, Serao also succeeded in conveying the significance of the bond between women through tales in which that bond is markedly absent. Each of the short stories and novels considered in this chapter feature protagonists who diverge radically in their *modus vivendi*. In *Piccole anime*, Serao contemplates the impact of the hardships and brutal realities of contemporary life on the innocence of young children. The novels *La ballerina*, *Suor Giovanna della Croce*, and *Storia di due anime* all bear the additional title, *L'anima semplice*. These narratives feature isolated protagonists whose childlike innocence and faith are corroded through external forces. The novels and short stories I consider in this chapter are linked through the use of the word *anima* in their titles. Regardless of her age or economic station, the female protagonist in each narrative has the same cross to bear: she is alienated from society.

At first glance, Serao's *Piccole anime* appears to be a collection of endearing tales about children, a continuation of the light-hearted sketches Serao had penned four years earlier in *Dal vero*. But unlike the three to five-page *novelle* and *bozzetti* that comprise the latter work, *Piccole anime* presents characterizations and storylines that delve deeper psychologically and sociologically.

The first of these stories, “Una fioraia,” follows a seven-year old, unnamed beggar girl who has been poor all her life, but now that her mother, also a beggar, is dead, she is alone and hungry as well. While she once ate bread and slept in her mother’s lap in stairwells, she now sleeps on the pavement or on the Church steps. Her entire world is contained in the dark, narrow alley of via dei Mercanti. The girl imagines that another world exists *lassù* but her fears of the unknown dangers there prevent her from exploring any other part of the city. On a typical day, she begs in vain and receives neither money nor food, and her sole subsistence is rotten orange peels, or the empty bean pods that she chews on. Passersby not only ignore her plaintive requests, they heap scorn and disdain upon her, either in the form of harsh and vile verbal castigation, or physical abuse. The only soul that shows her any kindness since her mother’s death is a kindly prostitute who gives her every Saturday a *soldo* with which she is able to buy bread. This sustains her, both morally and physically for six months, until the unconventional benefactress mysteriously disappears. The following Sunday she finds herself hopelessly alone as all the stores in her street are closed, and everyone has gone to the streets above. Completely dejected and driven by her hunger, she dares to venture beyond her self-imposed boundaries and climbs the stairs that transport her beyond her little world. Once she has reached this other world, she is astounded by the wide open space, the clean and towering buildings, and the sight of the sky itself. The wonderment of this new world causes her to forget her hunger and misery and she follows the crowd until she sees a beautiful flower peddler who fills her with awe and amazement, and the only dialogue of the story is expressed, “‘Signora, signora’ mormorò una voce infantile, ‘dammi un fiore’”

(29). The benevolent flower peddler is the third person in her young life to show her any kindness and gives her a small bouquet of carnations.

The girl, who had only wanted one flower simply for aesthetic reasons, capitalizes on the unexpected abundance of the gift and decides to try and sell off the flowers. Her hopes of entrepreneurial success are dashed, however: she is met with the same disdain and contempt that she encountered *giù* in her world: “Neppure lassù erano buoni con lei” (30). When she finally manages to sell a flower to a soldier, she earns enough for one bread roll. With this, the narrative indicates, the girl is satisfied: “Le bastava. Voleva andar via” (30). She sets off to cross the street, presumably to return to her own little world below, when she is run over by a carriage, causing its passenger, *una signora*, to scream in horror and then faint.

The final scene portrays her as lying in the street surrounded by the remaining carnations, which now assume their customary significance as funereal flowers. The little girl’s life and death in “Una fioraia” are emblematic of society’s ills as seen through Serao’s narrative lens. The beggar girl, like many of the children in Serao’s narratives, is a casualty of the war between the classes. She is described as “una innocente creatura” whom society fails to acknowledge until her tragic death forces them to take notice, as signaled by the screaming woman in the carriage (31). The only people that care enough to help her are marginalized figures themselves: her beggar-mother, a prostitute, and a flower peddler. Because the girl has nothing of economic value to offer, she is disenfranchised from society and is thus alienated in the pure Marxist sense. The concept of an orphaned, homeless child who treads the cold harsh streets barefoot and hungry was a tragic reality of late-nineteenth-century Naples. In this respect, the theme evokes

Serao's journalistic proclivity. However, the two images that frame the narrative add another dimension. In the beginning of the tale, the little girl pauses in front of a statue of Christ crucified described thus: "coronato di spine, con gli occhi pieni di lagrime immobili, la fronte e il petto macchiati di sangue coagulato" (19-20). The last words of the story describe her "grandi occhi meravigliati e dolorosi che guardavano al cielo" (31). The little girl's death is now infused with a greater significance: she is a martyr figure. She is thrust into this life and bears her adversity and the maltreatment of others with humility.

This same ideal of turning the proverbial other cheek is explored in "Nebulose." The story is divided in three parts, each of which features a nameless little girl who is poor and exists on the fringes of society to the extent that she floats in and out of the public eye.

The first of these sketches features a barefoot and scantily clad waif who is walking through the dusk with a bundle of wood on her head. She is described as "una piccola ombra" who is spotted by a pair of disenchanted lovers who instantly take pity on her and offer her a coin which she refuses, disappearing into the night (105). The sight of the poor child infuses them both with such compassion that they forget their difficulties with each other for the time being.

The urchin girl in the second story is more visible, but rather than inspiring compassion, incites aggression in a young, aristocratic child who is gazing at a toy store window with his nanny. The little girl is so fascinated by the sight of this beautiful child, and by the way he talks, that she stops and stares at him, watching his every move, and hanging on his every word. Eventually the boy realizes that he is being watched and

spurts out a stream of hostile insults: ““Quanto sei brutta!” “Sei brutta, vattene!”” (107).

This reaction fails to deter the girl, and she trails after him, struggling under the weight of the oversized box she is carrying. Eventually the boy realizes that she is still pursuing him and is enraged. He lashes out viciously, striking her in her side. The girl runs off with tears in her eyes, but she is also described as “sorridente e beata” (108).

The third and final tale features a little girl who is encircled by a large flock of pigeons that she is feeding from a store of grain in her pockets. She is completely fixated on the birds, deriving a complete fulfillment from watching them eat her grain. When she finds no more grain in her pocket, her expression is suffused with melancholy. The story ends as she watches the birds fly away.

The last tale is brief and simple, yet the simplicity of this young girl poignantly unites the three tales and their protagonists. Each of the girls is lacking in economic worth, but each also possesses a wealth of humility and a precocious sense of tranquility and contentment. The girl in the first tale is too proud to accept the coin from the strolling lovers, the girl in the second endures a senseless assault with a smiling and blessed countenance, and the third derives happiness simply through the act of giving. These unassuming children are politically and economically oppressed in the same capacity as the little *fioraia* is, but they do not internalize this oppression. Sandra Bartky in her study of psychological oppression discusses the historical and sociological tendency of marginalized people to suffer from “psychic alienation”:

To be psychologically oppressed is to be weighed down in your mind; it is to have a harsh dominion exercised over your self-esteem. [. . .] Differently put, psychological oppression can be regarded as the internalization of intimations of inferiority. (105)

The young heroines of “Nebulose” are certainly aware of their disconnection from society, but this knowledge does not make them bitter or angry. On the contrary they seem blissfully ignorant of their state. This blissful ignorance is also found in the story of an impoverished and abandoned girl in the story “Canituccia”.

In “Canituccia,” Serao presents an illegitimate child who has been abandoned by her prostitute mother, Maria *rossa*, and taken in by a peasant woman, Pasqualina. Canituccia’s primary chore is the caring for a pig, Ciccotto. Canituccia’s life is harsh and lacking: she survives on a small parcel of bread and sleeps in an apple pantry on a single cloth. Her caregiver beats her for every minor transgression, and yet in the grand scheme of things, Pasqualina muses, she treats Canituccia no differently than other peasants treat their own legitimate children: “Batteva qualche volta Canituccia, non più che le altre contadine battessero le proprie creature” (64). Pasqualina herself is as much a marginalized figure as Canituccia. Pasqualina is constrained to live in the shadow of her boorish brother who stingily withholds her dowry.

As the seasons eventually move towards winter, the pig grows larger, as does Canituccia’s love for him. It is to him alone that she speaks and narrates the events of the day, “andiamo alla casa e Ciccotto se ne va alla stalla e mamma Pasqualina gli dà la cena e poi mamma Pasqualina dà la minestra a Canituccia, che se la mangia tutta tutta” (66). Canituccia is portrayed as blissfully ignorant to the harsh realities of her life. When she is informed that her real mother, who went to be a prostitute in the city, is dead, Canituccia does not respond. In her world, Pasqualina is her mother. Canituccia does not detect her surrogate mother’s inherent distrust of her, nor Pasqualina’s growing discontent and anxiety over the general state of poverty in which they are living. As the

narrative draws to a close, the dour and melancholic atmosphere of the farm is suffused with hope and elation, as the peasants busy themselves for their yearly feast. Canituccia is oblivious to the preparations until the servant informs her that because it is Christmas, they are going to slaughter Ciccotto. What is the source of joy and nourishment for the rest of the household is a death knell for Canituccia. In the final scene, Canituccia, who is described as “moriva di fame,” refuses to partake in the feast provided by the sacrifice of her only friend and companion. Like the unnamed beggar girl in “Una fioraia,” Canituccia, a diminutive nickname for Candida, is a portrait of innocence and purity, who asks for very little from others, and is humbly content with what she receives. Her plight is characterized as being somewhat more favorable than the little *fioraia* since she has a caregiver and minimal food and shelter. The message that runs through most of Serao’s literature is echoed in these tales: when women have to negotiate their way through a patriarchal society alone, they encounter misery and often death; but when women band together, they derive strength and security from that relationship that enable them to survive.

In perhaps her most masterful work, Serao underscores the significance of the female bond through a thematic shift from the unified group, in this case an order of aged nuns, to a state of alienation when their community is disbanded by powerful external forces.

In *Suor Giovanna della Croce*, Serao explores the gradual disintegration, in mind, body, and spirit, of Sister Giovanna of the Cross, after the Government closes her convent, forcibly expelling her into the outside world.¹

¹ Beginning in 1860, Naples began closing convents and other religious institutions in response to the demands of the new Italian State. For more information on the historical background, see

Suor Giovanna is a member of the order of Suor Orsola Benincasa, also known as the *Sepolte Vive* or as the *Trentatre* (sic). The *Trentatre* is identified as the second name of the order, referring to the original thirty-three nuns recruited to the order, the number chosen to represent Christ's age at the time of his crucifixion. The sisters continue to use this designation, even though nineteen of the original members have long since died. For all of the fourteen nuns that live here, this has been the only life and the only home they have known for the past thirty to forty years. The first ten pages take place before the nuns learn of their forthcoming dissolution. In this introduction to the novel, the unity of the *Trentatre* is stressed. Serao reinforces the idea of this unity through repetition of the word *coro*.

Initially the term *coro* is used to refer to an actual physical space, that of the nuns' sheltered choir area in a balcony of the church. The church is open to the public, but the nuns, whose vows include one of complete sequestration, are obscured from view by a wrought-iron, open-work, inner wall. Although the choir is designed for singing, Serao depicts the women joining together in silent prayer. Furthermore, within this exclusively female space hidden from the temporal world, no vestige of femininity can be detected: the nuns' hands are usually concealed by the ample sleeves of their heavy, black, woolen tunics, which also obscure any trace of their individual physiognomies, and a heavy veil masks their facial features:

Ma i grandi mantelli neri, infine, chiudevano i corpi e non lasciavano scorgere che a stento le linee della persona: ma i grandi veli, infine, covrivano il volto, fittamente , e nulla lasciavano indovinare di quelle fisonomie di claustrate. (7)

M. Jeuland-Meynaud, *La Ville de Naples après l'annexion, 1860-1915*.

The relationship between these women is almost purely on a spiritual level. Without mirrors, the interference of men, and stripped of traditional societal expectations, they are free to relate to each other without superficial influences such as competitiveness or jealousy.

This suppression of individuality further reinforces the idea of the women forming one unified group. In the first ten pages, the word “coro” is used ten times, referring to the female space where the nuns gather to pray. Four pages later, this word appears again, but now it is used in conjunction with “echoes” coming from the nuns’ cries and laments upon hearing that the convent is to be closed. A priest, their confessor, is the one to break the news, and the presence of Don Ferdinando de Angelis in their reserved female space is uncomfortable for the women, as well as portentous of their eventual return to a patriarchal society. What is also striking about the appearance of Don Ferdinando is his very limited and inconsequential role in the nuns’ lives. He is presented as ineffectual, having neither answers nor adequate condolences for the nuns’ valid fears and concerns.

It will be Suor Teresa di Gesù, the Mother Superior of the order to whom they will turn for strength and answers. Initially she attempts to intercede on behalf of the other nuns:

“E che faremo, padre? Dove andremo?”
Egli fece un cenno vago, con le mani. In realtà, nulla aveva da offrire, a quelle misere, discacciate dal loro convento. (17)

Alone in her small room, for the first time in thirty years, Suor Giovanna must confront how to define her life and her identity: “Chi era più, lei? Non una donna, non una creatura muliebre: era una monaca, una sepolta viva” (27).

Suor Giovanna has trouble at first recalling her former identity from *that* life. Before taking her vows, she was Luisa Bevilacqua, a noblewoman whose initial motivation for entering the order was the bitter betrayal by her fiancé with her sister. Despite her preliminary lack of vocation, Suor Giovanna came to fully embrace her vows, finding peace, equilibrium, and freedom through her “faithful and humble service to God” that cancelled all of her painful memories (37). Now that she is faced with separating herself from her vow, her cloister, and from God, she is filled with terror. On the last night in the monastery, the sisters commiserate on their impending fate, echoing each others’ thoughts and feelings:

“Sorella mia, è l’ultima volta che diciamo le preghiere del vespro insieme.” [. . .]
“Mia sorella, è l’ultima sera che passiamo, insieme, per questi chiostrì.”
“Sorella, è l’ultima notte che ci concedono di dormire, in questa cella.” (44)

The nuns’ individual and collective voices are muted after the police enter the convent with the intention of ushering out its inhabitants and permanently closing its doors. Their rough and imposing presence renders the nuns as vulnerable as young children. The nuns are ordered to remove their veils, and when, following the mother superior’s example, they refuse; the police forcibly remove the veils from each of the nuns, revealing the faces that show traces of years of abstinence and devotion; faces that are aged and wrinkled, like “un frutto conservato da lunghi anni” (63).

Once the nuns are forcibly escorted out of the convent, a crowd has gathered, made up of expectant relatives who have come to collect some of the nuns, as well as spectators who have come to witness and voice their protest at this injustice. Now it is the crowd as chorus that speaks for the nuns:

“Poverette, poverette!”
“Che ne sarà di loro, che ne sarà?”
“Oh malann’aggia il Governo!”
“Tutto deve rubare, tutto.”
“Hanno preso i loro danari, ora prendono il monastero!”
[. . .] “Sono vecchie.”
[. . .] “Povere anime di Dio!” (68-77)

After the last of the nuns with family have left, four nuns remain who have no relatives to take care of them. Their fate is by far the most horrific of all the nuns: they are to be held at police headquarters like common criminals. Again the crowd observes and decries this injustice, in unison:

Anche le quattro, confuse, smarrite, non sapendo camminare, con suor Camilla che minaccia cadere a ogni passo, vanno via, scortate dal delegato. La folla sa, essa, chi è quell’uomo, qual sia il suo duro e triviale ufficio, che sia la questura. Comprende, subito, la folla:
“Queste non hanno nessuno.”
“Le portano in Questura.”
“Coi ladri! Con le cattive donne!”
“Dormiranno dietro il cancello.”
“Con le guardie e i malandrini!”
“Poverette, poverette!”
Le monache non odono, non comprendono, non sanno il loro destino. Vanno. (81-82)

The crowd's compassionate exclamations are reminiscent of the group of women who "bewailed and lamented" Christ's fate as he was led off to the crucifixion.² The crowd as chorus essentially knows more about the nuns' fate than the nuns themselves comprehend. Their cries serve a dual purpose for the overall structure of the novel. First, the crowd is made up of people from varying socioeconomic stations, and is thus intended to represent society as a whole's cry for justice. Secondly, the crowd's horror at the now penniless sisters being evicted from their homes into the street sets the stage for a series of demoralizing and tragic circumstances that will define Suor Giovanna's life as she returns to the secular world as Luisa Bevilacqua. Even this transformation, returning to the identity Suor Giovanna had shed decades ago upon entering the convent, is difficult, as it was for all the nuns to make this change. This is first evidenced in the mother superior's reply to the soldier's demand of her true identity:

"Vostra Reverenza," disse il prefetto, cavando una carta dal suo portafoglio e leggendola, per dominare il suo lieve turbamento, "è la duchessa Angiola Mormile di Casalmaggiore" [. . .].
Le palpebre della badessa batterono, replicamente. Ella ebbe l'aria di riunire i suoi ricordi.
"Io sono suor Teresa di Gesù, badessa delle Trentatre. Ero...ero, nel secolo, quella che voi dite." (62)

One of the most striking elements of this novel is the literary reference Serao selects to introduce the first chapter. It is from Canto 3 of Dante's *Paradiso*, and it is the only instance in which Serao prefaces a novel with the words of an eminent Italian literary figure. In *Paradiso* III, various souls are assigned to this "lower sphere" of Paradise for having vows that they neglected in some way. What makes Serao's

² Luke 23.26-32

selection of verses from this Canto of the *Paradiso* more striking perhaps is the fact that the soul who speaks is Piccarda Donati, who in life had been violently removed from her convent by men, one of whom was her own brother, and forced into an unwanted marriage that she did not survive for long.³ Piccarda describes the tragedy of her life thus:

“Uomini poi, a mal più ch’a ben usi,
fuor mi rapiron della dolce chiostra:
Iddio si sa qual poi mia vita fusi.” (106-08)

It is the last verse that sets the stage for the tragic story of Suor Giovanna: the indescribable horror that her life became once she was stripped of her veil. This too is foreshadowed by the remainder of the opening citation from the *Paradiso*:

“Ma poi che pur al mondo fu rivolta
contra suo grado e contra buona usanza,
non fu dal vel del cor già mai disciolta.” (115-17)

Like the other nun that accompanies Piccarda, Suor Giovanna will never be separated from the veil in her heart. Serao’s selection of this Canto is also significant in the language used to convey love. Canto 3 of the *Paradiso* is one of a select few that features the word *caritate* instead of the words *amor*, or *amore*, which otherwise abound throughout the *Divina Commedia*. According to John Sinclair, this word, in medieval theology and philosophy, has the connotation of “love of God before love of neighbor” (58). It is this love, a love on a higher plane, that pervades the narrative of *Suor*

³ In the example of Piccarda, the soul who speaks to Dante, she was forcibly removed from the convent by her brother, Corso Donati, and constrained to marry a Florentine, Rossellino della Tosa (Singleton 67).

Giovanna della Croce and through which Serao challenges the reader to reevaluate the authenticity and value of the traditional love relationship. The search for authentic, genuine love between humans, which will prove fruitless in Suor Giovanna's drama, calls to mind the "I-thou" relationship envisioned by Martin Buber in his ethical and religious philosophy. This divine contemplation on love is a divergence from Serao's popular sentimental fiction, and she defends this choice in her prefatory warning to her readers:

Io volontariamente [. . .] rinunzio a lusingare coloro che domandono il rinnovamento di quella eterna storia di amore, che tutti hanno raccontata e che tutti racconteranno ancora... (XIII)

Similar to the term *caritate* superseding *amor* and *amore* in *Paradiso* 3, mentions of pure, positive love in *Suor Giovanna* are expressed in prayers, or among the nuns themselves before they are disbanded. In the few instances in which the narrative alludes to physical love, it is expressed in derogatory words or contexts. The love that drives Suor Giovanna is pure and unwavering, but it is desperately lonely. It is the steadfastness of Suor Giovanna's faith that ensures her alienation from society.

Peter Berger, in the *Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* explains what he refers to as the "alienating propensity of religion":

Alienation is the process whereby the dialectical relationship between the individual and his world is lost to consciousness. (The individual "forgets" that this world was and continues to be co-produced by him.) [. . .] One of the essential qualities of the sacred, as encountered in "religious experience," is otherness, its manifestation as something *totaliter aliter* as compared to ordinary, profane, human life. (85-87)

Once she is returned to society, Suor Giovanna is forced to identify herself by her given name, Luisa Bevilacqua. She is taken in by Grazia, the very sister who betrayed her. Grazia's cruelty has not abated over time: her sole motivation is avarice: she is eager to cash in on the sizeable dowry their parents paid to the convent, which she believes the Government will return to them. While living in Grazia's house with her two grown children, Suor Giovanna's niece and nephew, Suor Giovanna is treated with derision by Grazia and her grown daughter. The two women mock Suor Giovanna's spiritual devotion and piety, as well as her childlike innocence. Grazia's son is a shiftless playboy who charms his penurious aunt of her remaining *lire*. Suor Giovanna's confusion and anxiety over her nephew Francesco's prolonged nightly excursions, and her niece's brazen flirtations with a young man in the street reveal the unadulterated simplicity and purity of her being. In fact, she often resembles a child in her disorientation and lack of comprehension about the world she has been plunged into.

Eventually Grazia savagely evicts her sister when the Government informs them that they will not be returning the nuns' dowries. Suor Giovanna now has to find lodging among strangers on the meager pension provided by the Government. As she is about to leave her sister's home, she becomes violently aware of the nature of the house next door, which up until now had appeared to be the benign residence of a community of women, not unlike her former home, the convent. A murder before dawn of a young man in the street brings the inhabitants, sequestered up to this point, outside. In their lewd and indecent attire, Suor Giovanna becomes aware that they are prostitutes. This scene sets off a brutal awakening to the world around her which will be accelerated and fully realized in her next living arrangement, and because of her pressing economic concerns.

She is now plunged headlong into the streets of Naples and is no longer shielded from the horrors and injustices of the real world.

In the next chapter of her life, Suor Giovanna rents a room from a single mother who has lost her faith, befriends a former prostitute who is now a kept woman, does housework for an old curmudgeonly judge whose younger wife has left him under embarrassing circumstances, and cares for a young mother who becomes physically and psychologically ill as a result of childbirth. In each of her encounters with the inhabitants of Vico Rosario Portamedina, as with her sister and her children, her faith is often ridiculed: her niece coarsely dismisses her suggestions for propriety and modesty with, “Voi non ne sapete niente, perchè siete monaca” (143); the delusional post-partum mother responds similarly to Suor Giovanna’s ministrations, “Che ne sapete voi, sorella mia? Voi siete monaca” (212). And when the single mother’s situation becomes grave, she rebuffs Suor Giovanna’s reassurances with the following:

“Ah voi parlate così, perchè siete monaca; perchè non avete mai nè voluto bene a nessuno, nè desiderato niente; perchè non avete avuto figli; perchè non avete sofferto nella carne e nel cuore.” (267-68)

In the face of all these rebukes, insults, and rejections, Suor Giovanna turns the proverbial other cheek. Her stock replies are, “Dio vede e provvede” (256) or “Dio sa quello che fa” (267). Her compassion, pity and forgiveness for those she comes to know are boundless, and her faith remains untouched, even when her pension is reduced once again. In this penultimate setting, Suor Giovanna is relegated to five lire per night lodging with other downtrodden women. These include a woman who is ill and cannot afford medical treatment, and a homeless mother with her two small children whose

husband is dying somewhere in a hospital bed. It is at this cheap boarding house, during a nighttime police search for prostitutes, that Suor Giovanna hides her faith for the first time, shielding it from the stain of iniquity associated with the vulgarity of the situation. When the police brusquely ask her identity, Suor Giovanna answers, “Mi chiamo Luisa Bevilacqua. E non ho mai portato altro nome” (311).

Suor Giovanna’s story concludes twenty years after her expulsion from the convent. The final scene is a charity supper provided for the poor at a Church by upper class men and women. Suor Giovanna is described as physically resembling the many other elderly, decrepit, and destitute vagrants; she is now toothless, stooped, and dressed in threadbare rags. In contrast to Suor Giovanna’s wretched state and that of the other needy, a young, wealthy, and beautiful woman satisfying some sense of social responsibility through volunteering, floats among the tables making idle chatter with the less fortunate. Her demeanor changes abruptly, however, when she comes upon Suor Giovanna and is seized with sadness. Her first impression of the aged beggar-woman is revealing: “Cento storie di tristezza si leggevano in quel volto di decrepita, attraversato da tutte le tracce che lo sconvolsero” (354).

For the first time at the meal, the young woman relates to one of the poor guests, listening to Suor Giovanna’s sad tale of decline with genuine interest once she reveals that she had been a nun. Moved by Suor Giovanna’s story, the young woman is emboldened to ask her religious name. Unlike the episode in the cheap hostel, Suor Giovanna no longer holds it back, but reveals it, unleashing pent up tears and profound sadness.

The simplicity of Suor Giovanna's spirit remains a constant throughout her tale. She perseveres regardless of how grave her situation becomes, allowing herself only the indulgence of the "due lacrime" she sheds at the end. The *cento storie di tristezza* the young noblewoman sees in her face suggest a reflection not only of the hardships Suor Giovanna has had to endure, but those of all the suffering women she has encountered over the years. In this respect, Suor Giovanna is a social commentary on the very real adversity and injustice that many Neapolitan women endured at the beginning of the 20th century, but Serao has chosen to convey it through a religious allegory. Ursula Fanning maintains that Serao's faith is woman-centered, and this would certainly be supported by the close network of women presented in this narrative. But Suor Giovanna is not representative of a Madonna figure, as one might expect. The profound misery that she has had to endure through no fault of her own does not temper her fervent devotion but makes her in essence more of a Christlike figure. Suor Giovanna's simple faith serves to bridge the schism between worldly wisdom and spirituality.

Thus far we have seen children alienated from society because they were born into poverty, and a nun who is robbed of her life and her financial stability because of political forces beyond her control. In the novel *La ballerina*, dire economic want and external political factors generate alienation, but this condition is intensified through an internal conflict with longstanding social mores. The protagonist of this narrative is a modestly talented dancer who finds herself estranged from society when she flouts the parameters of societal norms. Like Suor Giovanna, Carmela Minino is an *anima semplice* as evidenced immediately in the first pages of the narrative. For several months prior to the onset of the narrative's drama, Carmela has worked towards one goal: buying

an elaborate wreath of flowers for her deceased godmother, the celebrated ballerina Amina Boschetti. Carmela has suffered greatly in her efforts to save this money and when November first arrives, Carmela triumphantly strolls into the flower shop with her hard-earned eighteen *lire*. Like an innocent child, she is quickly deflated upon learning that the cost is ten times the amount of her meager savings. The experience leaves her feeling profoundly depressed and she chastises herself for her stupidity. Unlike the inner fortitude exhibited by the protagonists in the aforementioned narratives, Carmela displays a propensity for self-deprecation:

Perchè era entrata colà, quando non possedeva se non diciotto lire? [. . .]
Perchè questa follia in lei, così povera, così meschina, così abbandonata,
senza altre risorse che le sue gambe di ballerina di cui spesso gl'impresari
non volean sapere [. . .]?
Che si credeva di essere? Una miserabile ballerinetta, bruttina, poco
graziosa, senz'altro pregio che la gioventù, senz'altra qualità che la sua
instancabilità [. . .]. (13-14)

Already several elements that are key to Carmela's alienation are evident: her deprived economic status, her tenuous career and hence her tenuous role in society, and her deficient physical attributes which are virtually inseparable from the other elements. It is clear from the beginning of the narrative that Carmela and the other minor dancers can barely survive on their earnings alone. It is primarily for this motivation that the other dancers take on lovers: these are neither sentimental nor amorous experiences but are more akin to financial arrangements. Carmela is somewhat unique in that initially she staunchly safeguards her virginity and thus her virtue. Not having a benefactor of the sort the other women have, has intensified Carmela's pecuniary dilemma, as illustrated in the analeptic description of her failed professional stint the summer before. Carmela had

signed on to dance for two months in an open air theater in Castellamare under the direction of a dubious character who in the end, citing bad weather and poor business, attempts to cheat the dancers out of their pay. The evil director is unsuccessful with those dancers who have a father, brother, or lover to vehemently intervene on their behalf. But he has no trouble, despite her protestations, defrauding Carmela who is described as being without *difensori* (4).

In yet another analeptic passage, Carmela remembers with bittersweet fondness her “defenders”: her mother, and more significantly, her godmother, Amina Boschetti. Until the death of these two women, Carmela has a bright and forward-looking future, despite her meager talent and unattractiveness. The famous Amina Boschetti, for whom Carmela’s mother was a seamstress, had taken the young Carmela under her wing, financed her dance lessons, and ensured her place in the San Carlo theater, albeit in the last row of dancers. While this small circle of female support still existed for her, Carmela moved through life with optimism and confidence, bolstered by her simple but unyielding spirituality. Carmela reflects on the loss of her muse and protector at the legendary dancer’s gravesite on All Souls’ Day, after she is finally able to convince the florist to cut her a deal on a funereal flower arrangement. The weather and the prevailing mood are dark and somber as rows of mourning Neapolitans file through Poggioreale to honor their loved ones. Kneeling at the tomb of her benefactress, Carmela pays her respects in a manner that is suffused with feverish mysticism:

Carmela s’inchinava ancora una volta, ebra di obbedienza, ebra di devozione, oltre la tomba, sino alla morte e oltre la morte. Anzi, nella sua febbre di amore e di sacrificio, Carmela dimenticò completamente di pregare. Con la familiarità religiosa comune ai cuori semplici napoletani, con la empietà ingenua dei cuori

passionali, ella era certa, certa, che il Signore aveva perdonato ad Amina Boschetti tutti i suoi peccati. (54-55)

With this scene, Serao provides a glimpse into that particular breed of Neapolitan Catholicism which is a leitmotif in Carmela's existence. Her virtuousness and carefully guarded chastity are grounded in her fervent faith, but it will all dissolve in the face of economic and societal pressures.

Several proleptic episodes foretell Carmela's eventual moral decline. Routinely, as she makes her way to the theater, Carmela has to run the gauntlet of onlookers and would-be suitors. Three of these men in particular exchange pleasantries with her, while proffering thinly veiled invitations. One is Roberto Gargiulo, a young department store clerk who sees a challenge in the modest virgin; another is Don Scognamiglio, a fifty-five year-old affluent pharmacist and patron of San Carlo; and the third is the son of the stage manager at San Carlo. Carmela bears their suggestive flattery with a seemingly impenetrable fortitude. However, she herself is all too aware of the weakness that lingers beneath this superficial appearance:

Ella supponeva sempre un inganno maschile, una trama, per farla cadere nel peccato, per burlarsi di lei, subito dopo. Vagamente, nella sua coscienza di povera serva sociale, di povero atomo, senza forza e senza coraggio, ella sentiva che, un giorno o l'altro, questo sarebbe accaduto: ma, con tutte le cure quotidiane, ella respingeva da sè questo avvenimento, ciecamente respingendo chiunque avesse potuto rappresentarlo: adoperava le più puerili e le più inani armi di difesi, fuggendo le conversazioni, fuggendo i contatti, evitando ogni occasione, facendosi anche più rustica e più sgraziata [. . .] Roberto Gargiulo o don Gabriele Scognamiglio, [. . .] o il figliuolo del direttore del palcoscenico, qualcuno di questi la perseguitava per due o tre giorni, per una settimana, dicendole sempre le stesse cose, volendo tutti la medesima cosa, ingannarla, cioè, pensava lei, condurla al peccato, per piantarla subito. No, no. Ella li scoraggiava, facendosi vedere sempre più goffa, a occhi bassi, troncando i discorsi, fuggendo, quasi sempre. (63-64)

Carmela's weakening grip on her virtue is accelerated by the decadent examples of the other dancers, all but a few of whom are essentially kept women, as well as the jeers and acerbic comments by various male figures: her would-be and eventual suitors, and the suitors of her peers. Carmela attempts to draw strength from her faith, but finds it increasingly more difficult:

Altre volte, quando il suo spirito era più tranquillo, in quelle ore di aspettativa che la direzione del teatro le infliggeva, quando la sua schietta anima non aveva turbamenti strani, ella, mentalmente, tenendosi la mano nella tasca del suo vestito, dove portava sempre il rosario, ne recitava
[. . .] il rosario doppio, quello di quindici decine [. . .] pronunciando con molto fervore, sempre fra sè, *i misteri gloriosi* e *i misteri dolorosi*, a ogni decina. Ah, ora, no! [. . .] Come dire devotamente il rosario, in quell'ambiente di vizio oramai ingenito, costituzionale, su quel palcoscenico che era, ingenuamente e turpemente, un mercato di bellezza e di gioventù? (107-09)

Besides her dwindling faith and her cherished memory of Amina Boschetti, the only mitigating force in Carmela's battle with herself is Gaetanella, her hairdresser, who consistently attempts to bolster her client's resolve. When Carmela hints that she might ask a male friend to accompany her home from her late night performance for security, Gaetanella, reading more between Carmela's words, gently rebukes her: "Fate bene. La Madonna vi mantenga in questa intenzione" (72). It becomes clear that Gaetanella appreciates Carmela's purity, which apparently is legendary in this small world of Carmela Minino's Neapolitan *vicinato*:

Tutti lo sapevano che Carmela Minino tornava a casa sempre sola, che non riceveva visite, che non riceveva lettere o fiori, che usciva soltanto per andare al teatro e alla chiesa, che era così povera perchè non voleva aver protettore. (72-73)

Everyone in Carmela's neighborhood, from the *fruttivendola* to the *panettiere*, serves as an enforcer of the moral code. The fact that Carmela's virginity is so highly touted by this community sets the stage for her inevitable fall from grace.

Carmela's ultimate capitulation comes on the heels of a harsh exchange with Emilia Tromba, a fellow dancer. Carmela remains in awe of Emilia primarily because of the latter's paramour, the aristocratic Ferdinando Terzi, whom Carmela secretly and hopelessly loves. In this scene Emilia chides Carmela for fruitlessly safeguarding her virginity:

“Chi mi vuol bene, donna Emilia? Chi volete che mi voglia bene?”
[. . .] “Eh, qualcuno lo avrai! Proprio nessuno?” [. . .]
[. . .] “Qualcuno...forse...” sussurrò. “Vi sarebbe qualcuno...”
“E deciditi, va, figliuola mia!” esclamò maternamente la corruttrice. “Buttala via questa zitellanza! Che ti serve? Che ne fai? Per Gesù Cristo?
A tempo e ora ti penti dei peccati, e muori in santità, come farò io.
Per il mondo? Il mondo si ride di te, perchè sei zitella. Se non ti decidi adesso, quando aspetti? Bella non sei, già è inutile dir bugie, lo sai; se non profitti di un poco di gioventù, nessuno ti vorrà più; quando è passato questo tempo...” (123-24)

The final coup de grâce comes when Emilia, adding insult to injury, whispers in Ferdinando's ear, at an audible volume, “è ancora zitella!” To which Ferdinando tactlessly replies, “Che sciocca!” (130). Shortly after the two lovers depart, Roberto Gargiullo shows up and once again attempts to seduce Carmela, preying on her apparent vulnerability and fatigue, offering to take her home by carriage. Carmela accepts his offer, and her descent down the slippery slope of licentiousness begins.

In the affair that results between the two, Roberto gradually increases his domain over her, and in response Carmela's passivity increases. She changes her dress and

increases her make-up to conform to his expectations, and even allows him to call her “Lina,” a diminutive nickname, which under the circumstances is demeaning. In a parallel context, another fellow dancer, Concetta Giura, also allows her married lover, the Duke of Sanframondi to call her by an alternate and diminutive name, “Tina.” In this relationship, Concetta’s lover is described as reveling in Concetta’s crudeness, and her lowbrow Neapolitan dialect which she exaggerates to please him. Her rough aspects are portrayed as appealing to Sanframondi’s base desires, standing in stark contrast to the refined demeanor of his staid and aristocratic wife.

These relationships have something in common with Emilia’s cruel words to Carmela: they all spring from the same source of oppression. In her study, “The Five Faces of Oppression,” Iris Marion Young identifies one aspect of oppression as cultural imperialism, which she explains as

the experience of existing with a society whose dominant meanings render the particular perspectives and point of view of one’s own group invisible at the same time as they stereotype one’s group and mark it out as the Other.

[. . .] The stereotype marks and defines the culturally dominated, confines them to a nature which is usually attached in some way to their bodies, and thus which cannot easily be denied. (100-01)

Essentially all of the women in Serao’s milieu would fall into the category of the culturally dominated. They are subjected to the standards and expectations established by the patriarchal society and for the most part exist in a vulnerable and marginalized state. Emilia’s advice that Carmela should offer herself to any man who is willing to take her is also a product of this cultural domination. Emilia has been conditioned to rely on men for survival, even if it means surrendering her dignity and self-respect. This

internalization of patriarchal oppression suggests the psychic alienation that Bartky maintains is analogous to the Marxist conception of alienation of labor. Bartky cites sexual objectification and fragmentation of the self as two key features of psychological oppression and thus draws the following analogy:

In many ways, psychic alienation and the alienation of labor are profoundly alike. Both involve a splitting off of human functions from the human person, a forbidding of activities thought to be essential to a fully human existence. Both subject the individual to fragmentation and impoverishment. [. . .] To be a victim of alienation is to have a part of one's being stolen by another. (110-11)

Carmela Minino, already a marginalized entity, loses her identity and her external life crumbles as a result of her capitulation to Roberto Gargiullo, and then Don Scognamiglio. Even her finances are not improved through these illicit ventures as she discovers she has to spend more money to maintain an appearance pleasing to her suitors. The final scene places Carmela at the side of the man she loved from afar, Ferdinando Terzi, who, prior to her arrival, and completely irrespective of Carmela or her peer Emilia (his true love was another married woman), has killed himself in a hotel room. Carmela first hears of his death through the rapid spread of gossip among the other dancers during a staging of *Aida*. None of the girls know all the details, even the hotel in which Count Ferdinando has killed himself is unclear. Carmela departs abruptly from the theater and has a coach drive her from one hotel to another, repeating her *funebre domanda* to the clerk at each hotel, “È qui che si è ucciso il conte Ferdinando Terzi di Torregrande?” (241). Finally Carmela has success at the *Suisse* hotel, and bribes the doorman to allow her to stay with the deceased Count in his room. Carmela kisses his forehead and holds

his cold hand, and prays her rosary regaining the original fervor she once possessed. The return to this simple and pious state signifies a kind of redemption for Carmela.⁴

Many of Serao's protagonists are women who are constrained into prostitution or moral turpitude, but, unlike Carmela, few of them are able to cast off the stigma of their wayward acts and move forward. In *Storia di due anime*, Gelsomina, an eighteen year-old girl of modest means and background, falls hopelessly in love with Domenico Maresca, twenty-eight years old and a painter of religious figurines, representing primarily saints, by trade. This is a short novel, but it is rich in imagery of sacrifice and martyrdom. Gelsomina is a simple soul, much like the female protagonists considered thus far. She is insecure about her appearance, particularly because of a birthmark on her cheek resembling a strawberry that she thinks disfigures her. Still fresh in her memory was the unnamed person in her past who mockingly called her *fraolella*, the Neapolitan equivalent of the diminutive *fragoletta*: little strawberry. Aggravating her situation, her mother is dead and she lives with her miserly stepmother who often beats her. The other *anima* of the story, Domenico Maresca, lives for his work, and has such a low opinion of himself, he does not recognize the young Gelsomina's complete adoration for him, which could more aptly be described as a divine sort of adulation. Gelsomina comes to talk to Domenico in his shop almost daily, lauding him with praise that does not reveal the true depths of her affection: "Sei così buono! Sei un santo!" (17). Domenico also expresses a similar view of Gelsomina, but without any deeper emotional underpinnings. In an almost fatherly fashion, Domenico lectures Gelsomina to keep her distance from the

⁴ Salsini interprets this scene, and the context as a strict duality between eroticism and chastity, with an emphasis on "gender-coded expectations": "[. . .] through Ferdinando's death [. . .] Carmela can create an unsullied, nonerotic relationship that allows her to regain her former virginal status" (92). I would add to her interpretation the profound significance of faith and spirituality for Serao's heroines.

scheming Don Grimaldi, an older man of nobility with illicit designs on the young innocent. Domenico emphasizes his opinion of Gelsomina as being “una ragazza buona e religiosa” (17).

Later in the narrative, when Domenico becomes engaged to Anna Dentale, a beautiful but devious woman, Gelsomina is devastated. Her grief, coupled with her difficult financial situation, renders her too weak to resist the advances of Don Grimaldi and she becomes a kept woman, showered with money and new clothes, and nonchalant promises of an eventual marriage. When Gelsomina meets up with Domenico a couple of years later at his wedding, he is disheartened to find that she has chosen this wayward path: “Eri così buona, così religiosa!” (31). Gelsomina presents him with a wedding gift, a man’s ring made of gold. In return she asks him for a flower which he takes from his balcony. This act alone demonstrates Gelsomina’s selfless devotion to Domenico. By presenting him with a ring, a traditional symbol of betrothal or marriage, she is vowing her loyalty and faith to him and asking very little in return.

The two meet up again years later under desperate circumstances: Domenico tragically becomes aware of his wife’s pathological philandering and Gelsomina, cast aside by the vile Don Grimaldi, has turned to prostitution. Domenico openly shares his feelings with Gelsomina, revealing the depths of his grief and hopelessness, and commenting on the similitude of their wretched situations. Domenico has not only lost his wife to another man, but she has stolen every last *lira* from him, including valuable statues for which customers have already paid him. Gelsomina shows great compassion for Domenico’s plight, but points out that Domenico’s situation, albeit sad and tragic, still offers more hope and promise than her own future. He can still get another job, reinvent

himself, move forward. She, however, bears the stain of a marked woman which she cannot erase, much like the disfiguring birthmark on her face. Gelsomina has now completely internalized her alienated condition to the extent that in her new profession of sorts she has renamed herself with the most disparaging moniker possible: *Fraolella*. Exacerbating her plight even more, she has a lover, a young delinquent named Gaetanino Calabritto, whom Serao describes in language that calls to mind a pimp: he abuses her and takes her money. Gelsomina cannot, however, leave him, she confides to Domenico, or he would surely kill her. In relaying all of the grim details of her plight, Gelsomina does not waver in her grace and measured restraint. However, when Domenico discloses his desire to kill himself, rather than face the humiliation and criminal charges for what Anna has left in her wake, Gelsomina can no longer hold back her feelings on the injustice of Domenico's words:

“Tu vuoi ucciderti [. . .] vuoi ucciderti? E che avrei dovuto fare io? Cento volte avrei dovuto uccidermi, io! Ero una fanciulla buona, ti volevo bene, mi hai respinta, non mi hai voluta, ed io mi sono lasciata prendere, da uno qualunque, così per debolezza, per tristezza, per non aver più che fare di me. Non mi dovevo uccidere, forse, il giorno seguente al mio errore? Don Francesco Grimaldi mi ha lasciata; e io, abbandonata, già perduta, ho rotolato sempre più giù, ogni giorno, perchè ero sola, perchè ero fiacca, perchè nessuna mi ha soccorso, neppure tu [. . .] Ah quante volte la morte mi è parsa bella: e non mi sono uccisa! [. . .] Un tempo, due o tre anni fa, questa vita di vergogna mi dava da vivere, avevo degli abiti, dei cappelli: poi sono venuti degli infami, come Gaetanino Calabritto, degli altri, mi hanno oppressa, mi hanno maltrattata, mi hanno tolto tutto [. . .] sono venuta qui per dirti, Domenico, che se uno doveva uccidersi, dovrebbe uccidersi, sono io, io sola...io che era una buona ragazza... e che sono una disgraziata. (64-65)

When Domenico asks why she did not take her own life, she tells him, “Aspetto che Dio mi tolga da queste tribolazioni” (65).

Although Gelsomina has been abandoned by everyone and has resigned herself to her miserable lot in life, she has not completely abandoned her faith. Furthermore, *Storia di due anime* can be read as a tale of survival and perseverance: given her lack of financial resources and society's limited choices for women, Gelsomina has done what she needs to in order to survive.

All of the heroines in Serao's marginalized tales experience some profound form of alienation. One common denominator in all of these narratives is economic want which would indicate a Marxist conception of alienation. However, the problem for women runs even deeper since Serao was writing in a time when women were viewed, in a sense, as commodities: they enjoyed few legal rights and were blocked in claims to property and custody of their own children; and their worth could be quantitatively measured by a dowry, the lack thereof rendering them valueless, as in the case of *Suor Giovanna*, or that of the surrogate mother in "Canituccia".

In *Ce sexe qui n'en est pas un*, Luce Irigaray considers the male engendered equation of women as currency or commodities, also found in Marxist theory. Irigaray stresses that:

la culture qui est nôtre, est fondée sur l'échange des femmes. [. . .] Pourquoi échanger les femmes? Parce que'elles sont des "commodities rarefies et essentielles à la vie du groupe" affirme l'anthropologue [. . .] L'analyse que fait Marx de la marchandise comme forme élémentaire de la richesse capitaliste peut donc s'entendre comme un interprétation du statut de la femme dans les sociétés dites patriarcales. (28)

Financial need is not the only root of alienation among Serao's heroines. Difficulties conforming to expected societal roles and norms, and questions of religious faith all come

to bear on this equation. However, for Serao, faith is also a redeeming aspect, something that sustains and defines the *anime* of these narratives.

In her analysis of *Moll Flanders*, Gillian Beer maintains that the “concealed message” in Daniel Defoe’s narrative is that “women are tough”. She goes on to say, “do what you will to them, they survive. Poverty, sexual ill-usage, depression, imprisonment: they can take it all” (86). This same conclusion could be drawn for Serao’s narratives with the following qualifying statement: as long as women maintain a network of mutual support, they are impervious to self-destruction. However, once this network breaks down, they find themselves irretrievably lost and alone. Moll Flanders’s name is fictional: she bears generic and depraved names denoting prostitution and venereal disease. As Beer points out, she “has been named by society” (86). However, she manages to transcend her wanton life and reinvent herself. By contrast, when Gelsomina becomes *Fraolella*; Carmela Minino, “Lina”; and Concetta Giura becomes “Nina”, they are accepting belittling names that signal a complete surrender to a demeaning existence and a loss of their former self. It is in the loss of identity, in oppressed circumstances, and in the void of female support that one can appreciate the significance of solidarity among women all the more. Serao essentially leaves two options for her heroines: to be sacrificed or to remain marginalized. There are no happy endings to be found in love nor in marriage. Neither Serao’s working girls who are single, such as the dancers in *La ballerina*, or the *telegrafiste* in “Telegrafi dello stato”, nor the *zitelle* experience contentment and acceptance. The only scenario which suggests potential for true happiness and fulfillment is the convent.

Suor Giovanna's tale is one of the superlative examples of support and solidarity among women in Serao's narratives. The fulfillment and cooperative spirit among the nuns of the *Trentatre* is underscored through the stark contrast with Suor Giovanna's later decline into a life of solitude and misery after the government's violent expulsion of the community of sisters. It would seem that Serao is offering up the monastic life as a model of a utopian existence for women.

However, there is another realm of woman's existence that Serao esteemed, despite its inherent pitfalls, dangers and necessary sacrifices: motherhood. In a letter to one of her friends, Serao has been noted as saying, "love is worth something only when it leads to maternity."⁵

Carmela Minino, Gelsomina, and the unnamed beggar girl in *Piccole anime* all carry with them memories of a better time, when they were nourished, bolstered and supported by the dominant female presence in their young lives, that of their mothers. For Serao, the maternal bond is the most sublime example of pure, uncomplicated love, and the most significant font of strength, support, and guidance for women, as I will examine in the next chapter.

⁵ *Lettere di Matilde Serao a Olga Ossani Lodi* (124).

Chapter Three:

Da lei tutto: The Mother-Daughter Relationship In Serao

In the afterword of a recent edition of Matilde Serao's letters to her closest friend, actress Eleonora Duse, Titti Marrone marvels at Serao's ability to juggle a high-powered career while mothering several children over a span of nineteen years:

Noi stressatissime impiegate-redattrici con figlio unico affetto da sindrome di abbandono materno stupiamo nell'apprendere che ne ebbe ben quattro da don Eduardo, e che un quinto figlio le nacque dalla relazione con l'avvenente Natale. Non solo: lei, signora, decise di prendere con sè anche la bimbetta che Eduardo donnaiolo impenitente aveva avuto da una sua amica suicidatasi di lì a poco, e seppe amarla come i figli suoi. (61)

For Serao motherhood was not a choice, but an instinct ingrained in all women, whether they had given birth or not. Mothering is a recurring theme in Serao's short stories and novels, and one that she wrote frequently about in her newspaper pieces. In *Parla una donna*, for example, Serao refers to all women as having *viscere materne* (xii). According to Serao's perspective, this maternal nature also serves to unite all women. In *Il ventre di Napoli* and the novel *Il paese di cuccagna*, Serao delineates examples of women providing free childcare, food for other mothers' children, and even breastfeeding babies whose own mothers are unable to do so. While many of Serao's contemporaries were exploring the idea of the onset of maternity as the end of a woman's individual

existence, Serao's conception was entirely different. For Serao, motherhood not only enhanced a woman's existence, it defined it.¹

While the inevitability of marriage and its accompanying grief and frustration are themes that Serao repeated in many of her short stories and novels, it is clear that many of Serao's heroines see marriage as a sure course to achieve the only "pure love" by Serao's definition: maternity.

Serao's concept of motherhood, while exalted to an almost sacred status, is far from uncomplicated. It has been described by some critics as implying great sacrifice and as imperialistic by others. Gistucci sums up Serao's depiction of the mother-child relationship as one of authority and of dependence that implies sacrifice, but also maternal imperialism. Gistucci declares, "Et tout d'abord il y a les mères. Matilde Serao ne prend pas la maternité à la légère. [. . .] C'est un rapport d'autorité et de dépendance qui implique le sacrifice, mais aussi l'impérialisme maternel" (190).

Other critics comment on this imperialism of the Neapolitan mother. Marotti, commenting on the contemporary Neapolitan writer Fabrizia Ramondino, concludes, "Neapolitan mothers are powerful matriarchs who rule over their children. Rather than subverting male dominance, they indirectly undermine it through their own power in the family" (26). This perception of motherhood is most strongly illustrated in *Mors tua*. In her final novel Serao depicts a mother-child relationship that is often brutally realistic, unlike the idealized mother-child adoration that typified earlier novels and short stories such as "Terno secco" and "Silvia." This attitude is due in part to the harsh realism of the

¹ For examples see *I divoratori*, by Vivanti, and Aleramo's *Una donna*. One of the most powerful excerpts in support of this idea is from *Una donna*, in the form of a letter written by a mother, read by her daughter, who is now also a mother and also experiences the same drama: "Debbo partire [. . .] qui impazzisco [. . .] Ed io soffro tanto che non so più voler bene ai bambini [. . .] debbo andarmene [...]. Poveri figli miei, forse è meglio per loro!" (180-81).

novel's theme. It is essentially a novel about war (specifically, the first World War as it resonated in Italy), the adversity the soldiers fighting in the war endured, and the loss or hardship those who loved them experienced. Citing this and other mother-child narratives, both Fanning and Salsini conclude that Serao's overall attitude about mothering is inherently negative. I maintain that Serao's narratives indicate a strongly favorable point of view on maternity. Even the tragedy and heartbreak in *Mors tua* only further supports and enhances Serao's veneration of the mother-child bond.

Mors tua is a departure from many of Serao's other novels in that the mother-son relationship is also explored, as in the example of Marta Ardore. Marta's older son Fausto, completely enamored of and taken in by the patriotism of the time, convinces his younger brother Giorgio, portrayed as the more innocent, and perhaps more favored child of Marta's, to enlist in the war. When Giorgio is killed in action, Marta's feelings for her first-born deteriorate; she blames him for her younger son's death and it seems unlikely that she will forgive him, or even regain her feelings of love and compassion for him. This dynamic is revealed through Fausto's own realization of what has transpired between his mother and him as a result of Giorgio's death in a sort of confession to his mother:

Ti ricordi che io mi assunsi il terribile incarico di dirti , che Giorgio, il nostro Giorgio [. . .] era stato ucciso, in guerra, a venti anni? [. . .] Ti ricordi il tuo urlo di orrore che era a me rivolto, ti ricordo il balenìo furente dei tuoi occhi folli, che era a me rivolto? Madre, madre, finch'io viva, ovunque io vada, in ogni tempo e in ogni paese, io udrò il tuo urlo che mi accusava, vedrò la folgore del tuo sguardo, che mi volea fulminare! (324-25)

The negative undertones in this example point more to the overwhelming grief of a mother and an anti-war stance, than to a denunciation of motherhood. Furthermore, what is clear from this example is that the bond between mother and son is far less complex than that of mother and daughter, and at the same time more idealized. At the heart of this complexity is a psychological theme that Serao explores in many of her novels and short stories: what Chodorow called “boundary confusion” between mothers and daughters:

Because they are the same gender as their daughters and have been girls, mothers of daughters tend not to experience these infant daughters as separate from them in the same way as do mothers of infant sons. In both cases, a mother is likely to experience a sense of oneness and continuity with her infant. However, this sense is stronger, and lasts longer, vis-à-vis daughters. Primary identification and symbiosis with daughters tend to be stronger and cathexis of the daughter as a sexual other usually remaining a weaker, less significant theme. (109)

Chodorow, whose claims are rooted in Freudian and post-Freudian studies, maintains that the daughter’s identification with her mother is so strong that the daughter will struggle throughout her adolescence and young adulthood to break free from this influence and create her own identity. She cites Signe Hammer who confirms this virtual oneness between mothers and daughters in her book *Daughters and Mothers: Mothers and Daughters*: “At some level mothers and daughters tend to remain emotionally bound up with each other in what might be called a semi-symbiotic relationship, in which neither ever quite sees herself or the other as a separate person” (109).

This type of complex relationship is powerfully illustrated in the example of Carolina Leoni and her young-adult daughter Loreta. In the beginning of *Mors tua*, Carolina Leoni still expresses hope for her young-adult daughter’s future: “[. . .] Loreta [. . .] Mi

disubbidisce, mi fa paura, talvolta, ma è buona” (4). As the narrative progresses, however, the turbulence in this relationship accelerates as Signora Leoni tries to save her daughter from a life of misery as well as one of dishonor. Loreta, who has no imminent plans to marry her fiancé, wants to leave her home and follow her beloved (who is a soldier) to the front. Carolina Leoni attempts to convince her daughter, sincerely and wholeheartedly, although ineffectually, to stay. She reminds Loreta of her Christian responsibility and points out that many other women are in the same situation and choose to remain at home and suffer in silent dignity, thereby preserving their honor:

“Migliaia di donne, madre e mogli lo faranno, Loreta.”

“Io no! Io no!” esclamò la ribelle figliuola.

“Esse saranno pazienti, Loreta, e avranno fede nell’attesa” concluse fermamente e dolcemente, la madre.

“Donne che hanno il tuo cuore, mamma, non il mio” replicò, in un violento corrucio, Loreta. (51)

What disturbs Loreta’s mother the most is the scandalously open, sexual relationship Loreta has with her fiancé. Carolina Leoni fears that her daughter will be abandoned, and consequently dishonored and stigmatized for the rest of her life. In the end the mother is unsuccessful, and the daughter leaves. What ultimately unfolds proves to be even worse than what Signora Leoni could have imagined. Loreta’s fiancé is killed in battle, and Loreta, now a dishonored woman, becomes ensnared in a life of moral depravity, going from one lover to the next. This situation is revealed in Carolina’s dialogue with her priest, Don Filippo. Carolina laments her daughter’s transgressions in language that evokes complete loss and death: “Ho perduto una figliuola. [. . .] Loreta è perduta, è

perduta!” (270-01). Don Filippo attempts to console Carolina Leoni by pointing out the many indirect casualties of war:

“Tante creature virtuose si sono perdute così durante quel tempo” dice, tristamente, il sacerdote. “Migliaia di fanciulle, travolte ... I padri al fronte... le madri deboli, impotenti a frenarle... tutta la libertà ... una custodia impossibile ... E in contrasto, in reazione all’incubo pauroso di guerra, una furia di vivere, una furia di godere... Loreta vostra non è stata la sola, a peccare... Pensateci!” (272)

The way in which both Carolina Leoni and Don Filippo narrate this loss is interesting because it reveals two significant concepts that Serao considers in this and other works. First, it is as though a malevolent force, the brutal and ugly reality of war, is more powerful than Carolina and other mothers, and is responsible for the loss of their children. This loss does not suggest a weakening of the mother-daughter bond, but it only intensifies the mother’s grief. This situation is reminiscent of the Greek myth of Demeter and Persephone, which Luce Irigaray cites to support her argument of male interference in relationships between women in Western society.² Just as Persephone was abducted by evil male forces (her father Jupiter, and Hades) and transported to the underworld where her mother can neither reach nor save her, so is Carolina Leoni unable to retrieve her daughter from her debauched life in Montecarlo, or, as Carolina Leoni refers to it, “un paese pieno di corruzione e di orgia” (271). As Irigaray maintains, the separation of mother and daughter is ultimately due to machinations of the patriarchal society.

² "To re-establish elementary social justice , to save the earth from total subjugation to male values [. . .], we must restore this missing pillar of our culture: the mother-daughter relationship and respect for female speech and virginity" ("The Forgotten Mystery of Female Ancestry" *Thinking the Difference* 112).

The second concept that this discourse elucidates is that of the supreme sacrifice of the mother as representing martyrdom, sainthood, and even the Virgin Mother. When Don Filippo observes Carolina Leoni consumed by grief, he recalls this last image:

Egli scorge, innanzi a sè, quella madre trafitta nel cuore, simile a Colei che vide (sic) a morire Suo figlio sulla croce, quella madre che ha emesso solo un grido, ha chiamato solo un nome, e questo l'ha fatta novellamente sanguinare. (270)

Ultimately Carolina Leoni convinces Don Filippo to send her with the Franciscan Missionary nuns to minister to a leper colony in Africa, even though she is not a nun, knowing that this decision will mean certain death. This final act reinforces the martyred status of the mother, who is willing to atone vicariously for the sins of her daughter; it also signifies the profound grief and pain of losing a child; the mother's life is now effectively over. The question that might naturally arise from Carolina Leoni's decision is whether, as a mother, she feels ultimately responsible for not succeeding in holding back her daughter? The answer to this question can be found in the final dialogue with Don Filippo, in which Carolina Leoni convinces him to send her to Africa:

“Non si può, Carolina, riparare l'onore?”

“No. È irreparabile.”

[. . .] “adesso, come vive la vostra Loreta?”

“L'ho detto, monsignore. Vive nel peccato.”

“Con un altr'uomo? Il secondo?”

“No. Un altro. Non so chi. Qualcuno.” Le risposte sono amare, amarissime. Ma Carolina Leoni incrudelisce, profferendole, **anche contro sè stessa**. [my emphasis]

[. . .] “Siete certa, Carolina, di aver fatto tutto il vostro dovere, verso vostra figlia?”

[. . .] “L'ho educata nella fede, nella pietà, nella virtù, monsignore!” Ella esclama. “**Io sono stata una donna onesta.**” [my emphasis]

“Non avete tentato di raggiungerla, di unirvi a lei, di prenderla sul vostro cuore?”

“Ho tentato. È stato inutile. Ha trovato sempre modo di eludermi, di sfuggirmi. [. . .] ha bisogno di liberarsi completamente di me. Vorrei sparire. [. . .] L’amerò sino alla morte: pregherò sino all morte: ma voglio sparire. Debbo sparire.”
(270-03)

The discourse between Carolina and the priest is very revealing: it is clear that as much as she is able to objectively rationalize the situation, Carolina believes she has done all that she can to help her daughter. However, at the same time, her maternal sense of responsibility is infinite: whatever her daughter does, or does not do, Carolina feels that she is ultimately culpable — her daughter’s sins become her own. In the end, Loreta’s desire to separate herself from her mother is too painful for Carolina Leoni.

Paradoxically, Carolina’s solution is to physically separate herself from her daughter.

In *Mors tua* Serao focuses on the devastating loss of the bond between mother and child, either through death or separation, as well as the overlap between mothers’ and daughters’ existences. Carolina Leoni chooses a penitent life in exile because of the life her daughter is leading. Although she is unable to help Loreta in this earthly life, Carolina hopes that her prayers and acts of piety will redeem her daughter in the after-life.

Serao examined this idea of maternal guidance in her earlier narratives that feature heroines whose lives unfold in a manner that is similar or analogous to those of their mothers.

Whether these fates are inherited, as is the case, quite literally, in *Cuore infermo* or “Silvia,” or focalized in a supernatural context as in *La mano tagliata, Il paese di Cuccagna*, or *Il delitto di Via Chiatamone*, or to a lesser degree in “O Giovannino o la morte,” all these texts are linked by a chilling embedded narrative: the profound influence

of the mother on her daughter's life, even after the mother's death. This is a variant of the focus of *Mors tua*. The aforementioned novels and short stories span thirty-one years, and two radically divergent genres: *Cuore inferno*, "Silvia," and "O Giovannino o la morte" are sentimental or romance narratives, while the other three represent Serao's Gothic phase. Unlike *Mors tua*, where the mother is the focal point of the narrative, it is primarily the daughter's voice that orients the narrative perspective in these other works.

In "Silvia," the self-titled protagonist fulfills both roles of daughter and mother. However, the latter role proves to be fleeting and even fatal, just as it had been for her own mother. As the story opens, Silvia is gazing beyond her balcony, one late afternoon, watching her entire life pass by in a meaningless, colorless panorama, "tutta la sua vita passata da una fredda e indifferente abitudine" (175). Silvia comes to the realization that in her thirty-two years of life she has imparted nothing significant, enduring or beneficial to this world. Through her reflections on her life, an austere and cold childhood is revealed, marked by one significant and analeptic event, the death of her mother in childbirth. Silvia's father is cold and detached, and later in adulthood such words as *freddezza* are used to describe her marital relationship. Silvia is devoid of and removed from life, described as passing her days "parlando poco, sorridendo molto meno, pensando pochissimo, immaginando nulla, ed aspettando la morte senza impazienza" (181) until she discovers that she is pregnant. This event transforms her into someone who is experiencing life for the first time:

Per la prima volta essa sentì la sua vita: ecco i forti ed onesti palpiti del cuore, ecco il sangue ricco e tiepido che irrompe nelle vene, ecco i nervi pronti, disposti, sensibili; ecco le idee che si affollano al cervello, l'intelligenza che si dispiega, la fantasia che sorge e si libra: è la vita, la

la vita, la vita! (182)

Silvia not only has been given a vocation in life, but she is full of life for the first time, as though she were just born. The true and singular meaning of life is thus revealed to her: “[. . .] la verità di essa [la vita] è nell’amore e la felicità nei figli [. . .]” (183).

Tragically, Silvia’s own life ebbs away within months of this awakening, when she comes down with a ravaging fever during childbirth. At this moment, it becomes clear that the external analepsis of Silvia’s mother’s death was proleptic as well, unveiling a theme which Serao develops in many mother-daughter narratives: that the daughter’s fate replicates that of the mother.

As Silvia tenuously clings to consciousness after giving birth at the end of the tale, the one person she thinks of is her own mother, who had died giving birth to her. She asks her father if it pained her mother to die, and she is told that her mother was sorry to go because “lasciava in terra una figlia.” Shortly before this exchange between daughter and father there is a one-time shift in focalization, as Silvia’s father becomes suddenly and painfully aware of his emotional detachment from his daughter:

Presso il letto della inferma vegliava solo il vecchio padre: quando il medico gli aveva detto che Silvia era perduta e con lei il bambino, il suo egoismo aveva ricevuto un colpo formidabile, qualche cosa di aspro gli cercò il cuore ed era il rimorso. Egli impallidiva e tremava, pensando per quanto tempo aveva trascurata la figlia, egli si chiedeva la misura del dolore che gli aveva inflitto con la sua indifferenza; non le aveva mai dato un bacio, mai detto una buona parola, era stato per lei un estraneo. Ora essa, avvelenata da quella crudele noncuranza, moriva. (187)

It is important to note that Silvia’s story leaves off at a point where many of Serao’s other stories begin. That is: the love and concern for, and influence on, a

daughter's life are not terminated with the mother's death. On the contrary, in death these mothers are imbued with mystical powers verging on the divine to warn, guide, or protect their daughters. In *Cuore inferno*, *Il paese di Cuccagna*, *Il delitto di via Chiatamone*, and *La mano tagliata*, the mother, already dead before the opening of the story, either indirectly or directly communicates a warning to her daughter in order to save her from an untimely death. In all four instances, the perpetrator of this impending peril is either the daughter's husband, as in *Cuore inferno* and *Il delitto di Via Chiatamone*; or the father, as in *Il paese di Cuccagna*; or father and would-be suitor / fiancé, as in *La mano tagliata*. Curiously, the mother in all of these stories is attempting to prevent her daughter from mirroring her own wretched life and tragic death. In only one of these narratives will a daughter be "saved" from a cruel fate through the influence of the mother figure.

As we already saw in Chapter One, in *Cuore inferno*, Beatrice's mother is omnipresent in her life: she lives on through the powerful memory and admonition of her death. Beatrice's ultimate demise is suggested as having occurred as an indirect result of failing to heed her mother's advice not to succumb to the perils of passion. Beatrice's fate is first alluded to in a physical comparison between mother and daughter in the beginning of the narrative. Luisa Revertera, Beatrice's mother, is described as

aristocratica, raffinata; da per tutto le tracce di quello spirito medio, scettico, disdegnoso di poesia, incapace di grandi e di piccole azioni, arido, superbo, contento di sè soddisfatto del proprio ed unico interesse. (14)

Her daughter Beatrice is similarly described in a scene in which she regains her composure after being stricken with fear at the thought of her impending marriage and all that it entails:

[. . .] il volto andò man mano riprendendo la sua serenità olimpica, una sicurezza quasi gaia lo colorò, lo ricompose nella purezza della sua espressione ridiventando così la bella e solita Beatrice Revertera che si occupava pacificamente dei fiori, degli arazzi, degli abiti che servivano alle sue nozze. (18)

This unsettling fear is initially described as “una cura segreta” that “vi portava anche la sua forza ed il suo coraggio”(36). Eventually, Beatrice’s withholding of love and affection for her husband is explained as Beatrice’s *cura segreta* is disclosed. In a revealing and emotionally charged scene brought on by rumors of her own husband’s indiscretions, Beatrice confronts her father for his role in her mother’s death:

Sapete voi di quale malattia è morta mia madre [. . .]? Io lo so. Ella è morta di una malattia di cuore [. . .] quel povero cuore infermo, che batteva così irregolarmente, che si gonfiava di sangue con tutte le sue forze, con una devozione cieca ed ostinata. [. . .] il cuore le diceva: io sono infermo, io non posso sopportare tutto questo, io ne morirò — ed ella soffocava anche questa voce, camminando al suo destino [. . .]. Dicono che accogliesse molto bene la donna per cui era tradita [. . .] mia madre morta molto giovane [. . .]. Queste malattie del cuore si ereditano, come la tisi e la follia [. . .]. Ebbene, padre mio, io non voglio avere il cuore di mia madre, non voglio morire come lei. [. . .] Così come vivo, la vita mi piace. [. . .] io non amerò, io non sarò inquieta, ansiosa, gelosa [. . .].
(114-15)

Beatrice continues to live her life with assumed indifference until the grief of her husband’s love affair proves to be too much for her to bear. In a desperate moment she kneels to pray for help or inspiration, but rather than implore the Virgin Mary for

assistance, she prays to her own mother, “gridando con la voce del fanciullo disperato: Mamma mia, mamma mia” (165). Beatrice ultimately decides to regain her husband’s affection and surrenders to her passion for him. Like her mother, she ignores all physical warnings of her imminent demise and she too dies, presumably from excessive strain on her heart.

Once again Serao employs the theme of the daughter replicating her mother’s fate. Beatrice’s death brings to light what was in essence a self-fulfilling prophecy: by trying to avoid this inherited illness of the heart, Beatrice withholds her love, which leads her husband to betray her, thus causing a fatal strain on her heart. What is interesting is the tacit and almost telepathic communication between mother and daughter. When Beatrice confronts her father about her mother’s death, she stresses that she alone is the bearer of this secret, “Nessuno sapeva che l’avesse, ella non ne disse niente a nessuno” (114). This intuitive discourse evokes a communication with one’s own conscience. Similar to the “internalization” Chodorow speaks of (97), the daughter has absorbed so much of the mother’s characteristics that she herself essentially becomes her mother. In this and other narratives that feature a daughter destined to replicate her mother’s fate, one should consider the prevailing science of the time, biological determinism or social Darwinism as interpreted by various nineteenth-century scientists, including Cesare Lombroso’s school of criminal anthropology.³ The idea that nature plays a significant

³ Serao demonstrates the influence of Lombroso’s concept of a physical type for criminals in the following description of the *camorista*, who is Giorgio’s accomplice in *Il delitto di via Chiatamone*: “Dice la scienza che i delinquenti, consumando una grande forza nervosa nel disegno e nel compimento delle loro male azioni, sono, dopo, presi da un esaurimento mortale e hanno bisogno immediato di molto mangiare e di molto dormire. Ed è per questo che, avendo esaurito il loro maligno acume e la loro energia malvagia nel mal fare, essi si fanno quasi sempre prendere in trappola dalla giustizia, nella forma più ingenua. Questa verità della scienza, dunque, distrugge qualunque idea del rimorso tormentatore” (60). For more information on the predominant scientific theories on heredity in the nineteenth century, see Stephen Jay Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man*.

role in determining a person's fate, eclipsing at times all consideration of environment, influenced Serao's thinking at least tangentially.

In the three later works although heredity and environment continue to play a role, they no longer are the primary sources of the daughter's potential destruction. Instead we see a more tangible and involved villain emerge. As this villain's direct role evolves from Serao's earlier novels, so does the influence of the deceased mother.

Il delitto di via Chiatamone was originally published under the pseudonym "Francesco Sangiorgio" until its 1916 release as *Temi il leone*. With this novel Serao experiments with the mystery genre, and her constructed web of intrigue and suspense provides her with a platform to explore the maternal bond with an innovative approach. At the onset of the novel, Teresa Gargiulo's mother is already dead, but has left her a portentous Saint Teresa medal upon which she has engraved the cautionary inscription, *temi il leone* — the lion referring to the coat of arms for a powerful and aristocratic Neapolitan family named Vargas. Tragically, Teresa will learn the story behind the warning, as well as both her mother's and her own connection to the Vargas family, too late.

Teresa's mother, an Englishwoman named Cecilia, was seduced, impregnated, and abandoned by Francesco Vargas who did not support or recognize his daughter Teresa until shortly before his death. A provision in his will stipulated that Teresa would inherit his fortune once she reached her twenty-first birthday. Shortly before that day, his nephew, Giorgio San Luciano, the second-in-line to the Vargas family fortune, seeks out Teresa and seduces her for one purpose: to secure the fortune from her. However, Teresa, not knowing anything about her father, is unaware that she is the heir to his six

million lire fortune. Furthermore, there is a far more sinister secret lurking behind Giorgio's heartless seduction: this is his second attempt to secure the fortune, the first having been an unsuccessful assassination attempt of Teresa by his underworld colleague. Teresa knows nothing of Giorgio's involvement in the shooting that she barely survived, nor does she know anything of Giorgio's family since he presents himself to her under an assumed identity. Giorgio, understanding the message of Teresa's medallion, seizes it from her, and keeps her relatively sequestered from the outside world in order to ensure that she remain ignorant of her true circumstances. Teresa believes herself to be an illegitimate child from a lower class: a fact Giorgio exploits to make her feel beholden to him, as evidenced in the following scene:

“E saresti capace di abbandonarmi?”

[. . .] “Se mi annoi, sì.”

“Per me non resterebbe che la morte!” disse ella, tetramente.

[. . .] “Se invece tu ti porti bene,” egli riprese, volendo rinfrancarla “io farò il mio dovere con te.”

“Il dovere? Il dovere?”

“È una gran cosa, credilo. Non t'illudere. Lo rammenti chi sei tu?”

“Lo rammento: una infelicissima figlia del popolo.”

“Ed io sono un duca di San Luciano, con tre o quattro altri titoli, sono Grande di Spagna: la distanza è enorme. Conosci tu il tuo nome?”

“Ahimè... non ne sono certa!”

[. . .] Or dunque, vedi che è bella fortuna per te essere stata l'amante del duca Giorgio di San Luciano [. . .].” (II. 37-38)

Teresa dismisses ominous dreams which warn her of Giorgio's evil intentions, as well as obvious clues such as the representation of the *leone* on Giorgio's coat of arms. Like her mother before her, Teresa succumbs to the diabolical charms of an elegant and charismatic member of the Vargas clan and becomes pregnant. However, Teresa's fate is inherently far more dangerous: unbeknownst to her, she has aligned herself to a man who

has already attempted to have her killed. The shooting and her ensuing illness had weakened her constitution; furthermore, she had been previously advised against pregnancy because she may very well die in childbirth. After the birth of her son, Teresa initially appears to see the *somiglianza* between her mother's tragic fate and the path she herself is following:

Il mio destino è simile al suo, [. . .] Ella è stata sedotta...e io come lei. [. . .] Ella ha avuto una figliuola ... e io un figlio [. . .] io sono una bastarda...e mio figlio che è? [. . .] Mia madre è stata abbandonata ... ed io... ed io? (II. 185)

Giorgio capitalizes on these fears as well, and is craftily able to assuage her fears and convince her of their imminent need to marry — an act Teresa views as salvation to her name and her son's future, when in fact it plays into Giorgio's treasure-hunting scheme.

“Tua madre è stata abbandonata, e io sono qui teco, [. . .] Tua madre non ha avuto nome, e tu fra giorni sarai una San Luciano... [. . .] Tu sei stata riconosciuta alla morte di tuo padre, e mio figlio, fra pochi giorni, avrà un padre e una madre legittimi. [. . .] Infine, tua madre ha languito nella miseria, e tu vivrai nell'abbondanza.” (II. 185)

However, on the very day of their wedding, as soon as the marriage certificate is signed, Giorgio abandons his promises of happiness and his ardent pretense of affections:

“Non resti con me, oggi?” ella esclamò, con voce di rimprovero.
“Perchè, oggi?” chiese lui, come se nulla fosse avvenuto in quella giornata, o come se egli avesse tutto dimenticato.
“Ma è il giorno delle nostre nozze!”
“Non siamo mica due sposini freschi,” disse ironicamente lui. [. . .] Debbo andar via, ho da fare. [. . .]
“Ritorna, almeno!”

“Non so se posso ritornare,” e il suo tono era glaciale. [. . .] “Addio!” fece lui, senza neppure baciarla. (II. 248)

Giorgio's departure is postponed, however, by a visit from Giuseppe Rossi, an attorney who has been searching for Teresa to protect her interests. When Rossi, who knows all about Giorgio's involvement in Teresa's shooting, discovers that she has married Giorgio, the attorney reveals to her the sinister duke's true identity and intentions, including a love letter Giorgio had written to his mistress with assurances of Teresa's imminent demise. Teresa now understands her mother's supernatural warnings, but they ultimately have no effect on Teresa, who is portrayed as the epitome of sacrifice and martyrdom, as well as of patriarchal abuse. After reading Giorgio's written confirmation of his intentions to dispose of her as soon as possible, Teresa despondently laments, “Non mi resta che morire per te” (265). Teresa's complete surrender of identity is reminiscent of Anna in *Addio Amore!* Similar to Anna and the other heroines abandoned in love that I considered in Chapter One, Teresa eventually dies in a manner that suggests that her emotional state exacerbated her weak and fragile physical condition.

Cecilia, Teresa's mother, is presented throughout the narrative as the only protective and guiding force in Teresa's life. Teresa hears a voice in her cautionary dreams that is very similar to her own, which suggests some sort of paranormal communication from her mother. The significance of the Saint Teresa medal is referred to throughout the novel as well. Beyond its engraved words of warning, *temi il leone*, the relic itself may have saved Teresa's life after the shooting. Clinging to consciousness in the hospital, Teresa's surgeons examine the blood-splattered medal that Teresa had been wearing over her heart. The doctor then comments on how the bullet punctured the lung,

and would only require a small incision (I. 67). The implication is that the bullet had ricocheted off the medal, thereby missing the fatal target of the heart. Serao reinforces the sacred, supernatural significance of the mother's influence through this tragic tale.

Teresa's eventual physical demise is reminiscent of Loreta's moral decline in *Mors tua*: both endings illustrate the catastrophic effects of ignoring a mother's warning.

In the next two novels to be examined the idea of the mother communicating from beyond the grave is developed, as well as the role of the father as villain. In the novel *Il paese di Cuccagna*, economic hardship dominates the lives of the characters because of the malignant and consumptive power of the lottery.⁴ Set in Serao's familiar milieu of Naples, this evil is epitomized in the character of the Marchese Carlo Cavalcanti, who exploits his daughter Bianca Maria Cavalcanti, a young woman with mystical powers, for winning lottery numbers.⁵ Bianca Maria receives these numbers in febrile visions which successively drain her of energy and health. As Bianca Maria's fever escalates and her health and life begin to wane, her father's savage indifference escalates. The Marchese deprives her of food, sleep and the man she loves and wishes to marry, Dr. Antonio Amati. Her father's only concern is that she reveal the winning numbers to him:

⁴ Serao recognized and condemned the destructive power of gambling on the poor and addressed this theme in many narratives and journalistic pieces. For more examples see *Il ventre di Napoli* and *San Gennaro nella leggenda e nella vita*.

⁵ Bianca Maria's story is very similar, at the core of its theme, to D. H. Lawrence's 1926 story, "The Rocking Horse Winner." In Lawrence's story the mother exploits her young son who conjures up the names of winning race horses by feverishly riding his toy rocking horse, an act that, like Bianca Maria's feverish lottery predictions, leads to his death. I have been unable to substantiate whether or not Serao's novel had any influence on Lawrence's short story. However, there is evidence that Lawrence, who wrote translations of several of Verga's works, as well as in introduction to the English translation of Deledda's *La madre*, was familiar with Serao's works. In his *Selected Critical Writings*, Lawrence likens the *femme fatale* in Verga's *Tigre reale* to Matilde Serao's heroines: "The enigmatical lady is, however, consumptive, and the end, in Sicily, is truly horrible, in the morbid and deathly tone of some of Matilde Serao's novels." (223).

“Mio padre, voi volete che io muoia,” [. . .]
 “Sei una sciocca.” [. . .]
 “Io morirò di ciò, mio padre.” [. . .]
 “Ascolta, Bianca.” Egli riprese, freddamente, frenando ancora il suo sdegno, “tu devi credermi. Io sono un uomo, sono sano, ho la mia ragione, ho la mia logica [. . .] il tuo obbligo di figlia ubbidiente, di figliuola amorosa della casa Cavalcanti, è di dirmi tutto, subito.” [. . .]
 Non pensava più a sua figlia, la cui febbre era arrivata al più alto grado [. . .].
 (140-45)

As the story progresses, the father’s cruelty and her relative sequestration propel Bianca Maria to seek divine consolation. In this text, like the others, however, the deceased mother figure supplants the divine, and the daughter prays to her instead of the traditional saints or Virgin Mother. Her mother’s death is portrayed as due in part to the father’s neglect, but it is her model of unwavering loyalty to the Marchese that Bianca Maria strives to emulate. Initially Bianca Maria demonstrates this allegiance to her father by relinquishing her fiancé as her father has mandated : ““Voi siete l’uomo più buono e più onesto che io abbia mai conosciuto, [. . .] ma mio padre rifiuta, io debbo ubbidire”” (193). However, as Bianca Maria’s poor health deteriorates into meningitis, and her prayers to her mother intensify, she finds the courage to reject her father and reclaim her true love. In the final scene, Bianca Maria tells her fiancé to banish her father from her sick room:

“Mio padre [. . .] ti prego, mandalo via. [. . .] Non voglio vederlo.”
 [. . .] “Bianca Maria, ma è tuo padre!”
 “È mio padre [. . .] ma mi ha uccisa.” (252-53)

Her final words beseech her mother’s supernatural intervention, ““Mamma, non voglio morire, non voglio, non voglio, mamma cara!”” (255). In the end Bianca Maria’s father

has a dramatic conversion as he prostrates himself before his dead daughter, begging for forgiveness in a manner Serao compares to the Shakespearian King *Lear innanzi al cadavere della dolce Cordelia* (256). Bianca Maria's ultimate rejection of her father, and his subsequent contrition signify a vindication for the mother whose blind obedience went unnoticed and unappreciated. Serao employs this final repentance of the father at the end of "Silvia" and *Cuore infermo* as well, further strengthening the bond and the idea of sacrifice between mother and daughter. Furthermore, it appears that the patriarchal system is being challenged by a new generation of daughters. This challenge is poignantly addressed through Bianca Maria's fiancé Dr. Amati, who encourages her to rebuke her father's orders: "Ma voi siete libera, non siete una schiava; le fanciulle hanno diritto di scelta" (193). However, in this and the aforementioned texts, the daughter, failing to heed the counsel or tragic example of her mother, is exploited by the patriarchal system, and loses her life.

Among Serao's narratives that explore the theme of the mother's life-saving guidance, only *La mano tagliata* has a happy ending for the daughter. In this dark mystery, the protagonist Rachele is spared precisely because she heeds her mother's counsel. It is important to note that this counsel defies the direct command of Rachele's living father, Mosè Cabib. Rachele's father has ordained that Rachele will marry the very successful, and much older Marcus Henner. Rachele is repulsed by this sinister figure who stalks her, watching her through her window at night. It escapes the father's perception that not only is Marcus Henner a sinister character, but he is the very man who abducted Sara (his wife, and Rachele's mother), and subjected her to the most barbarous

treatment by severing her hand, eventually killing her. Moreover, Mosè becomes an accomplice by attempting to facilitate the wedding of his daughter to this villain:

“Io l’amo e la odio.” egli [Henner] disse [. . .].
“Ma ella respinge la vostra offerta sempre. [. . .] Vi teme, ma vi sfida.”
“E tu, suo padre, non puoi fare nulla? Che uomo sei?”
“Ella ha minacciato di uccidersi, Maestro, se io tentavo di costringerla
[. . .] è capacissima di farlo. E mi è figlia, Maestro.”
“Tu l’ami! E la daresti a me?”
“La darei.” (38)

Marcus Henner proceeds to threaten to kill Rachele’s fiancé, a threat that should awaken paternal feelings of protection for his daughter, but instead only reinforces his commitment to foster this union. The father’s pathetic weakness is revealed in his warning to his daughter:

“Lo ucciderà, lo ucciderà! Egli ha tante armi che uccidono bene, tanti veleni che non lasciano traccia: il Maestro è il signore della morte. Ranieri Lambertini è un ostacolo, a lui, al suo amore, alla sua felicità ; Ranieri Lambertini morrà.” (54)

By portraying the father’s complicity early on in the narrative, Serao creates a hostile and cold environment in which the oppressive elements of the patriarchal society are magnified, and which the daughter is ill-equipped to navigate alone. The influence of the mother thereby becomes all the more imperative. Throughout her young life, Rachele is unaware of what actually happened to her mother. Her father is vague on the matter, telling her in one instance that she had simply disappeared, and later that she is buried in a small cemetery in Germany. Rachele is consumed by the mystery enshrouding her

mother's memory, emphasizing that "her mother should not have abandoned her as she did" (67). Desperate for answers, Rachele implores her mother in the form of a prayer:

Ora la pregava, come si prega una santa, a volerla soccorrere dal cielo o dalla terra, dove si trovava, a voler darle un consiglio, una guida, una luce ! [. . .] "Madre, madre mia, se tu vivi, vieni a me! Se sei morta, prega per me!" — implorava così, inginocchiata, Rachele Cabib. (67)

Once again, the daughter's life mirrors her mother's. Tragically Rachele is aggressively pursued by Henner because of her striking resemblance to her mother, his first object of desire. In the end, however, Rachele's prayers are answered as the mother takes on a more vigilant role in this text, appearing to her daughter in dreams, as well as leaving relics, such as a crucifix and letters.⁶ In the end, Rachele escapes Henner and is thus saved from certain death by heeding the words of her mother.

In these novels, the connection between the mother and daughter is firm, and remains so even after the mother's death. What is striking is the tacit message that seems to lie beneath such overt statements as "fear the lion": these mothers seem to be shielding their daughters from inevitable misery and disappointment, should they submit, body and soul, to the life and expectations generated by a patriarchal society. The female-female relationship, particularly that of the mother and daughter, is presented through Serao's textual depiction as the only true, dependable relationship worthy of a woman's faith and trust. Should a woman deny or find herself removed from this sisterhood, she is instantly and irretrievably delivered up to the oppressive and deceitful forces engendered and instituted by men.

⁶ One of the mother's primary objectives is to convert her daughter from Judaism to Christianity, as she herself did before her death. For more on Serao's treatment of Judaism and possible undertones of anti-Semitism in *La mano tagliata*, see Harrowitz.

My final consideration vis-à-vis the enduring power of the deceased mother comes from “O Giovannino o la morte,” a short story about love, corrupted familial roles and betrayal. The heroine of this story is a young woman, Chiarina, effectively orphaned, who is constrained to live with and rely on her stepmother for support. In an interesting twist, Serao reinforces her resurgent leitmotif of the preeminence of motherhood via the amoral and nefarious character of the stepmother. In “O Giovannino o la morte,” Chiarina’s deceased mother does not cross over paranormal boundaries, but her photo provides her with the strength and dignity to resist her stepmother’s intimidation. Chiarina courageously defies her tyrannical stepmother, and resolutely pursues her quest to marry Giovannino, until a licentious betrayal by her fiancé and her stepmother leads to Chiarina's suicide.

In order to better understand the role of motherhood and woman in this context it is essential to closely examine the intended role, which the author creates, of the stepmother, Donna Gabriella, in “O Giovannino o la morte.” Donna Gabriella lavishly and decadently provides for herself and Chiarina at the expense of others’ misfortunes, through her crooked usury business. Although a provider and an authority figure for Chiarina, Chiarina does not recognize her as her mother. Chiarina openly and brazenly defies her stepmother, particularly when Donna Gabriella raises the subject of Giovannino, Chiarina’s betrothed. The stepmother has forbidden their relationship in order to maintain the utmost control over Chiarina. Donna Gabriella’s prohibition elicits Chiarina’s repeated refrain, “O Giovannino o la morte,” and necessitates that the couple meet secretly outside the house, next to an open well.

In the opening scene, as Chiarina gets ready for church, she is urged by her stepmother to exchange her humble clothes for some extravagant garments the stepmother has obtained through one of her clients. She is worried about her image in the community and she does not want others to think she is neglecting her stepdaughter. Chiarina refuses and their discussion escalates to a confrontation with an exchange of insults and threats. The final affront for Chiarina is her stepmother's denunciation of the memory of Chiarina's deceased mother.

“Sentite, donna Gabriella” — disse a bassa voce — “che voi vogliate insultare me, sta bene, debbo sopportare [. . .] ma che vogliate insultare l'anima santa di mia madre, di cui non eravate degna neppure di baciare la terra dove metteva i piedi, questo [. . .] non lo sopporto. [. . .] Ma era una signora, capite? [. . .] quando usciva tutti le dicevano, *tu possa essere benedetta!* tanto era buona, capite?” (286)

This scene reinforces the same theme found in the three previous texts I considered: the immutable influence of the mother even after the mother's death. The scene eventually ends in violence, as the stepmother slaps both of young Chiarina's cheeks, with her cumbersome gold bracelets slapping down on Chiarina's neck (287).

Laura Salsini and Jaqueline Reich have both interpreted the stepmother Donna Gabriella as a surrogate mother, and from this interpretation they conclude that Serao's representation of maternity is inherently negative. I maintain, however, that Serao's literary production, and stylistic devices employed in “O Giovannino,” not only refute the idea of the sinister mother, but rather they serve to reinforce Serao's pervasive adulation of the mother.

Despite Chiarina's intense loyalty to her mother, Donna Gabriella continuously attempts to assert herself as the mother, as evidenced in her verbal commands, such as "Chiamami mamma." It is this device of verbal commands and the selection of maternity-related vocabulary that supports my assertion of Serao's unwavering loyalty to the mother figure. Unlike Salsini and Reich, I do not believe Donna Gabriella's character as *matrigna* is synonymous with *madre* or *mamma*.

The word *mamma* is used nine times in this *novella*. It is used primarily by Donna Gabriella in her assertion that she be called *mamma* by Chiarina: "chiamami mamma," "io ti sono mamma," etc. Giovannino also uses the term, alluding to his complicity with her, for he refers to Donna Gabriella as "la bella mamma nostra" and "la nostra buona mamma." *Madre* appears thirteen times, and is used, with one exception, to either refuse Donna Gabriella as her real mother, "voi non mi siete madre," or to refer to Chiarina's real mother.

Chiarina uses *mamma* and *madre* only once to refer to her stepmother: the first is as a result of sheer elation, when Donna Gabriella approves the engagement: the second is a result of sheer terror, when Chiarina learns of Giovannino joining Chiarina's stepmother in her usury business.

It is important to note however, that *matrigna* is used forty-three times. Rather than referring to her by name, or as Chiarina's mother, Serao chooses to call her *la matrigna*, making a clear distinction between the two personages and employing a term fraught with negative images in Italian.

The final consideration one should take into account is the ultimate, vile betrayal, of Chiarina, not only by her fiancé, but also by her stepmother. It is important to note that

none of Matilde Serao's other accounts of mothers and daughters relate or even insinuate anything less than undying love and devotion of the former for the latter. This precedent of mother-daughter devotion makes Chiarina's suicide, subsequent to discovering her stepmother and Giovannino in a romantic embrace, rather significant. However, subtle differences affect at least the character of the female protagonist, and possibly make a more forceful statement about the subjectivity or lack thereof in Serao's women.

Chiarina may not seem to be particularly resourceful to the modern reader; however, given the rigid constraints of her milieu and time, she pushes and manipulates her boundaries to the best of her abilities, in search of freedom, a word that occurs several times in the text. In a time when a single woman of modest means could not venture off on her own, Chiarina saw the possibility of freedom in her planned marriage to Giovannino: "Il giorno di matrimonio rappresenta per lei la liberazione, tutto l'oblio naturale del doloroso passato...ella sarebbe libera libera accanto a lui [. . .]" (159).

Chiarina sees Giovannino as a means to an end: a way out of a stifling, degrading, and abusive life with her stepmother. When Donna Gabriella gives her consent to the marriage but adds the caveat that the young couple must live with her, Chiarina urges Giovannino to chart a financial course for them independently of Donna Gabriella. In this plan, Giovannino, like many of Serao's depictions of family dynamics, is shiftless and weak. However, Chiarina stays true to her word, and when she discovers Giovannino in the arms of her stepmother, she voluntarily plunges to her death, in a bold move to secure her pride and freedom at any cost.⁷

⁷ Laura Salsini supports this view of Chiarina's intentional act, likening Chiarina's suicide to Edna Pointellier's in *The Awakening*: her suicide is viewed as a "constructive act" to "control her destiny" (95).

In essence, the character of *la matrigna*, represented by Donna Gabriella, who exploits the poor, savagely mistreats her stepdaughter, and ultimately betrays her stepdaughter by starting an affair with Giovannino, is a foil for the pure font of unconditional love provided by the true mother figure. Donna Gabriella's evil nature is a perversion of Chiarina's true mother, which consequently embodies purity and love.

Thus far, I have considered narratives in which Serao effectively emphasizes the mother-daughter nexus through examples of physical loss, either through death, or separation. However, in her early short story, "Terno secco," Serao creates a powerful testament to this profound bond through the tender relationship of Caterina and her mother.

"Terno secco" has been heralded by many critics as one of Serao's most finely crafted Neapolitan tales. In "Terno secco," the poignant portrayal of the mother-daughter relationship, according to Harrowitz, "prefigure[s] twentieth-century psychoanalysis" in that it "identifies the mother-daughter relationship as potentially the most intense in a woman's life" (45). Serao explores the nature of the roles of both mother and daughter in a text that is, at least in part, autobiographical. Serao's autobiographical motivations are apparent in this early narrative which portrays an absent paterfamilias, contrasted with the strong, capable mother figure at the helm of the family. Years later, in an interview with Ida Baccini, the director of the popular girl's magazine *Cordelia*, Serao would attribute all of her positive qualities and accomplishments to her mother in a simple, yet profound and heartfelt statement: *Da lei, tutto* (qtd. in Gisolfi 8).

"Terno secco" is a short story which relates the blissful and grievous effects three winning lottery numbers, hence a *terno*, have on the residents of a Neapolitan

neighborhood, particularly their effect on a teenage girl and her mother. In “Terno secco” the household of fourteen-year old Caterina parallels Serao’s own life, in which her father was a weak and ephemeral figure, and portrays her mother, frail but resourceful, with an infinitely angelic nature. Their daytime servant Tommasina also figures prominently, as does an entire community of struggling, working-class characters. We learn that the mother, though very sickly and plagued by a chronic cough, is the sole provider, laboring tirelessly six full days a week as a private language teacher to support her fourteen-year old daughter. In one of the opening scenes, Tommasina enters the humble apartment on a routine morning, and goes to wake mother and daughter, who are sleeping in the same room and share the same iron bed. This scene alone is emblematic of the rest of the *novella*, as well as Serao’s recurring theme: that of a community of women, supporting each other on many different levels:

“Caterina, Caterina” — fece la signora rivolgendosi alla persona che dormiva accanto a lei. Ma questa neppure si mosse [. . .] la madre, la chiamò ancora una volta, ma pian piano, come se le mancasse il coraggio di svegliarla.

“Povera figlia” — disse poi [. . .].

Tommasina, appoggiata alla spalliera del letto, familiarmente, guardava Caterina [. . .] — “Perchè dite; povera figlia? Sta benissimo, Dio la benedica.” —

“Vorrei che dormisse sino a tardi, che non fosse costretta ad andare a scuola.” — fece la madre, mentre quietamente, modestamente, cominciava a vestirsi.

“Va alla scuola e impara la *virtù*” — disse sentenziosamente Tommasina — “se io sapessi leggere, non farei la serva.” (119-20)

The household is completely absent of any male influence, thus accentuating the dire economic hardships these women must endure alone. Meanwhile, the servant

Tommasina, who is pregnant and is described as pale and sickly, toils daily to the point of exhaustion with little more than bread and re-boiled coffee in her stomach, while her husband does very little to relieve her of these physically taxing duties. The hardships they endure are a reflection of the times. Caterina and her mother, nevertheless, are sustained by their powerful bond, with the following type of exchange occurring frequently throughout the text:

“O mamma, tu mi porti.”
“Ma tu mi sostieni, piccola. ” (124)

In the end, the lottery numbers which were chosen by Caterina’s mother, intercepted and circulated throughout the neighborhood by Tommasina, win, but there is no celebration for Caterina and her mother as her mother confesses to her that she spent the lottery-allocated *lire* on school supplies for Caterina:

“Madre, madre” — disse la fanciulla [. . .].
“Che è piccola?”
“Hai proprio dimenticato, proprio dimenticato di giocare quel biglietto?”
“...dimenticato” — rispose fiocamente.
“Mamma, [. . .].hai dimenticato o non avevi il denaro [. . .]?”
“...non avevo denaro.”
“Come, non avevi denaro? Non ti ho chiesto una lira per i miei cartoncini di disegno e me l’hai data? [. . .]. Non avevi che quella, mamma, e me l’hai data? ”
Nulla disse la mamma, non proferì parola, non fece atto. Ma come uno straccio le cadde ai piedi, la figliuola, con le braccia aperte, battendo la testa sulle ginocchia materne, gridando:
“Perdono, mamma, perdono, mamma! ”
E fiocamente la madre diceva:
“Piccola, piccola figlia.” (164)

"Terno secco" substantiates the power of the mother-daughter bond, which is only strengthened through financial hardship. This is Serao's most idealistic portrayal of the relationship between mother and daughter. With each subsequent novel or short story in which she explored this dynamic, a more sophisticated, complex and hence more realistic narrative emerged.

In the foreword of *Dal vero*, a revised edition of previously published short stories including "Silvia," Serao reflects on how maturity and the gift of retrospection transform a writer, changing her/his attitudes and perceptions in a more worldly and less idealistic manner.⁸ Serao's early works convey the emotional and psychological state of the daughter, perceiving the mother and all motherhood through an idealized perspective. In narratives such as "Terno secco" and "Silvia," the love between mother and child is simple: free from challenges or strife. There is no question regarding authority, and the love and reverence between mother and daughter reflects a devout and steadfast faith. These early narratives were written in the wake of Serao's own mother's death, and before Serao became a mother. Certainly the youthful and idealistic patina began to fade by the time she wrote "O Giovannino o la morte." At this point in her life she had become a mother to four children, and her marriage was already in peril because of the pathological philanderings of her husband, Edoardo Scarfoglio. By the time Serao wrote her last novel, *Mors tua*, she had also become a mother to her husband's illegitimate daughter and then to her own daughter with her new partner, Giuseppe Natale.

With age comes a more mature perspective borne out of experience, and it is understandable why Serao's later works lost the youthful gloss that had typified her early

⁸ "Quattro anni di vita artistica militante, senza posa, bastano a trasformare lo scrittore: e lo scrittore trasformato, avrebbe voluto cambiare tutto, imprimere in queste novelle e in questi bozzetti il senso del presente. Sarebbe stato un nuovo libro: ma più vecchio. Invece questo è un libro antico e giovane" (8).

narratives. What emerges in these grittier, more complex narratives, however, is the maturation of the seed planted in “Terno secco.” The indissoluble bond between mother and daughter is not weakened in these later narratives, rather, it is more profoundly understood.

Chodorow maintains that “children seek to escape from their mother as well as return to her” (195). This consideration, as developed in Serao’s narratives, rings even more true for mothers and daughters. A recurring theme in many of Serao’s narratives is the daughter’s attempt to escape from her mother by avoiding the latter’s chosen course, only to find herself following that same path. One of Serao’s contemporaries, Annie Vivanti in her novel *I divoratori*, posits the idea that mothers not only sacrifice energy and financial resources for their daughters, but that their identity or their very life is subsumed by their daughters. It would then seem to follow that a similar risk would exist for the daughter, who would lose her identity and acquire that of her mother.

The same idea of fusion or boundary confusion has been explored in many of Luce Irigaray’s works, such as *Thinking the Difference*. Irigaray, however, challenges the previously held tenets of Freudian psychoanalysis with regard to fusion: “Psychoanalysis teaches us that it is essential to substitute the father for the mother to allow a distance to grow between daughter and mother. Nothing could be further from the truth” (110). Irigaray further explains, using the Demeter-Persephone myth as a point of reference, that patriarchal societies are ultimately responsible for the weakening of the mother-daughter relationship. However, the preservation of this relationship is “essential to a real culture” (20). This concept of the close and everlasting bond between mother and daughter as something nurturing is most poignantly illustrated in the example of

Carolina Leoni and her daughter in *Mors tua*. The dissolution of the bond and the resulting physical separation of the two brought about disaster for both mother and daughter.

Serao wrote in a time when fathers were culturally and legally authorized to control their daughters (as well as wives), and women on the whole enjoyed few rights and liberties. The one constant source of renewable support and affirmation was the cycle and power of maternity. Daughters derived strength from their mothers, and then, becoming mothers themselves, provided strength for their daughters. Rather than focusing simply on an assimilation of identity between mothers and daughters, Serao's narrative underscores the necessity of identification of one with the other as a means of survival.

Chapter Four

Chorality and Collective Memory

In the previous three chapters, we have seen how Serao's heroines navigate their way through relationships with men and other women. Women who draw support from their mother or female friends have a distinct advantage over those women who are isolated. Serao explored female friendship in her sentimental novels and novella such as *Fantasia* and "La virtù di Checchina." However, it was in her more socially conscious narratives, in particular her choral studies, that Serao's consideration of the solidarity among women reached its fullest expression.

In her preface to *Il romanzo della fanciulla*, Serao defines choral narratives as those without protagonists, or rather, in which everyone is the protagonist.¹ This narrative style, according to Serao, evokes the ancient Greek tragedies and comedies:

Mi pare infatti di aver sentito dire che nelle tragedie antiche il protagonista vero era il coro, e di aver letto che nelle commedie di Aristofane il protagonista è il popolo. [. . .] Ho fatto delle novelle corali, ove il movimento viene tutto dalla massa, ove l'anima è nella moltitudine [. . .]. (5-6)

¹ "[. . .] vi do delle novelle senza protagonisti, o meglio, dove tutti sono protagonisti" (5).

Serao's programmatic statement has been criticized for using this reference to the Greek chorus erroneously, since it is not the focal point of the drama.² However, according to the *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, the chorus in Greek tragedies echoes the sentiments or beliefs of the audience, while the chorus in Greek comedies expresses the voices of a select few who are representative of certain types.³ The characteristic elements of both of these classical genres can be found in Serao's choral studies.

The French novelist Paul Bourget, a friend and admirer of Serao, compared her to Zola and Maupassant, referring to the French masters as "ces admirables peintres de foules" and thereby praising Serao's talents in the process (qtd. in Gistucci 206). Examples of Serao's depictions of crowds can be found in such riveting social commentaries such as *Il ventre di Napoli*; *Il paese di cuccagna*, "Trenta per cento", *La conquista di Roma* and *Lettere di una viaggiatrice*. In these narratives, Serao explores both the ills and the attributes of urban life in late-nineteenth century Naples and Rome, as well as early twentieth century Paris.⁴ To Bourget's aforementioned assessment of Serao, Gistucci adds the essential caveat, "elle excellait à peindre le groupe, qui n'est pas encore proprement parle la foule, mais une petite communauté, une entité sociale" (206).

²Mazzoni, Guido, "Il romanzo della fanciulla," *Domenica del Fracassa*, 1885; quoted in Gistucci 218.

³For Greek comedy, see pages 370-71; for tragedy, 1538-42.

⁴For examples of crowd depictions, please see the following: *Il paese di cuccagna* (110), "Trenta per cento" (214; 229-30); *La conquista di Roma* (61-62), *Lettere di una viaggiatrice* (282; 304). The very thesis and subject of *Il ventre di Napoli* is the city as a whole, and terms such as *il popolo napoletano* are prevalent throughout the text. Women are presented en masse in *Il ventre di Napoli*, either as part of a non-descript crowd, or singularly as emblematic of the entire population.

It is this social entity, this community of women that links the six *novelle corali* that comprise *Il romanzo di fanciulla*.⁵

In these short stories, Serao presents a representative sampling of young women from different socioeconomic backgrounds and with different perspectives and ambitions who function together as the story's protagonists, even if they do not always speak in unison, as the classical chorus would. The characters themselves, according to Serao who addresses them in her preface to the work, are simply products of her memory:

[. . .] la mia psicologia è fatta di memoria. E in me, nell'anima, tutte avete lasciato un solco, una impronta, un fantasma, o voi, creature femminili che viveste meco, un'ora, un giorno, un anno. Voi vivete in me, come eravate un tempo, nei corridoi e nelle aule della Scuola normale, negli uffici del Telegrafo. [. . .] Ogni volta che io tento di costruire lo schema ideale e generale della fanciulla, per farne l'eroina di un romanzo, tutte quante le vostre voci, o amiche, felici o infelici, lontane, lontane tutte, mi risuonano nella testa, in coro. (4-5)

Guido Mazzoni, one of the earliest critics to write about Serao, questioned the authenticity of her memory-based characters. Mazzoni rejected Serao's claim that the young protagonists were individual living acquaintances from her girlhood, and instead asserted that they are in fact personifications of various social conditions (Gistucci 220). Mazzoni's contention would cast doubt on Serao's presentation of *Il romanzo della fanciulla* as a mere transcription of her memory. It is true that the schoolgirls, young telegraph workers, brides to be, and monastic novitiates share the narrative spotlight with other silent protagonists such as hunger, poverty, illness, and oppression. However, rather than precluding the existence of genuine characters, the predominance of social

⁵There are actually seven short stories in this text, however the last, "Il virtù di Checchina," was originally published separately (1883) from the other stories that were planned from their inception as forming an organic whole (Bruni, "Nota al testo", XLII).

themes reinforces the veracity of these characters. Although her narratives span almost a half a century and represent a wide range of genres, many critics agree that her *romanzi* and *novelle sociali* set in Naples are the most powerful and masterfully written. The nexus between social context and memory is a key feature of Serao's writing.

This is best understood in the context of Halbwachs's theory of collective memory. Collective or social memory asserts that although it is individuals in a group or society that are responsible for memories, these memories are not suspended in a vacuum. They are shaped by the present, and more specifically, as Lewis Coser explains, "are affected by mental images we employ to solve present problems."⁶ As Halbwachs himself stated,

But I believe that the mind reconstructs its memories under the pressure of society. [. . .] Society from time to time obligates people not just to reproduce in thought previous events of their lives, but also to touch them up, to shorten them, or to complete them so that, however convinced we are that our memories are exact, we give them a prestige that reality did not possess. (51)

Halbwachs emphasized the importance of collective memory to the identity of social classes. Serao's narratives that center around the lower middle class in Naples highlight the extreme hardships of the age and consequently reveal the plight of women struggling for survival. The fulcrum of all of these narratives is collective or social memory.

The first story of Serao's professed collection of memories is "Telegrafi dello stato," an assemblage of young women working long hours for meager pay in late nineteenth-century Naples. The story begins on All Souls' Day and follows the young women through their shared experiences, concluding about a year and two weeks later the

⁶Introduction to *Maurice Halbwachs On Collective Memory* (34).

following mid-November. The opening scene is a grim anticipation of the *novella*'s tragic end. Maria Vitale, a young telegraph worker of modest means, leaves her family's overcrowded apartment an hour too early, a consequence of her poor family's lack of a clock or watch. The very real threat of fines for tardiness has made Maria over-eager and she longingly thinks of her *lettuccio* as she takes refuge from the bitter cold on a hard wooden pew of a drafty church. Overcome by the need to sleep she nods off, after praying for the soul of her recently deceased grandmother. She is soon awoken and joined by a few of her peers who accompany her to the office, among whom is Caterina Borrelli, acknowledged by critics to be Serao's fictional rendering of her younger self.⁷

Although each of the young workers is suffering her own particular crisis of love, or of fatigue, they are all equally afflicted by the harsh cold and their meager economic situation which necessitates their endurance of less than ideal working conditions. Through the journey to the telegraph office and the subsequent arrival in its austere antechamber, the girls are presented as a unified group:

Parlavano ancora del freddo, innanzi alla porta bianca su cui era scritto: *Sezione femminile*. [. . .]
“È ancora venuta la direttrice?” chiesero, quasi in coro, le tre ausiliarie, entrando. [. . .] Respirarono. Era sempre meglio giunger prima della direttrice, per dimostrar zelo e amore all'ufficio. Come entravano in quell'anticamera tetra, la burocrazia avvinghiava l'anima di tutte quelle ragazze, il frasario di ufficio, sgrammaticato e convenzionale, fioriva sulle loro labbra. Quelle già arrivate, chi seduta, chi presso la finestra per avere un po' di luce, parlavano già di linee, di guasti, d'ingombri sui circuiti diretti. Lo stanzone era cupo ed esse sbassavan la voce, per istinto. [. . .] A un tratto, sulle voci irose, lamentose e strasciate nella noia, sugli sfoghi dei rancori amorosi e di invidie di ufficio [sic], un [sic] zittio

⁷Caterina Borrelli is described as constantly adjusting her glasses on her “naso rincagnato,” writing a novel continuously in her notebook in the corner. Her name is believed to be a variation on her mother's last name (Bonelli). Gistucci is one among those critics to identify this character, who is repeated in several different *novelle* over the years, as Matilde Serao. In her “Index des personnages,” Gistucci lists “Caterina Borrelli” as “le prête-nom de Matilde Serao quand elle se décrit toute jeune” (628).

passò: entrava la direttrice. Subito, in coro, a voci digradanti, più basse, più alte, acute, lente, frettolose o in ritardo, queste parole si udirono: “Buon giorno direttrice.”

[. . .] Poi, uno squillo del timbro e la voce liquida della direttrice: “Signorine, in ufficio.” In silenzio, esse sfilarono avanti alla sua scrivania e si diressero alle macchine. Nella piena luce del salone, rischiarato da tre finestre, si vedevano le facce assonnate di quelle che avevano troppo poco dormito, le faccie smorte di quelle colpite dal freddo, le faccie scialbe di quelle malaticcie: e da tutte si diffondeva un senso di pacata rassegnazione, di noia indifferente, di apatia quasi serena. Cominciavano la loro giornata di lavoro, senza ridere, tutte occupate meccanicamente in quei primi apparecchi: curve sulle macchine, chi svitava il coltellino d'acciaio che imprime i segni, chi metteva un rotolo nuovo di carta, chi bagnava d'inchiostro, con un pennello, il cuscinettino girante, chi provava la elasticità del tasto. (13-17)

The cohesiveness of the group is only disrupted slightly when the director hands each of the girls a slip of paper containing their fate for the next seven hours: each is assigned to work a different telegraph line, and Serao stresses that some lines are more desirable than others, “[. . .] ci erano linee buone e linee cattive, linee senza lavoro e linee con molto lavoro, linee dove ci vuole una pazienza infinita” (14). However, even though each of the girls is entrusted with a different line, they are again united in the drudgery and tedium of the job:

Poi, nella quiete mattinale, principiò il ticchietto dei tasti sulle incudinetto, e ogni tanto, queste frasi suonavano monotonamente:

“Direttrice, Caserta non risponde.”

“Direttrice, si va bene con Aquila.”

“Direttrice, al solito, Genova chiede un rinforzo di pila.”

“Direttrice, Benevento vuol saper l'ora precisa.”

“Direttrice, Otranto ha un dispiaccio di quattrocento parole, in inglese.”

“Direttrice, Salerno dice che vi è guasto sulla linea di Potenza.”

Il sole d'inverno, ora, entrava in ufficio. Nessuno levava la testa, a guardarne, sui vetri, la striscia sottile. (17)

The drudgery and oppressive atmosphere is most clearly visible on Christmas day, when the girls constrained to work until nightfall collectively lament about their families' and friends' holiday festivities. Maria Vitale, laboring to breathe from the chill she caught on all Souls' Day, surmises with her peers how her family will have spent Christmas:

“Tutta la mia famiglia mia avrà pranzato insieme, verso le tre, poi sono andati al teatro di giorno, al Fondo: si fa *La figlia di madama Angoti*. Beati loro che si divertono! Alle nove saranno già a casa e andranno a dormire, essi che hanno avuto la consolazione di godersi il Natale.” (26)

The only hope the girls have to salvage this day rests in the hands of their superior, the *direttore*, who holds the impermeable authority to allow them to leave early if communications are slow or at a standstill. However, despite the lull in telegraphic activity and the intercession of the *direttrice* who is their more immediate supervisor, the *direttore* is unrelenting and the young women file out at nine p.m., disheartened and overcome with fatigue:

Esse uscivano di là, salutandosi fiocamente, senza baciarsi, come istupidite, con la faccia rilasciata nella fatica: fuori le madri, i padri, i fratelli le aspettavano per ricondurle a casa. [. . .] Maria Vitale se ne andava, col padre, tutta incappucciata nella mantiglia che le aveva prestata Clemenza Achard: Maria Vitale piegava la testa sotto il peso plumbeo del raffreddore e respirava profondamente, per vincere l'oppressione del petto. Le ausiliarie si allontanavano per le vie della Posta, di Monteoliveto, di strada Nuova Monteoliveto, di Trinità Maggiore, strette nei paltoncini, ombre dileguantisi nell'ombra, un po' curve, come se una improvvisa vecchiezza le avesse colpite. (34-35)

The hardships and injustices of the job, which seem to be aging the girls prematurely, only intensify as the story continues to build momentum. Throughout it all, however, the

stale and austere atmosphere of the State Telegraph Office is lightened by the camaraderie of the female co-workers, who share stories and secrets of their own, as well as the more salacious telegraphs intercepted from third-party correspondents.

The next significant event in the narrative is the anticipated springtime elections which are expected to bring a chaotic flurry of telegraph communication, and subsequently an increased demand for more hours of service from the telegraph operators. Typical of the director's despotic authority, the young operators receive his edict soliciting volunteers to work up to seven extra hours in order to tackle this crisis. The director does not entice the women with offers of extra compensation or reduced schedules in the future, but instead smugly stresses the *zelo* of the operators, who might be willing to put forth the extra effort as a *prova di amore al lavoro* (36). The initial reaction of the women is one of complete indignation as they collectively mull over the extent of their oppression and exploitation at the hands of the administration, as well as the chauvinistic governmental legislation:

No, non volevano prestar servizio straordinario. Era una oppressione, un martirio anche quell'ordinario: farne dell'altro? Niente affatto. Perché, per chi? Le trattavano come tante bestie da soma con quei tre miserabili franchi al giorno, scemati dalle tasse, dalle multe, dai giorni di malattia: e invece, esse avevano quasi tutte il diploma di grado superiore e al telegrafo prestavano servizio come uomini, come impiegati di seconda classe, che avevano duecento lire il mese. Farsi un merito? Ma che, ma che! Chi le avrebbe considerate? Non erano nominate nè con decreto regio, nè con decreto ministeriale; un semplice decreto del direttore generale, revocabile da un momento all'altro. Se le telegrafiste facevano cattiva prova, le potevan rimandare a casa, tutte, senza che avessero diritto di lagnarsi. L'avvenire? Quale avvenire? Erano *fuori pianta*, non avevano da aspettar pensione: anzi, diceva il regolamento, che a quarant'anni il Governo le licenziava, senz'altro: - cioè se avevano la disgrazia di restar telegrafiste sino a quarant'anni, il Governo le metteva sulla strada, vecchie, istupidite, senza sapere fare altro, consumate nella salute e senza un soldo. (36)

However, despite their justified indignation, when the deadline arrives for their voluntary offers of extra hours, each of the girls sign up for extra service, including Maria Vitale, battling her third round of bronchitis, who pledges extra hours from her sickbed upon her eventual return to work.

The tremendous sacrifice that the young women ultimately make indicates that they are held to higher and more stringent standards than their male counterparts. This pool of educated, intelligent women toil at a lower wage under the threat of fines, spontaneous termination, and mandatory retirement. Furthermore, they face dismissal if they get married. However, above and beyond these draconian rules, the female telegraph operators are expected to do their jobs with a palpable enthusiasm that consistently demonstrates a “love” of their job.⁸ The willingness of the young women to comply with these directives emphasizes their strength of character and overall fortitude which is reinforced through their mutual cooperation. This is best exemplified in the penultimate event of the narrative, when the operators are besieged with the resultant election-related telegraphic communication. Having worked ceaselessly for an entire Sunday without even a break for breakfast or lunch, the young women can barely keep up with the traffic, and must rely on each other:

[. . .] le ausiliarie erano tutte svelte, tutte intelligenti, quel giorno: quell’ambiente, quell’eccitamento avevano sviluppato in loro qualità nuovissime. Si soccorrevano, con amore, scambievolmente, d’inchiostro, di penne, di carta, le più disadatte alla corrispondenza, registravano, mettevano l’ora ai dispacci, contavano le parole, mettevano i rotoli di carta, raccoglievano i telegrammi trasmessi. Non

⁸The following examples, already alluded to, are as follows:

“Era sempre meglio giunger prima della direttrice, per dimostrar zelo e amor all’ufficio” (13).

“[. . .]tutte quelle che volessero dare questa prova di amore al lavoro, si firmassero sotto quella carta” (36).

vi erano più distinzioni di *turno*, di antipatie, di valori: si assistevano fraternamente, arse dal desiderio di far bene. (41)

The frenetic pace which Serao introduces with the advent of the elections only accelerates as the *novella* draws to a close. With an almost musical style, Serao orchestrates a dramatic crescendo against the backdrop of a severe November thunderstorm which begins with minor threats of electric shocks through the girls' machines, and culminates in an urgent announcement that the lines are down:

Tutte le machine scricchiarono, a tutti i reofori, a tutti i bottoncini, vi fu un fioco scintillio: negli isolatori parve un fiammeggiamento. Il *capoturno* si presentò alla porta della sezione maschile e gridò:
"Temporale: vi è pericolo: linee alla terra!" [. . .]
Subito dopo una quiete si allargò nell'ufficio. Napoli era isolata: i tasti, le macchine, gli isolatori, parevano colti da una improvvisa morte: la corrente era morta. (48)

The panic of moments earlier is instantaneously quelled by the event of the downed lines. However, the true source of the solemnity enveloping the office is revealed with the return of the *direttrice*. Dressed in black, with red, swollen eyes, she has just returned from the cemetery. In the narrative's final show of solidarity, the girls gather around their benevolent mentor, collectively mourning the death of their friend Maria Vitale.

Serao imbues the character of Maria Vitale with no more attention nor detail than the other characters profiled in the narrative, thus I would maintain that the group of girls do function together as a single, unified protagonist. However the death of Maria Vitale's character is significant within the context of the narrative as social criticism. Maria Vitale's martyr-like sacrifice exemplifies the sacrifice routinely made by all of the

girls to help support their families, and underscores the severe adversity that defines their lives.

Matilde Serao wrote “Telegrafi dello stato” less than ten years after her own experience as a state telegraph operator, and thus it would seem reasonable that her account would be an accurate transcription of her memory of the *telegrafiste*’s poor working conditions as well as their solidarity. However, the significance of the social context in which these memories are formed cannot be overlooked. In his study of memory as a cultural and collective faculty, Paul Connerton makes the distinction between “historical reconstruction” and “social memory” (13). In his exposition of these practices, Connerton defines the former as based on documented evidence that is critically evaluated and proscribed by authoritative historians. Statements or memories of “informants” are not taken at face value, but are continually questioned in a more scientific approach. However, this practice of historical reconstruction is neither entirely infallible nor even empirical. To illustrate this point, Connerton tenders the extreme but real example of oppressed or minority groups who fall victim to totalitarian regimes. These despotic governments have the potential to fraudulently change the recording of history through methods Connerton refers to as “organized oblivion,” “forced forgetting” and “collective amnesia” (14-15). The end result of this strategy is the “mental enslavement” of the subjects, and the silencing of specific social groups. He describes it thus:

Contemporary writers are proscribed, historians are dismissed from their posts, and the people who have been silenced and removed from their jobs become invisible and forgotten. What is horrifying in totalitarian regimes is not only the violation of human dignity but the fear that there might remain nobody who could

ever again properly bear witness to the past. [. . .] there were people who [. . .] made it their aim from the beginning not only to save themselves but to survive as witnesses to later generations, to become relentless recorders: the names of Solzhenitsyn and Wiesel must stand for many. (15)

Hanna Arendt addressed this concept in the context of both the Nazi and Soviet Communist totalitarian regimes, identifying the sinister goal of these regimes as seeking to “safeguard the fictitious world through consistent lying” (qtd. in Kristeva 137). Paradoxically, in times of political crisis, the true accounts of oppressed peoples or minorities can be preserved in fictional narratives. In his *Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, Czech dissident Milan Kundera challenged the permanence of the Soviet Communist regime’s attempts to “airbrush” history, citing the example of fallen Party member Clementis, whose image was later removed from a State photograph after his execution. As they had on previous historical occasions, the Czechs were again confronted with the task of remembering: their identity, their culture, and their history in the face of governmentally imposed edicts of forced forgetting. “The struggle of man against power,” Kundera concludes, “is the struggle of memory against forgetting” (3). With his narrative of social memory, Kundera is able to restore a piece of history that could have otherwise been erased. Thus through the writing of their “oppositional histories,” to use Connerton’s term, courageous dissidents like Kundera, Solzhenitsyn and Wiesel, preserve the collective voice and experiences of marginalized groups whose traces might have otherwise been eradicated.

Serao’s recollections of the female telegraph operators can be viewed in a similar context. During her time, histories were sanctioned by, for, and about men, and prominent male authors such as Zola, Verga, Capuana and Pirandello wrote about the

sufferings of men. Serao's transcription of the bleak living and working conditions of women can be read as an oppositional history, preserving an unappreciated and otherwise forgotten sub-section of late-nineteenth-century Naples. Perhaps even more significant, what emerges from Serao's account is a representation of a cooperative network of women, whose economic and emotional survival is bolstered through their solidarity and friendship.

This theme is also delineated in the narrative, "Scuola normale femminile," in which a group of girls are working towards the ultimate goal of the *concorso* to earn their teaching certificates. Chronicling the girls' years at a Jesuit convent high school immediately preceding their stint at the telegraph office, this account features many of the same characters from "Telegrafi dello stato," including Serao's alter ego, Caterina Borrelli. As in "Telegrafi," the girls suffer from similar economic hardships and subsequent health issues: "[. . .] tutte [. . .] avevano l'aria infermiccia, pallida, di ragazze che vivono in un luogo umido, che mangiano male, che dormono col gas acceso" (147). However, Serao devotes more attention to the camaraderie and youthful spirit of the girls, providing a narrative with less dramatic intensity than "Telegrafi dello stato." While in school, the gravest fear the girls face is stern teachers and harsh exams, and their primary concerns are their fervent friendships:

[. . .] esterne e convittrici erano unite a coppie, a gruppi, così saldamente che nessun castigo poteva disunirle; appunto per questo si erano stabilite amicizie ferventi che rasentavano la passione, simpatie invincibili che affrontavano tutte le punizioni, e uno scambio continuo di servizi: lettere impostate, lettere prese alla posta, romanzetti imprestati di nascosto, pezzetti di sapone al *fieno*, passati di sottomano; appunto per questo, in quelle teste giovani non era che un continuo studio per eludere la sorveglianza dei superiori. (148)

The choral element pervades this narrative as well. The students often speak, move, and sing in unison, as well as experience shared perceptions and emotions. This collective sensitivity is highlighted in a physics class in which the girls are given the onerous task of explaining the laws of motion, equilibrium and tension via the Atwood machine. The professor's frustration grows as not one of the students is able to formulate a cogent explanation, and the girls are humiliated and reduced to tears. Finally, one of the older girls, described as "la bella e cara creatura," Checchina Vetromile, intercedes on the group's behalf:

“Sentite, signor direttore, la colpa non è nostra, nè di nessun altro. La lezione è difficoltosa, complicata: la studiamo da una settimana, senza arrivare a penetrarla. Abbiamo trascurato tutto il resto per questa tremenda macchina: forse abbiamo fatto peggio, perchè ci siamo istupidite a furia di ripetere venti volte la stessa cosa. Se volete, lasciamo per un poco la macchina e andiamo innanzi: la riprenderemo fra una settimana. Vi promettiamo d'impararla magnificamente: posso parlare per tutta la classe. (165)

The storyline concludes with the group's final exams for the *diploma superiore*, but the narrative adds a bleak postscript on the girls' respective paths three years later. Of the twenty-three young women included in the group, only eight manage to make it to the *concorso*. Of the remaining fifteen, their economic situations necessitate a more immediate solution, and they settle for positions ranging from the telegraph office to poor, rural teaching positions that do not require the *concorso*. The girls who choose the latter option are exploited, working under inhuman conditions for a meager salary that does not afford them fuel in the winter or proper medical care. As a result, several die from exposure, typhus, bronchitis, and even suicide. Serao recounts the horror of their fates in graphic detail:

La Pessenda non potendo aspettare il concorso, ha subito accettato il posto di maestra rurale, comune di Olevano, nel Cilento [. . .], con cinque cento franchi l'anno di retribuzione. [. . .] Nell'anno seguente, il comune di Olevano [. . .] ha diminuito di cento lire la retribuzione della maestra elementare [. . .]. Nell'estate ultima la Pessenda [. . .] è stata presa dal tifo petecchiale, che è stato mal curato dal medico condotto. Essendosi nel paese diffusa la voce che la sua malattia era contagiosa, ella è stata abbandonata da tutti, anche dalla contadina che veniva a fare i grossi servizi; quindi non si può bene accertare il giorno della sua morte, avendola poi ritrovata quasi nera, sul letto, in una stanza senza mobiglio, con le finestre aperte e un lume spento, per terra, in un angolo. (180)

Once again, Serao demonstrates the extreme sacrifices and vulnerability of women in her milieu, which are intensified when the group disbands and the women are left to fend for themselves. By recording the tragic accounts of these women, Serao ensures them a place in her oppositional history, which serves as a sort of “collective autobiography” (Connerton 70). Together, women may manage somehow; left alone, they often succumb.

In both “Telegrafi dello stato” and “Scuola normale femminile,” Serao alludes to various religious customs and ceremonies. Connerton identifies commemorative ceremonies and bodily social memory as the two essential features of the concept of social memory. In “Telegrafi dello stato” the narrative begins on All Souls’ Day, and the traditions surrounding Christmas dominate one section of the *novella*. In “Scuola normale femminile,” the songs, sermons, and religious teachings consistent with a Jesuit school are interlaced with the narrative. In both novels, rites of passage such as marriage and childbirth are also alluded to, either as imminent events in one of the girl’s lives within the timeline of the narrative, or in the postscript. However, in the remaining three *novelle* of *Il romanzo della fanciulla*, Serao places greater emphasis on various

ceremonies and rites of passage. This focus is most pervasive in “Per monaca.”

Ostensibly the story of a young woman, Eva Muscettola, who becomes a nun, the narrative gives equal attention to the young women in Eva’s circle of friends. Similarly, although Eva’s ultimate induction into the religious order is superlative in terms of the ceremony’s solemnity and grandiosity, the other ceremonies depicted — weddings, baptisms, and funerals — also reinforce the idea of social memory.

Unlike the other stories of *Il romanzo della fanciulla*, “Per monaca” features a group of more upwardly mobile young women, whose relative economic comfort is revealed in their generous dedication to charity. The narrative opens with an example of their more affluent class, as the future “monaca” of the story and her friends are gathered for a sewing circle, where they create and provide clothing for poor, abandoned children. Their conversation is exclusively centered around love and relationships as Eva’s closest friend Tecla laments her beloved who, in turn, is in pursuit of a married woman:

“Ma perchè ti ostini, Tecla? Carlo ti vuol bene, ma *ella* è più forte di te, amore mio. [. . .] Non vedi che vince sempre? È bella, è bionda, sa piangere, è piena di seduzione, ama Carlo da disperata...”

“Anche io amo Carlo.”

“Sì, ma le donne maritate sono più forti di noi altre ragazze;” soggiunse Eva, con una filosofia inconscia.

“Sarà, ma io non cedo.”

“E che puoi fare?”

“Aspettare.” (50)

The talk soon turns to their friend Olga who is about to marry. However, just as Tecla’s romance is fraught with betrayal and sadness, so is Olga’s prospect problematic: her fiancé, Massimo, is a compulsive gambler whom her friends describe disparagingly:

“[. . .] non avrà più trovato nè un amico che gli presti cinquecento franchi, nè uno strozzino che gli creda” (54). Eva responds to her friends’ castigation of the fiancé in question by declaring, “Che orrore! Non mi vorrei maritare a questo prezzo, neppure per un uomo che adorassi.” In a later scene, at a dance aboard a ship, the girls’ assessment of Massimo proves to be accurate as Olga waits in vain for her betrothed who has promised to accompany her. Eventually it becomes clear that he has gone off on another gambling binge. Meanwhile, Tecla pursues the fickle object of her desire, asking him to dance while he is in the company of his illicit paramour, Maria di Miradois. In this scene, another key element of collective memory is introduced, that of bodily social memory, in this instance, conveyed through dance. The dances that were an integral part of late nineteenth-century Neapolitan society incorporate “gestural” and “postural” behavior that I can explain by means of what Connerton identifies as essential aspects of this bodily social memory. He explains it thus:

Bodily practices of a culturally specific kind entail a combination of cognitive and habit-memory. The appropriate performance of the movements contained in the repertoire of the group not only reminds the performers of systems of classification which the group holds to be important; it requires also the exercise of habit-memory [. . .]. Indeed, it is precisely because what is performed is something to which the performers are habituated that the cognitive content of what the group remembers in common exercises such persuasive and persistent force. (88)

The dances Serao chooses to illustrate this theme reinforce the dynamics of this awkward love triangle, as Tecla flanked by her friend Chiarina Althan, confronts the shameless pair:

“Oh Carlo, vi cercavo. Non dovevamo ballare insieme il waltzer?”

“Naturalmente: possiamo ballare insieme una quadriglia.”

“Finiamo di sentire questa spiegazione, volete?”

E tutti quattro, Carlo, Maria Chiarina, Tecla, rimasero in gruppo, ascoltando, per nulla imbarazzati, abituati dalla loro posizione a sorridere in mezzo al dramma; l'ammiraglio aveva preso un obice e lo sollevava, lo mostrava alle signore, dicendo loro di provarne il peso. Esse si provavano ridendo, non riuscendovi: donna Maria di Miradois ci rinunziò, con un attuccio adorabile: ma Tecla, tendendo un po' le braccia, stringendo le labbra, con una ruga che le tagliava la fronte, come una cicatrice, sollevò l'obice.

“Siete molto forte, Tecla,” mormorò donna Maria.

“Molto forte,” rispose costei, quietamente, raggiustandosi i polsini. E fu tutto il segno della grande lotta appassionata che ferveva in fondo a quelle tre anime. (71)

Through the nature of the specific dances, Serao takes us from the traditional couple relationship (*waltzer*) to the very real love triangle which necessitates a dance of four (*quadriglia*). Furthermore, the bodily movements involved in the show of strength with the lifting of the military weapon invert the culturally accepted and historically enacted practice of winning over one's object of desire. Traditionally, it would be the man demonstrating his worthiness through such a display, but here it is Tecla, a woman, vying for the man's attention. Serao's decision to use this image — that of a show of strength between women over a suggestively phallic image reinforces this inversion of socially constructed gender ideals. Through this imagery Serao is able to document a characteristic of women that might not have otherwise been noted by historians, that of their strength and fortitude.

In terms of rites of passage, this dance scene in the *novella* is also significant for Eva Muscettola's character. After this dance she becomes engaged to Innico Althan, the brother of her friend Chiarina.

A ceremony frames the next scene, although it has already taken place. The friends have gathered at the train station to say goodbye to the newly wed Olga and her

husband Massimo before they leave for their honeymoon. While they await the arrival of the couple, discussions and observations about several of the friends' recent engagements fill the hour. The young women are divided on their views and notions of the institution of marriage. Eva, who before her engagement had spoken indifferently about marriage, is now its most fervent supporter in the face of her friend's disapproving comments:

“Che sciocchezza, il viaggio di nozze!” diceva Chiarina [. . .].
“Ma no, cara Chiarella, è tutta una poesia...”
“Bah! Troppi alberghi, troppi camerieri indiscreti, troppe faccie estranee, un vagabondaggio inutile e noioso.”
“Tu non lo faresti, il viaggio di nozze?”
“No: già, io non ci entro.”
“Ah! Mi dimenticavo che non vuoi maritarti, o cognatella monaca. Perchè non vuoi maritarti, di’? [. . .] Ti farò maritare io, Chiarella, vedrai, vedrai.” (74)

Also negative in her estimation of marriage, Anna Doria takes this opportunity to berate Olga's new husband again, “non era meglio che morisse, Olga, anzichè prendere questo mascalzone di Massimo” (74). Her words of scorn seem warranted however, as Anna divulges that Massimo was an hour late for the wedding mass because he had been gambling all night, reducing his wife to tears throughout her ceremony. The most incredible viewpoint comes from Tecla, who happily announces that her beloved Carlo, was also with Massimo in the gambling den:

“Sì, sì, hanno giuocato tutta la notte, Carlo ha perduto ventimila lire” disse, sorridendo.
“E questo ti fa piacere?” domandò Chiarina, mentre Eva chinava la fronte, preoccupata.
“Immensamente.”
“È perchè?”
“Quando Carlo sarà pieno di debiti, converrà bene che mi sposi, per rimedio: donna Maria non gli può dare quattrini, io, sì.”

“E ti contenti di essere sposata per rimedio?”
“Mi amerà dopo, deve finire per amarmi,” soggiunse Tecla, con la ostinazione profonda di chi vuole una sola cosa. (75)

Again, Serao underscores the theme of the supreme sacrifices women make for love, as well as for naïve romantic passion.

When the newlyweds finally arrive, and the friends must see her off, the girls are filled with profound grief. They have brought flowers, heartfelt tokens of their love for their dear friend, and their misgivings about her new husband are only reaffirmed when he carelessly tosses them on the seat of their train compartment. Their well wishes are infused with emotion:

“Ti abbiamo portato le rose, Olga [. . .]. Sono un ricordo di Napoli, non ti scordare, Olga.”
“Coraggio, Olga mia, coraggio e saldezza.”
“Ricordati che ti vogliamo bene, sempre, sempre: te ne voglio tanto, Olga mia...”
(80-82).

With the departure of the married couple, and with Eva’s grim realization that her fiancè has most likely betrayed her, the scene closes. The implied ceremonies and rites of passage of this scene are replaced by an overtly extravagant ceremony in the subsequent and final scene. Set in the church of Santa Chiara, the elegantly dressed guests are described as waiting for “la sposa,” who is soon revealed to be Eva Muscettola. In the anticipatory period, other ceremonies that have touched the friends’ lives are recounted. There are weddings, cancelled engagements, births and deaths. Among the dead is one of the group’s friends, Eugenia, who had died in childbirth, and Luigi Muscettola, Eva’s brother. The same people, Serao narrates, that attended these

functions have come to Santa Chiara today for Eva. Eva enters, adorned with “un velo bianco amplissimo,” and “grossi orecchini di brillanti scintillavano alle orecchie delicate” (85). However, it is revealed that Eva has come to Santa Chiara to take the vows, not of marriage, but of the monastic order which she is entering. The mood is similar to that of the girls bidding farewell to the bride Olga, but it is suffused with a more profound grief. Underlining the sorrow of losing their friend to a life of perpetual sequestration, is the stigma of the scandal that led Eva to this vocation:

E quella che più s’inabissava nella preghiera era Chiarina Althan, la creatura buona e intelligente: ella sola conosceva l’orrendo segreto che aveva distrutto la vita di Eva Muscettola, ella sola aveva la misura di quel sacrificio, ella compiangeva la fanciulla, ma pregava per coloro che l’avevano uccisa, per coloro che mai più avrebbero avuto pace. (88)

The ceremony blends elaborate ornamentation and austere solemnity; it is a fusion of the traditional marriage ritual with funereal rites:

Poi la funzione divenne più lugubre ancora. In mezzo al coro, per terra, era disteso un tappeto; le monache vi condussero Eva, la fecero distendere supina, come persona morta, le incrociarono le mani sul petto, la coprirono con una coltre di velluto nero, gallonata d’argento, su cui erano il cranio e le ossa in croce, le insegne della morte. Attorno, ai quattro lati, come intorno al cadavere, ardevano quattro grossi ceri: e subito la campana di Santa Chiara si mise a suonare il morto. (91)

As her friends from her worldly life cry for their loss, the nuns who now represent her new life each welcome her into the order with a kiss. The narrative closes as they all disappear behind the door of the chorus while Eva prays, “Ego sum resurrectio et vita” (92).

The happiness, comfort, and wholeness of the girls is lost as soon as they marry and leave the group, but Eva's induction to the convent, while described in lugubrious terms, still suggests a positive beginning, as evidenced in her final words. Unable to find happiness in marriage, she will be reinvented, or reborn in her new life as a nun.

In the *Social Frameworks of Memory*, Halbwachs expounds the important relationship between religious rights and collective memory. Although it has long been maintained that the traditions of peoples throughout their ancient histories are strongly influenced by religious ideas, Halbwachs also acknowledges that every religion reproduces in more or less symbolic forms the history of migrations and fusions of races and tribes, of great events, wars, establishments, discoveries, and reforms that we can find at the origin of the societies that practice them. (84)

Halbwachs's general premise on collective memory requires a constant renewal of memories and traditions by present day societies, or as Coser concludes, "Memory needs continuous feeding from collective sources and is sustained by social and moral props" (34). Halbwachs extends this same argument to the sphere of religion, specifically Christianity, by stressing the relationship between traditional religious rites and temporal society:

Although religious memory attempts to isolate itself from temporal society, it obeys the same laws as every collective memory: it does not preserve the past but reconstructs it with the aid of the material traces, rites, texts, and traditions left behind by that past, and with the aid moreover of recent psychological and social data, that is to say, with the present. (119)

The intersection of temporal memory and religious memory is an integral part of Seralo's *modus operandi* and *modus vivendi*, as it was and continues to be for many Southern

Italians. Societal prescriptions on comportment, social interactions and lifestyle in Serao's milieu were, for the most part, inexorably linked with Catholic dogma. Feast days and the mystical, protective power of Saints, as well as weddings, baptisms, and funerals, permeate her narratives, and are usually linked symbolically to an event, or a stage in a person's life. One of the most significant spiritual icons for Neapolitans that has survived to present-day Naples is the cult of San Gennaro.⁹ Neapolitans have entrusted the image of the popular protector of the city with the arduous task of safeguarding them from the dangers of Mount Vesuvius. In the story "Nella lava," Serao reprises two characters from "Telegrafi dello stato" and "Scuola normale femminile": her alter-ego Caterina Borrelli, and Borrelli's faithful friend, Annina Casale. Most of the *novella* is filled with excessively detailed descriptions of social functions such as dances, vacation gatherings, or notices of impending nuptials. Serao uses the last occasion to voice once again a debate involving nineteenth-century Neapolitan society's view on marriage, as declared through the mouths of mothers with eligible daughters:

[. . .] Matilde Cipullo maritata Tuttavilla [. . .] si mise a parlare alla signora Galanti di un matrimonio per Riccarda, un proprietario di Terra di Lavoro, che sarebbe capitato a Napoli la settimana entrante. La Galanti ascoltava, rideva, rispondeva che ella lasciava libere le sue figliuole, che Riccarda specialmente, aveva una testolina capricciosa, che non si sarebbe maravigliata di vederla restare zitella. Matilde Tuttavilla si scandalizzava; che vi era di meglio del matrimonio per le ragazze? [. . .] ella parlava del matrimonio piena di emozione e piena di entusiasmo, apostolo convinto che ogni minuto cercava di far proseliti alla sua fede. (119)

⁹San Gennaro was an early Christian martyr who was beheaded by Roman soldiers, and whose blood, according to legend, was preserved by a peasant woman. This blood, said to have been preserved and stored in various churches in Naples for hundreds of years, is ceremoniously brought out every year on the anniversary of his death (the nineteenth of September). While the faithful recite the *credo* numerous times, they await the annual miracle, the liquefaction of the patron saint's dried blood, which is contained in an ampule, and held by the priest. If successful, this is a good omen for the inhabitants of Naples and its environs. On this belief, see Serao, *San Gennaro* (19-33; 122-38).

Amidst numerous descriptions of dances, engagements, marriages, and failed romances, the menacing, true protagonist of the tale, Mount Vesuvius, smolders in the distance, unveiling the inhabitants' earlier concerns as frivolous and superficial. When Vesuvius eventually erupts, supplicatory phrases are interspersed throughout the narrative among the frightened Neapolitans, "La terza lava minaccia Napoli: sarebbe bene di esporre San Gennaro" (143); "Perchè non si espone San Gennaro"; "Ma perchè non si espongono le reliquie di San Gennaro?" (143-44). This special duty of the patron Saint, to protect Neapolitans from the dangers of Vesuvius, is considered in several of Serao's works.

Serao provides more background on the patron saint in her text, *San Gennaro. Nella leggenda e nella vita*. A synthesis of Neapolitan customs, hagiographic tribute, and personal recollections, Serao recalls the city's reliance on the patron saint during the April eruption in 1872 within the context of her own memory. As the young Matilde Serao and her mother sought refuge from the clouds of ash and menacing lava flow, they hear cries for their spiritual protector from the people in the streets below. Serao describes the collective cry as, "un sol grido di invocazione delirante: 'San Gennaro, San Gennaro, San Gennaro!'" (174-75) In April of 1906, Vesuvius erupted again. This time Serao wrote a series of articles on the event which were then collected in the text, *Sterminator Vesevo*. Taking the title from Leopardi's Canto XXXIV, the nineteen articles or chapters feature an emotional style of reportage that captures the feelings of, and impact on the Neapolitans, Serao not excepted.¹⁰ In this excerpt from the chapter

¹⁰ "Qui su l'arida schiena
Del formidabil monte
Sterminator Vesevo,
La qual null'altro allegra arbor né fiore,

entitled, “Si parli il popolo”, Serao serves as the mouthpiece for the multitude of illiterate, common Neapolitans who could neither receive guidance via written instruction, nor record their experiences. This disadvantage injects a certain insanity to an already grave terror:

E, se, nei primi giorni il popolo napoletano ha mantenuto il suo carattere di spensieratezza e di serenità, più tardi la sua immaginazione è stata colpita, il terrore si è diffuso nelle forme più puerili e anche più invincibili: e, oramai il popolo napoletano non ragiona più [. . .] su niente, il suo terrore è diventato una follia. Purtroppo, i fenomeni paurosi persistono: e, invano, noi sappiamo che essi sono orribili più nell’aspetto, che nella sostanza. Questo il popolo non sa, non lo vuol sapere: e la sua follia di paura assume un carattere pericoloso, furioso. (82-83)

Serao’s commemorative association of religious and sensory imagery with the cataclysmic events of 1872 and 1906 provides an account of a segment of Neapolitan society that might not otherwise have been remembered or recorded. By documenting what is essentially an oral culture’s collective memory, Serao creates an alternative history of the events.

The influence of religious rites and ceremonies is also a key feature of “Non più”. The description of these rites highlights the predominant theme of this short story: the institution of marriage, and how its fulfillment, or lack thereof, shapes and defines a woman’s life. In this sense, although the characters are different, “Non più” picks up the ideological thread of the value and necessity of marriage considered in “Per monaca” and “Nella lava.” Although “Non più” is purported to be a choral study, the story’s focus on Emma DeMartino throughout her youth and advanced age causes the other characters to

Tuoi cespi solitari intorno spargi,
Odorata ginestra,
Contenta dei deserti.” (“La ginestra” 1-7)

recede into the background. Set in an unnamed Southern town outside of Naples, the story opens against the vivid backdrop of the festivals for the Assumption, as well as the celebration of the wedding of Rosina Sticco, Emma's best friend. The wedding of Rosina is related within the context of the other eligible young girls. Not only does Serao list their prospects but the actual financial value of each of them in terms of their dowry:

Le tre sorelle Capitella avevano ciascheduna centocinquantamila lire di dote; le due Roccatagliata centomila lire; Clelia Meotelella, sposa di un anno, ne aveva portate duecentomila; Felicetta de Clemente aveva trovato mezzo milione in casa del giovane marito, talchè il balcone del municipio, il più ricco come doti passate, presenti, e future, era l'oggetto di molti sospiri maschili e femminili. Le due spose Clelia e Felicetta scintillavano di gioielli. (187)

Emma DeMartino, although engaged, is described as "irregolare" because of her single status at the advanced age of twenty-five. Although Emma is happy for her friend's good fortune, Rosina's wedding further reinforces her anxiety as to the realization of her own engagement. Emma's fiancé, Carlo, has had to postpone their imminent wedding plans in order to study for the retakes of the law exams he has failed. The dark shadow now cast on their previously rosy future, as well as the physical separation from her betrothed fills Emma with anxiety and uncertainty as she laments that her wedding did not precede her friend's:

Che peccato, dover perdere così un anno! Lei ne aveva già venticinque, è vero, e questo le dava come un pensiero latente di malinconia, come una punta di amarezza: si sentiva pallida, smorta, sfiorita, mentre i venticinque anni di Rosina Sticco erano tutta una fioritura di rosei colori e di sorrisi. Con quanta grazia Rosina andava intorno, offrendo confetti e vino di Marsala, dei dolci [. . .] Se Carluccio avesse avuto miglior sorte agli esami! Ora sarebbe lei, Emma che regalerebbe alle sue amiche i confetti del matrimonio. E non volle mangiare

quelli che Rosina le offrì. Una grande malinconia le era piombata sull'anima!
(190-91)

Juxtaposed among the merriment and celebration of the wedding, and the fireworks of the Assumption festivities, the specter of Emma's alternative future lingers in the form of several well-known *zitelle* who look on from their windows with their "dentiare ingiallite" and their "sorris[i] d'ironia" (192). In the climactic conclusion of the Assumption festival, amidst the colorful lanterns, the ringing church bells of three neighboring churches, and the remaining embers of the fireworks, Emma earnestly offers up a supplication to the Virgin Mary, via the newly elevated and decorated statue of Her image, "Nelle vostre mani, Vergine Santa [. . .] nelle vostre mani, io e tutte quante" (193).

As the story progresses, however, it is soon revealed that Emma's worst fears have been realized. Abandoned by her fiancé for another woman, Emma finds herself in the awkward role bestowed on unmarried women of her age as a spinster. In scenes that contrast happy occasions and ceremonies, such as the births and baptisms of Rosina's children, with Emma's retreat and convulsive sobbing, her gradual detachment from her circle of married friends is painfully delineated. Emma's pain from her estrangement as well as a future barren of prospects is accentuated through the ritualistic details of the celebration of the birth of one of Rosina's children: there is the naming of the godparents, the exchange of gifts, and once again, the distribution of *confetti*, *vino*, and *dolci* to the guests.

In the last scene of the novel Emma's transformation into the dreaded *zitellona* has been fully realized. Her apathy and deteriorated physical appearance indicate the

passage of time and the disappearance of hope. Hiding behind her shutters, sitting at a window, as is the posture of the other *zitelle* introduced at the inception of the story, Emma is described thus:

Gli occhi avevano perduto la vivacità e il languore che li rendevano tanto seducenti, erano diventati come smorti, come opachi; due borse di pelle floscia, giallastra, con qualche intonazione livida si erano formate sotto le palpebre; le labbra erano passate dal rosso al rosa, dal rosa al violetto pallidissimo, delicato. [. . .] ma quello che invecchiava quel volto, senza rimedio, non era la radezza dei capelli male dissimulata, [. . .] erano quelle due borse di pelle floscia, come morte, già tinte dei colori della corruzione e della decomposizione. (200)

Emma is sewing, another bodily act already represented in “Per monaca” by the group of unmarried girls. In this context the act of sewing is symbolic of Emma’s solitary spinsterhood. As she hides behind her shutters, a young couple secretly gathers under her window, unaware of Emma’s presence. The pair of young lovers are Emma’s goddaughter, Rosina’s daughter Emma, known as Mimì, and her beloved, Federico. As Emma furtively observes the pair in their coquettish exchange, she is made painfully aware of her fleeting youth. Through the personage of Mimì Emma is reminded of her former self, as well as all of her unrealized dreams and potential:

Dietro la persiana, Emma DeMartino guardava i due innamorati bizzosi: non così, forse nel tempo lontano, litigavano dolcissimamente con Carluccio Scoppa? [. . .] E non aveva avuto una volta anche lei sedici anni, la donna che ascoltava, senza più lavorare dietro la persiana verde? Quando, in che epoca soave e remota della vita? E non aveva creduto, allora, che la gioventù non le dovesse mai finire? (204-05)

Just as the *novella* opened with a religious celebration, it ends with a religious rite of another kind: the bell tower of the Church of the Cross tolls to announce the death of

Donna Irene Moscarella, the oldest spinster of the minute society contained in this town.

The two lovers momentarily and casually reflect on the importance of this occasion:

“Chi è morto?” chiese Mimì.

“Donna Irene Moscarella,” rispose Federico. “Aveva novant’anni o centoventi, forse. Chi piglia il posto, ora?” E maliziosamente, senza parlare, Mimì la bionda, con l’occhio e col gesto sorridendo, indicò il balcone della sua matrigna, Emma DeMartino. (207)

Emma’s response to this callous assignation as the town’s eldest spinster is one of complete resignation and languor. Her life, since the dissolution of her engagement, is summarized as nothing more than “un grande funerale lento” (207).

With Emma’s story, Serao passes judgment on society’s rigid parameters for women’s happiness, a theme she will repeat in different forms in the novels that followed this compilation, such as *La Ballerina* and *Suor Giovanna della Croce*. By enriching the tale with detailed and vivid sense images, Serao further ensures the preservation and perpetuation of the social memory or collective identity of women in her milieu. In his study of the link between ancient Byzantine culture and Modern Greek society, Athinodoros Chronis stressed the significance of sense memories for the preservation of cultural heritage:

We preserve collective memories by referring to the material milieu that surrounds us [. . .]. The cultural heritage of an ethnic past can be conceptualized as an embodied remembering of sensory experiences. [. . .] Remembering is context-dependent and situated in the everyday realities of contemporary people. This process is not only a faculty of the brain since the body remembers, too. It is shown here that collective memory is carried through synesthetic bodily experiences and bodily enactments. (4; 28)

If there is one medium that links all of the key elements in these Serao narratives, particularly of collective memory and commemorative or bodily practices, it is food.

V.A. Goddard, in her study, *Gender, Family, and Work in Naples*, connects food with Naples's collective memory emphasizing the vital role of the family:

If identity is constructed through memory, the memories of time and place linked to food, eating, and nurturing play a key part in retrieving significant memories. Food could be seen as the sensory point of entry into a web of sentiments, memories and fantasies which largely constituted a sense of identity, as a person and as a member of Neapolitan society. This has implications for family life and how it is perceived and remembered and for women, whose role as nurturers provides a thread of continuity within these identities. (213)

Serao's Neapolitan literature abounds with references to specific culinary traditions. Ecclesiastical feast days, sacramental events, as well as financial means are examples of criteria for certain dishes. We have already seen the traditional *confetti*, *dolci*, and *vino Marsala* incorporated into wedding and baptism scenes in several *novelle*. Serao expands these customary culinary suggestions in *Saper Vivere; Galateo Napoletano*, an etiquette guide of sorts that among other questions of decorum, outlines acceptable choices for every course of a ceremonial meal from *antipasto* to dessert. Serao clearly outlines the distinctions between economic comestibles and elegant foodstuffs that must be chosen for certain occasions:

Ognuno, pure se non ne ha i mezzi, vuol essere *chic*. La dote è poca o non esiste: il giovanotto guadagna appena da vivere modestissimamente, lui e la sposa: non importa, si fanno dei debiti, purchè il matrimonio sia *chic*! (30)

Similarly, Serao warns would-be hostesses that their hospitality is “gradita al palato e allo stomaco dei suoi invitati.” To this end, Serao recommends the following:

Una zuppa, leggera, leggerissima [. . .] un pesce bollito, con salsa [. . .]; un piatto leggero di carne come filetti di pollo o *ris de veau* o costolettine di montone; [. . .] un piatto forte di carne, il che ha il suo valore, nella perfetta scelta del pezzo, una verdura che sia, asparagi, carciofi, cardi, [. . .] un arrosto importante, [. . .] un gelato, frutta svariate, [. . .] copiosissime, [. . .] biscotti inglesi e *bonbons* dopo le frutta, [. . .] lo champagne con frutta, [. . .] In salotto, coi liquori, *cognac* vecchissimo. (57-58)

These status-related classifications are also outlined within the fictional narrative of *La Ballerina*. The dancers who have money, such as the two Musto sisters, feast on rich ricotta-filled lasagna made by their mother, and invite various dancers who have not brought lunch, most of whom decline out of pride. This expression of generosity and solidarity among women was common, according to Serao, as she asserts in *Il ventre di Napoli*:

È naturale che il popolo non possa fare carità di denaro, al più povero di lui, non avendone: ma si vedono e si sentono carità più squisite, più gentili. [. . .] Nessuna donna che mangi, nella strada, vede fermarsi un bambino a guardare, senza dargli subito di quello che mangia: e quando non ha altro, gli dà del pane. (73-74)

I have already mentioned in Chapter two the example of women breastfeeding other women’s babies. It seems appropriate to examine the citation within this context:

Un caso frequente di pietà è questo: una madre troppo debole o infiacchita dal lavoro ha un bambino, ma non ha latte. Vi è sempre un’amica o una vicina o qualunque estranea pietosa, che offre il suo latte; ne allatterà due, che importa? Il Signore penserà a mandarle il latte sufficiente. Tre volte al giorno la madre dal

seno arido, porta il suo bambino in casa della madre felice: e seduta sulla soglia, guarda malinconicamente il suo figlio succhiare la vita. Bisogna aver visto questa scena e avere inteso il tono di voce sommesso, umile, riconoscente, con cui ella dice, riprendendosi in collo il bambino: “O Signore t’o renne, la carità che fai a sto figlio.” È la madre di latte finisce per mettere amore a questo secondo bimbo e allo svezzamento, soffre di non vederlo più: e ogni tanto va a trovarlo, a portargli un soldo di frutta, o un amuleto della Vergine: il bimbo ha due madri. (72)

Serao’s original objective in writing *Il ventre di Napoli* was to create a true account of the people in Naples; to present them as dignified, human souls who deserved to be acknowledged as such by the callous government of President Agostino Depretis. It was this government who proposed that the solution to the new cholera epidemic was to “sventrare Napoli.” Serao responds to this proclamation not only as a writer or journalist, but as a spokesperson for the poor Neapolitans:

Vi non lo conoscevate, onorevole Depretis, il ventre di Napoli. [. . .] le descrizioncelle colorite di cronisti con intenzioni letterarie, che parlano [. . .] del mare glauco, del cielo di cobalto, delle signore incantevoli e dei vapori violenti del tramonto: tutta questa rettorichetta a base di golfo e di colline fiorite, [. . .] tutta questa minuta e facile letteratura frammentaria, serve per quella parte di pubblico che non vuole essere seccata con racconti di miserie. Ma il governo doveva sapere l’altra parte, il governo a cui arriva la statistica della mortalità e quella dei delitti; il governo a cui arrivano i rapporti dei direttori delle carceri; il governo che sa tutto : [. . .] quanti mendichi non possano entrare nelle opere pie e quanti vagabondi dormano in istrada, la notte; [. . .] quanto renda il lotto. [. . .] Per distruggere la corruzione materiale e quella morale, per rifare la salute e la coscienza a quella povera gente, per insegnare loro come si vive — essi sanno morire, come avete visto — per dir loro che essi sono fratelli nostri, che noi li amiamo efficacemente, che vogliamo salvarli, non basta sventrare Napoli: bisogna quasi tutta rifarla. (3-10)

Serao’s objective clearly indicates an oppositional history: one that runs counter to the one being propagated by the establishment. However, this oppositional history not only reveals the truth about the oppressed lower classes, but about the disenfranchised sub-

group of women within those classes. Serao succeeds in creating this history by linking religion with regional traditions, as well as providing the memorializing force of sense imagery, and by demonstrating the selfless solidarity among women. The occasional inclusion of phrases in Neapolitan dialect further strengthens this cause.

Numerous critics acknowledge the courage, efficacy, and immensity of this project in which Serao states the case for the underprivileged of Naples. However, the year before her death marked Serao's most audacious and momentous literary accomplishment and social achievement. In *Mors tua*, Serao takes on the institution of war from the stance of an ardent pacifist, and by so doing, launches a virulent and incisive attack on the fascist regime of Benito Mussolini.

Anyone with a cursory familiarity with Serao's themes and motifs might presume that her guiding philosophy would necessarily concur with Fascist doctrine. Superficially, this presumption is easy to make. In numerous newspaper articles, Serao extolled the virtues of motherhood, railed against divorce, and ridiculed the idea of women's suffrage. In her journalism and fiction, Serao writes about female sacrifice in glowing terms. However, the popular label of Serao as simply anti-feminist, or even misogynist is neither a fair nor accurate assessment of her attitudes. To understand her intentions, one must be fully informed as to the scope and breadth of her social conscience, as well as the realities that faced women in her era.

Just as the dissidents mentioned earlier unveiled hidden truths in their otherwise fictional narratives, Serao's fiction reveals the unpopular truth about the brutal obstacles women in the lower classes faced. Her narratives resound with empathy for displaced nuns, underpaid teachers, overworked pregnant women, and working mothers.

Furthermore, these narratives denounce societal stigmas, patriarchal oppression and rigid limitations of women's liberties. Serao's *romanzi* and *novelle sociali* echo the plea of *Il ventre di Napoli* that society as a whole needs to rethink and restructure working and living conditions for women and their families.

To address specifically Serao's seemingly anti-feminist positions on suffrage, divorce and women's work, it is essential to examine the political realities of the age and its social ramifications for women. Suffrage for women, as it was being crafted, would only have allowed women of certain economic classes the vote. Furthermore, men — husbands and fathers — held such a tight rein over women, both legally and psychologically, that it was doubtful if women would truly vote their conscience, or in their best interests (Amoia 109). As for divorce, women in Serao's age had no legal claim to their children, nor any legal claim to their husband's finances. Modern social guarantees for women such as child support or alimony simply did not exist. Alba Amoia summarized Serao's opposition to divorce in this context: "As far as divorce was concerned, she [Serao] felt that it would always be the weak who would be victimized — that is, women and children" (109). Similarly, Serao's endorsement of stay-at-home mothers can easily be understood as her concern for mothers' and children's well-being; the reality of working women often left them and their children in difficult or even dangerous straits.

It is clear that Serao exalted the idea of female sacrifice, particularly maternal sacrifice. This too would seem to resonate with the Fascist dogma which made voluntary, female self sacrifice a cornerstone of its credo. Maria Antonietta Macciocchi identifies themes of "sexual repression," "self-sacrifice," "passivity" and "masochism"

(25) as characteristic of Mussolini's platform designed to persuade women to submit to his regime:

From its inception, Fascism aimed at an acceptance, which I have defined masochistic, on the part of women: an acceptance of every "torture" and of a kind of "death impulse" (Freud) celebrated with the everlasting rite of those killed in battle and widows exalting their chastity-sacrifice. From this renunciation of life is born woman's self-negating joy: it is the "joy" of the relation between woman and power: renunciation, subordination, domestic slavery, in exchange for the abstract, verbose, demagogic love of the Leader, the Duce, the greatly virile Fascist clown. (qtd. in Pickering-Iazzi 25)

Robin Pickering-Iazzi sums up Macciocchi's interpretation thus:

Anticipating female masochism as a means to solicit the female subject, Fascist discourses addressing a female audience operated, Macciocchi tells us, according to the formula "power-joy-sacrifice = joy in sacrifice" and shaped women's relation to power in the state. Thus, she concludes, Mussolini's appeals for female self-sacrifice elicited women's voluntary surrender, performed with "masochistic joy," enabling the *duce* to "enchant,' 'mystify,' and 'possess' millions of women," seducing them into the prescribed role of Wife and Mother (34). Within this phallic economy, the compensation for female self-effacement consisted of the symbolic love conferred by Mussolini, "the Male par excellence, the Husband of all women, or the lover of each woman," as well as the Father of the children they would give for their country .(41)¹¹

It is interesting that Pickering-Iazzi, who has written two significant volumes on Fascism and women writers, does not mention Serao, not even in a footnote. Serao's steadfast resistance to Mussolini's regime transcended her literary activity.¹² In 1925,

¹¹(26)The page numbers indicated within the citation refer to Macciocchi.

¹²An interesting anecdote about Serao's relationship with Mussolini was recently (April, 2007) described by Serao's granddaughter, the Marchesa Adriana Gherardini Taglioni in an interview by the Università di Salerno's publication, *Il Giornalista*. Adriana, daughter of Serao's only daughter, Eleonora Taglioni Natale, explains the situation behind Serao losing the Nobel Prize for *Mors tua*: "Mia nonna doveva averlo, ma non lo vinse per due ragioni. Innanzitutto perché i suoi racconti erano considerati immorali, vi erano ad esempio donne che tradivano il marito. Poi per i suoi rapporti con il

Serao not only signed, but published in her paper *Il Giorno* Croce's anti-fascist *Manifesto degli intellettuali*, and did not allow fascist raids of her newspaper in the 1920s to impede her job as its director (Amoia 107). Returning to the set of Serao's motifs that appear to be in harmony with Fascism, it is imperative to resolve one more central idea, that of female self-sacrifice. As interpreted by Macciocchi and summarized by Pickering-Iazzi, the ultimate objective of female self-sacrifice and maternity within the Mussolini agenda is to provide soldiers for the regime's military campaigns. Serao did not subscribe to this propaganda. Instead, it could be said that she answered to a higher calling. Serao's conception of maternal sacrifice is inspired by the model of the Virgin Mary and the tenets of Catholicism, and is grounded in the very human instinct of mothers ensuring their children's safety and well-being, at all costs. The realization of this maternal responsibility is diametrically opposed to Mussolini's call for female self-sacrifice. This conviction reaches its full expression in *Mors tua*, which I have already considered in the previous chapter on motherhood. However, I would like to examine three passages from the end of the novel that best exemplify Serao's pacifist philosophy.

The first episode of *Mors tua* that I will consider concerns a Lieutenant, Guido Soria, decorated in battle and respected by all, who has experienced a conversion from his previously firm convictions. The death, by his hand, in battle of a young Austrian, Hans Flugy, is haunting him, in particular the sight of the young soldier's dead face,

fascismo. Le racconto un aneddoto. Nel '24, a Napoli, all'altezza del Grand Hotel, passò Mussolini. I miei genitori dissero a mia nonna di alzarsi, ma lei rimase seduta. Accortosi di ciò, Mussolini le chiese spiegazioni e mia nonna le rispose: "Eccellenza Mussolini, io non sono antimussoliniana, io sono antifascista". Mussolini si sedette vicino alla nonna e parlò con lei quasi due ore; il giorno dopo le mandò una grande pianta. Mia nonna aveva simpatia per l'uomo Mussolini, ma era antifascista, tant'è che le squadriglie fasciste andarono a romperle le rotative de "Il Giorno". Dunque il premio Nobel del '26 non fu assegnato a lei che, vicina alla morte (che arrivò l'anno dopo), visse con grande rammarico questo evento."

whose eyes Soria was unable to close. Soria confesses to a young corporal how this experience has transformed him:

“Quegli occhi, Costantini, non ti pare che guardino [. . .] e parlino? [. . .] È a me, a me, che parlano, amico, quegli occhi, a me che l’ho ucciso.”
“Signor tenente, si calmi, si calmi!”
[. . .] “Mi seguono, dove vado... mi appariscono, ovunque... E sono così dolci, Costantini... così teneri...”
“Doveva essere un buon ragazzo, quell’austriaco...diverso dagli altri...” [. . .]
“Un fanciullo, un fanciullo ignaro di male... E io l’ho ucciso, così barbaramente...”
“Era la guerra, signor tenente!”
“Parola stupida e crudele... Io l’ho ucciso...”
“Era un nemico...”
“Era un uomo, come me: e aveva diritto di vivere la sua vita: e io, ferocemente, gliel’ho tolta!” (293-94)

Espousing a philosophy that completely rejects the essence of Fascist dogma, Serao emphasizes the humanity of the “enemy” soldier, and repudiates the merits of war.

The next passage I would like to consider involves Marta Ardore, who, as I mentioned in Chapter Three, loses her youngest son in the war, and blames her older son Fausto, who lured him into conscription, under the sway of military propaganda . Fausto himself was initially deluded by this martial fervor, but his brother Giorgio’s death transforms him, and he confesses his realization to his mother:

Avevo torto. E non lo sapevo. E ora lo so. Ed è vero che la mia delirante parola, ha ucciso mio fratello. [. . .] Tutto il sangue di mio fratello è sulla mia coscienza. E non solo il suo sangue, madre! Tutto il sangue di mezzo milione di morti e lo strazio di mezzo milione di madri. Esse mi hanno maledetto, maledetto, e la loro maledizione ha ucciso Giorgio! (326)

The final scene that I would like to offer in support of Serao's message actually precedes the encounter between Marta and Fausto Ardore in the narrative. In this scene Marta Ardore witnesses the onset of Antonia Scalese's madness over the loss of her only son:

Gianni mio...Come va che non ho le tue lettere? Mi hai scritto ieri? Allora l'avrò domani? È lunga, la lettera? Sei un gran buon figlio, Gianni, Gianni... [. . .] Ma che mi dici, di questo tuo ritorno? [. . .] Presto, dici, Che significa presto? Non puoi precisare... ma torni, è vero torni?...(321)

Antonia Scalese is described as "povera, abbandonata, orfana di suo figlio." It is this term that is particularly innovative and insightful: the idea that mothers are "orphaned" by their children in times of war. What is also noteworthy is the context that frames this scene: Marta, irrevocably broken from the loss of her son, has taken Antonia Scalese into her home to care for her. Here again Serao illustrates the phenomenon of the resolute alliance of women in times of crisis. Despite the intensity of her own grief, Marta still manages to extend herself to care for another bereft mother.

Mors tua, like the other novels and short stories considered in this chapter underscores the network of women: a disenfranchised group providing mutual support while struggling for survival in a male-dominated society. In this way, Serao is not only carrying on the collective memory of Italian women in her era, but her oppositional history provides invaluable insight into a tumultuous time when the dissemination of historical facts was often suppressed by the oppressive government in power.

Antonio Gramsci's writings have come to be appreciated by contemporary feminists and critics as tangential to the cause of women. Laura Ruberto analyzes how Gramsci's ideas are significant in the realm of women and labor:

His understanding of a class-based national popular culture founded on alliances between different subaltern classes (sometimes with the help of an organic intellectual) and his privileging of everyday practices and what he called "folklore" are all relevant here. For Gramsci, understanding society through the perspective of the subaltern is fundamental. The subaltern is a specific term [. . .] that for him incorporates all politically and culturally disenfranchised people (including but not limited to women.) Simply put, the positive value he placed on culture produced by the subaltern classes helps underscore the position women (both as historical beings and as representations) hold with respect to the formation of culture. (9)

Ruberto then cites Lucia Chiavola Birnbaum, who comments on Gramsci's influence on the Italian feminist group, "Rivolta femminile":

They are indebted to Gramsci's emphasis on cultural revolution, the revolution as a dialectical process, the importance of regional differences (particularly the cultural and economic difference of the South), the significance of self confidence in socialist self-management, and careful strategy in periods of backlash. (9)

The idea of the subaltern, and more importantly, of the organic intellectual, is a pivotal one as it concerns Matilde Serao. In attempting to address the lack of a "national literature in Italy, Gramsci uses the term "nazionale popolare". Gramsci's invention of this term sets the stage for the role of the organic intellectual:

In Italia il termine "nazionale" ha un significato molto ristretto ideologicamente e in ogni caso non coincide con "popolare", perchè in Italia gli intellettuali sono lontani dal popolo, cioè dalla "nazione" e sono invece legati a una tradizione di

casta, che non è mai stata rotta da un forte movimento politico popolare o nazionale dal basso. (qtd. in Ruberto 30)

As a possible solution to this dilemma, Gramsci proposes the idea of the “organic intellectual,” an alternative to “traditional intellectuals” (Ruberto 17). The organic intellectual can help create this national popular culture. Ruberto explains the role of the organic intellectual according to Gramsci:

Organic intellectuals come from the subaltern classes and act as bridges between the subaltern and the dominant classes. Instead of ignoring or patronizing the subaltern (as traditional intellectuals do), organic intellectuals, for Gramsci, fortify subalterns with the tools they need to create a national popular culture. The organic intellectual can succeed through a strategic use of language — in practice, by translating, in a sense, the dominant culture for the subaltern and vice versa. (17)

Matilde Serao’s writings celebrate her social commitment to, and documentation of the subaltern classes: of women, of the poor, of the Neapolitans, and of those people who represented all three demographic criteria. A subaltern herself, Serao has been misperceived by many as possessing hypocritical tendencies. This is because she wrote narratives and journalistic pieces that sometimes appeared to favor the privileged classes and other times were scathing social criticisms in defense of the underprivileged. This deceptive incongruity can be better understood in light of her role as an organic intellectual, advocating the cause of the oppressed, and serving as a bridge between the classes. Serao’s humble assessment of her *oeuvres*, that she has never been anything

more than a “faithful chronicler” of her memory, only partly explains her motivations, and the sum total of her achievements.¹³

Serao’s social narratives, particularly her choral studies have been placed by most critics within the school of *verismo*. Among other objectives, the primary leaders of this movement, Verga and Capuana, strove to raise consciousness of the sufferings of the disenfranchised and to stimulate social change. Verga’s depictions of small Sicilian communities in such works as *I Malavoglia* and *Mastro Don Gesualdo* have been described as choral narratives because the spirit of the community is reflected as an organic whole, and the narrative voice is impersonal and detached. In a letter to Luigi Capuana in 1881, Verga stressed the “primacy of the text over the writer and the subsequent necessity of suppressing the authorial persona” (Garofalo 85). It has been suggested by one critic that what is lacking in Verga’s choral novels is the “narrative voice of modern compassionate consciousness” (Parks 143). Verga and Capuana, through their respective “physiological” and “psychological” interpretations of *verismo* reflect economic and sociological crises as perceived and acted upon by men.¹⁴

Furthermore, one of the principal tenets of the *verismo* movement was the idea that “each social class requires its own narrative methodology” (Barnaby 222). Incorporating Gramsci’s idea of the subaltern, it could be said that women writers, a marginalized class, would require its own specific narrative methodology to reflect the sufferings of women. Serao crafts a unique narrative style that incorporates the gritty realism of *verismo* with the descriptive flair of the Naturalists such as Zola and Flaubert. Her methodology

¹³Preface to *Il romanzo della fanciulla*: “io non ho mai voluto e saper voluto esser altro che un fedele, umile cronista della mia memoria.” (5)

¹⁴ These distinctions are from Pellini’s *Naturalismo e verismo* qtd. in Barnaby 222.

deviates from the male *veristi* in her emphasis on memory. The impersonal detachment that gives Verga's *Malavoglia* its rough-hewn masculine spirit of desperation and loss is very different from Serao's compassionate recollection of the sufferings of Neapolitan women. Her narrative voice is not as intrusive as Jane Austen's trademark "gentle reader," but it is a voice that adds warmth and personal identification to the text.

The transmission of Matilde Serao's memory is that of an entire and unique community: of women, Southern Italians, the poor, the marginalized and disenfranchised. This collective memory not only ensures that both the plight and achievements of these minorities will not be forgotten, it serves as a link to future generations, influencing the visions of writers, policy-makers, and everyday people.

Conclusion:

Chora: Matilde Serao's Female Space

Almost forty years ago, in the post-script to her encyclopedic compendium of Matilde Serao, the critic Marie Martin Gistucci posed the question, *est-elle un pionnière?* (511). In *L'oeuvre Romanesque de Matilde Serao*, Gistucci traces Serao's writing career, with cursory consideration of her narratives' principal themes, such as love, death, religion, and *le métier* of writing itself. Gistucci identifies a complex problem: how to classify Serao's achievements, and where to place her in the canon of Italian women writers in particular, and in Western literature in general. This problem stems from Serao's polemical viewpoints and the diversity of her narratives that spanned almost a half a century. Because of the range and sheer volume of Serao's fiction, it is next to impossible to locate her narrative style within any one school of influence. Serao's fiction reveals traces of classical literature, the influence of the *stilnovisti*, elements of Romanticism and French Naturalism, as well as her own adaptation of the Gothic mystery and *verismo*. Serao wrote about the impoverished and the aristocracy with comparable proficiency, and her narratives traverse various regions and cities of Italy as well as other European countries. The one constant in Matilde Serao's fiction is woman.

Serao explores woman as daughter, mother, friend, lover or nun. She explores women at work and at school, as well as in love and in despair. Although Serao's journalistic pieces seem to avow hard-line conservative ideas about woman's place in

society, her fiction proffers strong, capable female characters that often challenge or even transcend traditional norms and expectations.

As such, Matilde Serao analyzes the social conditions and challenges women of her era faced, but also, in a more general sense, she reaffirmed the inherent value and humanity of woman. Through her short stories and novels focusing on social and cultural issues, Serao continues the noble and progressive task of her theoretical forbears such as Christine de Pizan, Lucrezia Marinella, Suor Arcangela Tarabotti, and Mary Wollstonecraft, who also challenged traditional society's archaic notion of woman as an inferior sex and lesser being. But what of Serao's legacy? What literary and cultural endowments has Matilde Serao bequeathed to future generations? The answer lies, in part, in her use of language.

Amidst the accolades and acclaim for her powerful prose, in her day Matilde Serao received some public criticism for her inferior command of Italian. Even her husband, the journalist and newspaper mogul Eduardo Scarfoglio, criticized her deficient linguistic ability publicly (Kroha 2000, 168). However, many other critics agree that Serao's imperfect Italian, with its infusion of Neapolitan sayings and conventions, confers authenticity and sincerity upon her narrative. The use of the vernacular is a hallmark for many nineteenth- and twentieth-century Southern Italian writers such as Verga, Deledda, and DiGiacomo. The desperation and resilience of the Sicilian peasant in *I Malavoglia*, for example, is vivified through some form of rendering of the Sicilian language, and in *La madre*, the Sardinian dialect is the conduit through which Deledda exposes the harshness and isolation of Sardegna. The same result can be found in Serao's fiction, which, by her own admission, was often stylistically flawed in terms of

grammatical inaccuracy and neglect of standard Italian. Serao herself explained the reasons for her use of language, admitting that she had received an incomplete education, and that she was exposed daily to Naples's three different languages. Amoia summarizes Serao's identification of three Neapolitan languages thus:

[. . .] a purist, literary classroom language that "one dreams about [but that] is not real," a dialect that is alive, clear, picturesque, ungrammatical, and nonsyntactical; and a middle level, "bourgeois language" found in newspapers which shears the dialect of its vivacity, attempting to imitate classroom Italian, but never achieving its clarity. (111)

Serao also firmly defended her technique, claiming that her use of the real, living Neapolitan vernacular infused her works with warmth (Amoia 112). Although no in-depth analysis of Serao's use of language has been done, many critics agree with Serao's own authorial assessment.

While Verga's and Deledda's narratives were written in Italian, with the vernacular reserved for the voices of peasants, fishermen, priests, etc., for Serao the influence of the Neapolitan language was not an artistic affectation, nor stylistic evocation. Rather, it lent itself to a natural mode of expression. Furthermore, in her Neapolitan tableaux, Serao relates the socio-economic plight of indomitable heroines by means of raw, compelling language. Overall, Serao chose to convey her stories in a language that can be described as chaotic, rule-transcending, or even subversive. The very nature of women's writing has been postulated by feminist critics as embodying these characteristics of disorder. Perhaps the most notable voice in this debate is Hélène Cixous. Cixous maintains that when women first started to write, they found it difficult, if not impossible, to emulate the great literary masters, who were male. According to

Cixous, rather than fumbling awkwardly with words and conventions that are essentially foreign to them, women have to engender their own genus of writing. In her essay, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” Cixous coins the phrase, *écriture féminine* to describe the task at hand for the woman writer:

We’ve been turned away from our bodies, shamefully taught to ignore them [. . .] Why so few texts? Because so few women have won back their bodies. Women must write through their bodies, they must invent the impregnable language that will wreck partitions, classes, and rhetorics, regulations and codes, they must submerge, cut through, get beyond the ultimate reserve-discourse, including the one that laughs at the very idea of pronouncing the word ‘silence’ . . . Such is the strength of women that, sweeping away syntax, breaking that famous thread (just a tiny little thread, they say) which acts for men as a surrogate umbilical cord. (qtd. in Marks and deCourtviron 256)

In this regard, Amoia states that the “relationship between Matilde Serao and writing is visceral” (112), a statement that would support Cixous’s strategy followed by women writers.

The connection between the woman writer’s language and her physical body has been developed by Kristeva in several of her works, most notably in her *Revolution in Poetic Language*.¹ The most striking example of Kristeva’s conceptualization can be found in her theory of the *chora*, a concept that I believe effectively illuminates the relationship between language and the key motifs in Serao’s narratives.

Kristeva’s theory draws on Plato’s original spatial category from the *Timaeus*, Plato’s dialogue between Socrates and Timaeus, an astronomer and mathematician, on the creation of the “body and soul of the universe and humanity” (Gamard 157). In this dialogue, Timaeus describes a “third nature,” that of the *chora*, to be considered along

¹ The pagination I use for this text is from Kristeva’s text as it is reprinted in Toril Moi’s *Kristeva Reader*.

with the properties of “being” (“immutable, mind”), and “becoming” (“mutable, sensible”), a receptacle that is “eternal and [. . .] [suggests] the space of genesis and intercession” (Gamard 158).

Kristeva points out that Plato is ambiguous as to whether *chora* is a “thing” or a “mode of language” (126); her interpretation incorporates both. To understand Kristeva’s linguistic formulation of *chora*, and its relevance to Serao’s use of language, it is helpful to first examine Kristeva’s basic theory on the *semiotic* and *symbolic* aspects of language. Kristeva identifies the symbolic aspect of language with “authority, order, fathers, repression and control” (Barry 128); it corresponds to Lacan’s conception of the symbolic realm, while the semiotic is defined as maternal, characterized by disorder and “slippage,” a sort of linguistic “unconscious” that is closer to Lacan’s *imaginary* realm (Barry 129).

Peter Barry, examining Lacan’s imaginary realm and Kristeva’s semiotic modality of language concludes thus:

The semiotic is seen as inherently subversive politically, and always threatens the closed symbolic order embodied in such conventions as governments, received cultural values, and the grammar of standard language. (130)

The feminine as well as the politically and grammatically subversive attributes of the semiotic are consistent with feminist critics’ conceptualization of women’s writing in general. It seems logical that Serao’s linguistically anomalous style of writing could be categorized within the aforementioned conceptualization as well. Even more pertinent to Serao’s narrative is Kristeva’s interpretation of the *chora*, a semiotic dimension that is configured in womb-like imagery, as the “mother’s time and space,” that precedes

symbolic language as well as the “father’s time and space” (Birkeland 136). Kristeva identifies the mother’s body as the *chora*’s “ordering principle” (95) stressing that it is “analogous to vocal and kinetic rhythm” (94), and pointing to the example of Mallarmé’s discourse on semiotic rhythm in language in his “Mystery in Literature,” which she summarizes as follows:

Indifferent to language, enigmatic and feminine, this space underlying the written is rhythmic, unfettered, irreducible to its intelligible verbal translation; it is musical, anterior to judgment, but guaranteed by a single guarantee: syntax. (97)

The rhythmic quality of the *chora* calls to mind Serao’s language in her narratives that relate romantic passion. As I explored in the first chapter of my inquiry, Serao emphasizes writing and music as instrumental in stimulating, perceiving, and expressing passionate love, an idea supported by Barthes’s and Kristeva’s theories. In her *Tales of Love* Kristeva, expanding on Barthes’s theory, expresses the virtually ineffable quality of love. The difficulty in expressing love would suggest the need for alternative modes of communication, one of which is music, identified by Kristeva in *Revolution* as a purely semiotic, “non-verbal signifying system” (93).

Kristeva’s emphasis on the rhythmic quality of the *chora* extends to bodily rhythm to include dancing. In her essay on Jackson Pollock, Kristeva suggested etymological links between *chora* and *chorus*, describing *chora* as a “dancing receptacle” (qtd. in Berry 257). If this linguistic link is plausible, it reveals a unifying thread that runs through all of Serao’s narratives. Serao makes explicit reference to the Greek chorus in the preface to *Il romanzo di fanciulla*, and emphasizes the importance of the

choral nature of her *novelle* within that work. Furthermore, Serao uses the word *coro* ten times in the first ten pages of *Suor Giovanna della Croce*, specifically to denote a secluded, exclusively female space, that of the choir loft occupied by the sisters of the *Sepolte vive*. Etymologically, there were originally two words in Greek, *χορός*, meaning “round dance, dance place, or chorus;” and *χώρα*, meaning a “room” or a “place.”² Although the meaning of this latter word, *χώρα* or *chora* may seem limited, some theorists have demonstrated that there may be a connection between the two. Thomas Rickert cites Indra McEwen’s etymological study which “argues that *chōra* also shares affinity with *choron* and *choros*, words first appearing in the written record in the *Iliad*, where they refer to both a dance and a dancing-floor” (254).

According to the *Garzanti dizionario*, the definitions for the word *coro* in Italian include:

[. . .] nell’antico greco, canto e danza con accompagnamento musicale che interrompeva l’azione tragica; Gruppo degli attori che eseguivano il coro; Luogo dove veniva eseguito il coro; [. . .] spazio riservato ai cantori, situato nella parte terminale della navata centrale. (338)

As I established in Chapter two, in *Suor Giovanna*, Serao uses *coro* to denote both the women’s space of the choir loft, as well as using the Greek theatrical device of the crowd-chorus as commentators. *Suor Giovanna* is an innovative narrative in many respects, not the least of which is its perspective which diverges from similar narratives that preceded it. Diderot’s *La religieuse*, Manzoni’s *I promessi sposi*, Enrichetta

² These are brief translations from Frisk’s *Griechisches Etymologisches Wörterbuch*. Frisk identifies *χορός* as “Reigentanz, Chorreigen, Tanzplatz, Tänzerschar, Chor,” and *χώρα* as “Raum, Zwischenraum, Platz, Stellung, Rang, Ort” (1112; 1116).

Caracciolo's *Misteri del chiostro napoletano* and Verga's *Storia di una capinera* are linked by a similar theme: that of the forcing of the veil, or life in the convent as being analogous to a prison sentence. Contrary to the aforementioned literary precedents, Serao opens her nun's story with a reference to Dante's Piccarda in order to bolster her theme of the violation of a nun by being stripped of her veil. For Serao, the cloistered community of women is presented not only as a safe refuge, but as a utopian society, much like the general model of an ideal society posited by Socrates and Timaeus in Plato's dialogue.

The convent as an exclusively protective, female space, as a womb-like "matrix" (Rickert 259) that presents an alternative set of possibilities for women also can be understood within Kristeva's conception of *chora*.³ The life of the nuns in the convent is similar to a child's earliest psychoanalytical phase, where there is complete identification with the mother, and s/he has no needs nor desires, since everything, in the most basic and simple sense, is being provided. However, Serao did not confine this state of spirituality to the representation of nuns, but she demonstrated it as a quality inherent in all of her heroines. Whether or not religion is overtly mentioned within the narratives, Serao's female characters are all projected ultimately towards God, but more immediately through their relationship with their mother, as well as their reverence for the Mother of Christ, the Virgin Mary. In some of Serao's narratives there is an overlap or apparent confusion between these two roles of natural mother and the Mother of God. One of the most poignant examples, as I demonstrated in my third chapter, is that of the characters Bianca Maria in *Il paese di cuccagna*, and Rachele Cabib in *La mano tagliata*, who pray

³ The connection with this Freudian phase of development comes from Lacan's *Imaginary* realm in which "The child lives in an Eden-like realm, free of both desire and deprivation" (Barry 130).

to their own deceased mothers in a manner that replicates a young girl praying to the Virgin Mary. The intersection of maternity with the venerated image of the Virgin Mother is an integral part of Serao's view of motherhood. Her view is consistent with the Virgin Mother's unique nature according to Catholic doctrine. Kristeva cites Dante in her summary of the system of belief underlying the Marian tradition:

“Vergine Madre, figlia del tuo Figlio,” Dante exclaims, thus probably best condensing the gathering of the three feminine functions (daughter-wife-mother) within a totality where they vanish as specific corporealities while retaining their psychological functions. Their bond makes up the basis of unchanging and timeless spirituality, “the set time limit of an eternal design” [*Termine fisso d'eterno consiglio*], as Dante masterfully points out in his *Divine Comedy*. (*Tales of Love* 243-44)

As I cited previously, Kristeva's conception of *chora* is that of a maternal nature.

Philippa Berry has likened the “maternal origin” of Kristeva's *chora* to that of Plato's in the sense of its liminality:

It is on the borderline between all polarities: between being and nothing, idealism and materialism, sacred and profane, silence and language. Moreover, she shows that this mysterious, negative ‘beginning’ is vitally related to the present as well as to the future. [. . .] Kristeva's elaboration of *chora*'s relationship to representation describes it as a heterogeneous and disruptive ‘semiotic’ dimension upon which language obscurely depends; yet the tendency of *chora* is always to undermine the stability of the subject within signification. Thereby it bears testimony to the frequent inadequacies of language as a direct means of communication, reminding the decentred speaker of other, speechless modes of expression. (255)

The primary characteristics of Kristeva's semiotic *chora* — bodily rhythm, repetition, liminality, and alternative modes of expression — are also attributes of collective and bodily social memory. Serao's choral studies feature religious and

commemorative ceremonies that evoke strong, lasting sensory images through food, dance, and music. The end result is a vivid and animated account of what life was like for young women in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century in Southern Italy. Serao's invocation of collective or social memory in her *novelle corali* as well as in her regional studies (*Sterminator Vesevo*, *San Gennaro*, *Il ventre di Napoli*) is also significant because it gives a voice to the countless poor and illiterate Neapolitans who were not capable of transcribing their own accounts of momentous events such as the eruptions of Mount Vesuvius. Serao frequently infuses these accounts with Neapolitan phrases and sayings, thus enhancing their credibility.

In the final analysis, Serao's use of language will prove to be an invaluable tool in her most momentous role: the "organic intellectual," to use Gramsci's term. Serao's "strategic" use of language (Ruberto 17), her fluid ease in moving between social narratives and aristocratic romances, and her focus on the disenfranchised — the poor, the southern Italian, and the nineteenth- and twentieth-century-woman — all conflate to make Matilde Serao a bridge between the classes, and an interpreter for both sides. Serao's role as oppositional historian, or "organic intellectual," set her apart from her contemporaries and predecessors.

To answer Gistucci's question that I posed at the beginning of this inquiry, yes, Matilde Serao was a pioneer. Her innovations in style, language and diversity of themes charted a new course in the canon of Italian women writers. As for Serao's literary descendants, Gistucci cites Amelia Roselli and Maria Messina (517). Salsini cites Alba de Céspedes as an heir to the Serao literary legacy for her portraits of female friendships and Dacia Maraini as continuing Serao's analysis of female sexuality and identity (152).

To the aforementioned literary descendents to Matilde Serao I would add one more recent and appropriate example. In 2003, Elena Gianini Belotti published, *Prima della quiete*, a novel about the brutal and miserable lives of teachers in late nineteenth-century Southern Italy. Belotti's historical research includes Serao, who fictionalized this plight in the postscript to "Scuola normale femminile," and chronicled a tragic case of a young teacher who committed suicide in her 1886 article, "Come muoiono le maestre" (Jeannot 232). Clearly this modern example of Serao's enduring influence bolsters her role as a cultural and very effective oppositional historian, by giving a voice to the disenfranchised and forgotten subsectors of society.

It is important to note, however, that Serao's influence and appeal are neither limited to the provincial boundaries of Naples, nor relevant only within the confines of Italian literature. Fanning, for example, has suggested that Serao's study of the "vulnerability of the self" is anticipatory of contemporary feminist British writers Doris Lessing and Margaret Atwood (275). Serao's analysis of female friendships, her celebration and reverence of the mother-daughter bond, and her cautionary tales of the destruction of identity through passion are themes that sociologists and psychologists continue to analyze today. As a novelist and social chronicler, Serao's works contain universal motifs that encourage women writers, as well as readers, to explore the whole concept of female identity further and beyond her own timely, perspicacious, and sympathetic analyses.

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