NEGOTIATING MOTHERHOOD IN THE WORKS OF LAUDOMIA BONANNI

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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The purpose of this dissertation is to analyze the notion of the maternal in the works of Laudomia Bonannni. I have focused on three of Bonannni’s texts for this purpose: a collection of three short stories entitled Il fosso, and the novels L’imputata and Le droghe. In my analysis, I demonstrate how her writing provides a voice for women and their struggle to survive as mothers and wives in postwar Italy. While examining these issues, I also consider the influence of patriarchal institutions in shaping the status of motherhood in post-World War II Italy and how these cultural and social constraints are portrayed in her works. My research leads to significant conclusions regarding intertextual relationships in Bonannni’s works and her commitment to social critique. In the end, I claim that Laudomia Bonannni, despite her insistence that she is not affiliated with any feminist movement, emerges as a true champion of women’s rights, particularly those of mothers.
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DEDICATION

To my beloved parents

Dr. Vincent J. Frallicciardi

Signora Rosa Capuano Frallicciardi

and

Dr. Regina Soria
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INTRODUCTION

Much of the existing academic research concerning Bonanni focuses on the realistic aspects of her work. In a style reminiscent of verismo, she records the misery and misfortune of Abruzzo’s poorest people with sharp, often crude images and use of realistic language. My investigation focuses on the representation of motherhood in her works. She portrays women as survivors who are faced with the difficult task of rebuilding the family unit. Of these women Lombardi writes:

In ogni racconto le donne hanno un ruolo di primo piano: di tutte le età e di tutte le condizioni, le donne popolano la scena, tengono le fila della lotta contro le distruzioni della guerra; il loro legame con la vita è sotterraneo e tenace, quasi un patto con la legge della sopravvivenza di cui esse sono lo strumento e il tramite. (425)

In her classic study of motherhood and the mothering experience, *Of Woman Born*, Adrienne Rich discusses two distinct experiences of motherhood. She argues that motherhood is both an institution created by a patriarchal society and a relationship that is the natural result of giving birth and caring for a child (13). In the earliest societies, the act of childbirth was considered a mysterious process governed by women, and it was the cause of awe and fascination in men. The capacity of the female of the species to create life was viewed as a potential for power. This resulting conflict of power was resolved by placing womankind in a powerless position. The work of mothering soon became a type of enforced labor, demeaning and uncompensated. By gaining
control over the female reproductive capacities, the balance of power shifted, thus eliminating the threat posed by the female procreative power.

In my analysis of these texts, I look at the various forms of mothering and how women cope with the demands placed upon them as mothers. The Bonannian mother is dedicated, hard working, and seemingly indefatigable. She is called upon not only to care for her young, but at times, to manage financial affairs, comfort those who grieve, bury loved ones, and offer emotional support. These mothers are able to seek solutions for everyday problems, employing whatever means available to them within their limited capacities. Within this framework, I analyze a vast range of interpersonal relationships centered on motherhood.

Chapter 1

In chapter 1 I examine three short stories from the collections Il fosso and Palma e sorelle. The first story, “Il fosso,” recounts the tale of a young foundling, Colomba, and her journey as wife and mother. Written in the third-person narrative, Colomba’s story provides an example of the status of women during this period in Italy. Colomba accepts her fate, that is, a life of poverty and misery, which is exacerbated by the fact that she is a woman. She faces many restrictions related to her gender, including the absence of control over the number of her pregnancies, the lack of formal education, and an enforced reliance on her husband for financial support. This story foregrounds several significant topics, which are developed throughout the Bonannian texts. These
include the preference given to the male child, the failure of the male head of household to function successfully as provider, and the superior inner strength of women.

Two major Bonannian themes, those of childlessness and the mother-son bond, are the focus of “Il mostro.” This is the story of an unmarried aunt who visits her sister and her family. Zia Berenice is single by choice and has devoted her life to the study of child behavior. Her claims as expert in the field are challenged when she encounters the reality of raising a child through witnessing the coming of age of her nephew Nino. As Nino moves from childhood to adolescence, both Berenice and her sister, Paola, are blind to his transformations. His emerging masculinity both attracts and frightens the women, who do not know how to react to this natural process: they find Nino’s masculinity monstrous, as the title demonstrates. This story is especially significant for its presentation of mothering from the point of view of a childless woman and for the introduction of the theme of the mother-son bond, developed more extensively in later novels. Bonanni’s interest and focus on the mother-son bond and male adolescence anticipate recent feminist studies in this area.

The third and final section of the chapter consists of a close textual reading of the short story “Palma.” Palmina is a young girl traumatized by several life events, including the death of her mother, her father’s sudden decision that she marry, and his selection of a spouse for her. The young woman learns quickly that her ability to make personal choices is thwarted. In this section I discuss the role that patriarchy plays in silencing women’s voices.
Palma is abused on her wedding night, detests her illiterate and uncouth husband, and is mostly controlled by her domineering father. In analyzing the maternal preference for the son over the daughter, I argue that patriarchy informs the mother’s emotional reaction to the sex of her child. These three short stories contain the seeds of the major Bonannian motifs that are developed throughout the course of her writing career.

Chapter 2

With the publication of L’imputata, which was awarded the Viareggio prize, Bonanni establishes herself as a promising Italian author. Chapter 2 is devoted to a detailed discussion of the characters and themes of this novel. The plot revolves around the investigation of a murder, allegedly committed by a youth, Gianni Falcone. However, the story is much more than a murder mystery as it details the lives of the working-class people living in a crowded tenement in the Abruzzi region. My analysis is divided into three sections, highlighting the various themes of the narrative. A close textual reading reveals the feminist themes incorporated into the fabric of the novel. Bonanni refused to be associated with any feminist movement or group, but I argue that her concern for women, in particular for mothers, places her among the foremost feminists.

In my discussion I refer to Victoria DeGrazia’s seminal study of women during the Fascist era and argue that the oppressive system that dominated women extended into the next decade. I explore themes such as the prohibition of birth control, the idealization of motherhood, childlessness, infanticide, aging,
male adolescent sexual awareness, and the mother-son bond. I note that Bonanni anticipates the concept of female bonding, which later will be known as affidamento or entrustment. In this context the war memories affect all the residents, but in particular, the children.

Finally, I note that the title of the novel, which is written in the feminine singular form, alludes not to Gianni, accused of murder, but to some other person or responsible party. I argue that Bonanni, using inspector Lanti as her mouthpiece, indicts the paralyzing and omnipresent fear that colors the daily lives of the tenets.

Chapter 3

_Le droghe_ (Bompiani 1982) was the last work Bonanni published and is the second of her novels to be written in the first-person narrative. The story, set in the 1970s, chronicles a mother’s desperate and relentless attempts to save her son from self-destruction through the use of drugs and alcohol.

A close analysis of the text reveals the persistence of many Bonannian themes, such as the negative depiction of the weak or absent husband, male adolescence, sex education and birth control, childlessness, and the mother-son bond. New to this later work are the themes of non-biological mothering, incest, homosexuality, drug addiction, and women’s writing. Giulia, the protagonist, is a well-educated non-biological mother, who successfully manages both her career as a schoolteacher and her responsibilities as mother and wife.
Bonanni, I argue, is a visionary in her presentation of the mother-son bond from the mother’s point of view. I also note her daring in treating the complex issues of incest and homosexuality—topics that were considered taboo and interpreted by many feminists as threats to patriarchy.
CHAPTER 1: WOMEN AND MOTHERS: A REALISTIC PRESENTATION

Il fosso

The collection of short stories entitled Il fosso, published in 1949 by Bompiani, was the first publication of Laudomia Bonanni’s mature writing period.1 The opening story with the same title received the Strega Prize, “Amici della domenica,” an award given to an unpublished author. The entire collection was later awarded the Bagutta prize. The stories included in this collection are “Il fosso,” “Il mostro,” “Messa funebre,” and “Seme.” Their setting is the Abruzzi region where Bonanni worked and lived. Her experience as a teacher and later as a judge provided her with the raw material to write. Bonanni recorded the misery and abject poverty of the poorest inhabitants of the region with a sharp, realistic style. She presents their lives in minute detail, detail that is often disturbing, indelicate, and heart wrenching. Leaving nothing to the imagination, she insists on uncovering the suffering and anguish of this people. Indeed, her vision elicits an emotional sincerity that defies any attempt to whitewash or sanitize the reality she is compelled to record. She evokes a profound response that leaves the reader disquieted and agitated.

In the analysis of three selected short stories (written in the third-person narrative), I have discovered a number of significant stylistic features. Two of the stories are told from the point of view of the protagonists, who are biological

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1 Bonanni’s writing career began in 1925 with the publication of Storie tragiche della montagna. Between 1925 and 1949 she published a number of children’s books, and her first association with Bompiani was in 1939 with the publication of Men.
mothers, while the story “Il mostro” is presented from the viewpoint of the maternal aunt. This shift in perspective points to the fact that mothering is not limited to biological constraints. The mother-child relationship is seen not from the daughter’s or son’s perspective, but from that of the mother. In particular, the bond between mother and son takes center stage in many of Bonanni’s stories, such as *L'imputata* and *Le droghe*.

Of particular interest is also the authorial intervention in the narrative in the form of maxims, proverbs, and commentaries expressed by the women of the town, often referred to as “le donne.” These women provide the author with a voice to elicit the reader’s awareness on topics that include female psychology, the customs and culture of Bonanni’s native Abruzzi, and the political and economic situation in Fascist and wartime Italy. These “donne” have been likened to a Greek chorus in Olga Lombardi’s article “Laudomia Bonanni” (8: 7055). They are the voice of wisdom, a wisdom that represents centuries of experience handed down by word of mouth. They observe everything and respond to everyday situations. In a sense, they are the “foremothers” of this society. Another significant feature is Bonanni’s avid lifetime interest in the flora and fauna of her native Abruzzi. The many references to the plants, flowers, animals, and landscapes in her writings provide ample material for an ecocritical approach to her works.² And last, upon close

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² In her introduction to a collection of Bonanni’s letters entitled, *Epistolario*, Fausta Samaritani notes: “L’interesse per la botanica non è marginale nella Bonanni, che agli alberi ha dedicato alcuni elzeviri. . . Un analogo elenco di elzeviri si potrebbe fare per verificare l’interesse della Bonanni per la gastronomia, per la zoologia, per i paesaggi campestri montani e cittadini, per gli incontri fortuiti in strada su treni e autobus, per la vita nelle città italiane, per la superstizione e la magia” (qtd. in Samaritani 17-18 n 8).
examination of the texts, many feminist themes become apparent, such as the female body, birth control, breastfeeding, female sexuality, women as property, women and work, choice of profession, financial affairs, immigration issues, mothering, and the mother-son bond. Women become the main protagonists in the patriarchal drama of Bonanni’s stories. They indeed move From Margins to Mainstream (Lazzaro-Weis).

“Il fosso”

The first story, “Il fosso,” chronicles the life of a young girl, a foundling, who resides in a local convent. The nuns name the child Colomba, in honor of the Holy Spirit. Indeed, as the story line progresses, one wonders if a unique strength of spirit might have been guiding this woman throughout her life as she confronts one misfortune after another. In the opening scene, Colomba is on her way to the Falalani home to work in their tavern. She arrives with almost no baggage, just a small sack with some personal items. Wearing a gray pleated dress, the slight woman, who is twenty years old, seems much younger. This brief physical description is significant in that, later in the story, this wisp of a woman exemplifies a mother with unreserved strength and devotion to her family in the face of adversity. Colomba’s magnificent spirit contradicts her delicate figure. In spite of her petite body, she is surprisingly industrious and competent: “Era lesta e alacre, niente ciarliera, forastica anzi” (7).

The name Colomba (“Dove”) evokes an image of purity and whiteness, which sharply contrasts her black hair and dark eyes. She is soon accepted by whoever
meets her, and she is treated with the greatest courtesy. Colombina, as she comes to
be known, was never thought to be a candidate for marriage. One can image Signora Falalani’s surprise when one day a poor, young farmer comes asking for
Colombina’s hand. Irritated by the request, Signora Falalani sends him to the
convent for permission to marry, convinced that it would never be granted. Quite
intimidated but nevertheless determined, the young suitor appears before Mother
Superior, who questions him thoroughly. In spite of his extreme poverty, the farmer
is convinced that he can provide for his future wife: “Egli balbettò che aveva un
tetto, l’orto, le braccia, poteva custodirla e nutrirla” (9). In the end, she is persuaded
by his insistence: “La prendo lo stesso” (10). And so one day, at dawn, they marry. At
the local tavern they are toasted: “Figli maschi, figli maschi!”

The ideal patriarchal wish is a family of many sons. Adrienne Rich, in her
landmark study of motherhood, Of Woman Born, tells us that in patriarchy the
mother exists for one reason: “to bear and nourish the son” (188). It is upon the son
that all hopes and desires for the future are heaped. The son guarantees the
continuation of the bloodline and the family name and thus perpetuates the male
desire for immortality (Rich 99). Yet as we move through the story, we learn that of
the two, Colomba and her husband Titta, she is the strongest, suggesting that
Bonanni is undermining current beliefs. She depicts mothers as women of strength,
yet acknowledges society’s preference for the male child. Often the daughters are
presented as weak and are despised by their mothers for this presumed weakness.
These instances indicate Bonanni’s keen awareness of a society that places the male
in a position of power over the female and of the female’s inability to break free of
this hold. It is a power struggle in which the women of any patriarchal society always lose. Although Bonanni denied any association with feminism, her focus on women and, in particular, mothers, strongly suggests that she had observed their personal drama.³ The patriarchal wish for many sons highlights the prevailing conviction that men will fare better in society and that the male is the empowered individual, thus rendering the female voiceless and powerless. Nevertheless, the men in Bonanni’s world are not the privileged sex, as they do not have inner fortitude and are emotionally needy. In fact, their weakness and ineptitude are constantly stressed. Without question, the women are the focus of her stories.

After the toast, the newlyweds leave with Titta’s mule. He walks in front of her, Colomba trailing behind in her place of submission, until they reach their home: “La casa—un cubo di sassi soprammessi, con pochiembrici addosso che radevano quasi il sentiero—era di tutta di sotto, bisognò scendere per entrarvi” (Bonanni 11). This underground hovel is their new home.⁴ The one-room structure has only one window, a small fireplace, a straw bed, and an earthen floor covered with bran.

The wedded pair feasts on a meager supper of bread and cheese and a gift of a sweet ricotta cheese from a neighbor. As night falls, Colomba goes to the window and is followed by Titta. He clumsily embraces her, almost imprisoning her with the weight of his body. There the marriage is unceremoniously consummated. Titta

³ Of Bonanni’s feminism, Fiorani writes: “Lei stessa non si riteneva una femminista nell’accezione comune” (50).
⁴ In a recent study entitled “Laudomia Bonanni, Il fosso e Palma: il tragico della vita,” Giorgio Bàrberi Squarotti describes this space: “È il buco scatologico del mondo, dove anche le piante sono deformi e confuse, ma è vero che il sambuco brutto e scerpato a primavera fa sbocciare i suoi fiori candidi, a dimostrazione che la vita combatte e vince contro l’inverno, la violenza della ragazzaglia, l’arsura dell’estate” (261).
claims what is rightfully his—his wife’s virginal body: “Non l’aveva ancora toccata mai” (12). Colomba is quickly impregnated and loses her child one day while working the fields: “Il primo frutto la Colomba lo scodellò, immaturo, nei campi della parrocchia, ove stava a mondare il grano con le altre, frammezzo ai papaveri che le avevano dato la vertigine” (13). Adrienne Rich notes that, “historically, woman have borne and raised children while doing their share of necessary productive labor, as a matter of course” (44). Like generations of mothers before them, Colomba and her Abruzzi sisters never considered any option open to them other than bearing and nurturing children and working simultaneously for survival.

The miscarriage does not surprise the women of the community. Colomba’s small body does not seem fit for field labor, much less for childbearing. Soon the townsfolk begin to call her “la Monachicchia,” “the tiny nun.” As a dutiful young wife, she devotes herself to household chores and working at the Falalani tavern. Colomba refuses monetary compensation, preferring instead odds and ends and leftover food that both she and Titta consume for their evening meal. Sometimes, in the evening they walk home arm in arm. This is their happiest time, for even the poor can partake of the pleasures of a joyful moment: “Fu la loro stagione felice: quella, se Dio vuole, che tocca a tutti: ai poveri non più d’una volta, ma non per questo se la godono meno, anzi” (14). They work hard, but the money is never enough. Over the years, Colomba finds ways to acquire the most necessary household goods to survive, but she never realizes her dream to buy a decent set of sheets. The blame for their miserable condition is placed on Titta. Titta, who had nothing, had no business taking a wife he could not afford. But they do not seem to
notice. He, the simpleton who works like a mule, and she, the rustic and reserved woman, make an unusual couple.

Often Colomba would sit facing the window gazing at the ditch: “e stette per mezza giornate a rimirare il fosso. Cosí le donne chiamavano quel che Titta chiamava orto” (16). This obscure hole in the earth is home to Titta and Colomba in spite of its lack of sunshine, its inability to grow much, and its use as a common dumpsite. Little by little, Colomba works until she has cleaned it up as best she can. Nevertheless, a prevailing sense of hopelessness fills the air: “Neanche di sole, ce n’è per tutti a questo mondo, ben si sa: ma certa gente non vuole accorgersi che il sole non l’arriva” (17).

Colomba finds herself pregnant again, and as her second pregnancy progresses she must stop working the fields to avoid another miscarriage. Her survival skills are put to the test as she discovers alternate ways to earn money. These skills are a sign of her cleverness when she decides to work for the few wealthy families in town. “S’ingegnò allora d’entrare nelle case dei ricchi” (17). One day she gives birth to a child, a daughter, alone. But the town women become aware of this and are there to help and give support. The theme of female bonding in times of need is introduced here and maintains a constant presence throughout Bonanni’s works. It is the women who share common experiences, observe everything, give advice, pass judgment, and offer assistance. They represent the female voice in a patriarchal society that has often silenced women’s voices. “Le donne,” like the war, are ever present, not only in these stories, but throughout Bonanni’s texts. This “coro femminile” (Lombardi 7055), is an integral part of the lives of these people.
The women are the collective voice that documents the events and makes comments as the action proceeds.\footnote{It is interesting to note the use of this same device in the literary movement known as verismo. (See Verga’s \textit{I malavoglia}.) Bonanni, however, selects women’s voices as the observers and commentators.} Nothing escapes their notice: “Ma si sa che, in paese, certi avvenimenti non sfuggono al fiuto delle donne: subito erano accorse e l’assistevano” (17). Nevertheless, upon completing their tasks and organizing everything, the women leave, noting that “una simile miseria non si era mai vista” (18). Indeed, Titta and Colomba were so poor and miserable that they did not even have cloths or rags to clean the blood from the delivery or to wrap the child in. “Ah! no, non si comincia da nulla la famiglia” (18). Once again it is the voice of “le donne,” the wisdom of the community of women, who pass judgment upon these two miserable creatures.

Unable to control her reproductive capacities, Colomba has fourteen pregnancies, but only one daughter and one son survive. All the while, she continues to work wherever she can—in the fields, in the tavern, or in the homes of the wealthy. Once they are weaned, she leaves the children alone in the garden. Unattended, they grow up wild and dirty and are often hungry. Only when Colomba is home is she able to care for them. Then little Onorina and Innocenzo are spotlessly clean, and all marvel as to how well kept they are under the different circumstances.

Motherhood as an institution obliges Colomba to care for her children, keep up their humble home, prepare meals, and provide clothing, all while also working outside the home. In postwar Italy, the mother was expected to bear children and
also work. Furthermore, Colomba does not have any control whatsoever over her reproductive capacities. In a period of twenty years, Colomba is always seen either pregnant or carrying an infant bundled up to her. After the two surviving children, she had a child yearly—all of whom died: “Invece ne faceva uno l’anno, le morivano tutti” (21). Numerous pregnancies were not unusual during this period in Italy. In fact, Titta’s parents had ten children with only one surviving. But Titta and Colomba resign themselves to their destiny. In the beginning, the deaths of their infants are traumatic: “Il babbo stava ritto in piedi, la mamma piangeva” (22). But soon the deaths no longer shock them: “Ma poi si abituarono, neanche la madre piangeva piú” (22). At work here are the social and economic constructs that governed women’s bodies and the survival of their offspring. In this backward and mostly illiterate Abruzzi society, the inability to control the number of pregnancies and the lack of proper nutrition led not only to numerous pregnancies, but also to a high mortality rate for both mothers and infants. The notion that the female body was destined to reproduce at any cost was confirmed in both cultural and religious terms.

One day, while walking and carrying one of her infants bundled to her chest, Colomba encounters the town priest. It is her own desperate situation that prompts her to ask him if it isn’t a sin to have so many children. In spite of her ignorance and her lack of education, Colomba instinctively understands that bringing forth more children into their world of abject poverty and misery, and to an existence of suffering and dying, is inherently and morally wrong. The priest, normally a gruff and stern type, gently reproaches her. He seems to understand her predicament but
is unable to assist her: “S’ebbe un amorevole rimbrotto, esortazioni stranamente gentili per quel buonuomo così impetuoso e collerico” (26).

For families to even consider any form of birth control, except perhaps abstinence, would have been unthinkable in Mussolini's Italy. The Fascist ideology promoted motherhood as the highest and most honorable participation in the service of the Italian nation, which can be interpreted as an extreme form of nationalism and as the silencing of the female voice. In 1932 Mussolini proclaims, “La donna deve obbidire . . . La mia opinione della sua parte nello Stato è in opposizione ad ogni femminismo” (qtd. in Pickering-Iazzi 78).

Fascist Italy was a dire and oppressive place to live for all Italians, but particularly for women. Violence and aggression toward any form of dissent was condoned. Journalists were heavily restricted and censored. Of particular interest is Mussolini’s alliance with the Catholic Church. Well aware of the need to have the support of the church, Mussolini made a concentrated effort to align himself with the Pope. To begin with, he had his marriage sanctified by the Church and his children baptized. Moreover, as Denis Mack-Smith states in his biography of Mussolini, “[I]t greatly pleased the Vatican when he outlawed freemasonry, exempted the clergy from taxation, and used public funds to save Catholic banks from collapse” (159). The Church also approved of restricting any kind of Protestant missionary work and even refused to allow a mosque to be built in Rome (159).

Most notable was the Church’s cooperation with Mussolini’s restrictions concerning women. Convinced that Italy’s population needed a boost in order to contend as a world power, Mussolini urged families to produce more children. His
goal was to encourage an increase in the birth rate and thus allow Italy to compete with other nations: “In a moment of optimism, he told parliament that the birth rate must be doubled . . . [and] in 1927 a precise target was specified of raising the Italian population from 40 million to 60 million in the next 25 years” (160). Interestingly, the birth rates did not rise but actually fell. Nevertheless, his policy restricted the number of women in the work force, taxed anyone whose celibacy was not justified, and taxed childless marriages. Businesses discriminated by giving hiring preferences to men with families. Divorce was out of the question, as was birth control. Yet the abortion rate remained as high as 30%. Restrictions were placed on women’s dress code, on dancing, and on women’s participation in sports. Both Mussolini and the Vatican were opposed to women partaking in any so-called “masculinized” activities (160-61). Without question, Mussolini and Fascist ideology did much to perpetuate patriarchal attitudes and practices in Italy while at the same time crushing feminism as a movement.

Colomba struggles to survive in this hostile, anti-feminist, and oppressive environment. She is not able to care for her children as her days are consumed with work. To survive is to work. As long as her children are nursing, she can keep them with her, but once they are weaned she is forced to leave them on their own in the garden. In a long descriptive passage, forecasting eco-writing, the children become one with their natural environment.6 Left on their own, they find survival in the

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6 In a study by Karen Raber entitled “Recent Ecocritical Studies of English Renaissance Literature,” ecocriticism is defined as “the study of the relationship between literary and cultural artifacts and the natural environment” (151). A study of Bonanni’s extensive knowledge of the flora and fauna of her native Abruzzi and
elements of nature. Evident here is Bonanni’s interest in botany and all aspects of
the fauna and flora of her native Abruzzi. Throughout her works she refers to
various plants and other natural elements, linking them often to her subjects. In this
case, the children join in the natural rhythm of their environment in what seems to
be the re-creation of a pagan ritual:

Trascorrevano le ore a ruzzare, erano come cuccioli smaniosi. Pareva
animarli una vitalità roteante, il giro vorticoso d’una breve carica meccanica,
che, al suo acme, prendeva del frenetico: invilucchiato il capo d’erba e
pagliuche, tints in viso di succhi vegetali, come piccoli coribanti ballavano
sui piedi nudi attorno alla pecora saltabecante. (23)

When they have exhausted their energy, the children drop off to sleep wherever
they happen to be, at the foot of a chestnut tree or by the berry bushes. The garden
is their home: “Erano verdognoli e smilzi come pianticelle essi stessi, con gli
occhiolini lustri della madre” (23).

Colomba, in an attempt to provide for all aspects of childrearing, finally
enrolls her children in school. Onorina at age nine and Innocenzo at seven finally
begin their early formal education. The experience proves to be an unforgettable
one for their teacher. The only language these wayward children understand is that
of Mother Nature. They are incapable of formulating any abstract ideas or of sitting
still to listen to their lessons. Indeed communication between them and their
teacher proves fruitless: “Un’altra lingua, infatti, parlava, poco essendovi
d’intelligibile per essi ove non fosse natura, pura e semplice e selvatica natura” (24).

The two children are like wild animals in the classroom. Unfocused and restless,
they do not have the slightest concept of where they are and what they are doing

the relationship with her characters and settings is an area of research that is
lacking and of much interest.
there. Despite the fact that they are like little animals (the narrator likens them to a lizard and a snake) and that they are disruptive in the classroom, the young teacher is remorseful at any attempt to punish them, because “era in loro qualcosa di così fragile e inconsistente che batterli non si poteva, solo sbalordire di tanto sperpero vitale in così grame esistenze” (25).

Colomba as the dutiful mother goes to the school to learn of her children’s progress. Sadly the teacher cannot give her any encouraging news. Yet she finds both mother and children endearing in their innocence, and pitiful in their miserable economic situation. The bodily description of the children presents them as physical opposites. The girl is as thin as a rail and has an almost sickly appearance. The boy is robust, the picture of health. Their complexions can be seen as reflecting the male/female binary construct of their positions in society. The male is strong, full of energy, has all the advantages, and is in a position of power, while the woman is weak, anemic, confined to the home, and powerless. This physical portrait provides an early indication of the success and survival of the two children. To the young teacher their presence is disturbing, and their hunger, misery, and poverty appear overwhelming:

Perché scoprí allora la miseria, in quei due passerini sempre avidi, che prendevano tutto, che abboccavano bramosamente ogni cibo, che si leccavano le labbra dopo la cucchiata nauseabonda dell’olio di fegato, all’inusitato sapore di pesce e condimento. (25-26)

Not surprisingly, the school experience is a source of agitation for Colomba. It fills her with distress and anxiety: “Le si agitavano in capo troppi pensieri e l’angustia pei figli diventò uno spino confitto: se lo sentiva, entro il cuore, pungere” (26). Seeing her children compared to their peers in school forces her to come to the
realization that they are very different. She understands that they can never be assimilated into that educational system. As the narrator comments, they are like lilies of the field that do not bloom under the same sky: “Gigli del campo erano chiamati i suoi bambinicchi sotto un cielo inclemente, non fiorivano loro adosso quei concetti variopinti” (26).

Watching her children study is also a painful experience. Onorina never learns to read, and this is a cause for disgrace. Despite this, she remains the apple of her father’s eye. On the other hand, the boy does manage to learn something. He can read slowly, pronouncing or spelling out the letters. It is interesting to note the relationships forming between father and daughter and between mother and son. Colomba’s maternal response to her children’s inability to learn is realistic and sobering: “Per indomabili che fossero le sue ambizioni materne, erano pur consce abbastanza da soverchiarle il senso d’incongruenza d’un tale sterile sforzo” (27). To the contrary, Titta, totally illiterate himself, cannot understand the value of learning to read: “A che gli giova?” (27). Colomba realizes the futility of the situation, but as a mother who desires better for her children, she cannot relinquish the hope of an education and perhaps an improved life condition for them. Her concerns for her children dominate her thoughts: she understands that education is the key that will release them from a life of misery and poverty. Eventually, using her womanly skills, she succeeds in persuading Titta to allow them to continue their schooling: “le donne sono esseri inappagabili e subito ti riscuotono se t’incanti un poco” (28). Bonanni here posits the ability to persuade as a female characteristic that can be seen as a way to assert some control in situations in which a woman might
otherwise be powerless. In a patriarchal society in which the male as father and husband has the final word, this trait develops out of the necessity to assert a female voice and to participate to some degree in decision-making.

The children eventually follow pre-selected paths according to their gender: “La femmina perse un poco per volta il gusto di vagabondare, stette piú in casa, imparò a tirar l’ago. Innocenzo divenne un omicciolo indaffarato, rivelava in un suo modo utilitario la industriosità materna” (28). Innocenzo finds all creative ways to earn money, including making shoes out of pork rinds: “Insomma, seppe lucrare di tutto” (29).

One day Onorina becomes ill with a fever. The doctor is called, but upon seeing Colomba pregnant yet another time, he is more concerned for her health than for the child. The doctor places the blame for Colomba’s many pregnancies on her husband and advises him to consider abstinence: “Sarebbe ora di smetterla, eh galantuomo!” (30). Titta is bewildered and wonders if he is truly responsible. Perhaps Bonanni uses this episode to point a finger at the Italian society’s barring of couples from using any form of birth control. Indeed, in Fascist Italy, Mussolini urged women to have large families with little or no regard for their health. Titta, thinking he is to blame, turns pale with fear. In his ignorance he assumes that he has the right to be with his wife and is not aware that in satisfying his sexual needs he is at the same time compromising his wife’s health. The sudden realization upon hearing his doctor’s comment and understanding its implications compels Titta to face a reality for which he was not prepared. This is a life-changing moment for him and, not knowing how to proceed, he begins to spend less and less time at home and
takes to drinking. Bonanni here clearly faults a society that had refused to consider
the rights of women; in her encompassing view, both males and females are victims.
Colomba begins to send her son to look after his father, and Innocenzo takes very
good care of him: “gli parlava come a un orso ammaestrato, traendoselo appresso e
sbandando con lui” (31). It is interesting to note once again the link to animal life;
that is, to the flora and fauna of Bonanni’s native Abruzzi.

Winter comes. It is cold and snowing heavily. Families are safe in their homes
while wolves are driven out of their dens looking for food. In their hovel, Colomba
and her family bury themselves under their blankets in an effort to save wood that
might be used for fire and light. Colomba is once more expecting a child. But her
thoughts, as well as Titta’s, are focused on their daughter. As they are unable to
provide the necessary medical care for her, Onorina has been entrusted to a young
nun. Giving her up was a very traumatic experience, and at this time of worry and
hardship, Colomba delivers a stillborn child: “Stavolta le comari raccolsero un
morticino” (32). Quite clearly the mother and father were unable to stop the process
and prevent further pregnancies. They were trapped in a system that was not
capable of assisting them in any kind of planned parenthood. Even the concept was a
taboo topic, and any form of permissible birth control was not to be a reality until
decades later. Women were powerless to limit the number of children they bore. In
the chapter entitled The ‘Sacred Calling’ in Of Woman Born,” Rich discusses the
notion of motherhood and women’s work in the home: “The real, depleting burdens
of motherhood were physical: the toll of continual pregnancies, the drain of constant
childbearing and nursing” (48). Women like Colomba were victims of a patriarchal institution that controlled every aspect of their reproductive capacities.

Years of hard physical labor, numerous pregnancies, lack of proper nutrition, and the psychological toll of sending her daughter away result in a sharp decline in Colomba’s health: “Vederla ridotta così, questa donnina solerte, rabbuia l’anima: eccola che pare ormai un tizzoncino spento, non ha piú un luccicore né all’occhio né in bocca, la granitura fina dei denti se n’è andata di già” (32). But by summer she regains her strength, and her neighbors are delighted to see her by the fountain. Indeed, Colomba’s spirits are revived, due largely to a letter she receives from the young nun informing her that her daughter would be returning home soon, and also due to the fact that Innocenzo had found work with his father. As Colomba cannot read, she has a friend read her the letter and then memorizes it: “La Colomba si beveva le parole” (33). But one phrase was disconcerting, with its attention to “un piccolo inconveniente.” They soon learn that their daughter, for reasons that are never made clear, returns home with a facial deformity.

When Titta goes to the train station to pick up his daughter, he sees a young girl whom he does not recognize: “pareva e non pareva” (34). The girl smiles at him, but he is sure this could not possibly be his beloved Onorina. He recognizes her at the sound of her laugh. Her deformed face throws the poor man over the edge and “si mise a ridacchiare come fra sé” (34). Soon the children begin taunting Onorina, calling her “Facciatorta” (34). Colomba’s reaction in defending her daughter is fierce: “Ma che vipera quella Colomba, che diavola di Monachicchia, nessuno avrebbe creduto potesse tirar fuori una lingua consimile, menar financo le mani,
pigliarsela così calda da buttar sassi alla cieca nel mucchio dei ragazzi” (34).

Colomba does not hesitate to use physical violence in order to protect her child. The couple finally decides to send their daughter to live with a widow to earn her keep as a personal maid.

Then one day, Colomba makes a most important discovery: “In quell’epoca la Colomba aveva già scoperto il Governo” (35-36). She is not entirely sure what this consists of, and in her mind it is “una specie di Padreterno in terra” (36). She learns to take advantage of the government assistance programs, knocking on doors and waiting for hours in luxurious waiting rooms. She is successful in receiving full compensation from the government for her daughter’s entire medical bill. She also receives benefits for all of her fourteen children; the fact that only two are living is inconsequential. She quickly perceives that her fourteen pregnancies make quite an impression on the Fascist government as, after all, it was Mussolini himself who urged women to bear more children: “Il numero faceva impressionare, che poi fossero vivi o morti contava meno, si persuase che essi dovessero per forza aiutarla, essendo servi di quel Governo—vuol figli, molti figli—il quale c’è ma non si vede come il signore Iddio” (36)

However, the women warn: “Quando il diavolo t’accarezza vuole l’anima” (36). If a war were to break out, “il Governo” could take a woman’s sons. But Colomba is well informed, knowing that her only living son cannot be called into service. And for this only living son she will milk “il Governo,” now that she has discovered it: “Essa per quell’unico voleva munger la vacca grassa del Governo, ora che l’aveva scoperta” (36-37). The townsfolk marveled at her survival skills. The
men in city hall “stupivano . . per l’abilità di quella donetta,” and the neighbors murmured: “Però ci sa fare . . ci sa fare, la Monachicchia.” (37). Nevertheless, the misery of their lives is unrelenting. On Colomba’s visits to Onorina, it is clear that she is not receiving the best of care: “S’era rifatta come uno sterpolo, deperita e tossiva” (37). Titta is no longer the same man. His health is failing: “Fatto sta quella colonna di Titta era crollato” (38). Colomba soon realizes that she cannot care for her husband, who has lost his mind and is no longer coherent; therefore she makes the difficult decision to take him to a local mental institution.

The war figures prominently in Bonanni’s early works. Here, too, it heaps more misery upon the townsfolk, but not on Colomba. Assured that they cannot take her son, and now with only two mouths to feed, she is managing much better than most: “Che la Monachicchia si fosse disfatta così della figlia e del marito, era considerato sacrilegio addirittura, mai s’era usato in paese disfarsi degli infermi e degli invalidi, la casa deve custodirli finché Dio gli dà respiro” (39-40). In her urge to survive, Colomba defies all convention. She shows not only strength of character, but also a certain wit and intelligence. However, rather than inspire the admiration of her neighbors, she is now judged to be heartless. This tough little woman has seemingly blocked out all memories of her dead children, her daughter’s unhappy situation, and her husband, who is physically and mentally consumed by hard labor. Colomba does not seem to be moved by the war, either. She has fleeced the government and emerges unscathed from the wartime misery. The resentment of the townsfolk grows when they learn that Innocenzo had taken a fancy for “quella gatta rossa della tessitrice, la piú brutta e povera ragazza della contrada: un’orfana
senza tetto” (40); they are quite pleased and feel somewhat vindicated. Colomba reacts shrewdly by showing indifference: “e questo non dar soddisfazione, che è considerato dalle donne la peggiore offesa, finí di alienarle gli animi” (40-41). Bonanni offers a commentary on the nature of female psychology: Colomba’s indifference to the women denies them their vindication. They are left frustrated and offended, and this alienates them even more from Colomba.

Colomba is not fazed much by the war. When one is so poor one really does not have much to lose, “nemmeno essa aveva da perdere nulla” (41). It is only in God’s power to heap misfortune upon these victims. Colomba continues her regular visits to her daughter and husband when she can. The threatening atmosphere makes each visit seem like it might be the last: “C’era in giro quell’aria di finimondo che dà ad ogni atto un senso definitivo irrevocabile, l’impressione d’un pericolo generale, d’una catastrofe collettiva che sommerga tutto” (42).

On one occasion while in town, Colomba sees Mrs. Falalani, who complains bitterly about the war, but Colomba is unmoved: “Ma la Colomba crede che tutti i tempi siano uguali sopra la terra, solo che una volta non si sommoveva così tutt’assieme” (42). Then, the war situation becomes critical, and food and supplies disappear. People are starving and struggling to survive. Innocenzo manages to find work with the Germans, skinning and butchering animals. He is paid well and, in addition, he takes home whatever leftovers he can. The animal bones, feet, and other parts are used to make soups and stews. Suddenly, for the first time in their lives, the family actually eats well. Indeed, they have more than they can eat and occasionally share their food with those who once had flocks and herds of animals.
When the soldiers suddenly pack up and leave, the food supply ends. Colomba just accepts the events as they are, never trying to understand: “La Colomba non tentò mai di capirci, essa si sottometteva agli avvenimenti senza scrutare nel domani” (45).

The scene that follows represents a complete reversal of circumstances. Up to this point, Colomba and her family had always relied on the assistance, compassion, and pity of their neighbors, but here she and her son are in a position to reciprocate. One day they hear a knock at their front door. Never before had anyone knocked: “E allora capitò l'unica occasione che qualcuno bussasse a quell'uscio quasi sotterra” (45). It is a German soldier whose feet are bloodied and broken. Mother and son clean and wrap his feet but can only offer him water and their pity. Nevertheless, the soldier is grateful and, as he is leaving, he takes a package from his backpack and hands it to them uttering something in German that is totally unintelligible to them. To their surprise, the package contains two very fine embroidered linen sheets.

Giorgio Bàrbieri Squarotti, in his article “Laudomia Bonanni, Il fosso e Palma: il tragico della vita,” likens this scene to the sacred ritual of the Catholic faith—the washing of Christ’s feet—and argues that the actions of mother and son are “il supremo atto di misericordia” (264). He points out that not only does Colomba bathe the soldier’s bloodied feet, but also she wraps them in strips of cloth made from her last set of sheets. He claims that this moving scene “è uno dei punti più solenni dell’opera” (265). Bonanni carries the symbolism of the sheets even further as Colomba, upon opening the package given them by the grateful soldier, discovers
a set of fine embroidered linen sheets: “Scartato l’involto, apparvero due lenzuola di un lino candido e sottile come paramenti di chiesa, tutto fiorito di ricami” (46). Squarotti notes, “la similitudine delle due lenzuola come paramenti di chiesa è perfettamente adguadata all’ sacralità della vicenda” (265). Colomba is sure that this is the miracle that she prayed for, “a un tratto vedeva il miracolo, proprio come raccontavano le monache: che uno fa carità e l’angelo subito porta il premio” (46).

Thus, the reference to the German soldier first as a pilgrim (“un pellegrino coi piedi rotti”) and then as an angel, along with the compassionate response of Colomba and Innocenzo to the young man’s suffering (ignoring all political distinctions) and the miracle of the sheets, work together to link the scene to the ritualism and sacredness of the Catholic church.7

In her final years, Colomba is still using the same sheets when she receives news of her daughter’s death.8 Shocked by the tragedy, she falls into a somewhat catatonic state. Innocenzo calls for help, and the women of the district come quickly, fearful she is dying. But the doctor finds her still breathing. She moans as he probes her depleted, worn out body. Her moan is filled with all the sadness and misery of her life, “fu un gemito ininterrotto, dal profondo, come esalasse tutt’in una volta la pena del vivere” (47). Colomba never recovers fully. She is no longer entirely aware

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7 As a point of comparison, it is interesting to note Marcus’s analysis of the film La ciociara pointing to Michele’s futile attempt to read the Lazarus story to an uninterested and distracted audience as an example of linking the text with, in this case, the Gospel, in order to make a particular point (Marcus 83–83).

8 In his article “Laudomia Bonanni,” Barbieri Giorgio Bàrbieri Squarotti argues that this scene represents one of Bonanni’s high points as writer and observer of life: “L’epicedio di Onorina morta ... è una delle più alte pagine del romanzo, e, forse, di tutti gli altri romanzi della Bonanni, per l’intensità e la chiarezza della consapevolezza della tragicità assoluta che è la vita” (262).
of the present, but alas cannot forget the past, “ignara del presente era, ma non ahimé!, immemore” (48).

In the final pages of the story, the metaphor of the ditch—“il fosso”—becomes apparent. Colomba and her family are buried deeply in the misery of this ditch that represents the family’s dire poverty. Bonanni’s description of Colomba’s sensation of being partially buried alive in the refuse of the ditch, barely able to breathe, evokes similar Dantean images: “Era stato così in principio: si sveglia e s’accorge d’essere sepolta, non profondo, sibbene a fior di terra, sepolta nella immondizia del fosso—una cosa tiepida arida soffocante—fino a metà corpo” (48). Slow to recuperate, Colomba is plagued by a dryness in her throat: “E un alidore raspante nella gola, lo sanno i morti che mangiano terra.” (48). In an almost delirious state she hears cries and weeping: “pianti diversi, un coro di pianti in distinte modulazioni; e non si sa chi siano né di chi, ma il giorno che nacquero e quello che morirono formano una serie di giorni di cui si vede il colore di tempo vivo, ancora” (48).

Colomba meditates on the meaning of life that she sees as an uninterrupted sequence of suffering and weeping, from birth to death. Images of Onorina flash before her. She has forgotten everything else and can only think of her daughter, who died alone, perhaps calling for her mother. Colomba is filled with regrets. Yet, despite all the suffering, life must continue; Innocenzo does manual labor, and Colomba returns to preparing her son’s meals. The narrator notes that her movements, lacking strength and agility, resemble that of a broken serpent. She has also suffered a hearing loss and is tormented by an incessant ringing in her ears that
penetrates her brain. The final image is that of a woman, a dedicated mother, consumed physically and mentally, yet still surviving. Now Colomba moves about as though in a fog, “era tutto in una nebbia” (49), yet amazingly her will to survive remains unbroken.

In the final scene, Innocenzo meets with “la rossa.” They are attracted to each other. He steals a kiss, “una cosa morbida dolce profonda” (50), and takes off. Bonanni ends this dreary story on a note of promise for the future. Innocenzo is industrious and willing to work hard. Perhaps he will fare no better than his father, but something in his character offers a glimmer of hope. The reader is left with the possibility that this young man will overcome the miserable circumstances of his youth and rise to an improved life condition.

“Il mostro”

The second story of this collection, entitled “Il mostro,” deals again with a mother-son relationship. However, this time the action is seen through the eyes of an unmarried aunt, the sister of the child’s mother. Her name is Berenice, or Zia Nice, as she is known in the family. Berenice is “una zitella,” a spinster aunt or an old maid. Each of these terms carries a negative connotation and as a patriarchal construct implies a state of lacking. Adrienne Rich informs us that in early America, “‘an old maid’ . . . was treated with reproach if not derision; she had no way of surviving economically, and was usually compelled to board with her kin and help with the household and children” (43). The stigma of not being married and of the state of childlessness is still embedded deeply in the subconscious minds of women
today and influences society’s perceptions of a woman. In this story, Berenice makes up for her lack of family by obtaining an education, specializing in early education and child psychology. She presents herself as an expert and certainly seems so to her sister, Paola. But it is evident by the end of the story that, despite all her studies, observations, and publications, Berenice does not know as much as she professes to know.

Berenice’s first impression of her nephew is one of a chubby young boy whose physical appearance is almost repulsive to her: “Poco fa le era capitato di paragonarlo a una di quelle gemme così pingui e lanuginose da parer bruchi, con un senso dentro di repulsione” (53-54). Confident of her pedagogical skills, she strikes up a conversation with the child. As an expert in early childhood education, she offers her didactic advice on how to speak to the young: “Con pedagogica calma e metodo si risolve infine a parlargli: sulle generali, in principio—il viaggio, il tempo—bisogna introdursi gradatamente nella confidenza dei fanciulli” (54).

Berenice finds her nephew to be quite normal, even though his mother has formulated an unrealistic idea of her son: “sebbene Paola, secondo il solito delle madri, si sia fatta una grande idea del proprio figlio” (54). At the opening of the story, Nino has been gone six long years, war years that kept mother and son

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9 In her discussion on the state of childlessness, Rich notes that these women were considered threats to patriarchy. They were often punished for their offense in a variety of ways. Yet, they found alternative means to cope with their situation in a society that marginalized them. Rich continues to argue that these women, because they had no children, were able to contribute to female spiritual and intellectual nourishment: “Yet, ironically, precisely because they were not bound to the cycle of hourly existence with children, because they could reflect, observe, write, such women in the past have given us some of the few available strong insights into the experience of women in general” (252).
separated and the two sisters filled with anxiety: “Erano fra loro sei anni di separazione, sei anni di guerra” (54). Paola looks to her sister for comfort and consolation, but Berenice cannot comply. She is filled with bitter feelings toward the youth, and in a flashback she remembers him as a sweet child with “quel corposo lanuginoso” (54). The remainder of the story is a recounting of an earlier experience as she recalls a stay at her sister’s home.

Their day begins in a typical fashion. In the morning Berenice is awakened by her sister Paola and feels refreshed and ready to begin writing again: “Medita infatti una intera serie di articoli, sul genere di quelli che procurarono tanto successo alla nascente rivista” (55-56). She is inspired by observations of the child and is anxious to begin work. Indeed, throughout the story the aunt will offer numerous reflections regarding the boy’s behavior. He becomes a subject of interest, seen from a distance. Yet, despite all her good intentions and expertise, Berenice is not prepared for the reality that will unfold before her eyes. As she reflects upon her research and writing, she is concerned for a loss of passion for her work. Nevertheless, she knows that she must continue writing in order to survive. This she does without passion, and the realization makes her blood run cold: “Anche la rivista sopravvive, le idee sole paiono morte: una impressione agghiacciante” (58).

Berenice keeps a watchful eye on “Il Nino,” and as she observes her nephew at play, she is distressed by the pertinacity she discerns in his demeanor. She is not altogether convinced that she will enjoy this occasion for research and study. She is growing weary of the child and desires rest:

Il ragazzo umano è una scimmia, pensò a un tratto disgustata anche dei ragazzi. Non desiderava scrivere alcun articolo, solo riposare, essere del tutto
However, Berenice soon realizes that she will not be able to escape the witnessing of her nephew’s metamorphosis. What becomes evident to her is that observing motherhood from a distance and making pronouncements concerning child rearing does not qualify her as knowledgeable in this field. Her lack of experience will challenge her and will always limit her as an observer. Berenice’s assessment of mothering will be linked to the reactions and behavior of her sister Paola, who is presented as a typical Italian mother doting on her only son. Paola expresses her excessive love for her child in a scene in which she tries to pull her son onto her lap as he passes by. She smothers him with kisses in a desperate attempt to preserve the affectionate nature of their primal attachment. She knows that one day she will have to withdraw, that her kisses and affections will be rejected as the boy enters adulthood. But for the moment, he gives in awkwardly and is seemingly happy to be coddled:

Egli vi si abbandonava un po’ goffamente nella sua nuova mole, ma d’una goffaggine solo esteriore, poiché continuava a ricevere tranquillamente le effusioni d’un tempo, senza le irascibili repulse di quell’età, tanto incresciose e dure alle madri. (59)

The vision of the boy’s growing body in his mother’s lap is a disturbing sight to Berenice. She is on edge as she observes her sister overpower the child with her kisses, as, to her, the sight of an over-affectionate mother is a cause for concern. Some of the negative notions regarding the mother-son bond are related to Freud’s theories regarding what he termed the Oedipus complex. He argued that it was necessary, indeed imperative, that an emotional separation occur between mother
and son early in the child’s life. The son’s failure to reject his mother’s advances could wreak havoc upon his masculinity and, consequently, “[the] mother’s sexuality would activate a son’s desire for her” (Smith 18). Paola, however, is blind to her son’s transformation from boy to young adult. Berto, Nino’s father, is also responsible for this imbalance, as he too is presented as a parent oblivious to his son’s growing manhood.

When Berto brings home Concina, an artist he met in a local caffè, with the hope that frequenting Nino would provide intellectual and artistic stimulation to their son, Berenice is skeptical. She is not convinced of Concina’s qualifications and sees him as “uno zazzeruto dalle spalle cosparse di fosfora” (60). Nino and Concina strike up a friendship almost immediately: “Conversavano di pittura, di musica, di poesia, e persino, pare, di filosofia” (61). Naturally the parents are delighted because “l’educazione intellettuale del Nino . . . veniva così rifinita. (Come attaccare un merlettino alla camicetta di tutti i giorni)” (61). Yet, despite Berto and Paola’s joy at having found a true artist to educate their child, Concina fails to produce the paintings of which he boasted. Berenice has the impression that his relationship with the young boy is unnatural. She suspects he is a fraud but must keep her suspicions to herself.

In an attempt to completely control Nino’s environment, his parents keep him isolated at home, in order to protect him from “bad” examples that might influence his behavior and formation. Berenice observes with sadness that the pedagogical rules she taught her sister, rules that she at times embellished, were applied to the child to the letter:
Berenice scoprì presto—una scoperta che la desolò—come fossero state applicate alla lettera, nel piú ottuso dei modi, e mantenute attraverso gli anni con gretto rigore, le norme pedagogiche che essa aveva impartito alla sorella nei periodi trascorsi insieme. (63-64)

As the family’s withdrawal from community moves toward one of almost total isolation (they did not even talk of the impending war), Berenice becomes increasingly alarmed. She notes her sister’s insistence on strictly following the goals and methods set forth in her articles. Sadly, Berenice must face the consequences of her teachings and recognize that she is at fault for failing to consider not only the psychological makeup of her young subject, but also her own lack of firsthand experience. Perhaps as a childless woman she should not have presumed to write about children without ever having had direct contact with them:10 “Ecco dunque che sua fu la colpa, di Berenice, non far conto dell’elemento psicologico avviando la inesperta madre a identificare le proprie dubbiezze con la legittimità di tenersi attaccato alle gonne il figlio perché non glielo guastino” (66). In the final analysis, Berenice’s sense of responsibility leads to feelings of guilt regarding her questionable influence over her nephew: “Finì col sentire di averlo tradito, quel grazioso bimbo che era stato alla mercé dei suoi oracoli” (66).

With time, aunt and nephew develop a closer relationship. Although he appears somewhat insensitive and a little sly, Berenice is soon won over by his good manners. Yet, there is an element that seems to prevent her from fully engaging with him. Indeed her suspicions are verified when, one morning, Berenice walks toward

10 Bonanni writes extensively about mothers and children, yet she never had children. In an interview toward the end of her life she stated, “Forse ho un solo rimpianto di non aver voluto un figlio” (qtd. in Petrignani 64).
the kitchen and hears Nino talking with the maid. She overhears him say to the maid, “Be’, porta ‘sto caffè a quella culona di Zia Nice” (69). Shocked and embarrassed, Berenice flees to her room. She is bewildered and realizes that she does not know her nephew at all. She asks herself, “Chi è veramente il Nino, com’è?” (69). Berenice, who had always considered herself somewhat attractive, looks at herself in the mirror and cannot escape the reality of the extra pounds added to her frame. Then she turns, looks again, and is horrified that Nino would focus on that part of her anatomy. His inappropriate remark on her body shocks her.

Indeed, as she observes him more closely, she notes Nino’s subtle physical changes. She blushes and wonders how she could have ignored those signs. Her sister and brother-in-law interpret her change in facial color as a hot flash. As he looks away, Berto comments with an air of authority that a husband would cure her ills. Berenice is inflamed. She chose to dedicate her life to teaching and research, not to marriage and mothering: “Mettere al mondo un figlio, ah! per l’amor di Dio. Essa ne impazzirebbe, non è mica Paola” (71). She is childless by choice. In the patriarchal system, a woman without a child is incomplete and lacking. In her chapter entitled “Motherhood and Daughterhood,” Rich discusses the issue of childlessness and patriarchy and states the following:

Throughout recorded history the “childless” woman has been regarded (with certain specific exceptions, such as the cloistered nun or the temple virgin) as a failed woman, unable to speak for the rest of her sex, and omitted from the hypocritical and palliative reverence accorded to the mother. (251)

In the patriarchal narrative, a woman is defined by her sexuality. She is single, childless or barren, prolific, virgin, prostitute, widow, or mother. Although each
term carries with it an implication of her sexual status, it is the state of motherhood that carries the most weight. Rich argues that “the ‘childless woman’ and the ‘mother’ are a false polarity, which has served the institutions of motherhood and heterosexuality” (250). Berenice’s academic immersion in the field of pedagogy and parenting can be interpreted as an attempt to mother indirectly via her research. Although she claims that she has no interest in mothering, the direction and focus of her works imply a hidden desire to share the maternal experience.

Berenice’s perception of her chubby, nondescript nephew undergoes an astonishing and unexpected metamorphosis: “D’allora andò concretandosi come una sensazione di mostruosità per quel tanto di esteriore che talvolta sfigura il ragazzo in crescita, e, piú, per quell’interiore sfiguramento che s’immaginava accompagnarvisi” (71). Suddenly Nino’s physical and emotional transformation has taken on an air of monstrosity. The innocent child is morphing into a full-bodied, sexual male being. The sexual awakening that Berenice witnesses is startling to her, and its representation borders on the obscene. Nino, on the other hand, seems to be unaware of the physical changes of his youthful body: “non sembra avvedersi di niente, non pare goffo né ombroso, non è mai impacciato” (71). Paola seems totally oblivious to her son’s change: “Naturalmente, Paola non s’accorge di nulla, non vede, non vuol vedere nulla. Come passa un figlio dall’infanzia alla giovinezza? Come avviene una tale metamorfosi?” (72).

Long before any discussion appeared in modern day criticism regarding the patriarchal narrative of the mother-son relationship, Laudomia Bonanni was noting
it in her writings. This story is a case in point. Both mother and aunt are closely involved in the young Nino’s upbringing. As he matures into adulthood, initially they both seem blind to the physical and emotional changes happening before their eyes. Babette Smith, in *Mothers and Sons*, points out that as male children adapt themselves to “masculinity,” a distancing occurs between mother and son. It is a “hurtful, bewildering change from affectionate toddlers to remote adults” (14). Both Berenice and Paola suffer from what Smith refers to as a “maternal ignorance of masculinity” (17), which in this story is personified as a monstrosity. Berenice’s link to Nino is almost as strong as her sister’s. Unquestionably, neither mother nor aunt can view Nino objectively. Smith argues, “Sons are different. They are harder for mothers to ‘read.’ The masculine ethos allows boys to keep their intimate feelings to themselves making mothers feel intrusive” (29). In this story, the communication problem is not only between mother and son, but also between aunt and nephew. In the final analysis, the problem rests in society’s understanding of what Smith refers to as “masculinity.” This understanding is crucial in bringing about positive changes in the mother-son relationship. The failure of the mother, and in this case also the aunt, to confront this issue is the aberration that both frightens and repulses the two women.

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11 In her study *Mothers and Sons Feminism: Masculinity, and the Struggle to Raise Our Sons*, Andrea O’Reilly asks, “Had we, in our negligence or disinterest, academic and otherwise, given our sons up to patriarchy, done to them what we have spent our lives fighting against for ourselves and for our daughters?” (1). She and other feminists, such as Nancy Backes, have noted the lack of discourse concerning mothers and sons. O’Reilly states, “As evidence of this, Backes cites the United States Library of Congress, which lists only seven titles between 1968 and the mid 1990’s with ‘mothers and sons in literature’ as a descriptor” (qtd. in O’Reilly 19 n1).
Berenice appears more cognizant of Nino’s physical development than her sister does. As Nino becomes seemingly more passive in his reactions to his mother’s affectionate advances, Berenice is much more offended by his growing maleness. Certainly any reciprocity on his part would be viewed as abnormal. Boys learn at an early age to reject their mother’s tender physical demonstrations of affection; for indeed the consequences might be severe, and the unsettling possibility exists that the male child might compete with the father for the mother’s affection. The fear that a possible sexual relationship might develop between mother and son is so abhorred that mothers prefer to ignore what they are witnessing while at the same time loathing to release control of the child. Then one day they are standing next to a grown man: “Poiché, dopotutto, se li ritrovano a fianco uomini, e non è accaduto nulla, la loro bestiolina addomesticata ha fatto il salto da sola” (72). It is important to note that the child’s masculinity is referred to here as a domesticated pet. Mothers’ overbearing attitude translates into carelessness in this instance. They do not provide their children with emotional support in facing this transition. Paola, like most mothers, finds it easier to ignore this phenomenon in the hope that it will just go away: “Ah, bene, esse, le madri, semplicemente lo ignorano” (72). Clearly Nino is not the person he pretends to be, and Berenice decides to keep her distance: “Aveva deciso di evitarlo, il Nino, sebbene le paresse sempre di sentirselo alle spalle, a spiarla, o se lo figurasse a rider con la serva della zia grassona” (74).

As Nino gets older, he is given a small sum of money on Saturdays to go to the movies. It is, in his father’s words, “la sua giornata di uomo” (75). One day, Berenice
sees him in town and realizes that the youth does not go to the movies, but wanders about the town. She recalls Berto’s statement that a child should be supplied with everything, believing that this will prevent him from secretly acquiring a desired but prohibited object. Berenice, critical of her brother-in-law’s assumptions regarding his son’s secret desires, notes Nino’s shrewd answer and remarks: “Ma che arietta ipocrita, ripete la lezioncina per darla a bere a sua zia” (76). At the end of the scene, Berenice agrees to keep her nephew’s secret with the realization that she has become his accomplice.

Later, at the dinner table, Nino is obliged to recount to his father the plot of the film he never saw. Berenice is amazed and marvels at this ability to weave a tall tale: “Caspita si è abituato a mentire” (77). Then it dawns on her that the money might be used to frequent “uno di quei luoghi” (77), that is, a brothel. All her pedagogical studies did not prepare her for the reality of a youth entering manhood: “Ah!, saper tanto, essere un’arca di scienza pedagogica, e ignorare questo, un particolare così essenziale” (77). She must confront her feelings of guilt. She will keep his secret, but she questions whether the father might be responsible for the boy’s sexual education. The subject of sex education is a theme that will return again in Bonanni’s works and will be treated in depth in her documentary-style novel, *Vietato ai minori*.

Over time, Berenice makes a series of startling discoveries. Observing Nino’s interactions with Concina, she realizes that Nino is not in the least interested in his studies, but listens because he has been taught to be polite. Increasingly evident to Berenice is that Nino has been trained well, but not truly educated: “L’hanno
addomesticato, non educato” (80). The youth has very little enthusiasm for his studies, and she suspects the culprit to be Concina, whom she views as a corruptor. One afternoon, the youth and his private tutor leave for their outing at the movies. Still curious and quite distrustful, Berenice decides to follow them, making another discovery. This so-called teacher is indeed introducing the youth to life, but this is not the type of education the parents had in mind. Concina provides Nino with access to a world that is prohibited by his parents, and their attempts to shield him from this world will fail. One evening, Berenice makes another even more startling discovery in the middle of the night. Noticing a light on in the maid's bedroom and overwhelmed by her curiosity, she climbs up a stool and peers into the room. Much to her surprise, she finds the boy and the maid in bed together: “Sorgendosi, può lanciare uno sguardo piú in basso: sono lí tutt'e due” (85).

The shocking discovery of Nino's affair with the maid is followed by an abrupt scene change: Berenice is at the train station with Paola and Berto, who are both still grappling with Berenice's sudden decision to leave. Paola is particularly distressed, as she had counted on her sister's expertise to help raise her son: “'Contava tanto, per il Nino, sulla tua influenza educativa’” (85). In the meantime, Berenice's thoughts return to the figure of the maid: “Berenice stava tentando di ricostruire in sé l'immagine della sbiadita donnetta, è come se l’avesse vista per la prima volta oggi” (85). The woman, in Berenice's eyes, gives the impression of being physically pale and frail: “gli scarsi capelli biondi, pallidina e acciaccata, con l'usuale sorriso sui denti rovinati” (86). Berenice estimates that she is probably a woman in
her thirties, someone whose honor has been compromised: “Forse una paesana, una che, commesso ‘il fallo’ deve andarsene a tirar la vita altrove” (86).

   For a woman who has fallen from grace, there is no conventional space of socialization to occupy. Patriarchy has imposed strict rules upon a woman's sexuality, viewing a loss of virginity as also a loss of honor. The patriarchal narrative constructed for women can be summed up as a narrative of loss in every aspect of a woman’s life. Thus, in a society that adhered strongly to the double standard—that saw the woman as both virgin and mother—any deviation would result in disgrace. It is no wonder then that young Nino would be attracted to this “experienced” woman. His meetings with her were without severe consequences for him, as he is a youth with awakening sexuality, and she is alone and easily accessible. Their encounter was inevitable. The affair between a “fallen” woman and a young adolescent craving experience is indeed a formula for disaster, and the fallout will involve Nino, Berenice, and Nino’s parents, still adherent to the patriarchal constructs that informed their lives.

   Berenice realizes that her knowledge about her much-studied youth is insufficient and faulty. She is overcome with the urge to return home, to her world of books and writings. There she is isolated from the real world—safe in her comforting cocoon of theory and analysis, her “calmo mondo teorico” (87). Indeed, she longs to return to her desk, stacks of paper, books, and piles of correspondence. This is the world she knows well and that does not let her down: “Era stato il suo immobile mondo senza dubbi e senza conflitti, quell’angolo dello scrittoio dove avrebbe ripreso a lavorare fra le pile dei ponderosi volumi e il mucchio della
corrispondenza inevasa” (87). Like Colombina in her “fosso,” Berenice knows now this is where she belongs. This is also an escape, a comfort-zone, where she recovers after the clash with reality. Nevertheless, she continues to reflect on the past events and is again amazed at how Nino found his way on his own. And all he did was follow his instincts: “Perché è stupefacente come abbia ritrovato così da solo la via diritta della natura” (87). Images of Nino as a young child, walking alone on the street, in the theater smoking a cigarette, and in bed with the maid flash before her and create a picture of a journey of a young boy to his desired destination—becoming a man: “E lo era. Era un uomo” (88).

Berenice stops to look at herself in the mirror. She is searching for a reality that has eluded her, and she understands that one can look without really seeing. At this point she makes an important discovery. In her sister’s home, where she thought nothing was happening, where she believed the isolation of the boy would be detrimental to his emotional growth, where time seemed to stop, everything happened: “Perché lí, in quella casa ove il tempo pareva arrestarsi, invece s’è vissuto davvero—e si continuerà a vivere fervorosamente poiché c’è un figlio che cresce” (89). She must now come to terms not only with Nino’s transition into manhood, but also with her own aging: “Ora sa d’essere vecchia e lo apprende con quella irrevocabilità che di solito alle donne è risparmiata” (89).

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12 The image of the self reflected in the mirror and its link to the soul has a long history. “The ancients attributed mystic powers to any reflective surface, solid or liquid because the reflection was considered part of the soul” (Walker 660). The symbolic mirror returns again in L’imputata. See chapter 2 for a more detailed discussion of this motif.
The train has arrived and is stopping to pick up its passengers. In a moment of courage, as Berto assists her onto the train, Berenice blurts out, “Ti avverto, il Nino va la notte in camera della serva” (90). Berto is stunned and cannot believe that his son is sleeping with the maid whom he refers to as “Faccia-di-crusca” (90). As the train departs, Berenice watches him from her window. Berto, “triste come un uomo ingiustamento colpito” (90), is bewildered and speechless: “immiserito con le braccia in giù, e in volto quella pietosa espressione di smarrimento” (90). Berenice realizes that he is a concerned father who tried to do his best for his son and direct him on the proper path to adulthood. She is well aware that the news is heartbreaking, but she feels justified in her actions, as Berto was so unrealistically bent on placing his son on a too straight and narrow path. Although she betrayed Nino’s trust in her, she felt it was in his best interest to reveal the painful truth concerning him: “Non è concesso che ai ragazzi saper sempre e con infallibilità quel che vogliono, quel che c’è da fare” (90). As she lowers her eyes to her purse, she vows never to regard her mirror so carelessly and accepts her failings: “ripiegò umiliata nella sua debole e confusa condizione di adulta” (90).

**Palma e sorelle**

Laudomia Bonanni’s second collection of short stories is entitled *Palma e sorelle*. It was published in 1954 and received the Soroptimist prize in 1955. With these stories, Bonanni moves into a more complex psychological realm, focusing on the female psyche. Olga Lombardi writes, “il discorso di L. Bonanni si apre su un paesaggio psicologico già percorso da inquietudini e l’espressione si adatta alle
esigenze del tema più complesso puntualizzando certi caratteri e situazioni femminili” (7051). Against the backdrop of the memory of the war experience, the stories deal with the roles of women in family and society.

“Palma”

The first story in the collection, "Palma," is a powerful and moving narrative that treats, almost exclusively, a mother’s relationship with her husband, her two children, and her father. The reader observes the events from the point of view of the mother. Palmina is a young fifteen-year-old girl going to school in a “collegio,” where she had been sent to continue her education in a controlled Catholic environment. The collegio was considered a safe place for young unmarried girls in pre-war Italy, thus allowing them to study without compromising their “honor.” The collegio was the fate of many middle- and upper-class young ladies. In these institutions, young girls studied music and fine arts, learned skills such as embroidery and needlepoint, and, of course, studied religion.

While she is still mourning the death of her mother, Palmina suddenly finds herself married to a young man who is a complete stranger to her: “si trova a rientrare in casa al braccio d’un uomo sconosciuto, che ancora stenta a capire chi sia” (97). Rebellion is never a consideration for her, as certainly the nuns would not have approved of such unladylike behavior. Palma is aware of the undeniable fact that her voice would not have been heard. For in truth, she had no voice, no say as to what decision she might want to make for her future. A father, who clearly regarded her as a property to dispose of as he pleased, made the decision for her. Nor does
the enforced marriage to a stranger change her position in society. She simply moves from being the property of her father to being the property of her husband. In her discussion of motherhood as an institution, Rich states, “The experience of maternity and the experience of sexuality have both been channeled to serve male interests” (42).

The man chosen as her spouse is described as “quel piccolo giovinotto nocchiuto delle masserie” (97). The narrator tells us that there is a faint odor of manure about him, and the roughness of his prickly shirt, made of goat's hair, makes Palmina shudder. She recoils from this gruff and uneducated man, as her delicate nature cannot connect with his vulgarity and lack of refinement. He is crude and coarse and in all respects a totally unsuitable match for this young, innocent bride. But in Palmina's father's eyes, the match has economic advantages that outweigh any other considerations.

The wedding ceremony and small reception end quickly. The guests leave, and Palmina is alone with her strange husband. She does not have any idea about sexual intercourse. Nor does the widow (Palmina's father's mistress) offer to inform her about this: “(Si capisce, mica, poteva spiegarle quello che faceva lei col padre)” (97). The girl was left to fend for herself. She is like the innocent lamb brought to slaughter. Before long, the screams are heard throughout the neighborhood: “E così, dopo un po', s'udirono gli strilli” (97). The townsfolk have no pity for her and almost seem to be entertained by her situation.

This is, in any event, the normal course of action, something that all women experience. The women of the village know from personal experience that she will
learn to adapt. Their bodies, after all, do not belong to them, but are the property of their husbands. Palmina’s husband’s lovemaking is relentless: “la gente del vicolo s’affacciò alle finestre, gli uomini ridevano ma alla fine risero anche le donne. Ci andava con troppa foga il duro caffone” (97). Indeed, the next morning Palmina cannot get out of bed. She cannot walk due to the pain. In this disturbing opening scene, Bonanni exposes the prevailing patriarchal narrative according to which a woman’s body is meant for a man’s sexual pleasure, and later to produce heirs. That this abusive behavior is accepted as normative is, in Bonanni’s view, deplorable. The dramatic beginning of this union, that is, the violent abuse of a young girl on her wedding night at the hands of an ignorant husband, verges on rape and is a dehumanizing experience for the young Palmina. This marriage was nothing other than a business contract.

Two days later, Iusè, Palma’s husband, was out at dawn working toward his father-in-law’s interests. Iusè was now understood to be part of the family and a trusted associate: “Scialoia aveva allora l’appalto della strada, si capí che quel giovinotto accorto gli doveva curare l’interesse: era un socio fidato sicuro—e senza pretese—che inoltre sarebbe costato poco” (98). They had picked him up off the street with only their business self-interest in mind. He is a cheap fix. But Palmina has to pay a high price in this arrangement. The young bride is still reeling from her wedding night. Ashamed and hurting, she has no idea why this has happened to her. Nevertheless, she begins her wifely “duties” in the kitchen, cleaning and cooking, essentially becoming the household servant. The whole affair affects her health, and she is reduced to skin and bone: “Si ridusse subito uno scheletrino, piccola
com’era—un palmo da terra—pure sfaticava eccome” (98). When the men return home, her attention is entirely devoted to her father. She quickly waits on him. She pulls his chair for him, unfolds his napkin, and fills his glass with wine, never glancing at her abhorred husband. Her feelings toward Lusè are described vividly:

Ma a un certo punto seppe comunque che quell'uomo tosto—un tronchetto nocciuto—a cui soggiaceva la notte, era un cafone scuro come un saracino, con grossi denti, occhi verdognoli spinosi di pelo nero e la faccia chiusa rappresa come un grumo di terra. (98)

Her anger and hatred turn quickly to indifference. Her young husband means nothing to her, as she views him as a primitive, inferior creature. This indifference makes her life with him tolerable: “Non le era nulla: né consanguineo, né amico né conoscente” (98). She instead directs her admiration toward her father and does not blame him for the disastrous marriage. Indeed, she understands now that it is the fate of women, and she is seemingly resigned to her destiny: “…idolatrava suo padre, non implicandolo affatto in quella calamità matrimoniale che s'abbatte ineluttabile sulle donne” (98-90). Her affection toward her father borders on idolatry. On the other hand, her husband's lack of manners, his brutishness and awkwardness, elicit in her only feelings of disgust and repulsion:

La disturba invece la fame cauta e furtiva di suo marito, vederlo masticare a due ganasce, sentirgli schioccar le labbra o quel succhio che fa con la minestra; soprattutto la urta vederlo allungare la mano al piatto che nessuno gli offre, servirsi goffamente in fretta, magari sporcando la tovaglia, d'una porzione ch'essa aveva già assegnato al padre. (99)

Palmina soon learns that the feelings of nausea she is experiencing are the result of her first pregnancy, which comes as no surprise. At the end of a typical day while her father is out walking with his friends, her husband waits by the window for her to finish her chores in the kitchen. Palma, knowing what he has in mind (that
is, taking her to bed), is never in a hurry to finish. Iusè is quick to realize that he is not master in this house. About a month later, he turns from the window and calls her name for the very first time. This small detail reveals the complete detachment between husband and wife, while at the same time points to a lack of communication of any type between the two, except a one-sided physical attraction.

At this point, Iusè attempts to assert his authority by informing his wife that he wants to go home the following day. At first she does not understand. Then she realizes that he wants to take her to his farm in the mountains where Iusè’s mother and sister live. Palmina is horrified. She considers his request an insult to the kindness and generosity of her father and thinks he must be crazy. Although she still has not called him by his first name, “(Ancora non lo chiama a nome neppure una volta, e mai le uscirà di bocca)” (99), Iusè continues to insist upon calling his wife “mogliema.” Speaking in dialect, he refers to her as his wife, who belongs to him and must obey. Palma does not easily accept this assumption. The thought of leaving with him causes her to vomit, and she vows that she will never go anywhere with that man and will never leave her father. Their relationship is even more strained, and the next day they do not exchange any words. Iusè never again calls her “mogliema,” nor does he ever mention his farm.

Palmina gives birth to a daughter. The delivery is a difficult one, and, due to an enforced bed rest, she begins to put on weight, causing her appearance to quickly improve. Also helpful to Palmina’s situation is that her husband has kept his distance: this, according to the women, “giova piú d’un elisire” (101). The women are struck by her beauty; she seems to them “una vera palomba” (101). The child,
however, is problematic from the very beginning. The infant has a voracious appetite, and her furious nursing causes her mother’s nipples to crack. The women are forced to bind the child to her breast, compelling Palmina to endure painful nursing sessions. Sadly, rather than create an intimate mother-child bond, the breast-feeding experience only distances Palmina from her daughter. The description of this child, her violent sucking (“succhiava con foga sangue e latte” [101]) and her dark complexion and hairy body, recall the image of her father. Subconsciously, the child clearly brings to mind Iusè, Palma’s loathed husband, and with it all the bitterness and hostility she feels toward him. All of these negative emotions are now transferred to her daughter. Indeed, with the word “foga,” the narrator has forever linked the child to her father, thus ensuring a permanent distance between mother and daughter. Here the term “foga” implies a blind passion that is self-directed and includes an element of narcissism. The husband’s lovemaking and the child’s nursing are linked by a common goal—the use of Palma’s body for the satisfaction of a physical desire. Everything about the child calls to mind Palmina’s abhorrence of all that Iusè represents in her life:

Nera nera, la bimba: una chiomuzza—appena nata era apparsa zazzeruta—lustra e già lunga, sfrangiata sul collo, a ciocche dense dietro le orecchie. Tutto il corpicino olivastro era ricoperto di scura pelurie che si partiva come una sciminatura sul filo della schiena. È il pelo che cade—dicevano le donne—farà la muta come una serpicina. (101)

13 It is interesting to note a possible link to the notion of vampirism, that is, an irrisistible urge to draw life energy from one’s victim. The image of the vampire is often associated with references to blood, sucking, love-bites, and sharp teeth. Palma is victimized by both her husband and her daughter, and the term “foga” provides the possible connection. On another level, however, one can see Palma also as a victim of patriarchy, which as an institution draws upon the life force of women for its survival.
The association of her infant with her husband creates an insuperable barrier between mother and daughter. As the story progresses, both mother and daughter clearly fail to form any emotional attachment with each other, and they both suffer the consequences.

Soon Iusè leaves for America in search of better paying jobs and perhaps even to get away from a loveless relationship in his home. The first dollars, along with a gift for his daughter, arrive six months later. Palma is liberated at last: “S’era totalmente perduta memoria di lui nella casa, come non vi fosse mai entrato” (101-02). Now she is free to lavish her attentions upon her beloved father. She places all her emotional attachment on him. She was never close to her mother, who sent her away to the convent as soon as possible. As a child, Palmina feared her mother, who was never openly affectionate and often very severe:

Fin da bimba aveva avuto un reverenziale timore di quella donna, che pure era sua madre, magra magra gialla e severa, che mai indulgeva a tenerezze e ordinava di ricondurla alle monache non appena spirate le vacanze, durante le quali l’aveva tenuta in camera a istruirla sugli obblighi e i diritti e il comportamento d’una signora nel mondo. (102)

Clearly Palma has a history of a failed mother-daughter relationship. The Bonannian mother typically withholds affection from her female child while exhibiting the opposite behavior toward the male child. Now without the constant bother of a detested husband and a cold mother with whom she was not close, Palma is finally at ease and the happiest she has ever been: “Solo adesso Palma con gusto vi [at home] fa da padrona, senza un uomo estraneo nel letto e senza piú lei di là” (102). For the first time in her life, she is free to follow her desires and devote
herself to the care of her beloved father. Her concern for him trumps even her care for her daughter.

When a letter arrives from America, Palma looks at it with curiosity. Only after opening the letter and seeing its address to “cara mogliema” does she realize it is from Iusè. With those two words, all the bitterness and rancor of her marriage resurfaces. She recalls the horror of her wedding night, finding herself in bed with a strange man who was insensitive to her emotional and physical needs and whose behavior resembled that of a beast. The experience would affect her idea of marriage and physical love forever:

*solo allora capisce e sussulta come all’apparizione d’uno spettro. Be’, era stata dura per lei, così senza saper nulla, conoscere all’improvviso il maschio- quel timido e forastico tutt’a un tratto insanito fra le lenzuola avventarsi. Il rancore sarà eterno. (102)*

With time, Palma’s economic status improves, and money begins to flow into the household. The sale of the first grape harvest allows for the acquisition of new clothes and other necessities, and the family quickly becomes the envy of the neighborhood: “come fruttano, eh? la fattucchierie” (103). They spend liberally and try to raise their image from a construction-working family to a family of “ingegneri.”

In the meantime, Palma tends to her household chores; the kitchen is her realm, along with caring for her child. Her studies are long forgotten: “Chiunque entrasse in casa la trovava ritta a servire” (104). Eventually she takes her place at the dinner table. It was a place of submission and servitude, a place that was symbolic of women’s position in the Italian society of the pre-war period in Italy. Palma “si è messa al proprio posto di donna, cioè in soggezione e servitú” (104).
The workload increases daily, and her father continues to bring guests to their home for meetings, some staying overnight. Palma quickly realizes that more space is needed, and renovations begin on the home and property. The work is constant, and Palma is forced to always drag her child with her. She prefers the male guests and treats them quite well. Indeed, the more they resemble her father, the more attentive she is to their needs. Their home soon becomes known as “L’albergo dell’ingegnere” and in time becomes a popular place well known to all. Scialoia, her father, is happy and content. He likes having people around and buys and sells land with the dollars that arrive from America.

The widow, her father’s paramour, is always present in the home during this period, constantly trying to ingratiate herself to Palma. Bonanni describes her as “untuosa piaggiatrice e servizievole, pronta a mescolare nei tegami, sventrare un pollo, dare un colpo di ferro alle camicie di lui” (105-06). Often she helps care for the child, as Palma’s lack of concern for her daughter borders on child neglect. Palma is not an attentive mother to this little girl, often leaving her to roam on her own. Already the child suffered an unfortunate experience; the result of falling onto a burning coal brazier, injuring her leg and scarring herself permanently.

With time and experience, Palmina becomes shrewder and begins to understand the evil in the world. She sees through the widow’s attempt to ingratiate herself as part of a plot to convince her father to marry her and thus legitimize their relationship. In fact, as soon as Scialoia suspects the plot, he insists that the widow keep her distance from the house. Up to this point, Palma still acts under the rules set forth by the patriarchal society that governs and informs her choices and
decisions. She accepts the norm according to which a man may keep a mistress, but not in his home. Palma has no doubts that it is a man’s world, and the best a woman can do is to try to adapt and survive.¹⁴

Iusè returns home and greets his daughter, Nina, or Ninella, who shows him her scarred leg. He is horrified, but does not mention this sentiment to his wife. Palma is grateful, as she was severely admonished by the women of the neighborhood for her negligence. As a gesture of gratitude, she treats him well in bed, at least the first night: “S’ingegnò di trattarlo bene fra le lenzuola, almeno la prima notte che fu spinosa quasi quanto l’altra delle nozze” (107). His return took both Palma and her father by surprise. Scialoia proceeds to show his son-in-law the properties and homes bought with his dollars and assures him that his daughter, Nina, will be provided with a decent dowry.

Iusè feels out of place and uncomfortable among the more refined guests, so different from his own family. An uneducated man, he does not know how to respond to their questions, finding it difficult and fatiguing to converse with them. His only relief comes in the evenings. But even then Palma would retire to bed exhausted from the day’s work and fall asleep almost immediately. Once “gli s’addormentò sotto” (108). To compensate for the lack of attention and affection, he begins taking the child to bed with him. They play and fall asleep together. Iusè’s

¹⁴ Sharon Wood refers to the national Civil Code of 1865 that was strictly prohibited regarding women’s rights. This code gave husbands supreme rights over their wives. On the subject of adultery Wood writes, “In the eyes of the Law adultery could be committed only by the woman; the man was deemed guilty only if he brought his mistress into the conjugal home…. Women’s guilt knew no bounds [and her] position was actually worsened by the new Code…. In almost all ways, patriarchal authority remained the basis for Italian law throughout the Fascist period until after the Second World War” (6-7).
relationship with his daughter strengthens, and a deep attachment forms: “Tutto il giorno lusè lo passava con la sua Ninarella, di cui grazie al cielo era pazzo” (108).

Both father and child can now share an intimacy denied them by Palma. The games they play and the smells of the vines and the fire evoke feelings of nostalgia in the lonely man. It is “un odore primordiale, l’unico che possa far credere all’uomo d’essere a casa propria ovunque” (109). So strong is his desire to be home that he takes his daughter, and they go off into the mountains to his farm. Palma has no use for either one: “Che se lo goda” (109).

The nausea returns once more. Palma becomes more short-tempered and at times quarrels even with her father. Of course, Palma is pregnant again. And to add to her problems, lusè informs her one night as she drops into bed exhausted that he wants to take them all to America. She lets him talk and falls asleep with the word “no” on her lips.

“La nascita del maschio fu tutt’altra cosa” (111). Bonanni begins this section with the exciting news of the birth of a son. Palma’s reaction to the male child is completely different, a sure indication that the relationship that will develop between mother and son will not resemble that with her daughter. The birth of the little boy is met with uncontrollable joy and passion. The breast-feeding experience, which was one of pain and repulsion with her daughter, is now one filled with pleasure and enjoyment: “Attaccarselo al petto, altra sensazione gaudiosa” (111). The child is a delight from the first moment of his life, and Palma is exhilarated. Not even his playful biting disturbs her: “Poteva divorarsela—e che mai sono i maschi se non dolcissimi divoratori?” (111). Of interest here is that, while Palma abhors her
husbands aggressive sexual behavior toward her, she is more than happy to endure the uncomfortable yet innocent nursing sessions. A mother’s preference for the male child is connected with her own personal desire for success and personal freedom. As the child moves from infant to adolescent and finally to adult, a significant distancing occurs. This aspect of mothering a son is discussed more fully in chapter 3.

At this point in Palma’s story, we encounter the patriarchal construct regarding the preference for the male child that is so prevalent in Bonanni’s Italy. Palma linked her daughter to her husband and transferred all her loathing for this crude man onto her daughter, who clearly resembled him. Also noted here is an underlying resentment, common in many mothers, toward female offspring. The female child cannot ensure the survival of the family name and inheritance. Furthermore, the fact that girls would grow up to be women in a society that clearly placed them in subservient positions made them less desirable. It was indeed more advantageous to be born male in a patriarchal institution that marginalized and suppressed the female offspring.¹⁵

Nevertheless, this is a wonderful period in Palma’s life. The men are off at work most of the time. Her in-laws on the farm are caring for her daughter. She has the house and her son all to herself: “E Palmina si godé il figlio” (111). Her relationship with her son grows more intimate. She becomes almost obsessed with

¹⁵ A similar observation regarding women and their pre-fixed subservient role in society is evidenced in the novel Teresa by Neera. As Sharon Wood notes, Teresa is a young woman “loaded down with the restrictions and compulsions of petit-bourgeois, provincial life and the marginalization of female sexuality” (34), and her experience is “one of utter subordination” (34).
the child and calls others to come and see the wonder she has given birth to. It seems to the women that Palma had never had a child before this: “Pareva—commentarono le donne—che non avesse ancora mai avuto figli” (111). Once her daughter’s existence is removed, she falls into oblivion. And in a sense perhaps this is true, as Palmina failed to create any type of lasting bond with her daughter.

During this period, Palmina’s vision of life undergoes an unusual transformation. She often has the impression of being someone else: not the Palmina who was forced into a loveless marriage, who was abused on her wedding night, and who gave birth to an unwanted daughter. The birth of her son is like an elixir that serves a therapeutic function; it is a wondrous cure for a life of forced responsibility and lack of true love and intimacy. Her son is now her reason for living: “La bellezza del mondo—quel cielo inarcato così leggermente, la misteriosa luce degli astri—la colpiva per la prima volta, immergendoli—lei e il bimbo: una cosa sola—nella panica felicità dell’essere” (112).

As the child grows and begins to cut most of his teeth, the nursing becomes more painful, yet Palmina is reluctant to wean the child even at the insistence of the women who note that she is becoming extremely thin and losing chunks of hair. She finally stops the nursing, but muses, “Si sa i figli, sono fatti della madre: sangue e carne e vita sua stessa” (112). The final episode in this section reveals the complete mental and emotional transformation of Palma. Iusè has given his son a large gold watch, “un orologio d’oro enorme” (113). Palma’s father wants to sell the watch, as they are short on cash, but for the first time she says no to her father and is without regrets: “Palma rifiutò. Per la prima volta gli rifiutava qualche cosa e neppure le
increbbe” (113). Her love for Mimmo, her son, now trumps even her adoration of her father.

Under these new circumstances, Palma begins to experience negative feelings toward her father. At the dinner table, the old man taunts the child and strikes him repeatedly. Scialoia’s reaction to his grandson is somewhat predictable. At the birth of his grandson, his daughter’s love and affection moved from father to son. The grandfather’s abusive behavior toward the child is most likely the result of his resentment and anger at no longer being the adored object of his daughter’s affection.

This is not the case with his granddaughter Ninarella, who has begun her elementary education. The child’s lack of progress early on shows that she is not suited for learning, even though her father writes continuously that he wants her to become a teacher, sending her great sums of money for her education. Palma does not agree: after all, Ninarella is a female, and it is known that a woman’s place is in the home: “si sa, la femmina, che destino abbia: maritarsi e figliare, a che pro lo studio” (114-15).

Once again we encounter Bonanni’s negative and ironic commentary regarding patriarchal constructs deeply ingrained in the Italian pre-war society. The place of the woman is in the home, and if she were to be educated, the most fitting profession available to her would be a teaching career. In the Italian

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16 Mariolina Graziosi in her article “Gender Struggle and the Social Manipulation and Ideological Use of Gender Identity in the Interwar Years” quotes from La difesa delle lavoratrici 1922a, 1923 that states, “Women go home, because home is the place where you really belong” (28).
cultural context, teaching is “a field that had been considered the domain of women since its beginnings” (Graziosi 30).\textsuperscript{17}

Palma’s attempt to encourage her children to engage in their studies is futile. Ninarella falls asleep over her books while Mimmo struggles to stay awake and tries his best to appease his mother. Palma hopes that after the harvest things will calm down and the children will have the peace of mind to apply themselves to their studies. Perhaps Mimmo, who has not been promoted in school, will achieve better results. At the end of the harvest, great celebration of its success takes place. Seeing her father at the head of the table, “festeggiato acclamato infatuato, purpureo nel collo, con una spiga erta dietro l’orecchio” (117), Palma panics. She is now fully aware of his power, a power to which she is harnessed. She is powerless in comparison to him and has no choice but to succumb: “Palma crede d’essere lei un cavallo bendato che gira in tondo” (116). Her resentment at being controlled by the men in her life intensifies. In a sense, even her extreme love for Mimmo is a consequence of the all-pervasive superiority of the male position in a society that refuses to see women as equal and worthy of the same dignity and freedom of choice. Palmina’s decisions, perceptions, and emotional attachments are all informed by these constructs. She is obliged to adhere to the dictates of her father, husband, and son.

\textsuperscript{17} In the same article Graziosi notes: “In 1859, Casati’s Law established compulsory education for the first two grades of elementary school. La Scuola Normale was opened for the preparation of elementary teachers. The law allowed women to enroll at the age of 15 and men at age 16. This decision was explained with the justification that women, given their maternal instinct, could learn more easily how to teach children (Tomasi, Genovesi, et al. 1978, 172)” (qtd. in Graziosi 46 n8). (Italics added).
Iusè returns from America filled with anger and bitterness. He wants to know what has happened to his money. A shouting match begins between Scialoia, who is still bandaged from a recent minor operation, and Iusè, who is livid. Palma hopes to assuage her husband by presenting him with the sight of their adorable son. But quickly sees that there is no loving relationship between father and son; in fact, there is no relationship at all between the two. Father and son look at each other with distrust, “come non conoscersi e non volersi conoscere” (118). Palmina notes their reaction, which just adds to the rancor she harbors for her husband: “Questo di nuovo Palmina mette rancorosamente a carico del marito” (118).

Iusè soon realizes that all his money has been squandered. His fifteen years of relentless sacrifice and isolation in America were all for naught. One cannot help at this point but to have pity on this man, a victim himself of a system that does not allow for any deviation. Bonanni shifts her readers’ response toward Iusè from disgust to compassion:

Ormai sa bene che non n’è rimasto nulla, che gli hanno sperperato quindici anni d’America, quindici anni di lavoro bestiale, senza respiro, senza un bicchier di vino, senza un’onzia di tabacco, senza famiglia, senza affetti: quindici anni bruciatì, una boccata di fumo alla pipa di quel dissipatore. Lo guarda con occhio omicida. (119)

As he looks at his two children, he realizes he hardly knows who they are. Even his beloved Ninarella is unrecognizable. She is now called Filomena, in fact Signorina Filomena. Further, Iusè fails to realize that his children are ashamed of him, of his peasant origins, of his American way of dress, and of the mangling of his language: “Allora Iusè guarda i figli, quelle face fredde sconosciute che lo criticano,
The numerous years of separation have taken their toll. Iusè feels like a stranger in his own home. Even his wife has changed. They have drifted apart more and more. Palma is so physically consumed by her years of care for the children that he barely recognizes her. She is thin and sickly and has lost her teeth; but despite her physical demise, she still possesses her indomitable hatred of him and is controlled by her father. Iusè pities her and feels partly responsible: “Lui stesso ancora credeva di farle male, si capisce. E lo coglie un impietosimento” (119-20). In an attempt to make up for their unfortunate match and the lost years, he promises to send her some dentures. Nevertheless, he does not hesitate to claim what is rightfully his in bed. Soon thereafter Palmina finds herself pregnant again and Iusè leaves just in time to avoid the war.

As Iusè’s dollars have stopped arriving from America, the family must begin to cut back on spending. Like her resourceful Abruzzi sisters, Palmina looks for other sources of income. Their debts continue to mount, and Palmina learns to beg for money. The majority of the money she earns goes to Mimmo and Scialoia; Mimmo still has to finish his studies, while Scialoia, as the patriarch, is given the money out of respect for his position in the family hierarchy. Mother and daughter do not figure in this scheme. They begin to sell some of their property, and, with the money they gain, Scialoia embarks on another project, opening a wine shop. Palmina takes care of the clientele. Her physical labor is never-ending; she learns to sleep upright by the kitchen sink, “come cavallo alla greppia” (122). The widow and some
of the local women often help, but she can never count on her daughter, who is always in church doing odds and ends for its maintenance. Young Filomena has devoted her energies toward this endeavor, as there she is her own mistress. Filomena's detachment from her family life is evidenced by her reaction to the guests in their home. Her behavior is aloof and disagreeable, and no one can believe that she is a Scialoia: “Non pareva quella della razza di Scialoia, tant'era brutta e scostante” (123).

Before long, the wine runs out and the cantina closes down. Without this source of income, their financial situation becomes dismal. And although Palmina rarely ventures into the city, her financial needs send her frequently in search of money. Palmina goes to former clients; she learns to tell her stories of woe and lets her tears fall freely. This is always a winning tactic, and Palmina must use all measures available to her as a woman. She knows the effect tears have on a man: “e sugli uomini ha effetto” (124). Tears, histrionics, and emotional outbursts have always been tools for women to obtain a desired end. Interestingly, Bonanni makes the reader aware of the depths to which a woman must descend in order to survive. These creative tools are the result of a desperate attempt to stay afloat in an environment that does not allow women any economic and educational advantages. Had Palmina been able to receive an education, or had she at least been compensated for her many hours of labor, she would not have fallen into disgrace. Instead, her husband earned the money, her father and son spent it liberally, and she was left to repair the damage.
In a poignant scene, Palmina finds herself in line for government subsidy with other women waiting for assistance: “Quasi tutte donne, donnette anziane, vecchierelle, malvestite e talune con l’aria di mendicanti” (124). Suddenly her past life flashes before her. She still sees herself as the daughter of the great Scialoia. She was young Palmina of skin so white she was often likened to a lamb or dove: “la Palmina delle carni bianche che le paesane chiamavano agnella e colomba” (124). The narrator reflects on the fleetingness of life: “Per chi non ha agio di pensarci, tutto si ferma a un passato florido e statico, una oleografia della propria vita appesa a un chiodo del tempo come un quadretto domestico” (124). Time had marched on and Palmina was too busy struggling to survive to stop and look at herself and her life. But in this moment—as she waits in line with other unfortunate souls—she realizes that she has lost her youth. By the time she reaches the window, she is fully aware that she is begging. This bitter and painful realization almost paralyzes her. She breaks down in tears and is unable to speak.

Palmina’s decline is not only economic; she has endured a miserable marriage and the mismanagement of family funds by her controlling father. To survive, she is economically dependent on a husband she detests. She has worked tremendously hard with little control over many of her life’s situations. As a woman in a society steeped in patriarchy, she has had to face many restrictions, including the selection of a spouse, the possibility of receiving an education, and the ability to earn a living and control her financial assets. Her relationship with her husband is strained at best, she has lost her adoration for her irresponsible and controlling father, she has failed to develop any sort of emotional attachment with her
daughter—who now seems a stranger to her, and her son has brought her nothing but trouble. But she persists. She maintains a faint glimmer of hope for the future of her son, a son who has been sent to war.

The next section of the story opens with the sudden arrival of her son along with three other soldiers, followed by a joyful reunion. The young men have come to hide from the Germans but are not sure for how long (“prospettiva paradisiaca per la madre” [125]). Palmina’s beloved Mimmo has returned, “Bello è, Madonna, che carni lattee paffute, che ricci tosti lustri, che occhi sfolgoranti, un arcangelone” (125). The home is again filled with joy. Only her father is not sure of the identity of this young man. As Scialoia enters the scene, he is unsteady on his feet, has grown quite old, and is showing signs of dementia.

Palmina’s happiness is comparable only to when Mimmo was a child. She does not know how long she will have him and even blesses the war for sending him back home. His presence animates her and gives her a reason for living. She seems to have taken leave of her senses: “Lo tocca l’accarezza lo palpa, l’adora con gli occhi” (127). The women observe her madness: “Gesù Maria che infanatichimento” (127). Her passion for her son is furious; indeed, it is the same furious attachment that she abhorred in both her husband and her daughter. “È sempre di lui febrilmemente presa” (127). Palmina transfers all her love onto her son. The narrator notes that this is a common reaction in women who are involved in a loveless marriage: “Ama il figlio con la foga smodata che erompe a un certo punto della vita nelle donne senza amore (non si vive senza amore impunemente:) una dolcissima follia—e le follie tardive sono le peggiori—che sa di perdizione” (127). The women
of the town comment that Palmina would even sell her soul for this son. And indeed, perhaps she has, as she refuses to divide her love between her two children, adoring one and abhoring the other.

At one point, Palmina must make an unavoidable trip to the family farm. She needs her in-laws’ assistance to help hide Mimmo, as the SS has appeared in the city. The young soldiers could no longer remain in town, for the danger was too great. Reluctantly, Palmina accompanies her son to the farm and leaves him. After a tearful and painful good-bye, she returns home (“Tornare nella casa vuota fu una desolazione” (128), where she spends her time arranging and rearranging Mimmo’s things. Sometimes she looks mysteriously at the jar in which she has preserved the fetus of another son. This was the child she lost after Iusè’s departure. The fetus is a symbol that often appears in Bonanni’s stories. Here it represents the excessive desire of Palmina to transfer her love onto another male child: “Anche guarda, con un sentimento arcano, il barattolo in cui aveva voluto conservare,—e sta là natante, vedi le unghiette, il pesciolino—il piccolo feto dell’altro figlio che le era sfuggito appena dopo la partenza di Iusè” (128). In the male child, Palmina sees hope and the possibility of vicariously realizing her full potential. She has learned the difficult lesson that, in her world, women are voiceless. The male child, on the other hand, has potential, power, and hope for the future.

The following section opens with a realistic description of the dramatic circumstances created by the war. Supplies are scarce. Palmina has sold most of her jewelry, except for the gold watch that is bequeathed to her son. The only thing preventing her from going insane is her concern and care for Mimmo. This keeps her
busy and distracts her from the news that the Germans are rounding up young men
to fight daily. She often has nightmares and has to be awakened by her daughter,
who stops her mother’s screams because “è una cosa troppo lugubre nel silenzio
notturno” (129). Palmina’s thoughts and dreams revert to the past. She recalls the
joyful moments nursing her son and caring for him as an infant and as he grew.
These memories comfort her.

During this period, her father becomes intolerable. In his boredom, he turns
his attention to food. He quickly gains weight and, in spite of his doctor’s
recommendation, does nothing to control his compulsion: “mangiava senza misura”
(130). Palmina looks resentfully at him and concludes that men are all alike. They
are only concerned with the immediate satisfaction of their carnal desires: “gli
uomini, tutti uguali . . . rimbambiscono presto perché amano mangiare e bevono
troppo nella vita. Gli rimane poi solo quella passione del corpo e s’ingozzano con gli
occhi vacui” (130).

Palmina’s critical attitude toward men is informed not only by her own
unhappy experiences, but also by witnessing the gender bias of a patriarchal society
that is built on the satisfaction of male desires. She sees men as voracious beings
whose carnal appetites need to be fed—by women. Nevertheless, with her father’s
mental and physical decline, she begins to feel the weight of all the responsibilities
placed on her shoulders, including concerns for her daughter. Filomena has found
her niche at the local cathedral, where she finds acceptance and a love that is denied
her at home. In recounting this story, Bonanni’s narrator expresses her view
concerning the mother-daughter relationship. Palmina has never reflected on her
bond with her daughter. It never occurs to her that she has denied her daughter the affection and love every child needs. Perhaps only Filomena is aware that the one thing they have in common is their complete indifference to each other. Once that mutual disregard fades away, a persistent hatred surfaces: “In fondo non s’è mai resa conto di non sentire nulla per quella figlia, forse solo la ragazza sa che il loro unico punto di contatto è la reciproca indifferenza: a rimuoverla un poco, inacidisce subito in odio” (131). Even the townsfolk comment: “Non fanno sangue l’una con l’altra” (131). These two women seem to have shared no common bond. They seem to belong to two entirely different worlds and are devoid of any affection or love for each other.

The meditation on the essence of love continues: the narrator remarks that when people love, there is always something carnal involved. And maternal love is perhaps the most carnal of all: “E l’amor materno è sovente il piú carnale di tutti—tanto forte si manifesta coi figli maschi—per quel possesso già consumato nelle viscere” (131). In the case of Palmina versus Filomena, this love is directed exclusively toward the male child, leaving the female child with an insatiable desire for the most basic and primal bond of affection in a human relationship. The mother-child relationship is the basis of the formation of all other human relationships. Inherent in this special bond is the mother’s narcissistic drive. In a sense, the child is an extension of the mother’s self. In this story, Filomena’s strong resemblance to her father (that her mother detests) prevents this natural bonding process from developing. By the same token, the male child is seen as an extension of Palmina and her family heritage. He is thus adored and preferred to his sister.
These extreme feelings and disruptive family dynamics will have dire consequences for the characters in the story. Bonanni writes, “Ora Filomena sente oscuramente d’essere orbata, d’essere fuori del giro di quell’amore carnale che riempie e governa il mondo, essa sola esclusavi anche per parte di madre” (131).

Palmina’s excessive love for her son is stressed in the next scene. News reaches the town that some young soldiers had tried to cross the lines and some were feared dead in a barrage of fire. Palmina becomes like a mad woman at the thought that Mimmo might be among the victims. Furious and fearful, she rushes to the farm, and in the kitchen she sees the corpses of two blond boys. Miraculously, Mimmo is not one of them, as he had hidden in the cellar and survived. The sight of her son, alive, overwhelms her: “alla vista del figlio grasso e ben vivo, corse ad afflosciargli addosso svenuta” (132).

The situation at the home front continues to deteriorate; Scialoia’s mental state worsens, and the debts are mounting, as Iusè has not been able to send money from America. Palmina reveals her managerial skills in taking care of the household financial affairs. The townsfolk recognize her ability: “era stata meglio d’un uomo d’affari” (135) (certainly any type of business enterprise was considered a man’s work). But Palmina’s thoughts are focused on her son, who is returning home. As they toast Mimmo’s eventual graduation from high school, Palma is ready to forget the past and looks to the future with hope, “domani sarà un giorno migliore di oggi” (135).

The moment of hope for the future turns to a pessimistic, fatalistic vision of life: “È un fatto che quando la vita ti si placa attorno e ogni cosa sembra aggiustata,
proprio allora bisognerebbe stare in guardia” (137-38). Palmina becomes aware of
this threat only after she becomes ill and is bed-ridden. She had never really been ill
before and suddenly understands what it means to have good health. While in bed,
she asks her daughter for her old prayer book that had belonged to her mother. She
always thought she would have time to pray, but life was such that she never did.
And she now perceives, “è incredibile quanto poco tempo avanzi per l’anima” (138).

Incapable of sharing her mother’s anguish, Filomena is even more irritated because
she must now care for the home and her ailing grandfather.

Palmina is well aware that she and her daughter share no deep bond. While
leafing through the prayer book, she finds an old photograph of her mother. She
strains to focus on the picture and must also face the fact that her eyesight is failing.
She hardly recognizes her, but manages to make out the face of a woman “brutta e
fiera, col collo lungo steccolito d’ansia e un tuppetto malbilicato in cima alla testa
come una corona storta. Anche, a un tratto, la capisce” (138). This is a revelatory
scene, as at this moment Palmina connects with her mother’s situation in life. She
begins to understand why her mother wanted to teach her to be a lady, and in a
moment of reconciliation, she cries and kisses the photo. Nonetheless, she comes to
the distressing realization that all these attempts are useless, that everything one
does in life loses its value before the reality of death. Meditations of her relationship
with her mother bring her thoughts to her own daughter, Filomena, and concern for
her future. Decidedly, she will not pass on the attitude of subservience to men to her
daughter. Perhaps Filomena has already understood that in a man’s world the
choices for women are limited. She will be better off dedicating her life to God and not to another man:

È stato inutile, certo—tutto quel che si fa nella vita, dinanzi alla morte, tutto appare inutile. Né essa tenterà di ripetere la lezione alla figlia, insegnarle che bisogna sedersi a tavola con gli uomini e adorarli nascostamente senza inginocchiarglisi avanti. Meglio ancora se può fare a meno di adorarli: che adori Dio, Ninella, se le riesce, che adori i suoi Nazzareni e i suoi preti. (138-39)

Palmina calls her daughter often to her bedside. But she still cannot bring herself to speak with her daughter, nor does she dare caress her: “Né osò carezzarla, mai l’aveva fatto, ed è così ritrosa con quegli occhi sfuggenti” (139). As Palma’s condition worsens, her children, the doctor, and the priest are called all at once to her bedside. But she asks to be alone with her daughter. Filomena is certain that the tremendous weight of her mother’s work will fall upon her and that, like her mother, she will be expected to care for the men in her family. But Palma has nothing of the sort in mind. From the moment she saw her mother’s face in the photo she experienced an instant awareness. She begins to see her life and that life of all women in an entirely different light. At this point, everything becomes painfully clear to her; why she was sent to the collegio for an education, why she was given to Iusè in marriage, why she became a servant in her own home, and why her mother was betrayed by her father in his affair with the widow. She understands more than ever that her son will fail to receive his university degree, but, notwithstanding that, he will assume his place as master of the house. She knows now that a ruinous pattern will be repeated: “E ha capito benissimo che mai il ragazzo raggiungerà la laurea, tornerà un giorno anche lui a casa, a fare a casa il grand’uomo” (139). Thus, a conflict arises between Mimmo’s failure in the public
scene and the performance of participation in the family boundaries, and despite his academic failure, he will be compensated on the home front.

All this she understands in the final hours of her life. Now she gives to her daughter the best advice she can to defend herself against being subjected to more authority: “Ninè—dice dolcemente alla ragazza che s’inginocchia per udirla. —Ninè, tu fatti monaca . . . Ninè giuralo” (139). Filomena’s eyes open wide in amazement. She nods, perhaps even responds yes, but Palma can no longer hear her. Her mind wanders to an image of her husband. He is returning home, taking possession of the house, and she smiles, mercifully reconciling herself to her fate. Now she comprehends her value as a woman in her society. She was nothing more than a plaything—meant for the pleasure and use of a man who was supposed to play with her for a short time, but, being awkward and hasty, broke his precious toy. It is one of Bonanni’s most powerful reflections of the fate of the Italian woman in this period: “Perché ora sa d’essere stata la sua favolosa bambola—gliel’hanno data da tenere per burla come si dà per poco un costoso giocattolo a un bimbo povero—benché lui maledestro e avido l’abbia subito rott" (140).

Palma leaves the bottle with the preserved fetus, while no decent photograph of her survives. And it will serve as a reminder that she was called upon to serve others and to be subservient at all costs, “e dirà di sí agli altri, dirà sempre e a tutto di sí” (140). She wants to give some of Iusè’s dollars to her daughter as a dowry to enter the convent. But her time is running out, and she feels her life slowly abandoning her body. She wants to see her son again but it is already too late. Her last thoughts are a promise to return to him, even if just for a moment.
The town women judge Palma for not calling her father to her bedside and for asking her son to leave. The women did not understand her desperate desire to speak alone with her daughter and somehow save her from a similar fate. In a sadly ironic end, Palma’s son does not shed a tear. She lived and breathed for him, but in the final moment there is no indication that her love was reciprocated. Indeed, at the sight of his mother’s body on her deathbed, Mimmo begins to laugh uncontrollably. The narrator does not comment as to the son’s reaction. Perhaps it is a nervous laugh due to his inability to respond appropriately to his mother’s death. The reader is left to speculate as the women take him away and give him something to drink. This seems to calm him, and, as he lights a cigarette, the narrator comments, “Eh!, la gioventú” (141).

At dawn, Filomena gets up and makes coffee for the men. She gives her brother some cookies, as she knows he needs his strength. Scialoia does not know yet that his daughter has died. He has an accident, and Filomena cleans and changes him. Her grandfather straightens his mustache. He is after all the head of the household!

And thus the pattern continues. Mothers and women are locked in a perpetual cycle. They are the ultimate caregivers, at inestimable costs. Coming to this realization too late, Palmina can only make a final heroic attempt to save her daughter from this fate.
CHAPTER 2: *L’IMPUTATA:*

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTS SHAPING MOTHERHOOD AND WOMEN’S LIVES

The novel *L’imputata* was published in 1960 and won the prestigious Viareggio Prize. The story details the lives of the survivors of World War II in a small, typical town in the Abruzzo region of Italy. Bonanni writes in a distinct, straightforward and realistic style. Her third-person narrator is an omnipresent observer of the lives of her characters in the aftermath of the war. The narrator observes and reports; her commentary springs from her insistence on realistic detail. Ever-present is the figure of the mother and her concern for the survival of her children. Bonanni presents a multifaceted picture not only of motherhood in postwar Italy, but also of the lives of the children in their mothers’ care. Fathers are noticeably absent, underdeveloped as characters, and often presented as failures. The men in Bonanni’s world are defeated by the war experience and its consequences. Thus, the survival of the family unit depends almost entirely on the strength of the women in the households.

The title of the novel, translated in English as *The Accused*, alludes to a woman put on trial. Yet, it is Gianni Falcone, an adolescent male, who commits the crime under investigation. However, the Italian title rendered in the feminine singular form suggests that the true perpetrator of the crime is not Gianni, who is himself a victim, but some other person or group. Perhaps Laudomia Bonanni is accusing Gianni’s mother, Anna, for her failure to read and understand her son. Or
she may be pointing a finger at “la società,” “la guerra,” or even “la comunità.” An in-depth analysis of the text provides some interesting conclusions.

The basic plot of the novel revolves around the investigation of the murder of a boarder in the home of Anna Falcone. The accused is allegedly her son, Gianni. But as the novel proceeds, it becomes quite evident that this is much more than a murder mystery. In fact, it is a commentary on the daily lives of some survivors of World War II, in particular the women and children. Here the chorus of female voices and the lives of their children are woven together to create an intricate tapestry of community life in this typical town in the Abruzzo region. At center stage are the mothers and their relationships with their children. Despite the miserable conditions in which they live, they always remain focused on their primary responsibility, that of caring for their children’s well-being. Bonanni presents an extensive cast of characters and delves deeply into the lives of these families living together in a tenement. The murder crime is seemingly the central event of the novel, but a close reading of the text reveals Bonanni’s use of the murder investigation as a literary tool, a frame within which to present the details of life after the terrible experience of the war. These survivors live in dismal conditions. They have endured the horrors of war, earthquakes, hunger, lack of adequate housing and clothing, and yet they persevere. In her essay on Bonanni, Olga Lombardi writes, “Importanti sono soprattutto le madri.” She continues, “Ma queste donne esercitano anche un matriarcato, parlano con indulgenza delle debolezze dei loro mariti di cui si sentono protettrici, rappresentano la continuità della vita, la sua forza non sottomessa” (1956: 7058). As Lombardi notes, this presentation of the
small world of the *casamento* is a reflection of a larger picture. This is a representation of life in the towns and villages not only in Italy, but also throughout much of war-torn Europe. Moreover, as Bonanni moves beyond the provincial, small town, she becomes “esemplarmente umana” (1956: 7057). It is this quality of universality that gives the text its lasting value. The voices of these mothers and their relationship with their children remain Bonanni’s true focus.

The novel is thematically rich and incorporates numerous topics concerning women and children. The themes can be divided into three categories: feminine issues, maternal concerns, and the mother-child bond, particularly the mother-son relationship. Many women’s issues are touched on, such as sexuality, appearance, aging, prostitution, work opportunities for women, relationships with husbands, and coping with death. Women as mothers face many difficulties regarding procreation, such as unwanted pregnancies, birth control, sex education, and infanticide. The mother-son relationship and the role of mothers who are obliged to become the sole caretakers of the home and of their children are central in the text. The themes of male adolescent sexual awareness and children coping with postwar trauma are closely linked to these motifs.

All these threads come together to create a multilayered and detailed picture of a sisterhood of women as they cope with the ever-present demands of a patriarchal society that seemingly offered no support for many of their concerns—including the prohibition of birth control, the condemnation of illegitimacy, and the oppression of women in the workplace—while at the same time exalting motherhood to a near saintly position. The idealization of motherhood ensured that
women would stay in the home and thus free their male companions to pursue
careers and their personal goals. Indeed, this study consistently shows that the
women in Bonanni’s world often viewed motherhood as an entrapment, and some 
even thought that women without children were perhaps the more fortunate ones.
In a patriarchal society that frowned upon childlessness, the wish not to have 
children expresses a deep-seated discontent with the current state of motherhood.
Bonanni’s mothers are often women who are not free to make personal choices 
regarding education, careers, the selection of a spouse, and the number of their 
pregnancies. Throughout Bonanni’s stories, a woman’s work is understood to be in 
the home, and the care for her children is the center of her existence. In most cases, 
women are totally consumed with the work of mothering.

**The Maternal within the Feminine**

Motherhood as we know it today is a fairly recent social and political construct. Ann Dally investigates the various aspects of motherhood in her study *Inventing Motherhood: The Consequences of an Ideal*. Here she argues that the notion of a woman confined to the home to raise children alone is a recent phenomenon:
“During the twentieth century, for the first time in history, the majority of women 
have had, increasingly, to bring up their children virtually alone” (9). In times past, 
women cared for their young in a community setting. A sole woman never would 
have been expected to spend many years isolated in her home with small children 
entirely dependent on her. This expression of mothering is new and, as many 
feminists suggest, is the result of cultural and ideological constraints. Dally claims,
“There have always been mothers but motherhood was invented.” The radical shift in thought regarding motherhood developed around World War II: “The 30 years following WWII, and in America the 30 years before that, could be described as the age of idealization of motherhood” (Dally 92).

This is the climate in which Bonanni sets her novel. The action takes place in postwar Italy in a small Italian town in the central part of the country, the Abruzzo region. Her story line, the murder investigation, is the frame for her true concerns, that is, the fate both of mothers and children after the war and the Italian society’s neglect in providing assistance for rebuilding their lives. Indeed, these are lives that have been forever altered by the devastation and destruction in the aftermath of the war experience.

In Bonanni’s earlier stories, “Il fosso” and “Palma,” women as mothers occupied a central space. Bonanni presented the stories of two mothers struggling to survive despite poverty, miserable living conditions, and weak or absent husbands, with minimal support from society. In L’imputata, Bonanni adds the plight of the children to the picture. Clearly she sees that the children are the true sufferers, those most adversely affected by the war and society’s response. Of the children’s voice in Bonanni’s work, Lombardi writes, “questo coro non è la cornice del quadro, è il quadro stesso” (7058). And noting the importance of the mothers, she claims, “le madri rappresentano la continuità della vita” (1985: 422).

Unquestionably, the two components are inextricably linked. The novel provides many examples of mothering, examples of women whose lives are dedicated almost entirely to the needs of their children. Children are the focus of their mothers’
concern, and in turn Bonanni’s text mirrors this perspective in constructing a series of vignettes of the daily life in this typical Abruzzo town.

Writing in a sharp, realistic style, Bonanni constructs a narrative that fully exposes the lives of her characters. Lombardi writes that *L'imputata* “tocca il punto estremo del suo [Bonanni’s] realismo” (1956: 7060). And indeed, in the opening scene, the discovery of the newborn corpse on the morning of September 15 sets the tone for the remainder of the novel. The children are the first to discover the infant in a corner trash heap. The baby is wrapped in paper, wet and soft, “come si buttano gli avanzi del pesce” (Bonanni 7). A crowd forms. But the police are soon on the scene and take over. They cover the corpse and do not allow anyone to touch or move anything. An investigation follows, and a young substitute detective is placed in charge of it. As he approaches the scene, he cannot help but notice the large population of children in the area. Upon a cursory examination of the corpse, he observes the flies hovering over the remains, and the narrator comments that he would remember the flies long after the crime. The connection between the flies buzzing around the human remains and an innocent child’s death produces a chilling effect. The reader is made painfully aware not only of the transitory nature of life, but also of the fate of unfortunate and unwanted children. The abandoned corpse of the child, the preserved fetus that Palma kept carefully hidden, and gruesome details of maimed bodies, as in the dismembering of a child during the birth process, are images that recur throughout Bonanni’s texts. They are representative of the unique connection between a mother and her child. Whether the child is lost early in miscarriage or abortion, abandoned, neglected, or well cared
for, the mother-child bond is a relationship that is primal and of utmost significance in shaping human lives. In the case of the discarded newborn, the child is clearly unwanted. Tossed upon the trash heap to be disposed of, the reader can only speculate as to why this occurred. Most likely it is the result of an illicit affair. The birth of an illegitimate child would only bring shame and humiliation to his or her mother. The child would also suffer the consequences, as he or she would be without a name and legal rights.

In her study *The Myths of Motherhood*, Shari L. Thurer offers a detailed history of motherhood, addressing also infant abandonment. She notes that this is an ancient practice and was a common occurrence in nearly every early civilization such as classical Greece, Rome, and later Egypt. She states, “Unwanted children were ‘exposed’ that is, abandoned, a practice that persisted quietly in Western culture in one form or another well into the Middle Ages, when the process became institutionalized in the form of foundling homes” (56). Unwanted infants were wrapped in cloths and placed in a large pot. Often a “birth token” was included. Other times the infants were placed on top of a trash heap at local dumpsites of the community in a similar vein to the infant discovered by the children in the opening scene of *L’imputata*. In ancient cultures, quite often the abandoned child was female, thus attesting to the lack of value attributed to the female child. Indeed, Thurer points out, “Only one family in a hundred raised more than one daughter” (56). Thurer notes that the practice of abandonment not only continued into the Middle Ages but also became institutionalized with the creation of foundling hospitals. In
her treatment of child abandonment, Thurer refers to John Boswell\(^1\) and concurs that child abandonment was common practice throughout the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.\(^2\) Thurer argues that the establishment and rapid growth of foundling hospitals indicated two significant facts: first, a true concern existed for the unwanted child; and second, many children were unwanted. One might conclude, along with Thurer, that the foundling institutions, whether considered homes or hospitals, were “the Christian solution to the ancient problem of exposure” (56, 96).

A number of circumstances and cultural forces might inform a mother’s decision to abandon her newborn child. An unwanted pregnancy is often the result of rape, incest, or an extramarital affair. Even within the sacred institution of marriage, a woman living in difficult economic conditions who bore numerous children found herself in desperate straits. This desperation often led to violent and seemingly unthinkable acts toward her offspring. In her chapter entitled “Violence: the Heart of Maternal Darkness,” Rich comments,

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\(^1\) In his detailed study of child abandonment, *The Kindness of Strangers: The Abandonment of Children In Western Europe From Late Antiquity To The Renaissance*, John Boswell notes that the medieval practice of leaving an unwanted child at the doorstep of a hospital grew to the extent that “by the end of the fourteenth [century] . . . many large German, French, and Italian cities had established institutions specifically for abandoned children” (415). Boswell observes, “a major benefit of the foundling-home system was that the problem of unwanted children was removed from the streets and the view of ordinary citizens” (423).

\(^2\) Boswell concludes, “It was Italy that adopted the Middle-Eastern religion Christianity and named it heir to Rome’s cultural and political patrimony, transforming imperial modes of abandonment into Christian ones . . . it was to be expected that by the end of the Middle Ages, Italy would introduce to Europe yet another way of dealing with her unwanted children, [the foundling institution]” (427). A striking aspect of the earlier foundling home was its revolving door, called the *ruota* in Italian. This device conveniently allowed the child to be left anonymously and without consequence (433).
In a tenement, or hovel already crowded with undernourished and ailing children, the new infant, whose fate was already almost certainly death, might be ‘accidently’ or unconsciously suffocated, lain upon in bed, allowed to drown, or simply left unfed. (261)

In many cultures, the unwed mother who gives birth to an illegitimate child is seen as a “fallen woman” and is scorned by society. Thurer remarks, “Her destitution forced her into the kind of basic strangeness that made her unfit for parenting . . . [and, as in ancient cultures and societies,] she was compelled to dispose of her baby” (188). The concept of illegitimacy is clearly a patriarchal construct that marginalizes both mother and child. Indeed, Adrienne Rich notes,

But it has to be emphasized that, historically, to bear a child out of wedlock has been to violate the property laws that say a woman and her child must legally belong to some man, and that, if they do not, they are at best marginal people, vulnerable to every kind of sanction. (260)

In a patriarchal society that thrives on possession and control, ownership and supremacy inform family institutions. Historically, an illegitimate child was ostracized and denied basic legal rights. “Until the eighteenth century or later bastards were largely excluded from the participation in trades and guilds, could not inherit property, and were essentially without the law” (259). A living baby born out of wedlock provided concrete evidence that a transgression had been committed. In most cases, the mother's abandonment of the child was the result of sheer desperation and fear. She knew that she could not keep the child and that she must free herself of it in order to survive. The notion that a mother might consider her newborn child an impediment and an unfortunate burden that would interfere with her ability to survive is a clear indication of the powerful influence of this patriarchal construct. This is possibly the case in Bonanni’s opening scene. However,
the death of the infant is never fully investigated, nor was it meant to be. Bonanni uses this tragic event as a literary device to command the reader’s attention. The discovery of an abandoned infant corpse is bound to elicit an emotional response. It is a response that will take into consideration the plight of women in society and the consequences suffered not only by the mothers, but also by the children. This gruesome scene sets the tone of the novel and points to the predicament of women in the aftermath of World War II. It is an image of desperation, suffering, and poverty. Bonanni presents a society attempting to recover from a devastating war, focusing her gaze on the experience of women and children. The dead child is the symbol of a society that has failed not only to protect its women and children, but also to shield its citizens from destruction, famine, and misery. In the final analysis, the persistent reality is the fact that the abandoned child was a burden on the disconsolate mother whose cry for assistance went unheard.

In an early scene in chapter 2, the men and women in the little town are engaged in a heated discussion on the discovery of the dead child. The women are sincerely surprised that the identity of the mother is still a mystery to them. These women take pride in knowing about everything that occurs within their small tenement world, yet this tragic event slipped past their gaze unnoticed. Quite

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3 Child abandonment continues even today (despite the fact that desperate mothers have other choices available to them) as this news report from Arcene, Italy, on April 7, 2010 attests: “Una tragedia inspiegabile, un fatto inaudito. All’indomani del ritrovamento del neonato morto, rinvenuto in un parcheggio abbandonato in un parcheggio ad Arcene, la gente del paese appare incredula e sbigottita. . . . Il corpicino, nudo, senza segni di violenza, pulito, era avvolto in una vestaglia rosa dentro un sacchetto di carta di un negozio di abbigliamento di Verdello.” (“Neonato trovato morto a Arcene®«Chi sa parli». Oggi l’autopsia” L’eco di Bergamo.it. Web. 7 aprile 2010.) This problem can also be connected at times to immigration issues.
clearly, men and women see things differently. The men tend to remain calm, emotionally detached, and more concerned with the political aspects of the crime. The women find this male response infuriating. After all, the men are never home and can be easily deceived in matters that are supposedly within their area of expertise. “Le donne nutrivano poca fiducia nell’acume maschile in certe faccende: puoi abbindolarli anche se sono del mestiere, noi se ne sa più del diavolo” (41). The women are proud of their knowledge of seemingly mundane daily occurrences. Tensions rise almost to the point of physical violence: “Ne discutevano a non finire, si scagliavano uno contro l’altro venendosi quasi alle mani” (41). Yet, all politics, patriarchal concerns, and social mores aside, the women know that in these situations it is the innocent child who suffers and pays with his or her life. This is common knowledge. “Alle donne invece non importa più nulla, non vogliono sapere chi ha scatenato il mondo, chi ha avuto colpa, a chi tocca pagare. Del resto si sa che pagare tocca all’innocente” (41-42). In a patriarchal society, the birth of an illegitimate child would bring considerable shame and disgrace, not only to the mother and child, but also to the mother’s family. Thus, the unwed mother had few, if any, options. Faced with this dilemma, it is not surprising that out of fear and desperation a mother would decide to abandon her child.

Closely related to issue of child abandonment and infanticide is the question of birth control. Margaret Sanger, in an essay written in 1920 entitled “Birth Control—A Parent’s Problem or Woman’s?”⁴ gives voice to what informs the friction resulting from a woman’s desire for freedom of choice and the patriarchal insistence

⁴ Reproduced in Feminist Theory: A Reader.
on control. This control at its most basic level is the struggle over the authority regarding issues of conception and the birth of a child. In the title of her essay, Sanger identifies the problem and asks the reader to determine whether this issue is a woman’s problem or one of both parents. She suggests that in a rational world, “birth control would become the concern of the man as well as the woman” (138). However, ours is not an ideal world, and thus she concludes, “Birth control is a woman’s problem” (139). As the novel progresses, the women voice their opinions on such matters as birth control and family planning.

As Bonanni’s story is situated in post-World War II Italy, it is useful to examine the political and social climate during the war years, in particular the treatment of the issues of birth control and sex education. In her influential study, *How Fascism Ruled Women: Italy, 1922-1945*, Victoria De Grazia notes that during the Fascist regime, all issues regarding sex education and birth control fell under the category of population expansion and thus under the rule of the Fascist state (5). Mussolini’s ambitious goal of turning Italy into a world power necessarily involved the controlled increase of the population of Italy, in order to allow the country to compete with other world powers. This meant that decisions concerning women and childbearing were to be determined by the state. De Grazia writes,

Hence, on principle, it [the state] denied women any role in decisions regarding childbearing. Indeed, on population issues, women were presumed to be antagonists of the state, acting solely on the family’s interest without regard for the nation’s needs. Seeking to compel women to have more children, the state banned abortion, the sale of contraceptive devices, and sex education. (5)
Yet, despite the government’s attempt to inform and control women’s reproductive choices, women’s desire to claim ownership of their bodies persisted. Nevertheless, it was not without serious repercussions for many Italian women:

Consequently, the struggle to control one’s own body exacted high personal costs: women fearful of unwanted pregnancies experienced sexual intercourse with nervous vigilance, warning their partners “fa tensiun!” (be careful!); in the worst cases, they turned to corrosive douches and makeshift abortion to interrupt pregnancy. (52)

In order to enforce the bans on abortion, birth control, and sex education, the Fascist state found it would need to employ an age-old method of control; that is, one of restraint and suppression (55). The royal decree-law of November 6, 1926, which focused on the ban of any information regarding reproductive issues, became effective on July 1, 1931 (55). This law “prohibited the display, sale, possession, distribution, manufacture, and importation of literature, engravings, lithographs, drawings, objects, and so on that offended public decency” (55). Thus, in Fascist Italy, any person tampering in any way with the process of procreation would be committing a serious crime against the state. (Later “this proscription was extended to apply to anything publicizing the means of preventing or interrupting pregnancy” [55].)

Also important to note is the Catholic Church’s compliance with the Fascist agenda regarding women and birth control. De Grazia refers to the encyclical of Pope Pius XI published in 1930. Entitled Casti connubi, the encyclical treated such matters as the sanctity of marriage, birth control, eugenics, and abortion. The Church’s view coincided almost entirely with the tenets of the Fascist state and thus reinforced the prohibitive directives of the government. De Grazia writes that this
encyclical "was widely regarded as giving firm theological foundation to state policy" (56). Young women in particular were kept in the dark regarding all sexual matters. They entered marriage totally ignorant of their bodies and the sexual experience, and they often found the wedding night to be traumatic; much like the protagonist’s experience in the short story “Palma.” The blackout of any information regarding sex education and birth control was not limited to the lower classes:

Even among the self-consciously modern working class of Turin, there were women who recalled “almost with rancor” that nobody told them about the facts of life; they had been abandoned to themselves, ignorant, “like beasts,” about their reproductive functions. (57)

Surprisingly, Mussolini’s attempt to control the numbers of abortions and increase Italy’s population did not yield positive results. Indeed, just the opposite happened. Abortions often became the only method of birth control available to many women, as it was the last desperate attempt when all other birth control methods failed.5 In the final analysis, the woman’s health was put in jeopardy. She risked becoming sterile or dying. The relentless attempt to control conception by the Fascist regime stands as an example of patriarchy in its most extreme form. In the end, women who terminated their pregnancies were able to justify their decisions by shifting their guilt to a power-hungry dictatorship and an unrealistic church. Indeed, they even rationalized that God was on their side: “in the face of dire necessity, God, too, preferred the well-being of the living to the existence of the unborn” (59).

5 “When abstinence or coitus interruptus failed, and douches and other postcoital home remedies proved futile, women resorted to abortifacients: emetics, irrigation with herbal infusions and chemical irritants, hair pins, knitting needles, scraping, and probes” (De Grazia 57).
Bonanni’s characters live and act within this cultural frame. Comments made by some of the female characters point to their collective feeling of loss of control over their bodies: they are overwhelmed by the number of children they conceive and give birth to. Throughout the text, numerous dialogues address the discomfort of pregnancy and the inability to prevent it. This is the case with one of the mothers of the tenement, the very pregnant Signora Basile:

Larga sfiancata sulla sedia, le mani sul ventre, la madre Basile non ha riso. “Del resto,” considera inaspettatamente [gli uomini] “sono tutti uguali. Ti credi,” rivolgendosi alla Salviati “che Pasqualino non m’ingravida un’altra volta?” (Bonanni 51)

Signora Basile knows that after this pregnancy she might be forced to have another child, as she cannot refuse her husband what he must consider his God-given right—her body. Like the other women in town, she lacks safe and acceptable methods to control her reproductive capacities during her childbearing years. According to Rich, numerous pregnancies were a fact of life: “And within wedlock, women have been legally powerless to prevent their husbands’ use of their bodies, resulting in year-in, year-out pregnancies” (260-61).

Another scene of L’imputata makes a powerful reference to the reality of numerous pregnancies and a woman’s duty to accept her fate. Women were not permitted to voice any objection, as the woman who dared to do so would become the object of scorn and shame. In this passage, Cristina Melli is distraught. She is unhappily married to a husband she detests. Living with him has become unbearable, and yet she finds herself getting up every morning, making his coffee and serving it to him. Cristina’s mother does not approve of her daughter’s attitude. In her view, Cristina has no cause for complaint and should understand that this is
the life women are destined to. The elder Melli reminisces, “Le madri di una volta
non si stancavano dopo dodici figli, dopo quarant’anni di allevamenti e tribulazioni,
mica ne avevano il tempo. Cristina non discusse, non voleva neppure parlarne” (58).
The mothers of times past were encouraged to procreate and produce as many
children as possible for the good of the Fascist state. Mussolini even went so far as to
establish a day to celebrate mothers. Referred to as the Giornata della madre e
dell’infanzia, the day was set for Christmas Eve, thus linking the earthly mother to
the divine mother par excellence, the earthly mother of Jesus, God’s son. Rather than
celebrating the work of dedicated mothers, this celebration was intended to honor
the women with the highest number of births (De Grazia 71). Indeed, every year at
Palazzo Venezia in Rome, Mussolini awarded the nine mothers who had given birth
to the most children with a sum of money and a free insurance policy (Mack Smith
210). Quite clearly, “the main objects of celebration were not just any mothers, but
prolific ones” (De Grazia 71).

De Grazia observes that during this period, two contrasting images of women
arise. On the one hand is the donna-madre. She is revered for her contribution to the
growth of the Fascist state. De Grazia describes her as “national, rural, floridly
robust, tranquil, and prolific” (73). This image of the poor, uneducated, worn-out
woman surrounded by numerous children is sharply contrasted with the image of
the donna-crisi. This woman was typically better educated, belonged to a higher
social class, was more affluent, and had fewer children. De Grazia describes her as
“urbane, skinny, hysterical, decadent, and sterile” (73). Not surprisingly, the poor
mothers with numerous children looked upon their childless sisters with great
resentment. For these women, the work of motherhood, the toll of numerous pregnancies on the body, and the struggle to survive was unrequited. The elder Melli’s statement is representative of a generation of women who accepted their fate and did not dare entertain the thought of protesting and challenging the status quo, while the younger Cristina Melli represents the beginning of a change. She is unwilling to resign herself, but she is still unable to alter her circumstances. The fear of another pregnancy torments Cristina, who warns, “se ne dovessi avere un altro, coi tempi che corrono, vorrei prima strozzarlo con le mie mani” (53). The resentment builds in her as she prepares her husband’s caffelatte. She considers him inept and is repulsed by his body. Even though she suppresses her anger and resentment, she becomes aware of her hatred of him: “La stizza che sorge per prima è soffocata dalla sua stessa infondatezza, poi ci si abbandona alle altre. Viene il momento che Cristina indaga nei propri sentimenti: lo odia” (59).

Then her concerns turn toward her only son, Ninni. He is undernourished and sickly. As she enters his room, she hesitates, sensing that something is terribly wrong. It is not her son’s condition, perhaps not even her unhappy marriage, but the daily grind of life. She is a woman struggling to survive in a postwar Italy with little hope for a brighter future. Without an education and trapped in the provincial town, she will continue her days serving her husband his coffee, attending to her son, and fighting the ravages of the aging process. Alas, it is life itself that is responsible. The following quote is a clear indication of the progression of her profound

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6 “That the ‘rich’ had fewer children and the poor many caused resentment not only against the wealthy but also against a regime that tolerated such inequalities of burdens and means” (De Grazia 73).
disillusionment and depression: “Ah!, ma è la vita, la vita che non va, questa cosa amara disgustosa che è la vita giorno per giorno. E lunga. Dio quanti anni, poterli almeno consumare a letto a occhi chiusi” (59).

The Fascist regime typically placed the mother squarely in the home. To be stationed on the home front was her honorary yet obligatory position. Rather than be a warrior herself, she was to provide warriors for the national cause. De Grazia remarks, “This pattern of relegating women to domestic duties, while diminishing their authority in the family, will come as no surprise to anybody familiar with how modern welfare states operate” (60). Women were restricted not only in the types of jobs available to them, but they were also discouraged from obtaining a university degree.7

De Grazia’s description of the new Fascist woman presents an identity in transition between the previous culture of traditional values and a more modern model, a “thoroughly hybrid new woman” (163). Notwithstanding her more exuberant attitude, she still lacked many personal freedoms in decision-making: “She was more self-confident and freer than her mother had been, yet as little or less emancipated” (163). Cristina Melli is a case in point. She is a woman with personal

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7 In her study *Italian Women’s Writing 1860-1994*, Sharon Wood notes, “From 1923 women could not work as heads of middle schools, nor could they teach history, philosophy or economics in the *licei* (grammar schools)” (98). In her article “Reading, Writing, and Rebellion,” Jacqueline Reich enumerates further restrictions regarding female education and work: “Female students were discouraged from advancing in their studies, even more so than their male counterparts. ... As an additional deterrent, university tuition doubled for female students in 1928 (Saracinelli and Totti 1983, 120). ... In 1926, women were excluded from teaching such subjects as Latin, Greek, history, and philosophy in the *liceo* and the *ginnasio* and were later barred from the major positions of authority in both the middle and technical schools (De Grand 1976, 949)” (Reich 223-24).
conflicts who is dissatisfied with her state in life. The contrast between her desire for a freer existence and the elder Melli’s blind acceptance of the traditional social constructs governing her life is a key factor. In the younger Melli, the seeds for a new self-awareness and release from predetermined social values reflect contemporary transformations. However, Cristina Melli does not achieve this awareness regarding her condition.

In a scene in this section, Cristina goes to awaken her son, Ninni. As she passes a mirror, she gazes at her reflection with disgust. Without make-up, she is unattractive. At this moment, she is confronted with the social construct according to which a woman’s physical appearance must be pleasing at all times. Like all women in her situation, she is required to wear the mask of a youthful exterior. Cristina is well aware that maintaining this artifice is an arduous task requiring constant upkeep: “Passando guardava con avversione allo specchio, ormai senza rossetto si diventa impresentabili. E bisognerà ricominicare con le pinze, questi odiosi peli che rispuntano come spini” (59). Lipstick and tweezers will not be enough to keep the aging process at bay. Cristina senses the futility of the attempt to control her aging and contemplates her death:

> Piange su se stessa, condannata per il resto della vita a doversi spelare. E intanto s’immagina morta—dopo morti il pelo cresce—esposta con quegli spini per la pelle: il marito, la gente, anche il Ninni a guardare, e sarà stato inutile tutto. (60)

This quote underscores not only Cristina’s fear of aging, but also her fear of death itself. Furthermore, it is a reflection of her personal sense of worth. Cristina’s self-esteem is deeply rooted in her estimation of her physical appearance, and, like the women of her social status, she places considerable importance on physical
attractiveness. A woman’s appearance is often related to her desirability to her male counterpart, which in turn is linked to her ability to thrive. Women of Cristina’s social standing—unskilled, poorly educated, and financially dependent—often had limited life choices, such as marriage or the convent.

In *Amazons, Bluestockings and Crones: a Feminist Dictionary*, Marjorie Ferguson stresses the relationship between feminine appearance and financial survival: “It is a social, cultural and economic fact that for some women their facial contours or body shape can determine their income and status more than their life chance situation” (67). Thus, a woman’s physical appeal is seen as a legitimate source of empowerment. In the *Irigaray Reader*, the chapter entitled “The poverty of psychoanalysis” emphasizes the significance and power of a woman’s beauty. Luce Irigaray quotes Lemonine-Luccionian, who sees “beauty as ornament, that is to say as weapon and cover” (qtd. in Whitford 88). In her study of beauty and female appearance, Sara Halprin argues that the notion of female beauty as a source of power is nothing new. Of the Old Testament, she writes, “The story of Esther, like the Apocryphal story of Judith, who slew Holofernes, introduces a new idea into the Bible, the use of woman’s beauty as a tool, whereby she gains an advantage over a powerful man” (36). Body image and physical beauty, in contrast to the negative effects of aging, are patriarchal constructs so ingrained in the female psyche that they become the prerequisites for the building of self-esteem in many women. The traits to which women may aspire, such as physical attractiveness, enduring youth, and an ideal body size, are often unrealistic and unattainable. As women age and experience a loss of sex appeal, they are consequently marginalized even further.
References to female aging appear throughout *L'imputata*. As the women of the tenement discuss the loss of physical attractiveness and beauty with age, they note that the aging process is far more traumatic for a woman than for her male counterpart: “Però l’uomo, ricomincia sempre da capo, mentre alla donna fa tanta impressione il primo capello bianco” (51).

However, despite concerns regarding aging and physical appearance, life in the tenement must continue. In chapter VI, the scene returns to the investigation not only of the infanticide, but also of other crimes committed in the neighborhood. The talk is of petty thefts, things that go missing, such as mats, trash cans, brooms, and vases. Perhaps the responsible parties are neighborhood boys unleashed by their mothers or their childish pranks. Once again, only the mothers are considered responsible for their children’s actions, and only they seem to struggle to survive in times of extreme poverty. Indeed, “La miseria dei tempi ha ridotto il popolo nudo e crudo” (149). The narrator recounts the case of the man who slits his wrist so that he can be admitted to the hospital and receive a decent meal. The women comment that this is no way to live, “col mondo così conciato finiremo per sbranarci” (149).

Then the focus turns to the women themselves. The narrator sees their suffering and their strength during the war and its aftermath. While their male counterparts grow leaner, the women are presented as healthy and fattened, “mute, presenti a se stesse, farsi grosse maestose (quando invece l’uomo si spolpava) come nelle gravidanze” (150.) Amazingly, these women thrived, although they endured famine, miserable living conditions, and numerous pregnancies. They worked as mothers and caretakers and, during the war years, took the jobs left vacant by the
men who left home and family for combat. The narrator remarks that these women seemed to find an inner strength in their sacrifices, “delle volte la donna sembra pascersi di sacrificio” (150). In the postwar period, women are confronted with a new reality, as the men have returned home and taken back their jobs. The women lament the fact that the jobs, which had been available to them, are gone, and they are once again confined to the home. So they focus all their energies and talent, their hard work and dedication, into the care of family and home life. No longer young and hale, they are now old, flaccid, and underweight. No longer silent, they have become argumentative, agitated, and irritable. They are the stereotypical wives: tired, worn out, no longer attractive, aged, and annoying. Yet, Bonanni sees beyond this stereotype and looks at these women as bastions of inner strength. She sees the world governed and cared for by their superior survival ability:

È adesso che le vedi dimagrire, o piuttosto rilasciano la carne, sono diventate vecchie mogli fastidiose. Querule e visionarie, eternamente agitate, esse coi figli in primo piano, riempiono la casa, la strada, il vicinato, il mondo intero. La guerra infemminsice il mondo. (150)

The women in the narrative may be presented as querulous and complaining, but Bonanni sees them as visionaries, perhaps the true heroines of the war, capable of facing the misery of its aftermath. When the war took their men away, they were left to take over, to care for the home and the children, and to make the choices that were necessary for their survival. And in the face of adversity, they proved their strength despite an uncertain future: “Nessuno d’altronde sapeva che avrebbe fatto

8 “On June 5, 1940, the dictatorship suspended all quotas on women’s work, and women began to be hired to substitute for some of the 1.63 million men called to arms. By 1943 women were prominent in the work forces of factories and public administrations” (De Grazia 282-83).
dei propri figli, non sai neanche se domani ci sarà posto per tutti in un mondo così sbalestrato, non ci si sente ancora sicuri e riammessi alla vita” (150). Throughout the novel, Bonanni provides examples of female inner strength, attesting to women’s superior ability in confronting adversity and maintaining their psychological balance.

In another passage, Gianni, the adolescent boy who is eventually accused of murder, stops before the home of the “vecchie Miserere” family. These three women live in a basement apartment, and the family consists of three sisters, one of whom is an invalid: “Le vecchie abitavano nel sottoscala . . . dentro giaceva la paralitica” (27). The women are “vestitrici di morti, vestivano i morti per mestiere” (27), an odd profession. As Gianni passes, he likens them to witches, “si aggrappavano ai ferri come streghe” (27). A woman unmarried, childless, and aged is tantamount to the abhorred and feared witch. As women age and experience a loss of beauty, they also experience a loss of power. In patriarchy, beauty is linked with fertility and procreation, while the absence of beauty—ugliness—is linked to sterility and old age. Sara Halprin notes, “so long as women are defined by their appearance rather than action, old women will be powerless in a world that sees them as ugly” (203). Interestingly, although the old witch is feared for her superior wisdom and possible association with evil, some feminists also see in her an unexpected source of power later in life.9 The narrator refers again to this archetype at the end of the chapter.

This scene is set at the home of the Paris family. Their son Vittorio is urged to drink

9 In Amazon’s A Feminist Dictionary, Mary Anne Warren states, “Some recent feminist writers have looked upon the legends and rituals of witchcraft as a part of women’s spiritual heritage and have found in the witch an inspiring image of female strength” (487).
some wine. As he does, Signor Paris turns to his wife and says, “Dovresti pettinarti” (32). His wife shakes her head and remains silent, “E la madre spallucciò ma non successe nulla” (32.) Suddenly Vittorio blurs out, “Sembri una strega” (32). The sight of a woman with uncombed, disheveled hair once again brings to mind the image of the witch. Cristina ignores this insulting remark and continues with her daily chores.

In several passages, Bonanni touches on a woman’s fear of aging and its consequences. Her female characters are typical in their aversion to this process. It is a slow process that in a scene catches Cristina Melli by surprise. Cristina has always considered herself young, agile, and attractive. But at this point, she is forced to face the inevitable changes brought about by time. This self-scrutiny happens upon close inspection of her son’s drawings. She had never really paid much attention to his youthful scribbling—which usually consisted of maternal puppet-like figures. All of a sudden, she happens to note Ninni’s drawings on his table with more attention, and she is shocked at what she sees. Unquestionably, the drawings portray her: “Era lei in ogni pagina, trovò la cosa sconcertante” (161). Much to her chagrin, her son has depicted her with wrinkles, frowns, and facial hairs. He has captured in his drawings the abhorrent signs of aging of which she was not aware. She is dismayed and mortified:

Cinque o sei segni paralleli in fronte stavano a indicare le rughe: il suo continuo aggrottarsi, se ne accorgeva spianando per un momento. Poi vide i peli. Fulmineo, Ninni svirgolava al mento del pupazzo fitti spini. S’allontanò arrossita. (162)

Cristina is mystified. Throughout the war years, she had always been young and attractive. What happened? She recalls looking at herself in the mirror of a
stranger’s home and barely recognizing the beautiful woman in the reflection. She had kept this image of herself in her mind’s eye and assumed this was the image she was projecting to others: “Eppure aveva continuato a nutrire l’incongrua fiducia che se guardano gli altri debbano trovarci immutati” (162). Yet, now this image contrasts greatly with the woman in her son’s drawings. Bonanni recognizes the traumatic experience aging can have on a woman—especially one as attractive as Cristina: Cristina the youthful mother has become Cristina the aging mother. Now she does not recognize the old face in the mirror and no longer knows who she is.

The mirror appeared in the previous short story “Il mostro” as a symbol of reality of the self. What one observes in this looking glass is the true self. The symbolic mirror brings to mind, for example, the Pirandellian characters that have faced their reflected image. Mirrors are a recurring symbol in Luigi Pirandello’s works. The gaze into the mirror of self is an attempt to know the self and perhaps to gain a deeper understanding of one’s humanity. However, the glimpse of the self-image reflected in the mirror is not without consequences. The viewer’s experience is marked by several different responses, ranging from surprise and shock to repugnance, denial, and anger. Rather than an innocuous moment, the glance into the self is fraught with drama. Pirandello himself attests that this is what informs his theater. Pirandello’s concept is referred to as *Il teatro dello specchio*:

> When a man lives, he lives and does not see himself. Well, put a mirror before him and make him see himself in the act of living, under the sway of his passions: either he remains astonished and dumbfounded at his own appearance, or else he turns away his eyes so as not to see himself, or else in disgust he spits at this image, or again clinches his fist to break it; and if he had been weeping, he can weep no more; if he had been laughing, he can laugh no more, and so on. In a word, there arises a crisis, and that crisis is my theater. (qtd. in Bassanese 54)
The Bonannian woman gazes into the mirror of self and instead looks the other way. She does not lose her sanity; nor does she retreat into another self, as she cannot afford this escape. Work must still be done; children must be cared for and households run. Although she may turn her gaze away from her self-reflection, she will not forget this revelation. The drama of the Bonannian character is the realization that she is bound to wear the masks society has imposed on her. Her true self is buried under the many layers of preconceived notions regarding her femininity and her maternal role.

Indeed, Cristina cannot linger for long on her fading appearance. She has many responsibilities, a son to rear, and other necessities of life that she must attend to. The Bonannian woman is portrayed as a woman who understands the importance of her work and everyday commitments. She is asked to make difficult decisions. She spends her days raising children and catering to her husband’s needs, and she does not always have time to herself. Her voice remains silent. Throughout the novel, Bonanni presents many examples of the strength exhibited by the women of the *casamento*. In almost every family situation, the woman is the pillar of resistance, like Colomba and Palma in the previously mentioned stories. These women and children could not possibly be more marginalized in the postwar patriarchal society, and yet, the women, mostly wives and mothers, are really the defenders of the families. In the *Grapes of Wrath*, a novel set in the Great Depression era, John Steinbeck writes, “Women and children knew deep in themselves that no misfortune was too great to bear if their men were whole.” (7) The circumstances of Steinbeck’s women of the Depression era are similar to those of the women of the
casamento in Bonanni’s novel. These women also look to their husbands for
security, but find that their men are not whole; they are broken as a result of the
war, of ill health, and of loss of job security. This is confirmed by a remark made by
Flora Fusco, one of the women of the tenement. As is often the case, the
conversation turns to husbands, “S’attacca l’inesauribile argomento dei mariti” (51).
The husbands have returned from the war, but in a debilitated state. Flora’s quick
response is telling: “Come ce li hanno sdirenati i mariti” (52). In their brokenness,
the men look to their wives, mothers, and sisters to solve difficult family and
economic situations. The women display their strength quietly yet firmly. They do
not hesitate or flinch when faced with the many life-changing decisions confronting
them. These women work steadily and indefatigably while contributing to the
changing role of the woman in the family dynamics.

From the onset of the story, the women are presented collectively as “le
donne,” and they are one unified female voice. They observe and comment on their
predicament and support one another in the act of living and surviving each day, “la
sorveglianza [nothing escapes their attention] avveniva da dentro, forse dalle cucine
[woman’s most typical workplace], ogni madre [unified by a common bond]
trovandosi pronta a richiamare i figli alla vista di gente estranea [dedicated to the
protection of her children]” (11). These women communicate constantly with one
another, focusing primarily on the fate of the children: “Le donne ne [of the
discovery of the infant corpse] parlavano con l’aria di sentirsi fuori causa,
interessate solo al discorso dei figli” (13). At times, they wisely recognize that they
cannot protect their children from all external influences. After all, the children are
growing up on the streets and in the alleys, courtyards, and piazzas of the neighborhood and cannot escape the war memories that are indelibly imprinted in their psyches. These are memories that are inherited from their mothers and fathers—memories that are substantiated daily by the remains of the war-torn cities and streets throughout Italy. In the midst of these remnants that are impossible to ignore, the women wonder how they could have produced so many children, only to introduce them to a life of misery:

Era colpa del cortile. Già nelle donne s’indeboliva la proibizione di passare il cancello. Sono abituati a stare fuori, c’è la strada interrotta e non transitano macchine, andavano a scorrazzare per gli sterri movendo le gambe sopra e sotto. E s’erano scordato quel vizio. Esse stesse finivano per scherzare: ci sono nati, l’hanno succhiato col latte, succhiavano e con che foga, ma appena li staccavi da capo quel lagno inappagabile, giorno e notte, non avevano più dormito durante gli allevamenti. Ora sembrano stupirsi di aver potuto partorire tanti figli mentre si subissava il mondo, ripetono con incerto tono di scherzo che l’hanno imparato prima di nascere. Effettivamente c’era stato un caso di pianto prenatale. (14)

In another scene, the children are at play with Gianni, their leader. Through conversations, quarrels, and compromises, they are interacting and learning social skills while the mothers take a moment to rest. This passage refers to the peculiar behavior of the mothers and their children’s inability to understand their persistent mothering, their anger in certain situations, and their overprotectiveness. It is the afternoon, a time for rest and repose. Suddenly the windows and shutters close, and the weary mothers retreat. They are tired and are no longer able to keep watch over their children. At a certain point, they must let go and become, as least for a while, detached—not only because they have other responsibilities, but also because of their sheer mental fatigue. Reluctantly, they must accept the fact that they cannot constantly control their children: “Ma ormai balconi e finestre erano chiusi. Con
l’incomprensibile comportamento delle donne, che a lungo si accaniscono e a un tratto lasciano andare, non venivano più sorvegliati né richiamati" (38).

Clearly, the care of children and home totally absorbed the mothers, and this left no time for anything else. A mother’s lot in life was automatically and unquestionably linked to home and family. Unpaid and undervalued, she had also to suffer the insults of those fortunate men who had been formally educated. Women’s lack of education is also evident in inspector Lanti’s observation of Signora Paris’s comment concerning her son, who was to attend college and only needed to acquire the proper documents. Lanti is quick to note the incorrect use of “carte,” rather than “documenti.” His silent remark is significant: “Non disse documenti, ma le carte, come una donnetta” (22). Indeed, Signora Paris, like most women in her society, would not have had much formal education, and this lack is evident in her choice of words. Inspector Lanti’s comment reflects not only the pervasiveness of the stereotype of the uneducated and ignorant little woman, but shows, by contrast, the importance of establishing equal opportunities for women in education.

Throughout the novel, the women come together and compose a chorus of female voices. They are always there to support one another in times of trouble and difficult decisions, in times of mourning and death, and in joyful times of celebration, such as a marriage or a birth. The women move in unison throughout the novel with a shared sense of community. This phenomenon is highlighted in the scenes toward the end of the novel in which the women unite as they are being investigated for the murder of the Falcone boarder. The women stand behind Anna, one of their own. Inspector Lanti realizes the futility of his attempts to extract any relevant
information from them. In their solidarity, they find the strength to resist his questioning and his authority. Bonanni writes, “Il gruppo delle donne era così fuso da non distinguerele più. Era stato impossibile capire dalle loro facce che pensavano della confessione della madre” (242).

This feminine voice provides a unifying thread in a narrative with an ample cast of characters. The women, for the most part mothers, visit the sick and praise, guide, and watch over one another’s children. They show inner fortitude in the face of adversity; they laugh, they cry, they reunite to welcome life at births and baptisms; they are witnesses at the marriages of their children; and at and the end of their lives, they dress their deceased loved ones and bury them. At every significant moment or life event, they are ever present. This element of female bonding is a significant aspect of the novel. These women support one another, and, although the practice known as affidamento or entrustment had not yet been conceived, Bonanni recognized the importance of a female community for survival. These women sharing ideas and experiences and offering advice to younger women to deal with everyday problems can be seen as the precursors of the Italian feminist concept of entrustment and the building of female solidarity.

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10 In Sexual Difference: A Theory of Social Symbolic Practice, Teresa de Lauretis defines affidamento or entrustment as “a term proposed to designate a relationship between two women. . . . Briefly, the relationship of entrustment is one in which one woman gives her trust or entrusts herself symbolically to another woman, who thus becomes her guide, mentor, or point of reference—in short, the figure of symbolic mediation between her and the world” (8-9).
The Bonannian Women: “dure a impazzire”\textsuperscript{11}

In Bonanni’s works, men are seen as inevitable obstacles in the lives of women. Only when the men are away can the women safely discuss such intimate issues as male sexuality and pregnancy. They formulate a unanimous opinion of the men in their lives: “Era l’ora delle donne, senza mariti e senza figli, che un po’ vagabondavano” (48); “Non c’era un uomo, nemmeno il padre, si parlò in libertà di gravidanze” (207).

Bonanni’s novel offers several examples of women who face these harsh circumstances with stoicim and fortitude. The story of Signora Pace and her son Angelo is a case in point. We meet Angelo (“un laureato, i suoi ex alunni lo chiamavano ancora il supplente Pace” [48]) as his mother runs after him in her slippers, trying to put his overcoat on him. Thus, the relationship is quickly defined for the reader: it is a rapport between an absentminded son and an overprotective mother. Later we learn of Angelo’s delicate nature, his love of insects and plants. He was a studious type with no friends and no interest in women; despite his two college degrees, his true passion was butterflies. Signora Pace recalls a scene between Angelo and his father, who condoned his son’s seemingly feminine preferences. Signora Pace has no doubts that it was his father who instilled these sentiments in the young boy, “Gli fece nascere quella passione” (68). When Angelo is called to active duty, his mother is not surprised to learn that this young man is unsuited for military life. “Lo prendono dalla cattedra e lo mandano soldato semplice in caserma” (67). Signora Pace knows that her son is not like the other

\textsuperscript{11} “Bastions of strength” (Bonanni 151).
boys. Surely he could not be expected to harm another human being when he could not bear to kill an insect: “ancora da grande Angelo prendeva le cose di natura con dita delicatissime, guai in casa a uccidere una mosca” (68).

Much later in the narrative, the saga of the Pace family continues. Mother and son are seen going out arm in arm. The son is unsuspecting. But, when he spots the car waiting in the courtyard he is quick to realize that the car is for him—to take him away. He frantically tries to free himself from his mother’s embrace. He becomes like a wild animal trapped with no way out: “corse attorno come una bestia in gabbia” (202). The nurses from the mental institution who had been summoned by Signora Pace were there, waiting to block his attempts to escape. The terrified young man turns to his mother and in desperation promises, “Non lo faccio piú” (202). Whatever his transgressions, he would promise anything to be allowed to stay in his own home. Then Signora Pace begins to caress and soothe him. She motions to the waiting nurses to stay put, as she will be the only one to touch her son. “Resoluta con la bocca ferma” (202), she manages to lead him to the waiting car, but once again he escapes through the opposite door. Suddenly Angelo begins stomping the ground as though he is trying to destroy something; unable to communicate to his mother and convince her, he resorts to a physical expression of frustration and anger. Then he begins to sniff as though he smells something of interest. “Forse sentí l’odore della ruchetta che aveva tanto cercato, si curvò, a strappare l’erba portandosela al naso” (202). The faint, familiar odor seems to calm him momentarily, and he wants to return home to his collection of insects and plants: “E voleva ritornare di sopra, alle scatole” (202-03). But his mother will not
allow it, and once again she takes him back to the car. His final attempt to escape is prevented by the nurses, who intervene and manage to get him into the waiting car.

Meanwhile, the people of the tenement had gathered and watched the whole scene unfold. The sight of the young Angelo being driven away with a fistful of greens is pitiful, in particular to the mothers: “La mano disperata piena d’erba che si vide per ultima al vetro del finestrino, gli restituí un’innocenza così conclucata da toccare a tutte le viscere materne” (203). Signora Pace, like the mothers of the casamento, understands that there are times when the woman must take control of the situation, particularly since, in her case, her husband is of no use. These women know instinctively what needs to be done: “raggiunta una certa carica nervosa, le donne credono di avere delle intuizioni” (204). One of the most difficult things a mother can be asked to do is give up a child and have him or her committed to a mental institution. But the mothers do not condemn her. They understand. They know that first and foremost, one must survive. God has dealt them a hand, and they must play it out. So when Signora Salviati must make similar decisions, the women in the tenement are not surprised.

We are introduced to the Salviati family early in the narrative. The family consists of a son, Gabriele; four daughters; and a couple of twins—a boy, Ugo, and a girl, Melina. The twins are referred to as “bambini infelici,” and we learn why much later in the story. The family is struggling financially and has not been able to pay their rent for months. One day, the landlady pays them an unexpected visit. Their poverty is overwhelming. The landlady, adorned in her pearls, looks around, noting their misery:
Gabriele era rimasto con la faccia umida e l’asciugamano sudicio penzolante. Guardava la pila dei piatti sporchi sull’acquaio e due mutandine rosa sbrindellate, gialle al cavallo, messe ad asciugare a uno spago attraverso la cucina. (100)

Notwithstanding these images of deprivation, the landlady is only concerned that the rent is paid: “Però,’ disse quella ‘bisogna pagare. . . . Perché se no sfratto” (100).

To help his family financially, Gabriele has taken a job at a local hotel as an elevator boy. But the situation in the Salviati home continues to deteriorate. In one scene, the girls are lying listlessly on the bed, the mother is standing in the kitchen mute, and the father is sitting on a stool just staring at his knees. The women try to help the family as best they can. Even Gianni lends a hand and takes the young twins to his home.

Early one morning, Gianni hears a scream. He wonders what has happened. He had been lying in bed, sleeping and dreaming. Apparently he had noted earlier the similarity of Signora Salviati’s voice with that of his mother’s. In the dream, he hears his mother calling him. This is a recurring nightmare remaining from the war experience. He arises and sees the women lining the stairs. They are in the act of descending, as if to flee. Oddly, there are no children with them. In the frenzy of the moment, the mothers taking flight seem to have forgotten their children. The dream ends when Gianni’s mother awakens him. She hurries him to the shelter, as the alarm has sounded. Now, on this particular morning, Gianni sees the mothers on the stairs; but rather than descending, they are ascending. His dream is in reverse, but with the same ominous sense. Gianni hears Gabriele’s name being called, followed by an explosion of screams and cries:
An investigation follows the death of Gabriele Salviati. The suicide attempt is inexplicable to all, and yet foul play is never considered: “A nessuno della casa, neanche ai genitori, venne in mente che non si fosse tolto la vita con le proprie mani” (127). Finally the case is closed, and suicide is confirmed as the cause of death. The reason for the suicide remains unknown.

The women of the *casamento* are well aware of the suffering of the Salviati family. As the family’s financial condition worsens, their mental states deteriorate. The women in the neighborhood visit often and witness the pathetic condition of the Salviati home. Signor Salviati is reduced to a shadow of the man he once was: “Il povero uomo lo tenevano in cucina come uno straccio” (150). Then one day, they find him crouched on the stairs outside his home. They try calling his name, pushing him and urging him to get up, but they cannot get him to move. He is seemingly frozen, paralyzed with the weight of the misery and sorrow holding him down. He finally must be carried into his home, where he must be kept under careful surveillance. He spends the remainder of his days in a quasi-catatonic state, crouched in a corner of the kitchen, mute and staring. At this point, Signora Salviati realizes that she must make her move. The family must survive, and clearly her husband cannot assist her in any way. She only allows herself several days of self-pity before she begins to take action. Like Colomba and Palma before her, she resorts to government subsidy for assistance. The narrator comments that when
husbands fail to take action, the women must be ready to take over: “Le donne ce la fanno sempre al posto dell'uomo” (151).

Signora Salviati’s intervention, however, does not end here. Her daughters are all encouraged to find work. And we learn that the wretched hunchbacked wife, “l’aggobbita Salviati” (165), has done her research and prepared papers to have her miserable husband committed. The two youngest children, the twins Melina and Ugo, are sent to an institution where they would be cared for and educated. She knows that she has done what was necessary and feels justified:

Aveva fatto tutto da sola, ricerche lettere suppliche e documenti. Tornando dopo la sistemazione del marito, disse alle donne che la circondavano: ‘Bisogna vivere, no?’ Il poveruomo era diventato un peso morto, come negarlo. (165).

However, one of the ladies of the tenement, Nina Bontempo, does not see Signora Salviati’s decision in the same light and is enraged. Nina, a dressmaker, and her husband, Michele, an agent, live together in the tenement with their many cats. They were a childless couple until they adopted their little girl, Spiritina. Nina is outraged at her neighbor’s decision to send her youngest children to an orphanage. Had she been aware of their desperate situation, she would have welcomed them into her home. One or two extra mouths to feed would not have made that much difference to her. Her anger overcomes her, and she must be held back from rushing to the Salviati home to take the children from their desperate mother. She is ready to denounce Signora Salviati for her unforgiveable acts.

An unexpected visitor calms her down. Spiritina goes to answer the door, thinking it is one of her mother’s clients. Instead, standing there is a curved little woman with a peasant scarf on her head. Nina recognizes her immediately, even
though she has never seen her before. Spiritina notices the woman looking at her with an air of recognition and asks her mother if the woman knows her. Indeed, Nina responds, “T’ha vista nascere” (166). As it turns out, the little woman is Spiritina’s biological mother. She has learned that the Bontempo family adopted the child she gave up years earlier. Nina is on the verge of asking the most obvious question, the identity of the father. The woman seems to guess Nina’s curiosity and, without hesitation, tells her that the girl is a child of the soldiers. She then announces to Nina that this time she has left a male child at the orphanage. Looking at her swollen breasts, Nina asks her why she left, and the unfortunate woman replies, “Volevano farmi allattare gli altri” (167). Then she leaves without looking back.

This biological mother who has placed her child in an orphanage is another war casualty. Many women bore children fathered by soldiers—soldiers who went off to war and left the women with no means of support. The children born to these women could be the offspring of a foreign soldier, or the result of rape. A frequent solution to the resulting illegitimate birth was to leave the child at an orphanage.\(^{12}\) Aggravating the situation, the post-partum women were asked to remain at the institution and nurse the hungry children abandoned by their desperate mothers. Bonanni paints a realistic picture of the terrible situation these women had to confront. Who is responsible for these women and children who are innocent victims of war? These unfortunate women, along with their illegitimate children who must be separated from them, pay a high price. A childless woman like Nina

\(^{12}\) See Elsa Morante’s *La storia* for a different choice that a mother of an illegitimate child fathered by a soldier might make.
could not easily understand how a mother could abandon a child to whom she has just given birth. However, women who have given birth and who have had numerous children may have an entirely different perspective. Flora Fusco, for example, thinks Nina is enviable in her childlessness: “La bionda riteneva il non far figli l’unica fortuna che possa capitare a una donna, e su questo punto non s’intendevano” (167). Bonanni delves deeper into the issues of childlessness in her novel \textit{Il bambino di pietra: una nevrosi femminile}.

The difficult and heart-wrenching decisions these women must make, the strength of character that they must demonstrate, and the wisdom of their choices are paramount in defining the Bonannian woman. Among the numerous examples of this theme that appear throughout the text is the debilitated Marchese, who must lean on his wife’s body for support:

\begin{quote}
Furono osservati in strada un giorno di concerto che aspettavano il taxi. Egli stava curvo abbiosciato, mutava piede di continuo pencolando con una spalla, poggiandosi tutto alla moglie. E la moglie, santo cielo, è proprio una marchesa. E ne sostiene il pondo, erta massicia, regge comunque validamente il peso di lui. (152)
\end{quote}

The Marchese ends his life with a gunshot to the head. Certainly the suicide implies a deteriorating mental state. The Marchesa, instead, remains level-headed. The contrast between the Signori Granata is also noteworthy example of male versus female strength. Once again, the woman is described in a positive light. She is quick, despite her size, while the man is seen gasping for breath: “Ma l’apparizione incredibile fu quella dei coniugi Granata. Lei avanti rapida malgrado la mole, lui dietro annasando, scesero nel cortile e risalirono per l’altra scala” (155). The
misshapen, bow-legged husband of the blond Flora Fusco is described as “lo sbilenco marito della bionda” (16).

In the male-female relationships presented by Bonanni, the woman emerges consistently as the more capable individual, both physically and mentally. The male head of household is often incapacitated for reasons of either physical or mental health. As the husbands are unable to face the reality of their present life situation, the women must take charge: the responsibility for survival falls squarely on their shoulders, and they rise to the occasion. In these vignettes, Bonanni challenges the construct of the woman as the “weaker vessel.” Her inherent strength is depicted as far superior to that of her male counterpart. Bonanni attributes the resilience of these women to their concern for their offspring and acceptance of the serious challenges connected to the experience of motherhood. Clearly, the stronger sex is that of the women with children: “Il sesso forte è la donna che ha figli, la spinta della vita sostiene come l’acqua il nuotatore” (269).

The Mother-Son Relationship

The relationship between mother and son occupies a central space in Bonanni’s works. It is a relationship with which she must have been personally familiar, having witnessed and presided over many trials during her tenure as a judge in the juvenile court. The mother-son relationship has only recently stirred the concerns of feminist critics, as in the past, the issues of how to raise sons and relate to adolescent masculinity were not addressed. In writing about the mother-
son bond, Bonanni was a visionary who anticipated a much-neglected area in feminist studies.

According to Annie O'Reilly's account, we are about ten years behind in our investigation of this important field in studies of motherhood (107). The mother-son bond is as essential in successful mothering as that of the mother-daughter relationship, albeit of a completely different nature. Mothers often have difficulty understanding their sons' masculinity, as it is a dimension foreign to them. Furthermore, any sort of intimacy between mother and son can often be misconstrued. A fine line exists between parental intimacy and possible sexual intimacy, and any transgression of this border is considered taboo. Western culture has set very definite parameters for the mother-son relationship.

In the early part of the twentieth century, the analysis of the mother-child relationship was greatly influenced by the studies of Sigmund Freud. Adrienne Rich recognizes the huge impact of his theories, especially the Oedipus complex: "No one aspect of his theory has been more influential than the so-called Oedipus complex" (196). This complex deals with the notion that at a very early age the child falls in love with his or her mother. The male child supposedly becomes jealous of his mother's love for his father. At the same time, the discovery that he is physically different than his mother is a traumatic event. Thus, the child is faced with feelings of aggression toward his father, the fear of castration, and an illicit attraction toward his mother. Freud did not dwell as much on the experience of the female child. Perhaps as the mother struggles to understand her male child, so Freud found delving into the female psyche just as mysterious. In her seminal study, *The
Reproduction of Mothering, Nancy Chodorow notes Freud’s “failure to deal with women at all in the major part of his writing, even when it specifically concerns issues of gender” (142). She continues to raise questions regarding Freud’s knowledge and understanding of women based on remarks made throughout his works and concludes “that he did not know much about women and did not really understand them” (142). While recognizing much of his innovative work, feminists such as Chodorow agree that at the base of Freud’s theories is the insistence on patriarchal constructs that informed his views. Feminist responses abound, challenging many aspects of Freudian theory. Rich argues, “But Freud was also a man, terribly limited both by his culture and his gender” (196). And Luce Irigaray remarks, “All Freud’s statements describing feminine sexuality overlook the fact that the female might possibly have its own ‘specificity’” (qtd. in Whitford 119). However, one cannot deny that an individual’s perspective regarding child rearing and the parent-child bond is linked to the predetermined spaces of women and children in the patriarchal society.

Although in Bonanni’s texts the adult male is portrayed in a negative light, the young adolescent son is seen in different terms. Bonanni’s novel is set in postwar Italy, a time and culture in which the male offspring was preferred: “The mother of a son was envied and praised just for giving birth to a boy. His arrival conferred prestige on her” (Smith 17). But prestige alone was not sufficient to guide women in their rearing of sons.

Two mother-son relationships stand out in this text; that of Cristina Meli and her son, Ninni, and that of Anna Falcone and her son Gianni. Cristina is an unhappy,
frustrated wife and the devoted mother of her only son. Ninni is her underweight child. His undernourished body is of constant concern to Cristina, who often experiences feelings of guilt at not being able to provide the proper diet for him. She is almost entirely focused on rearing this child and ensuring his growth into adulthood. Ninni is a quiet child who loves staying home and who spends many hours with his drawings. He often asks his mother odd questions that trouble her, such as whether or not it is necessary to go to school. Ninni has an inexplicable fear of leaving his mother and attending school, and he abhors adulthood: “Ma lui non vorebbe neanche diventar grande, il pensiero di crescere gli ripugna e lo allarma come andare a scuola e mescolarsi con gli altri” (158). The child’s dread of growing up, which should be a reason for joyous anticipation, anguishes Cristina: “le parve una menomazione che esulcerò il suo cuore di madre” (159). But, on the other hand, Cristina is a controlling mother. She does not encourage him to go out and play with the other children in the courtyard, as he may become overheated. In the colder months, she runs after him with scarves and hats.

Toward the end of the novel, we find a pregnant Cristina Meli sitting peacefully in an old easy chair in front of her terrace. She is watching her swollen belly as the child within her moves. Her hands caress the child with a sort of sacred awe at the life growing within her. She seems at peace with her pregnant state, despite her insistence that she would never bring another child into a world of misery and poverty: “Mai avrebbe immaginato di voler metter ancora al mondo un figlio” (251). She is so focused on her new state that she even forgets her son Ninni, who has gone down to the courtyard to play. She is filled with a calm sense of
resignation that life must go on. Her recurring nightmare of being pregnant and giving birth in a war-torn world has ceased. As she looks around her, she is filled with hope and comforted by the new growth on the trees: “Era verzicante” (252). For now, Cristina has overcome her fear of life. She can forget her apprehension: “Capí in confuso che quei tetti, gli alberi, la luce, avevano un senso eterno perché lei stessa era rientrata nella vita vivente” (252). Ninni will sense this newfound freedom from his mother’s ever-watchful eye. In the final scene, Ninni will begin to lose his fear of school, liking the idea that his name is Giovanni Meli. He will not fear strangers, and he will slowly break away from his mother’s domination, beginning his life as an independent youth, “Cominciava a sentirsi disinvolto” (279).

The second mother-son relationships that Bonanni explores in this novel and the more developed of the two is that of Anna Falcone and her son Gianni. Some of the dynamics of the difficult task of mothering a son are evident in Bonanni’s depiction of this particular mother-son relationship. The widowed Anna Falcone and her fourteen-year-old son Gianni are introduced early in the narrative. Lombardi describes the rapport that develops between mother and son as hostile and with sexual overtones. Moving from child to adolescent, “egli intuisce in lei quel grande segreto” (1956: 7059). As the events unfold, we learn that the great secret is that of her existence as a woman who is both mother and sexual being. The discovery of his mother’s sexuality proves problematic to the young adolescent who is quickly moving toward adulthood. In appearance, he is typical and of average stature, “lineamenti regolari, corporatura normale” (15). As visible proof of his growing masculinity and maturity, Gianni is often seen with a cigarette butt hanging
from his lips and is referred to in the tenement as “[il] ragazzò della cicca” (15). It is his trademark. The children of the tenement are in awe of Gianni as he roams about with an air of authority, the cigarette butt always hanging from his mouth. They follow him faithfully. The positive feeling toward Gianni’s capabilities as a trusted leader is evidenced in the mothers, who often entrust their children to him while they are off running their errands. Gianni is both delighted and surprised at this responsibility conferred upon him.

Gianni’s hostility toward his mother surfaces one day as he observes the Marchesa walking arm in arm with her son, “il marchesino zoppo.” He cannot imagine how a mother and son could have so much to say to one another: “Invece non riusciva a capacitarsi di quei due continuamente insieme, che potevano dire, che discorsi può fare un uomo con la propria madre” (26). He is happy that his mother, Anna, as he boldly calls her by her first name, leaves him alone. Anna is a single mother struggling not only to survive in the aftermath of the war, but also to raise her son. She is described as a widow of a certain age, “anni tot, vedova, affittacamere, buone referenze” (15) and “grassa ma irrequieta” (31). Her restlessness is apparent throughout the story. She senses behavioral changes in her son that she cannot comprehend. Notwithstanding her efforts, she and her son do not converse much, as she cannot engage him in any meaningful dialogue. At the dinner table, traditionally a place where families engage and interact, Gianni is depicted with his head lowered, shoveling his food into his mouth. As soon as he has finished, he disappears into his room. Throughout the meal, Anna is nervous and uncomfortable, “a ogni boccone sentiva il bisogno di alzarsi e girare per la cucina”
(31). She does not know what to make of her son’s odd behavior, “Che ragazzo, passò per il capo a Anna” (31). But as she begins washing the dishes, her thoughts turn elsewhere, and she forgets about him. This becomes a typical reaction to her son’s seemingly abnormal behavior. Anna senses the potential problem, but prefers to ignore it, as she does not seem to know how to approach her son. She believes that in time his problematic silence will disappear, and her son will simply grow out of it. But sadly, this will not be the case. Anna’s inability to connect with her son and to grasp the urgency of his needs proves tragic.

Gianni’s behavior is an enigma to his mother. He appears to be lazy and sleeps much more than she thinks he should. She complains to her neighbors, other mothers like her, who recall what a beautiful child he was as they attempt to assuage her concerns. During the conversation, Gianni lights a cigarette and begins smoking. This gesture goes completely unnotice by the women. Despite their wisdom and experience, the emerging masculinity of Gianni, as well as their own sons, evades them.

Suddenly, at 12:30 in the afternoon, an alarm goes off in a nearby school. It is a siren that had been reactivated: “Improvvisamente, alle dodici e mezzo, suonò la sirena di una scuola industriale, che era stata riattivata” (54). The dreadful, all-too familiar sound startles the townsfolk. Gianni is also frightened, and a flood of terrifying memories fills his mind. The narrator notes at this point the beginning of Gianni’s anxiety toward the women who have gathered. The women suddenly become aware of the cigarette butt hanging from Gianni’s lips. Finding themselves in this state of alarm, they realize that he should be prohibited from smoking at such a
young age. Yet, at the same time, they know that they are powerless to stop the progress of a child from adolescence into adulthood. Now they are concerned that the example Gianni is setting will influence their own children. But they recognize that he will always be the young boy who, while the other children cried in fear during the air raids, only perspired at his hairline. Here again the memories of the recent bombings remind the mothers of the collective fear of their loved ones. One mother’s remark about her daughter’s reaction illustrates the fear of the children: “Mi si buttava col capo nelle gambe . . . come se volesse rientrarsene da dove era uscita” (55). The child’s frantic attempt to seek safety in her mother’s body is a symbolic representation of the mother’s womb as a protective space.

However, the fears of Gianni Falcone are of particular interest. His greatest fear, expressed as an increasing jealousy of the boarder his mother has taken into their home, informs Gianni’s emotional well-being and his future decisions. Anna has rented a room to a railway worker in order to acquire some much-needed extra income to make ends meet. On a particular morning, Gianni awakens and goes to the kitchen to have the coffee left by his mother. Curious, he enters the room of the boarder. There he collects the cigarette butts that he will keep with him as the day wears on. The unpleasant odor in the room and the unmade bed leave a negative impression on the youth. He then moves to his mother’s room to look for loose change. There he spots his mother in the bathroom fussing with her hair, and he watches her getting ready in her usual disorderly fashion. The scene recalls a childhood moment that was filled with warm, pleasant memories, “un sapore d’infanzia che inconsapevolmente l’attraeva” (66). In that moment, he was glad that
his mother was so beautiful. This early morning exchange is one of the few happy moments for both mother and son: “Era l’unico momento della giornata che ridevano insieme e si parlavano” (66). As Anna speaks to Gianni, she has a distracted, elusive air, while he is filled with “una incerta tensione d’amore dentro” (66). When they enter the boarder’s room, the aura vanishes.

In this scene, we learn of some essential aspects of this mother-son relationship. The first is the son’s attachment to his mother and a sense of possession of her. Gianni’s estimation of his mother’s physical beauty touches on the sensual. As his father is dead, Gianni has been the recipient of his mother’s undivided attention. He enjoys the feeling of possessing her, as it offers him a sense of security in a menacing world. For now, in his limited experience, his mother represents all women: she has informed his notion of the feminine.

The second aspect concerns the mother. Anna loves her son, but seems unaware of the changes within her child as he moves from boy to youth. As this natural passage from child to adult progresses, a distancing occurs between mother and son. Unbeknownst to her, Gianni has been developing a deep jealousy of the boarder in their home. He sees him as a threat and as someone who will take his mother’s undivided love from him. He considers himself a rival with this man for his mother’s love. At the same time, he feels obliged to protect his mother from what he considers improper behavior. His mother fails to recognize the signs of what a Freudian analyst might refer to as the Oedipal complex. But in this case, rather than develop a growing jealousy of the father, Gianni has transferred his hostility onto the unsuspecting boarder. The boarder has become a detested rival, who not only
has acquired his mother’s affection, but who has usurped his deceased father’s place in the home, as Gianni learns later.

Anna’s difficulties with her son continue throughout the novel. His habit of sleeping late worsens, and Anna’s attempt to convince him to continue his studies fails. However, she is not persistent and gives up easily. She accepts her inability to persuade the young teen to do something that he is not inclined to do. As she observes the growing obstinacy in his face, she wonders how he went from an adorable child—a child whom she smothered with kisses and held closely at her breast while nursing him—to the strange youth before her. Even his body is unfamiliar to her (“da non riconoscergli il corpo” [72]).

Within Gianni, on the other hand, the reader notes a growing, troubling awareness of his mother’s sexuality. In another scene, Anna is dusting a piece of furniture with her arms raised up above her head. Gianni happens to catch a glimpse of her breast through the armhole of her dress. He looks away, realizing his gaze was inappropriate: “Il ragazzo pensa che della propria madre uno non deve accorgersi che ha il petto. Voltò la schiena” (73). Gianni instinctively realizes that any connection of sexuality with his mother is taboo. Yet, he finds his mother attractive and sensual. This conflict is the first sign of a confused mental state in the youth, a confusion that ends in an unexpected tragedy.

Gianni has few memories of his father and of his relationship with him. In a flashback, he sees him as a large figure taking his place beside his mother, “qualcosa di grosso accanto alla madre (che l’ingelosiva)” (74). But this massive, indistinct being, rather than evoking feelings of tenderness, only elicits a deep-seated jealousy.
Then Gianni remembers his father’s watch. It was to be his when he turned fifteen. Although his mother does not mention the watch anymore, Gianni is sure she will remember when the time comes. Sometimes he looks at his bare wrist and imagines the watch and how it might look. When he notices his white hands, another, more painful and terrifying memory is triggered—that of the air raids. He used those hands to cover his ears in terror: “Il ricordo gli fece senso” (74). The watch plays a significant role as the story progresses. It is a link to his deceased father, and when it lands in the wrong hands, Gianni is deeply affected.

Gianni is a solitary person, often walking through the city alone. As he wanders, he observes the happenings in the various districts, often finding himself in run-down neighborhoods. There, once again memories of the war, of soldiers lining up to be with the women, resurface. Anna is aware of her son’s wanderings and becomes suspicious. Gianni is irritated by her many inquiries as to where he has been and why he has been gone for so long and feels as though he has been caught in an illicit act. But, as usual, he does not bother to answer his mother: “Che musone sei” (81), Anna concludes and she finally gives up: “Finivano per tacere come al solito” (81).

The estrangement between mother and son deepens. As they lose their ability to communicate, they both withdraw into their own private worlds. Anna’s failure to understand her son’s needs coupled with her resignation reflects her non-confrontational personality. She prefers to ignore the small, seemingly insignificant, bothersome issues, thinking that ignoring them will somehow make them spontaneously vanish. Gianni, on the other hand, senses his mother’s detachment
and often locks himself up in his room during the day. This aggravates his mother, whose frustrations are apparent one day when she unexpectedly slaps her son. Gianni is stunned momentarily, but recovers quickly. Indeed, he is not offended, as, after all, she is a woman, and being slapped by a woman is insignificant—especially if the woman is one’s mother: “Essere picchiati dalla propria madre non è nulla, sono sempre le mani di una donna” (82).

Gianni’s rationalization is significant, as it points to the devaluing not only of his mother, but also of women in Italy’s postwar society. Women lack authority, despite their crucial contribution to the community. Rather than being honored for their sacrifices, they are devalued and unappreciated. Anna’s violent response to her son’s disregard toward her is a manifestation of her inability to effectively voice her concerns to him. One resorts to violence in a desperate moment—a moment in which words fail to communicate. Anna is overwhelmed and disappointed, and this minor act of violence—a slap in the face—rather than opening the lines of communication, only drives the wedge between them further. This lack of control and understanding toward her son, along with her inability to communicate effectively, causes Anna’s undoing. Also problematic is Gianni’s condescending attitude toward women and his disregard for his mother. Adhering to the dominant social construct, Gianni holds his mother in low esteem. Anna, on the other hand, fears her son’s passage into manhood. She does not know how to deal with his masculinity. Her position as mother of a young son is exacerbated by the fact that she is widowed, poor, and uneducated. All of these factors contribute to the failure of their relationship.
Little by little, Gianni begins to notice his mother’s growing affection for the boarder in their home. He finds them together in the kitchen and notes the gleam in her eyes when she looks at him: “Anna aveva alzato gli occhi, pieni della luce del fuoco, con uno sguardo abbagliante verso quell’uomo” (88). A critical moment occurs on Christmas morning. Gianni awakens, but hesitates to leave his bed. He does not want to get up until his mother and the boarder are no longer passing in and out of the rooms. Finally, when he thinks the bath is free, he enters the hallway and sees the boarder wearing a t-shirt and admiring his wrist. Gianni was familiar with the gesture, as he often gazed at his own wrist to imagine his father’s watch there. He was certain that someone had presented the boarder with the watch as a Christmas gift, since he did not have the money to purchase one himself. Only while washing does he realize that the watch is his father’s. Indeed, his mother had given the watch to the man that Gianni despised. His revulsion is extreme; he vomits into the sink: “Gli accadde di vomitare nel lavandino senza nessun preavviso, forse un cibo indigesto mangiato la sera prima. E già l’idea pareva inverosimile” (96). He cannot believe his mother would betray him. The watch was the only legacy left to him by a father he barely knew. After this episode, the tension between mother and son escalates. When his mother runs after him insisting that he wear a cap to cover his wet hair and keep his head warm, he does not respond. Anna continues to complain to the other women of her son’s obstinacy. Finally, one morning he turns to her and yells, “Se lo dici un’altra volta t’ammazzo” (101). His belligerent response indicates a growing rage.
In another scene, Anna finds her son in the woodshed. She is angry with him for having left it open and considers him a good-for-nothing—“disutilaccio” (104). Looking into the woodshed, she spots him reading with his head near the grating and voices her disbelief: “Sei impazzito?” (104). Anna does not understand why he would prefer to read in the woodshed when he has his own room in his home. However, this space is one reminiscent of the “fosso” in which Palma and her family lived. It is a private retreat for the young boy, a place where he can read and think undisturbed. She asks her son to return home and read in his bedroom, but he ignores her. Anna senses that her son is drifting away but is at loss as to how to prevent it. Gianni is becoming more and more withdrawn: his attempt to detach himself from his mother is a natural phase of the transition from adolescence to manhood. But in Gianni’s case, the behavior reaches an extreme. Without a strong mother-son bond, without a father figure, the young man falters. Anna knows instinctively that something is amiss, but she is incapable of bridging this gap, despite her unconditional love for him.

È forastico e incupito, non si sa da che verso prenderlo. Forse l'età, gli umori dell'età. Bisogna decidere qualche cosa, non appena compie i quindici [anni.]
Tornando a differire, già provava sollievo. Respirò profondamente all’ultimo gradino e si tenne la mano al petto, a sentirlo sollevarsi, poi cedere. La propria carne la conciliò. (104-05)

After Gabriele Salviati’s death, an inquiry is conducted, and Gianni and his mother are interrogated. Anna is not able to contribute much information as to her son’s relationship with Gabriele. She finds the questioning disturbing and has the urge to leave the courtroom for some fresh air. Gianni, on the other hand, is calm and composed. As he waits his turn, Anna is struck by his transformation from a
restless young boy to a serious and cautious young man. She hardly recognizes him. Gianni’s move from adolescence to adulthood is subtle and puzzling.

Later in the novel, Gianni surprises his mother by waking up early. He is filled with a sense of urgency, as he has much to accomplish. Anna awakens and begins moving around cautiously so as not to disturb her sleeping son. Gianni purposely waits until his mother is out of sight before exiting the bathroom. He is now doing all he can to avoid her. Each morning she asks the same question: is he hungry? Before waiting for a reply, she brings coffee and warm milk on a tray to his bed. The narrator notes that Anna “Aveva imparato a servire gli uomini” (139).

Anna realizes that her son has turned fifteen, and she must now think of his future. Railroad work did not seem to suit him. Perhaps he could return to school and resume the studies that were interrupted by the war. Anna still delights in thoughts of caring for him and spending the few moments in the early mornings together. She wistfully contemplates these last moments of adolescence, as she is uncertain about the future. She senses the need to talk openly with her son, but does not have the courage to do it. Like most mothers who come to the realization that their child is approaching adulthood, she experiences feelings of joy mixed with fear: “Covava un timore, quasi una sensazione di pericolo, com’è sgomentante che i figli crescano” (173). Anna is typical of mothers in her tenement. The mother-child bond begins at birth, and the relationship is lifelong. Smith argues that “empathy” may be the key factor in analyzing the mother-son bond (114). Mothering a son is even more challenging as the mother is called on to teach her son how to be man. But masculinity eludes her. It is as foreign to her as femininity is to a father. Thus,
the task of rearing a male child fills a mother like Anna with trepidation. She knows that if she succeeds as a mother, she will simultaneously experience a decline in her authority. As a mother of an infant she is in power and control, but, as her son matures, her position is reduced to one of inferiority. Smith writes, “Women begin their role as mothers from a position of power, yet many end up subordinate to their children” (117).

Anna daydreams. She fantasizes that she is holding her son close to her. In remembering the joys of nursing her infant son, she recalls once more the pulling force, an almost primal act of the child at her breast, communicating to her all the urgency for nourishment necessary for his survival. While the physical experience of birth and lactation belongs to women alone, it also has been partly responsible for the change in status of women in a patriarchal society. Many feminists point to the earliest civilizations in which the woman was revered—indeed, almost deified—for her ability to create life. They argue that with growing importance attributed to the male’s role in procreation, the woman’s status in society was forever altered. Rich remarks that in patriarchy the woman “becomes the property of the husband-father, and must come to him “virgo intacta” (119). This is to ensure the legitimacy of his possessions and to maintain the purity of the lineage. Thus, according to Rich, the necessity of this statement becomes clear: “I, too have the power of procreation—these are my seed, my own begotten children, my proof of elemental power” (119). Nevertheless, in the case of Anna, the memories of giving birth and nourishment to her son are perhaps among her most precious: “Svegliandosi si stupí che le fosse
tornato nel sonno quel ricordo scomparso da tanto, la vita che se ne va sembra restare custodita nel fondo di noi” (213).

A week during the summer break when the boarder is out of town provides Gianni and his mother the opportunity to spend some time alone. Anna is delighted with the prospect of having her son to herself. She is happy to wait on him, making him the perfect toast and coffee. Gianni is delighted to be the object of his mother’s attention as she urges him to eat, since he is underweight. Gianni also regresses to his childhood state. The passage from adolescence to adulthood is not a sudden movement but the result of a series of experiences. In this scene, both mother and child have reverted to their earlier days together, days that were filled with the joy of the mother-son bonding. Anna feels a strong urge to touch her son again, to hold him close as she did so long ago; but she holds back. She realizes that he is no longer the nursing infant but a young boy growing into manhood. Once the boarder returns, the spell is broken. Anna is both nervous and happy as she devotes herself to the care of the men in her home. She is overwhelmed and confused as to how to proceed: “Aveva sempre adosso un po’ di orgasmo, non arrivando a stare negli orari, a regolare la casa, il ragazzo, l’uomo; tutto le prendeva la mano” (215).

Gianni’s resentment toward the boarder gradually intensifies. He does not remember when it first happened, but now his mother is calling the boarder by his first name. At the dinner table, the man speaks of Gianni in the third person, referring to him as “tuo figlio” (215). As he slowly gains confidence, he begins to offer advice to Anna on how to raise her son. He seems very interested in the daily activities of the home. Although he never speaks directly to Gianni, he does not
hesitate to drop hints regarding Gianni’s daily habits of sleeping too much or his smoking, and suggests that he is too old to be playing with small children. The boarder even goes so far as to urge Gianni to consider his future. Gianni is unhappy with this interference in his life, and this dissatisfaction is reflected in his behavior. Anna does nothing to stop the man’s comments. Apparently she feels he has the right to express his opinion regarding her son. But the boarder’s unwanted attention has disastrous effects on Gianni. Once again, Anna misses or perhaps refuses to see the signs of a troubled boy and attributes his irascibility to his difficult age: “È l’età ingrata” (216).

Then one day she sees him playing on all fours like a small child. She smiles to herself and thinks he is still a little boy. As Gianni moves from one stage of development to the next, Anna is at ease when he exhibits signs of immaturity, but perplexed when he shows signs of masculinity, as this is a space that is foreign to her and beyond her reach. If he would remain a child, she would know how to read him. Gianni, however, senses his mother’s unwillingness to let him mature. As he enters her room, his eye falls on her comb, which brings to mind his mother’s stifling manner toward him. She has been an obstacle to his growth: “Entrando in camera pensava al pettine di Anna sul cassettone, con quel viluppo di capelli, come a qualche cosa che gl’impedisse di crescere, di aver un’avvenire” (217).

The Crime and the Inquiry

All these events in Gianni’s life culminate in the climax of the novel. One afternoon, Gianni is quietly playing under the bed of the boarder, who is sleeping.
There he discovers some of the buttons he used in playing imaginary games of soccer. Gianni’s fantasy takes him deep into the soccer match. He sees the players and the soccer ball and hears the cries of the spectators. He wins the match and is very excited. He then finds the small knife that had slipped out of his pocket onto the floor. He is still in an agitated state, and his heart is beating fast. He looks up and can make out the form of the boarder’s sleeping body. Suddenly and without hesitation, he drives the knife into the man’s body. At that instant, the children call him and he jumps up and runs out, as if awakened from a deep trance. The boarder is dead.

Once again, inspector Lanti is called to investigate the crime. He regrets having accepted this case and does not relish the trial. He finds particular difficulty in extracting any pertinent information from the children. They are faithful to Gianni. He has a mythical stature for them, and they will never betray him. The mothers also are protective of their children: “Altro elemento difficile erano state le madri” (222). The mothers and the children are impossible to separate without resistance to Lanti. The women understand the need to remain silent. They seem to find strength in their unity, and this worries Lanti. He senses something in them working against him: “Era la loro intima sostanza muliebre contro di lui. Stavano discoste come aveva ordinato, tutte ugualmente immobili, piuttosto maestose, con un’aria ancestrale che gli risvegliava obliate sottomissioni infantili” (222). The women were a pitiable sight—some pregnant, some shabbily dressed, and others nursing children at their breasts. In his frustration, Lanti realizes the futility of his efforts: “Le donne, se vogliono, una persona te la raccontano; i bambini se la inventano” (223). Clearly the children had created a mythical hero, and obtaining
any reliable information from them would be impossible. They no longer remember anything real: “Sembrava che non si ricordassero piú nulla di reale” (223).

Throughout the inquiry, the women stand firm behind Anna and her son. In their unity they create a formidable wall of strength. Nothing negative escapes their lips regarding Anna as mother. Indeed, Lanti observes, “parando lei sembravano parare se stesse; quasi una coscienza colletiva di maternità colpevole” (224). The reference to a collective consciousness of maternal guilt is of particular interest. Indeed, the spirit of the communal effort of the women as survivors empowers them. They share an unspoken allegiance and a sense of loyalty. This pledge is written in their subconsciousness and informs every act of their daily lives. Without the strength of this collectivity, they would fail to thrive. Bonanni’s central focus is not the crime of Gianni Falcone; it is the underlying story of a community of war survivors. It is about every woman who suffered the casualties of war and about every child whose life was permanently altered by having witnessed the terror. It is about all those who were scarred by atrocities beyond human comprehension. And, most important, it is about the empowerment that results when a community joins together to form one unified voice.

The inquiry continues and the residents of the tenement are put on the stand, but no hard evidence is found. Even Gianni himself seems to have forgotten the details of that afternoon. At one point Anna exclaims, “È colpa mia” (241), as she realizes that she was at fault in giving the watch to the boarder. She had given it to the boarder as compensation for household expenses. They had also decided to marry, and perhaps the boy was motivated by jealousy. Anna never suspected that
he was aware of the relationship between the boarder and her, as, out of
embarrassment, she tried to keep it a secret. Anna weeps while Gianni is in denial.
Then Lanti recalls a small detail he noticed while interrogating the boy earlier in his
office: Gianni had begun to perspire, and this happened again at the trial, out of fear
(245). Thus, Lanti’s statement to his colleagues is a scathing commentary on the
true culprit responsible for the misery in the lives of these people:

Il vero scandalo del tempo, avvocato Serni e onorevoli colleghi, è la paura. Tutti ne siamo stati coninvolti, con un’alterazione nel senso della vita, uno sconcerto profondo. Continuare a portarla nella propria sostanza, quello che c’è di avvilente, di paralizzante nella paura. La paura collettiva. (245; italics added)

Over the course of the novel, the narrator moves back and forth, weaving her
way in and out of the personal stories of each family as she reconstructs a tableau of
life in a postwar tenement in the Abruzzi region. This technique allows her to
present numerous vignettes and gather the multiple threads intertwining their lives
with the events of postwar Italy. Throughout the text, fear is a recurrent, dramatic
motif. It is a shared experience. It is the fear of the dreaded sound of another air
raid. It is the fear of natural disasters, such as the earthquakes that are common in
that region. It is the fear of every woman of growing old. It is the fear of giving birth
to an illegitimate child. It is the fear of every mother for the safety of her child. It is
Cristina’s fear that the new creature she will bring into the world will live in poverty
and misery. It is Anna’s fear that she will lose her son to manhood. It is Gianni’s fear
that he will lose his mother’s undivided love. It is fear that is on trial—a fear that is
devastating, paralyzing, and omnipresent. This fear informs the lives of the
tenement residents. But with the word “collettiva,” Bonanni goes beyond the
provincial town in which she has set her narrative and touches on a national drama. This is the effect of the terror people experience after having witnessed the tremendous loss of life, the destruction of their homes, and the loss of any sense of security. The tenants fear life itself. They are the survivors, but survival does not ensure a sense of peace or assuage the dread of more devastation. Bonanni presents a reality that begs for a solution. When people suffer through terrifying war experiences, through natural disasters, when they suffer famine and widespread disease, society looks to those who can provide relief and care to the victims and survivors. In the Bonannian text, we find the unlikely heroes—or in fact—heroines. They are the women of the community who rise up to face the challenges set before them.

In the closing chapter, life in the tenement returns to normalcy. Births and marriages occur, rebuilding takes place after the devastating earthquake, the spring rains have begun, and soon plants and trees are in bloom. Ninni makes an attempt to take Gianni’s place as honored leader, but he does not have Gianni’s charisma. One day, the judge walks by. His presence recalls the trial, and Ninni remembers where he had hidden the knife—the murder weapon that was never found. Ninni does not remember why he hid it, but it was Gianni’s, and he leaves it there where he had placed it—in their secret hideout. Ninni is beginning to undergo a change: he is interested in girls, and, like Gianni, he too walks around with a cigarette butt hanging from his lips: “Egli era esaltato e solo come un uomo davanti alle donne” (278).
Anna has retreated into her own private space, “un luogo remoto, al di là dell'immaginazione, del tutto chiuso e inaccessibile” (261). She always goes out late, walks with a slow gait, eyes downcast, and is dressed in mourning. She has become a phantom of her former self. Her son has been sent to an institution for the criminally insane for psychiatric observation. The residents of the tenement no longer recognize her. But the women know her suffering: they suffered with her, mourned her loss, and will be there to assist her. Through this communal memory of the women, she will survive: “Per le donne era lei al gesto di rinfilarsi una ciocca sotto il fazzoletto, esse la riconoscevano” (261).
CHAPTER 3: LE DROGHE: THE MOTHER-SON RELATIONSHIP REVISITED

Bonanni’s focus and concern for the status of women—in particular, mothers—are the unifying thread throughout her works and literary career. The extreme realism that dominates her style and the ethical commitment in her works suggests an underlying desire to call to her readers’ attention the deplorable conditions of two marginalized groups: women and children. Often her inspiration is derived directly from a newspaper article on a tragic event, such as in the novel L’adultera. Other times, her works are a result of her experience as honorary judge of the juvenile courts in Italy, as in the documentary-style work, Vietato ai minori. In any event, she remains thoroughly committed and engaged, incorporating dramatic events within her fictional accounts.

The novel Le droghe was published in 1982 by Bompiani. It is one of the last works of Bonanni’s literary career and the second to be written in the first-person narrative.¹ Writing from this point of view proves more effective, as it allows the author to present the situations as the character experiences them and not as others might perceive them. Thus, the elements of realism that the author presents are filtered through a more personal perspective. The novel’s structure consists of four parts; each of them is divided into separate chapters. These parts represent the various phases of the life of Giulia and her relationship with her stepson, Giuliano, also known as Nino, his nickname. The first part deals with Giulia’s childhood. It is written in an autobiographical mode, recalling many pleasant memories of the

¹ The first Bonannian text to be written in this point of view is Il bambino di pietra: Una nervosi femminile.
protagonist's childhood years, especially the summers spent in a seaside town in the Abruzzi region. Part 2 deals once again with childhood, but this time it describes the son's early years. Part 3 is entitled “Le fughe” and details the deteriorating relationship between mother and son as Giuliano moves from adolescence to adulthood. By featuring the life of the young Giuliano and his relationship with his mother, Bonanni captures the influence of the youth culture of the seventies and society's response to this troubled young generation. The final part, entitled “La droga,” deals with the young man's downward spiral toward a dissolute and apathetic existence. Giulia is distressed by her son’s odd and uncharacteristic behavior (for example, he no longer kisses her good-bye before leaving the house when his friends are present), and she finally realizes that her son is indeed a drug addict. The narrative ends on a positive note, highlighting the possibility of rehabilitation for Giuliano. Indeed, Lombardi states that the conclusion is “non consolatoria ma neppure priva di speranza” (427).

A number of significant Bonannian motifs are introduced early on in the narrative. Themes such as the mother-son bond, the negative depiction of the weak or absent husband/father, and the indirect portrayal of the culture or society of the period indicate a progression and continued interest in these topics. Accompanying these themes are issues regarding non-biological mothering, male adolescence, homosexuality, and drug addiction. A number of other related themes appear but are not fully developed, including sex education, birth control, infanticide, suicide, and incest. However, the mother-son relationship is the primary focus of the text. In her study The Tigress in the Snow: Motherhood and Literature in Twentieth-Century
Literature, Laura Benedetti claims, “the representations of motherhood found in Italian literature are, almost invariably, images of the mother seen through the eyes of her son” (4). However, Laudomia Bonanni does not just write about the work of mothering in general; she focuses more specifically on the mother-son relationship. And therein lies her originality. Benedetti notes that “[w]omen writers who have reflected on motherhood have done so almost exclusively as daughters” (5).

Bonanni writes from the mother’s point of view, featuring the mother-son bond almost to the exclusion of the mother-daughter relationship. From her earliest collection of short stories, *Il fosso*, the relationship between mother and son is by far the more prominent. In the story “Il fosso,” Colomba is a dedicated and caring mother whose relationship with her son already shows signs of preference. In “Palma,” the reader is shown two opposite behaviors in the protagonist toward her children, which range from an attitude of near neglect toward her daughter to the adoration of her son. Again in *L’imputata*, Anna and her son Gianni, the main characters, illustrate a different facet of the mother-son relationship. This time it is a failed relationship that ends tragically. Indeed, in almost every work by Bonanni, the mother plays a major role, whether she is poor, uneducated, and living in an impoverished rural environment, or the well-educated, more liberated city woman. Curiously, Bonanni herself never experienced the mother-child relationship. Although she remained unmarried and childless throughout her lifetime, she wrote constantly of mothers and children. Notwithstanding these circumstances, her experience as teacher and judge allowed her to witness first-hand the trials and tribulations of mothers and children. Certainly their welfare is her primary concern.
Parte prima: “Infanzia della bambina”

The first part of the narrative *Le droghe* is set in a small Abruzzi town near the Adriatic Sea. The date is July 1950, and the narrator—whose identity is unnamed at this point—describes one of her most unforgettable memories: the discovery of a bomb on the beach—an ominous remnant of the war. The bomb was found in the catch of the local fishermen. The villagers all gather at the shore to watch, filled with curiosity. The children cannot contain their excitement. The narrator notes, however, that there is an air of indifference among the adults. There had been so many bombs, so much destruction, and so much devastation that the residents are no longer fazed by the appearance of yet another bomb. Perhaps it is a symptom of their overwhelming fatigue, as they are too tired to even experience any excitement or fear. A sense of fatalism pervades their feelings. Nevertheless, the villagers must find out whether or not the bomb had been diffused, and a few days later a team is sent to accomplish this task. Not until August 15, the feast of the Assumption, is the beach cleared, and at noon, a loud explosion signals the closure of the incident. The narrator never hears a sound. Asleep in her bed with a licorice stalk in her mouth, she was nursing a childhood irritation at being restricted from going out. The next day, the bathers return and the children delight in playing in the large crater formed by the explosion. This, the narrator tells us, was the paradise of her youth: “Questo fu il paradiso della mia infanzia, tutto verdazzurro con una bomba nera nel mezzo (come lo raccontai a pastello infinite volte sui primi quaderni di scuola), una grossa bomba che per me allora non scoppiò” (11).
This opening scene is typical of Bonanni, as it is intended to capture the reader’s attention. Whether it is the description of a wedding night that verges on rape, the discovery of an infant corpse in a trash heap, or the appearance of a bomb on the beach, Bonanni uses the initial shock to engage the reader. The bomb brings the reader back to the war memories. The war still looms greatly in the collective conscience of the villagers, and Bonanni urges the reader not to forget. Thus, the narrator’s paradise is contrasted with the indelible memory of a war period that was anything but paradisiacal.

In the second chapter, two significant elements are introduced that define the childhood of the narrator: the fact that she was born during World War II and the tragic death of her mother during that period. Like Arturo in Elsa Morante’s *Isola di Arturo*, she is semi-orphaned and grows up not only without ever having known a mother’s love, but also with a father who was mostly absent from her life. Unlike Arturo, she was not left on her own as a small child, but cared for by various relatives and servants. The reader learns that her father is a judge in a small mountain town, and father and daughter often traveled to the seashore for the summer months. The narrator, having lived only in the mountainous area of her region, is delighted with the new experience. The drive from the familiar mountains to the seashore fascinates her. Of particular interest is her father’s reference to the iconic poet D’Annunzio\(^2\) as he describes some of the topography of the region:

“Marina dannunziana, diceva mio padre lettore di D’Annunzio” (12). And, “Come colli di Palestrina, recitava mio padre a mezza bocca dal suo D’Annunzio, certo a se

\(^2\) Bonanni’s interest in D’Annunzio is documented in her interview with Petrignani: “Compravo i libri di D’Annunzio appena uscivano” (61).
stesso non a me ignara” (13). Although there is no precise reference to a specific poem of D’Annunzio, passages such as the following serve to demonstrate the father’s familiarity with the great Italian poet:

Settembre, andiamo. È tempo di migrare.
Ora in terra d’Abruzzi i miei pastori
lascian gli stazzi e vanno verso il mare;
scendono all’Adriatico selvaggio
che verde è come i pascoli dei monti. (Picchione and Smith 57)

And:

Rientran lente da le liete pésche
sette vele latine,
e portan seco delle ondate fresche
di fragranze marine. (Flora 46)

These references provide an indication that Bonanni’s characters have moved from the rural villages and tenement areas to a more educated echelon.

As they drive the ancient marine road, Bonanni describes the beautiful landscape of the area—the slopes, inlets, rocky crags, and the many flowers in bloom such as oleanders, broom plants, and various grasses. The narrator sees many of these for the first time. She is impressed with the dark green waters and the women working in the fields, and she gazes enviously at the barefooted children playing. She is enchanted with everything: “mi piacque tutto” (13). These chapters, describing an almost idyllic existence in the beautiful seashore area along the Adriatic, are reminiscent of Elsa Morante’s L’isola di Arturo. The detailed descriptions of the landscapes, the various plants and topography, and the narrator’s relationship with the land evoke an image of a mythical and carefree existence. This young girl, like Arturo, roams freely along the rocky seashore looking for solitary places to swim, sucking on wild licorice stalks and simply and innocently
engaging with the beautiful world before her. This bucolic life, however, is short-lived and is soon interrupted by a dramatic reality that slowly brings this tranquil and serene existence to an end.

The author’s reference to a “marina rustica” (15) combines the image of an agrarian environment with the fascination of the sea. Bonanni is at her most lyrical when she depicts the carefree lifestyle of the young girl basking in her youth and freedom. The narrator’s father had decided that she would spend her summers there by the sea with her great aunt, her only living blood relative. We learn that she never really develops a close bond with the elder woman, who is deaf, absentminded, and often unaware of the child’s whereabouts. Not having a mother is a fact that the child has learned to accept; just as Arturo “senses that something essential is missing from his island paradise: a mother’s love” (Zlobnicki Kalay 57), so too does the narrator: “Quanto a me, una madre semplicemente non c’era” (16). A mother’s love is the recurring focus in Bonanni’s novel. The childhood memories in the beginning section set the stage for the events that follow.

The narrator fondly recalls one particular Christmas when she and her father leave the snowy mountain town for the seashore. She notes dramatic differences between what she had been used to and the new spectacle before her. In her hometown, the houses were covered with snow, and a profound silence filled the evenings; while at the shore, she is surprised by the sound of voices of people on the streets. On the way to Midnight Mass, the sheer number of brilliant stars in the sky amazes her. And of course she notes the smell of the fresh fish, the traditional food for Christmas Eve. Suddenly it dawns on her—this is the true nativity scene. In her
heart, she makes peace with this new experience: “Era un presepe, con l’aria verde solare del luogo. Un luogo—lo intuì allora—da natività, un paese sul colle col mare ai piedi, dolce, palestinese. Era autentico Natale e il mio cuore vi si conciliò in quell’istante” (17).

But the summer months leave their indelible mark in the young girl’s mind. Detailed descriptions of the natural environment punctuate the narrative. The young girl’s wanderings take her to isolated, mostly uninhabited areas described later as a space with “lussureggiante vegetazione” (18). Bonanni’s depiction of the seascape is almost mythical—with its green waters, a lighthouse in the distance, waves rushing to the shore with white crests that resemble fancy lace, mussels, shells, sponges, snails, starfish, seahorses, anemones, sea urchins, and tracks lefts by live crabs. These passages are filled with marine and botanical images. This is not the Elysian field of the young Arturo. Bonanni allows one to escape for a brief time, but always brings the reader back sharply to reality. Here, the young girl has learned to suck the flesh of live crabs. In so doing, she cannot help but look into the eyes of her prey, and she sees in them their sheer helplessness and resignation to their fate. This terrorizes her momentarily. But she is young and does not dwell on the experience. Nevertheless, these and other memories become part of her subconscious. They are the learning experiences that inform and shape her future: “Ma allora me ne dimenticai e imparai a succhiarli vivi anch’io. Come imparai un mucchio d’altre cose di natura, innocenti e brutali” (20).

Childhood is typically seen as a time of innocence and abandon. It is a delicate period, short-lived and fragile. In her study of childhood in Elsa Morante,
Zlobincki Kalay states, “through the theme of childhood, Elsa Morante articulates her particular vision of, and hope for, a better world” (12). Morante uses the theme of childhood as a vehicle for the presentation of a number of significant life issues, such as Arturo’s illicit attraction to his stepmother and his awareness of his father’s sexual orientation. Bonanni’s focus on the childhood years of her two protagonists—the stepmother and the adopted son—prepares the reader to follow the lives of the two characters on their journey. Whereas Morante in *L’isola di Arturo* is concerned with the complete treatment of childhood per se (Zlobincki Kalay 54), Bonanni understands childhood as an important moment in the progress of an individual from childhood to adulthood. These experiences and influences are instrumental in determining how a person perceives his or her own personal reality. Arturo’s existence is marked by isolation and complete abandon. It is a mythical and, at times, magical dimension. Bonanni, however, never provides a total escape from realism, as she is sure to keep one foot firmly grounded in the real world. Childhood may indeed be a time of innocence, but it is also brutal, and this brutality is what Bonanni investigates in her narratives. It is the brutality of living in a world at war, of suffering, poverty, and misery; it is the harshness of a violent society.

Yet, in these beginning chapters, the reader notes an attempt to break away—even if briefly—into that magical world by the sea. The young girl is one with her environment as she roams about with her licorice stalk. In these early years she is free to wander aimlessly along the shore: “lo zeppo di liquerizia in bocca, risalivo la collina masticando sabbia e libertà” (21). Not surprisingly, this exhilarating moment is fleeting.
During one particular summer, the villagers experience three days of strong, southwest winds. On the last day, Giulia, the narrator, is roaming the mountainous seashore area, as is her usual habit. After having gone into the water for a swim, she decides to lie in the warm sand to dry off, when three young adolescent boys spot her. They are laughing and making sly comments to one another. Then, one of them—the smallest—begins to approach her hesitantly, and before she realizes what is happening, he flings his body onto hers. One by one the others follow, each taking his turn. At one point she is ready to fight back, but the look of fear on their faces just makes her break out with laughter. When a local woman happens upon the scene, the boys run off. The woman asks the girl if she is all right, but she cannot stop herself from laughing. She learns later that the children received light punishment for their transgression: “Costò agli aggressori una battuta paterna, non priva, sembra, di compiacimento per la precoce manifestazione virile dei loro marmocchi” (22). After all, boys will be boys! Not surprisingly, gossip spreads, and soon the young girl realizes that her honor has been compromised. Indeed, the townspeople generally agreed that she had provoked the attack. According to the small-town mentality, women—of any age—who were victims of male violence were also accused of inciting the assault.

Life by the sea continues to captivate the young girl. She becomes more adventuresome and finds herself wandering in various parts of the village. It is at this early point the narrative that Bonanni introduces the theme of mothers with
numerous children. As Giulia wanders through the narrow streets of the seaside village observing the mothers caring for their children, she is so favorably impressed that, in her childlike mind, she decides she will do the same and become a mother of twelve children. As is mentioned in chapter 2, given the state of motherhood in many rural areas of postwar Italy, women continued to accept the reality of numerous births. Eventually the women’s movement of the sixties brought about significant changes to the status of women in Italy; women became better educated and gained control over their reproductive capacities, which, in turn, resulted in fewer births and a smaller nuclear family. Motherhood, with all its implications, is a notion that is in continuous flux. Here Bonanni, employing the filter of the narrator, comments on the state of motherhood during this period: “Donne piene di figli, che tenevo in gran considerazione, ripromettendomi addirittura di imitarle, io ne avrei fatto dodici. La donna fa l’uomo, lo fa lo nutre lo alleva e lo spadroneggia. Ero soddisfatta di essere nata femmina” (23).

Giulia’s fascination with large families may also be influenced by the fact that she is an only child. To make up for the lack of siblings, an only child may often invent an imaginary friend or bond with a pet. In the case of Arturo, his bond with Immacolatella, his faithful dog, is an essential aspect of his adolescent experience. In Bonanni’s narrative, the young girl makes a feeble attempt to keep a pet. It is an injured bird that had fallen out of its nest into a bucket of water. She takes the bird

3 In Vietato ai minori, Bonanni refers to the prevailing attitude of the women of the rural areas of her native Abruzzi: “i figli sono provvidenza” (181).
4 Birds figure prominently in many Bonannian texts. Although not the typically faithful childhood friend, Bonanni’s preference for this animal in her narratives may be seen as symbolic of a spiritual extension of the self: fragile, delicate, and often
home and realizes that she must feed it, so she leaves the house to gather insects. But when she returns, she finds that the small bird has drowned, despite her attempts to make her home secure. She is devastated. Tata, the maid, finds the child with the dead bird in one hand while leafing through her aunt’s missal. Two important discoveries occur at this time. One is the child’s love of reading: she had been teaching herself, and she refers to her attempts to read as an almost casual practice: “leggiucchiavo” (26). The second is the discovery of a holy card with her name on it as well as birth and death dates. These dates are not related to her, but they are those of her deceased mother, after whom she is named. Thus, not until the end of the first part of the novel is the narrator’s name revealed. Indeed, she is named after her mother, Giulia, or Giuliana. Information regarding her mother’s tragic death had been kept secret by her father and those around her. She only knows that her mother died tragically at the age of twenty-four. Giulia keeps the card in her pocket until it eventually disintegrates, as does the fleeting memory of a mother she never knew.

In the final chapters, Giulia’s great-aunt dies. She had two aunts, and they both had a personal story “come qualsiasi essere umano passato attraverso la vita” (29). Surprisingly, Giulia learns that the mute aunt with whom she lived had at one time a most beautiful voice. During the time of the German occupation, her voice kept her on good terms with the Germans. While she and the other villagers were gathering herbs and lettuces to eat, she would sing. She did not fear the Germans elusive. In *A Dictionary of Symbols*, Cirlot writes, “Every winged creature is symbolic of spiritualization” (25). In woman’s writing the imagery of birds and flying often allude to the desire to escape patriarchal control.
and began to sing “Lili Marleen,” a song they loved to hear over and over again. She sang to survive, “innocentemente, per non morire” (32). Eventually she lost her voice due to a glandular infection. But Giulia often detected a faint sound of that harmonious voice when her aunt laughed.

The memories of this joyful experience remain ingrained in Giulia as a time of innocence that will never return. It becomes symbolic of a Garden of Eden, a restorative place with “orti pensili con uva e pesche da Paradiso Terrestre, librati sullo sfondo delle acque, gli orti sospesi in aria miracolosamente ai miei occhi” (24). The natural beauty of the place and the simplicity and harmonious exchange with nature of that idyllic life enchant Giulia.

**Parte seconda: “Infanzia del bambino”**

In part 2, Bonanni introduces the reader to Giulia’s stepson, Nino, or Giuliano, and her husband, Giulio. These two men play a dominant role in the protagonist’s life. Giulia marries a widowed man who is considerably older than she is. As Giulia contemplates her feelings at that time, she realizes that she did not marry for love but for other reasons. She had known other young men, but had never developed an intimate relationship with any of them, and, indeed, she recalls that no one had ever asked her to marry. The most likely explanation is that she wanted desperately to escape her life with a cold and severe father, and perhaps she even harbored an unconscious desire to mother and care for the little Nino, Giulio’s child. In any case,

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5 Bonanni’s experience as a young girl is similar: “Gli uomini che conoscevo in provincia non mi piacevano mai del tutto, mi sembravano inferiori a me. Forse, fossi vissuta a Roma, fra gli intellettuali, sarei rimasta affascinata da qualcuno” (qtd. in Pettrignani 64).
little time passes before she realizes she has made a mistake. Interestingly, although divorce in Italy was legalized in 1974, it was still not a common occurrence, thus it never enters Giulia’s mind that she might end her marriage to a husband with whom she has very little in common and whom she finds almost repulsive.

Giulia meets her future husband casually in the elevator of the apartment building. She eyes him curiously as he sighs and recounts his tales of woe concerning his weak and frail wife, who is experiencing a difficult labor and delivery. Eventually, when his boy Nino is four years old, he and Giulia marry. Giulia enters naively into marriage thinking she will receive what she believes is every woman’s due—personal freedom. This reason is sharply contrasted with Giulio’s desire and physical attraction to his young wife. However, in spite of his “brivido erotico” (49), the marriage is not consummated on the wedding night, due to Nino’s insistence on sleeping with them, a habit his father had encouraged after the death of his mother.

Their was a simple ceremony, a light supper in a local restaurant, an intimate tête à tête made possible with the assistance of the governess who cared for the little Nino. During the meal, Giulia notes her new husband’s constant touching of her, as though he needed physical assurance of the legitimacy of their marriage. In the beginning, he is a most attentive and ardent lover (“tuttavia fu molto ardente e io corrisposi” [51]). She seems to understand that he had had to deal with a very sick and frail wife for two years and is now enjoying her own good health and availability. However, his numerous and indelicate advances soon become annoying. And even more disturbing, the child has begun to intuit his
father’s physical attraction to his new mother and is not happy about it. Nino “si sentiva ed era, veramente escluso” (52). The child’s jealousy is understandable, particularly from the Freudian point of view.6

Bonanni’s depiction of Giulio is of particular interest, as once again she presents a picture of a male who is insensitive to the emotional needs of his wife and child. The Bonannian male is unable (or unwilling) to establish significant relationships with his wife and children; his focus is often on the physical gratification of marriage rather than on the construction of a lasting bond. No male of reputable character exists in the Bonannian opus. Rather, men are presented as emotionally dependent, often physically weak, and inept when it comes to relating to women. Throughout the novel, the reader witnesses Giulio’s gradual decline both mentally and physically until finally Giulia is forced to employ a governess to assume responsibility for his care.

As Giulia reminisces about her adolescent years, and through the use of flashbacks, the reader becomes more acquainted with her. Memories of her life with her father flood her thoughts, evoking images of a figure that was mostly absent. Since he was a most severe and austere person, Giulia quickly realized that she was happier when he was gone. This left the young girl free to do what she pleased. In the summer months, she continued to vacation in the home of her great aunt, a place

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6 In a letter to Wilhelm Fliess on October 15, 1897, Freud writes, “A single idea of general value dawned on me. I have found, in my own case too, [the phenomenon of] being in love with my mother and jealous of my father, and I now consider it a universal event in early childhood” (Masson 272). Of the father’s intervention in the mother-son relationship, Elisabeth Badinter writes, “By his [the father’s] presence, often more symbolic than real, he must make the child understand that his mother is forbidden to him, for she belongs to another, and that to overcome his castration anxiety he must give up as hopeless his incestuous desire” (282).
in which her father was always ill at ease. In the winter months, her father was most often absorbed in his work and never knew or even seemed to care what his daughter was doing. Thus, Giulia led a solitary existence. As she was uncomfortable with children her own age, she filled her time with books. She was an avid reader, much to the chagrin of her father, who always found her at home reading and studying. She eventually obtained a teacher’s diploma and found work as a substitute teacher. She even took up the habit of smoking, having substituted the licorice stalk with the cigarette. Perhaps her obsession for reading and her smoking habit were the result of a rebellious streak and an attraction to anything prohibited, as Giulia suggests, “mi trovavo a studiare, effettivamente studiavo e leggevo molto, forse per quel sapore quasi di proibito insieme alla sigaretta” (44).

Giulia’s father is depicted as a man unable to cope with the loss of his young wife and the responsibility of rearing a child. The idea that he might have “mothered” Giulia is simply not a consideration. Thus, with time, the lack of communication and affection takes its toll. Indeed, Giulia notes that she does not call her father “papà” or “babbo” (both terms of endearment), but “padre,” a word that intersects with the address for a priest, and a term that created even more distance in their relationship: “Era il padre, non papà frivolo, né babbo ridicolo, mi aveva abituata a chiamarlo padre e anche per questo da piccola avevo creduto che fosse una specie di prete” (44). The choice of an appellative for a parent is an indication of

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7 In her youth, Bonanni shared the same passion for reading. In an interview with Petrignani, she states, “Dalla mia infanzia mi ricordo soltanto che volevo leggere continuamente.” She adds, “Anche a tavola mi portavo un libro e lo leggevo di nascosto, mangiando, tenendolo sulle gambe. Quando mio padre se ne accorgeva mi sgridava molto” (60).
the type of relationship between parent and child and the depth of their emotional bond. Giulia’s reference to “il mio austero padre” is significant regarding not only the father-daughter bond, but also her perception of parenting. The same can be said of Nino, who refers to his father by his given name “Giulio” and to his stepmother as “Gigi,” a nickname implying affection and endearment. The child senses a distance from his father, while his relationship with his stepmother is by far the stronger of the two.

In Giulia’s account of Nino’s birth, the reader learns that indeed both mother and child risked their lives. After the birth of Nino, Giulia is invited by Giulio to visit: in the bedroom, she finds a mother spent from a difficult childbirth—a breech birth that complicated matters even further. It seemed to Giulia that the child did not want to enter the world and fought it with every fiber of his being. The pitiful sight of the newborn child leaves a lasting impression on the young visitor: “Era un mostriciattolo rugoso, il faccino schiacciato rosso crudo, la testa deformata per le difficoltà del parto, che la cuffia respinta storta dalle bozze rendeva grottesca” (42).

Giulio, on the other hand, seems blind to the reality before him, as it is his nature to respond to everything in a positive but unrealistic fashion. Nino is a tranquil and quiet child. Giulia describes him as “silenzioso come un topolino” (40) and wonders whether he has any memory of his mother. She decides that in one way or another some sort of trace of his biological mother must have been preserved; if not as an actual memory, at least subconsciously he must have retained some remembrance of her (39). Nino soon begins to show signs of insecurity. He cannot be without his pacifier or his blanket. To make her case regarding her son’s
insecurity issues, Giulia refers to the cartoon strip *Peanuts* and the character Linus, whose blanket is always attached to him. This is Nino: never fussing, never discontent, and always with his pacifier in his mouth and a blanket held tightly to his chest. Despite her many earnest attempts to break Nino of his habit, Giulia is never successful. His dependency on this object continues even into school age. Nino would hide the pacifier and lock himself in the bathroom and satisfy this need when he thought no one was aware of his ritual. This dependency on an external object for gratification and security eventually evolves into a dependency on alcohol and drugs.

It seems here that Bonanni is tracing the evolution of a drug addict\(^8\) by chronicling the development of a drug dependency. Employing Giulia as her mouthpiece, Bonanni takes the reader on the long and painful journey of a mother who desperately works to save her son from self-destruction. Giulia provides the reader with her own theory to explain Nino’s odd behavior. She speculates that when Nino was born, his mother was too ill and too weak to nurse him. She often put a pacifier in his mouth to appease the hungry and needy child, at least momentarily. Consequently, the child learned to associate the pacifier with his mother’s breast, “quel finto capezzolo gli sapeva di mamma” (40). Although Giulia realizes that children are creatures of habit, she knows she is dealing with an emotionally challenged child: “[Nino] è un po’tardivo” (40).

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\(^8\) Bonanni’s work as honorary judge in the juvenile courts accounts for her familiarity with what she refers to as the new crimes in *Vietato ai minori*, “Da aggiungere politica e droga, i reati nuovi” (234).
Giulia and her stepson begin to spend their summers at the sea. The return to the seaside village evokes fond memories of her youth. There she could allow Nino liberties that in Rome were not possible. As she compares life in the city with life in the remote village, she recalls an episode that occurred in Monte Mario. She had begun to take Nino on daily walks until, one day, she noticed that he had picked up something off the ground. As children are wont to do, Nino tried to place it into his mouth, thinking it was a pacifier. However, upon closer inspection, Giulia was shocked to discover that he had found a prophylactic. This episode, symptomatic of a society in rapid and constant flux, ended their walks in the gardens at Monte Mario.  

Italian society underwent dramatic changes after the Second World War: “Italy began the post-war era as a defeated state, and relatively backward and peripheral Mediterranean society” (Hine 320). The most notable transition was the “transformation from a backward agrarian society . . . to a society committed to a market economy, an open trading system, and the Atlantic defence community” (320-21). The changes profoundly altered Italian society in all areas—political, economic, and cultural. However, the reforms of the seventies reshaped women’s position in Italian society. In Italy and its Discontents, Paul Ginsborg writes, “The mid-1970s were precisely the moment when everything began to change” (x). In this period, critical laws and reforms regarding women and children were implemented: divorce was legalized in 1974, and in 1975, the reforms of the family law changed the traditional definition of the Italian family: “the law marked a major

9 Once again in Vietato ai minori, Bonanni describes Rome: “Roma corrotta a metropoli col suo babelico dopoguerra” (77).
departure from the previous legal conception of the Italian family as a hierarchical, authoritarian and pyramidal structure” (Ginsborg, History 370). Women’s movements were formed and grew in strength, voicing women’s pleas: “A law allowed wives to keep their maiden name, a practice now more common in Italy than elsewhere in Europe. And wives were no longer obliged to live where their husbands wanted” (Hearder 266). On May 22, 1978, abortion was legalized. As a resident of Rome and an engaged intellectual, Laudomia Bonanni could not avoid witnessing the changes in Italian society unfolding in these years. Although she may not have actively participated in the social and feminist demonstrations, her perception of the society in which she lived and her view of the oppressed condition of many women and children were shaped by these innovative transformations. Her narratives provide a historical documentation of the changes that Italy underwent beginning with the postwar period and through the seventies and early eighties. Thus, the episode at Monte Mario places in sharp contrast the traditional agrarian culture of the country with the more modernized and liberated Italy.

After Giulia and Nino’s visit to Monte Mario, Giulia learns that she is expecting a child, and this realization changes everything for her: “Tutto cambiò con la gravidanza” (52). Despite the fact that no precautions were taken, the pregnancy comes as a surprise to the couple, who had never discussed having other children. Indeed, Giulia had never considered the possibility of becoming pregnant and having a child of her own. The reactions of the men in her life regarding the pregnancy range from Giulio’s surprise to her father’s nausea. Her gynecologist, another male, congratulates her husband for impregnating his wife despite her
slight build and narrow pelvis, considering this a worthy feat: “L’uomo è sempre fiero della sua potenza di generare” (53). This sentence reveals the extent to which patriarchy has overtaken the “miracle” of procreation. As Adrienne Rich states in Of Woman Born, “Through control of the mother, the man assures himself of possession of his children; through control of his children he insures the disposition of his patrimony and the safe passage of his soul after death” (64). Thus, the power of regeneration falls completely under the domain of the male: “The experience of maternity and the experience of sexuality have both been channeled to serve male interests” (42).

After three months of morning sickness, Giulia devises a plan for the health and survival of her child. She reads and informs herself on everything from diet to nonviolent deliveries. One remark regarding her child is of particular interest and resembles remarks made by Adrienne Rich regarding her own pregnancy. Giulia, fearing for the health of her child and concerned for his or her safe delivery, comments, “Lo sentivo prigioniero e io carceriera senza chiave” (53). The same sense of imprisonment of the unborn child is noted by Rich: “In early pregnancy the stirring of the fetus felt like ghostly tremors of my own body, later like the movements of a being imprisoned in me” (63). A mother’s impression that her child may be imprisoned within her womb reveals a deep sense of responsibility for the fetus that she is carrying. It also reveals an understanding that the fetus is both of the mother and also independent of her. Giulia is fully aware of the power she has over the new life growing within her, and she makes every attempt to provide the best prenatal care she can. But, in the final hour, the delivery proves most difficult.
The birth moment is horrendous, and the pain renders Giulia unconscious. The baby does not survive. A devastated and exhausted Giulia reflects,

Ci andai, piena di ignaro coraggio e inerme determinazione. . . . Esausta dal lungo strazio e alla fine incosc iente. Con una sola sensazione corporale: sclavicolata. Ero fuori, mi vedevo da fuori; una donna tutta sclavicolata come nelle antiche immagini delle torture. (54)

The next chapter begins with an abrupt scene change. Giulia and Nino are spending the summer at the seaside village. The sea provides a constant space of refuge, where they can recuperate and rejuvenate. Throughout the narrative, its restorative qualities are evident. Tired and exhausted from the birth experience, Giulia focuses her attention on her stepson, Nino. Mother and child take long walks along the beach while the father, who never liked the water, reluctantly visits every Sunday. His day consists of sitting by the shore, watching the young girls pass by. Giulia laments the changes that have transformed her beach experience. Swarms of people have discovered her seaside refuge. Gone are the fishing boats that once dotted the skyline. Nevertheless, mother and son continue their daily walks. Giulia's delivery experience is still a fresh wound. Anything might trigger a flood of memories: Tata’s humming of a lullaby makes her think that maybe she should have had the child in the village with a midwife, “in mano alle donne” (58). She is riddled with guilt and feels that the tragic ending to her pregnancy may have been the result of the choice she made. Perhaps, she thinks, it would have been better to let nature take its course. Instead, her child was brutally pulled from her womb with forceps, a birthing instrument that Rich refers to as “hands of steel,” citing Speert and Guttmacher in Obstetric Practice: “The obstetric forceps, more than any other instrument, symbolizes the art of the obstetrician” (142). Thus Giulia's statement is
a testament to the deleterious effects that the use of forceps can have on a newborn:

“Era stato estratto a forza col ferro e brutalizzato clinicamente” (58).

The birth of Giulia’s child has a negative impact on Nino, who viewed the newborn with suspicion. It is typical for a small child like Nino to fear the loss of maternal love when a new sibling enters his or her world. Giulia finds her stepson curled up on the ottoman with a pacifier and a security blanket. As her concern for the mental and emotional state of the child increases, she realizes that his father exacerbates the situation with his crude remarks regarding Nino’s behavior. Giulio never misses the opportunity to call attention to the child’s abnormal behavior, often referring to him as “stupidino” and “idiota” (60). Giulia is filled with bitterness and anger and finds her husband’s insensitivity to the child and his condescending attitude toward her father intolerable. Indeed, she finds very little about her husband that she can tolerate. No longer physically attracted to him, she realizes that their marriage has ended: “Bruscamente seppi che il mio matrimonio era finito” (61). Her depression, provoked by the loss of her child, informs her bleak view of her life: “Mi ero caricata di un uomo impossibile e di un bambino idiota” (62).

Giulia’s father is quick to grasp the situation and intervenes “con una prudenza e una delicatezza insospettabili” (62). He takes his daughter to their hometown in the mountains. In the beginning, the change of scenery, the cool fresh mountain air, and the return to her native town is like a tonic to her aching heart. Then one day they walk through the spot where her mother had been run over by a German motorcar, and they are suddenly reminded of her untimely death. Father and daughter leave and return to Rome. There Giulia is greeted by a very sad child
with his pacifier and blanket. At the sight of his stepmother, Nino spits out the pacifier, drops the blanket, and runs frantically into his mother's arms. Then Guilia understands that this is her child, the child she always desired: “Lo capii in quel momento. Era il bambino che avevo voluto” (63).

As Nino grows, Giulia continues to be troubled by his extreme attachment to her and finds his behavior puzzling: “Sembrava veramente un bambino, più che ritardato, con una qualche anormalità” (65). Her concern and desire to understand her child’s behavior leads her to the decision to attend the university to study psychology. Giulia is a woman who takes her mission as mother to heart. Intelligent, hard working, and compassionate, she is the ideal Bonannian mother. But Bonanni, using Giulia as her spokesperson, asks whether one mother can possibly give a child everything he or she needs to enter adulthood. What is missing in this narrative, which was central in Bonanni’s earlier works, is the chorus of women who supported and assisted one another in their common work of motherhood. As Bonanni leaves the rural and agrarian culture of her native Abruzzi and moves closer to the city, these marvelous voices slowly fade and disappear. Giulia feels this lack instinctively and comments: “Forse sarebbe meglio non avere una sola madre né una vice, ma tante madri in scambio di comunità. Io semplicemente non l’avevo avuta” (67). The loss of this sense of community leaves a

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10 The prevailing attitude regarding mental illness is documented in Vietato ai minori: “Avere un figlio in qualche modo anormale è la più grande sciagura” (168). Bonanni attacks yet another cultural stereotype, this time regarding the mentally challenged child, by presenting to the reader a mother who sees her son’s disability not as a disaster or a disgrace, but as a challenge to her mothering skills.
void, as the definition of motherhood is slowly reshaping itself. The mothers of the
city will likely find themselves more and more isolated.

The final chapters of this part focus on Nino as he grows from youth to
adolescent. The reader learns that Nino has a deep passion for cars and a love of
animals. Additionally, his relationship with his father is clearly deteriorating, and
soon the two can no longer communicate. Giulio finds his son’s questions irritating
and continues to berate him, calling him “cretino” (68). But with Giulia, his new
mother, the young boy was at ease and was building a relationship of trust. Giulia is
not sure what prompted his love of cars and attributes it to a sign of the changing
times. However, she does not doubt her influence regarding his love of animals.
Nino’s compassion and his quick thinking are evident in a brief incident involving a
neighbor’s dog. It was Nino who determined that the dog, tied up in the garage by
the exhaust pipe of a car, was being poisoned daily. The dog is nursed back to health,
earning Nino the nickname “il Nino dottore” (69).

The reader also notes a recurring theme and image in the Bonannian
narrative—the suicide of a child. In this account, the unnamed youth lived in the
village with his widowed father, who was an alcoholic. The boy was often seen
leading his intoxicated father home. Giulia learns that the authorities were looking
for an institution in which to place the youth and keep him off the streets. This,
Giulia adds, would deprive him of the sea and his freedom. It is no wonder that the
boy might attempt to take his life. His lifeless body is found hanging from a tree.
Giulia refers to this gesture as a “suicidio esistenziale” (71). The incident has a
profound effect on Nino, who becomes mute and unresponsive and spends the remainder of the afternoon staring at the sea outside his window.

At the end of the section, Nino is fourteen years old, a young teen who is somewhat of a stranger to his mother. Giulia notes: “Non era più un bambino e non era ancora un uomo, quell’ibrido commovente della metamorfosi. Cominciava a cambiare voce, qualche nota stridula e toni profondi, improvvisi e passeggeri mutamenti” (72). The discovery of both his old pacifier and photos of nude women in his room assures Giulia, perhaps falsely, that his son is on the road to normalcy: “Credo di aver sorriso, in qualche modo rassicurata. Come una qualsiasi madre ignorante” (73).

These first two parts set the stage for the development of the three central characters of the story. The author orientates the reader to the psychological spaces that each of the three characters occupy within the narrative. Giulia emerges as a highly intellectual yet compassionate woman who struggles with her relationships with the two men in her life. In her study Film making by the Book, Millicent Marcus refers to the dual presentations of Cesira in Moravia’s novel La ciociara as “Cesira—protagonist and Cesira—narrator” (69). This dual gaze is replicated in Bonanni’s presentation of Giulia—as narrator and as protagonist and thus participant in the narrative. Marcus argues, “their [Cesira protagonist and narrator] identities gradually converge until they fuse at the end with the climatic revelation of Michele’s posthumous teachings” (69). The blending of Giulia as mother, wife, and narrator is revealed in the final scene with Giulia’s promise of salvation not only to her son, but also to her readers. Thus, like Cesira, “the narrator claims her
epistemological superiority over her characters” (70). Giulio, on the other hand, lacks the ability to communicate intellectually with his wife and fails as a father to his son. He harbors a deep disdain and lack of compassion for the child and at the same time seems only to be physically attracted to his wife. The portrait of Giulio fits Bonanni’s pattern of describing a male who lacks emotional depth and is driven by physical attraction. For many of Bonanni’s male characters, marriage is more of a physical union than an emotional one. Nino, Giulia’s son, emerges as an overly sensitive young boy, perhaps traumatized by the violence of his birth experience and the death of his biological mother. He is emotionally dependent and intellectually challenged. He clings to his security blanket and pacifier not only throughout his infancy, but also well into his early adolescent years. Giulia takes it upon herself to mother this needy child because of the bond that was created at the time of his entrance into her life. Giulia is presented as a fiercely independent, compassionate, emotionally strong, and intellectually superior figure. Once again Bonanni has created a female character that possesses extraordinary inner fortitude. She is a survivor who accepts the challenge of mothering a child who exhibits unusual or abnormal patterns of behavior. The three characters intersect as a family only fleetingly, as the connection fails. The following chapters describe Giuliano’s struggle with addiction, Giulio’s demise, and Giulia’s desperate attempt to save her son from self-destruction.
Parte terza: “Le fughe”

In this section, Bonanni tackles many of the social issues and taboos that confronted mothers and children during adolescence and youth in postwar Italy. It is written in a semi-stream-of-consciousness and autobiographical style. The chapter divisions are not numbered, reflections and recollections are disjointed, and abrupt changes are indicated with spaces and ellipses. It is the longest of the four parts, and it details the struggles of Giuliano and his involvement with drugs and alcohol as well as Giulia’s pain as she witnesses her son’s demise. Giuliano’s journey was not uncommon of a youth in the Italy of this period. The 1970s were years of social and political discontent and unrest. The wave of what Tom Wolfe refers to as the “me decade”11 reached Italy full force. Italians awakened to a new political awareness with a youth culture that advocated free sex, drug use, and nonviolence, and that was thoroughly antiestablishment. Women’s movements formed, and Benedetti describes the new Italian woman as one who was “socially engaged and responsible, [and] feared motherhood as a force that could draw her back into the isolation and daily routines associated with the traditional family structure” (87). Feminists of the seventies saw motherhood as a possible obstacle to personal growth. They cautioned women not to base personal happiness or success on “mothering” alone, but instead encouraged them to find happiness and acceptance from within. Although socially aware, responsible, and well educated, Giulia chooses to embrace her mission as mother completely. Her life with a troubled son and an

inept husband is a challenge she accepts with full understanding, while her career is of secondary importance. Giulia’s gaze extends beyond the self into the maternal, thus offering a personal definition of motherhood seen not as entrapment, but as an instrument of salvation for her son.

The novel privileges the mother-son relationship, while the father-son and husband-wife relationships are developed to a lesser degree. The entries in this section suggest a diary or journal form. Writing in the first person, the narrator develops a sense of self in her characters, allowing the reader to journey with Giulia as she matures and evolves as a woman and as a mother. Benedetti posits that, traditionally, mothers were seen as extensions of their children and not as independent individuals (5-6). In this narrative, Bonanni breaks the mold, as Giulia is presented as a woman with a clear vision of the self. The text offers the reader a bare and essential representation of mothering.

Bonanni begins this section with a recounting of Giulia’s extramarital affair with a certain man, F. This man is a teacher and a colleague of hers. He is impressed with the fact that she is an avid reader and a college graduate. The two meet casually at a bar and gradually become lovers: their affair lasts for a period of two years. As Giulia reflects on their relationship, she notes his narrow-minded attitude toward their situation. He is troubled by what he considers their sinful state, but she muses, “tuttavia sembra che certi uomini amino sentire la donna in peccato per gustarlo meglio” (78). Eventually, his provincial outlook and the clandestine aspect of the affair become bothersome and disturbing to Giulia. Although she has no feelings of guilt, the pressure of maintaining the secret of the affair was simply too
troublesome. She does not have the heart to tell him that their relationship, reduced to quick encounters in safe environments, is no longer satisfying. This type of relationship, purely physical, is one she could have with her husband. The romance loses its appeal and becomes routine until, finally, one day while walking in the city, Giulia ends it. The man's childlike reaction is predictable: he is deeply offended and incredulous. But Giulia is determined and remains firm in her decision.

The opening scene reinforces several important aspects of Giulia’s character. The reader is reminded that Giulia is not the uneducated, provincial, small-town woman of Bonanni's earlier novels. This is a modern, well-informed, and well-educated woman of the seventies. She holds a university degree, is passionate about reading, and is employed. Unlike her predecessors, she is not dependent financially on her husband. Having an economic base is the first step toward a sense of freedom for the emancipated woman. Giulia’s thoughts regarding her affair reflect a lack of concern with societal mores and codes. She recognizes and accepts the reality of her loveless marriage with her husband and thus feels no remorse in looking elsewhere for a satisfying relationship with the opposite sex. In her view, her decision is totally justified. The fact that she is the one who ends the relationship is also significant and indicates that she is a determined woman who is not afraid to act. Giulia’s resolve and strength of character are contrasted with her lover's weakness.

Her lover is surprised and perhaps somewhat intimidated by the fact that Giulia is “laureata” and an avid reader. At that time, women did not commonly receive a higher education. Giulia’s love of reading and her immersion in the world of books and words challenges previously held notions toward women's capacity for
education, reading, writing, and abstract thought. Indeed, in the following section, the reader is invited to visit Giulia’s “room of her own.” Referred to as “uno sgabuzzino,” this small space is entirely her own and is an extension of her literary self. In her essay “A Room of One’s Own,” Virginia Woolf argues that there are two essential requirements for a woman writer: economic freedom and a private space (4). Giulia meets these requirements, and, indeed, this small space fills her need for privacy. It is a retreat where she can work undisturbed. The two men in the family have learned to respect this space. There she prepared for her university exams, corrected papers, and, most important, she wrote. As Giulia remarks, “soprattutto qui mi sono raccontata l’infanzia mia e quella del Nino” (79). Women and writing did not always coexist. In fact, the notion that a woman might have the intellectual capacity to write seemed inconceivable in patriarchal societies that held that writing was a manly activity. In their seminal study, The Madwoman in the Attic, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar argue, “In patriarchal Western culture, therefore, the text’s author is a father, a progenitor, a procreator, an aesthetic patriarch whose pen is an instrument of generative power like his penis” (6). And later, “the pen has been defined as not just accidentally but essentially a male ‘tool,’ and therefore not only inappropriate but actually alien to women” (8). Giulia’s lover’s reaction of surprise to the fact that she holds a university degree, is a lover of books, and is capable of typical male intellectual activity indicates that remnants of this construct regarding women and writing still persisted.

The theme of a place of retreat is a recurring one in the Bonannian canon. It was developed in earlier texts, such as “Il fosso” (the hovel in which Colombina and
her family live) and L'imputata (the secret hideout of Gianni and the children of the tenement). But here, rather than a collective space, it is Giulia’s own private space. The reader learns that eventually it becomes a substitute for the matrimonial bed: physical evidence that the marriage between Giulio and Giulia has failed. One day, as Giulia observes women on the bus, she looks for a wedding band on their fingers and contemplates the meaning of wearing that band. She believes that a woman without a ring is one who is not desirable to men. The stigma of being single is lasting. Only then does she realize that for most women, one’s personal sense of self-worth rests on this patriarchal construct. But Giulia distinguishes between two types of single women—those who are single by choice, and those who are not—and wonders if women who choose the single life can be happy and feel fulfilled. She is not sure. She notes that even nuns wear a wedding band (80). A nun belongs to Christ; to whom does an unmarried woman belong? As the old saying from her village attests, there is match for everyone: “I mezzi limoni sparsi dal Cielo” (81). So, it is simply a matter of finding one’s other half. Giulia believes that finding this other half is not always possible, and, rather than live a life of solitude, one often settles: “Se non hai un compagno, se non hai un figlio, non appartieni a nessuno e nessuno ti appartiene” (81). Giulia is all too familiar with this aloneness, as she experienced “il panico della solitudine” (81) and the agony of growing up without parental love. She will not leave her husband, nor will she abandon her stepson. In Giulia’s world, belonging is a basic human need, essential for survival.

The scene changes abruptly to observations concerning Nino, no longer a child and now referred to as Giuliano. He has begun to show an interest in girls who
have adopted the dress of the seventies hippies, or “capellone”: “Un po’ si assomigliano tutte, capelli lisci pendenti, faccia senza trucco, jeans e maglione o camicia di fuori, scarpe piatte” (81). Giulia however, is more concerned with the fact that her son still kisses her good-bye, even if a girlfriend is present. She wonders if her son will be labeled a “mammone”—the Italian version of a “mamma’s boy.” She is aware of the often-devastating results of overbearing mothering and the possibility of a son’s abnormal attachment interfering with his ability to separate from his mother. In Giulia’s eyes, the good mother must allow this detachment to happen: “Sempre ho tenuto presente che la migliore madre è quella che riesce a non ostacolare il distacco dei figli” (82). For the remainder of the narrative, achieving this goal proves to be an overwhelming and emotionally exhausting endeavor.

In the following chapter, Giulia describes physical and behavioral changes in Giuliano. He has become obese and has started to lock himself up in the bathroom for hours. She realizes that he is smoking and suspects that he may also be masturbating. Although she understands that it is natural and normal for young boys to want to discover their sexuality, she finds it disturbing: “Normale e naturale, ma mi provocava un invincibile senso di disgusto” (83-84). She does not understand her reaction. Is she experiencing a sense of nostalgia for his innocence? Would she have the same reaction if she were his biological mother? Significantly, Giulia never refers to herself as “matrigna”—a term filled with negative connotations regarding the stepmother figure. She is instead a vicar mother, “matrigna mai, però madre vicaria” (84).
Mothering a male child is a formidable challenge. A mother may relate automatically to her daughters, but with her male offspring, this exchange is not a given. Indeed, Ann F. Caron states in *Strong Mothers, Strong Sons*, “Mothers know that raising sons is not like raising daughters. In spite of noble efforts to eradicate male/female distinctions, the relationship between a mother and son still reflects their sexual differences” (3). In the earliest years, both male and female offspring share similar stages. But when a son enters adolescence, a mother loses her connection with him. His emerging masculinity poses problems many mothers are not equipped to confront. In her study *Every Mother’s Son*, Judith Arcana writes, “Many mothers begin to struggle with their sons’ maleness when the boys begin to change into men” (58). Giulia is well aware of this particular predicament for mothers. As a well-educated and dedicated individual, she makes a conscientious effort to connect with her son throughout the narrative. She observes her son’s behavior and intervenes when she can. She is committed to the well-being of her adopted son. And although she is not his biological mother, her concern for his smooth transition into adulthood, her dedication and drive, and her tenacity match that of any caring biological mother. Her work of mothering challenges the stereotypes regarding the much-maligned stepmother.

Giuliano’s biological father is the one who fails as a role model. According to Arcana, “the idealized mother is a woman who is both physically and spiritually, boundlessly giving and endlessly available . . . [but] The idealized father is practically invisible; he is almost never available, rarely giving” (140). Indeed, Arcana postulates that men who have never been directly involved in childcare are
unable to participate: “men are not trained to care for children” (160). In the case of Giulio, his character is revealed from the onset; as soon as he marries Giulia, he abandons his responsibility toward his son, leaving the entire task of parenting to his wife. As the novel progresses, he becomes less and less visible and seems to exit the scene. No father-son bond can possibly develop when a father detaches himself from the daily life of his child.

Giuliano’s new girlfriend is Mira, a secondary character who befriends Giuliano and later helps Giulia when her son is in trouble. While Giulia is not jealous of their friendship, Giulio’s reaction is entirely different. As he ages, and as the distance between him and his son increases, he develops overwhelming resentments. Reversing the situation of the past years, now the father resents the closeness between his son and Giulia: “Se ne risente come un bambino invidioso e capriccioso, fino al ridicolo” (84-85). Throughout the rest of the narrative, Giulio is portrayed as infantile in his behavior and in his resistance to make any sort of responsible decisions. Not only is he resentful of the mother-son bond and of his unavoidable exclusion from this exchange, but he is also distressed by his powerlessness in other respects. Giulia is financially independent. Thus, if she wishes to buy her son a motor scooter, she can and does. If someday she wishes to buy her son a car, she will be able to do so without having to ask permission of her husband, and she does so. Giulio no longer figures much in her decisions or in those of her son. This is a sign of a breakdown of collaboration between husband and wife, and it elicits negative responses from an unhappy Giulio, who seems incapable of forming any lasting and loving relationships. Giulia notes his anger and frustration
with her: "Giulio, al solito, si sentirà esautorato e defraudato, si arroga ovviamente diritti sul figlio" (85). Giulio is not happy about being deprived of the authority he is entitled to simply because he is the head of the household. By contrasting the presumptuous Giulio with the self-assured Giulia, Bonanni successfully attacks another patriarchal construct. Authority and respect must be earned. It is not automatic, nor is it gender based. Giulio is a father who does not participate in the rearing of his son and thus cannot make any claims regarding his paternal authority. Giulio is a dysfunctional father with a dysfunctional son, and Giulia must take control of the difficult situations within this family triangle in order to assure its survival.

"Tutti uccidono il padre," comments the narrator as she reflects on the problematic father-son and father-daughter relationships (87). The relationship between Giulio and Giuliano deteriorates to the point that they no longer speak to each other except for perfunctory casual greetings. Giulia finds this development understandable, as Giulio’s offensive and derogatory remarks toward his son can only contribute to a permanent distancing. Giuliano is a reticent and reserved youth who does not respond to his father’s verbal aggression. His inaction serves only to infuriate Giulio even more. But Giulia understands that her son is taciturn by nature and often communicates with facial expressions and hand gestures. He is silent even with her, but mother and son participate in an unspoken bond of affection from which Giulio is estranged. Giulia knows intuitively that in the formation of a child’s character is a time of separation that allows the youth to begin to form a separate identity. An incident between father and son underscores the tension between the
two: Giulio is infuriated with his son’s smoking habit, and when he sees his son with a cigarette hanging from his lips, he rudely snatches it from his mouth. Giuliano, in defiance of his father’s authority, lights up another cigarette. This leads to an indignant slap in the face from his father. Actually, Giulio had expected his son to step away at the sight of his raised hand, but instead he remained motionless. They freeze, momentarily glaring at each other. Giulia believes that had she not been present, they surely would have come to blows. Throughout the narrative, the tension between father and son escalates. Giulia must serve as mediator.

Giulia’s past experience with her father informs her perception of the father-child bond. She recalls her disturbing feelings of hatred and bitterness toward her father. Even she “killed” her father once in a mock trial, in a moment of anger. It was a game she had played out in her mind, an attempt to take revenge on a father who denied her the parental love each child so desperately needs. As she recalls the memory of the event, she realizes that she no longer remembers what the source of her anger was, nor does she remember why she had condemned her father to death. All that remains are feelings of remorse.

Giulia’s relationships with the men in her life are problematic. While no relationships with women are deeply developed in the text, Giulia’s thoughts shift from those of her father to those of her husband and those of her son, a trinity of men who are the major influences of her life. Thinking about her husband, she realizes that she is no longer sure why she married: “Si vive insieme anni e non ci si vede più” (89). Giulio has become insignificant and almost invisible to her. She cannot explain her original attraction to him, but she knows it was short-lived. She
contemplates leaving him. Perhaps she could have left when she was having the affair. One night, when they were already in their twin beds and Giulia had rejected his amorous advances, she hinted that they might indeed separate. In the dark, she hears, much to her surprise, her husband sobbing, “secchi singulti soffocati a testa sotto” (90). Crying in men is often associated with weakness. This is a patriarchal construct that denies men the natural emotional outlet available to women, who are seen as the weaker sex. Arcana argues that displays of anger are the only ones acceptable in a man: “For a man to cry, especially in the presence of other men, is to show that he is not only vulnerable, but weak and pathetic” (82). The image of the weeping Giulio serves to reinforce Bonanni’s insistence that Giulio is ineffectual and powerless. Despite the fact that Giulio is the biological father of Giuliano, Giulia will be the only effective parent, acquiring the authority that Giulio has surrendered to her.

In the following chapter, the narrator moves from personal reflections on her marriage and male interactions to observations regarding the societal changes in progress and their effects on her role as mother. Bonanni demonstrates that she is keenly aware of the many influences that shape the formation of the mother-child bond and inform a child’s life choices, such as social and cultural mores, political circumstances, prevailing theories regarding parenting, infant bonding, peer pressure, schools, violence, and drugs.

Giulia witnesses many changes including dress codes, political demonstrations and protests, fear of nuclear catastrophe, drug and alcohol use, and clandestine activity, such as drug dealing, frequently resulting in violence The
changes are often so drastic that she does not recognize the society she was once familiar with. But some constructs remain constant, as they are deeply woven in the fabric of cultural thought and experience. Bonanni presents to the reader the bare reality and the possible devastation that these preconceived ideas can have on individuals in society. She also provides detailed accounts of situations that result in the destruction of human life. In these passages, Bonanni, the experienced judge of juvenile court, speaks through Giulia. She does not hesitate to tackle taboos that no one wants to approach. These themes include infanticide, abortion, incest, and homosexuality. 12

In one episode, Giulia has returned to her seaside village and learns of a recent tragedy involving the death of an infant and a case of incest. She finds that the villagers are horrified not so much by the infanticide, but by the fact that the child is the result of an incestuous liaison between a brother and sister. In the minds of these villagers, incest is the worst possible offense, “peggio del fornicare e del commettere adulterio, peggio dell’uccidere. Il più scellerato, l’orrendo, il micidiale, l’unico senza perdono” (95). This is an unforgivable crime, and the town is without pity. The general consensus is that the two parents should be lynched: “Quanto può essere feroce la buona gente” (96). In contrast to this lack of sensitivity and understanding of the townsfolk, their story elicits pity on the part of the reader. The fraternal twins were orphans who were left to survive on their own on a farm in an isolated mountainous area. As a result of their isolation and lack of adult guidance,

12 A thorough investigation of Bonanni’s Vietato ai minori will yield numerous examples of cases involving themes such as infanticide, the lack of sex education, homosexuality, children’s suicide, incest, drug abuse, and violence.
they had grown wild and uncivilized. They had become creatures of instinct, and the young girl’s pregnancy sealed their fate. Sexual desire is the culprit: “anche la gente semplice, la innocente pacifica gente, ha un maledetto sesso” (96). The girl must have suffered a long and difficult labor, and her brother/lover, in an attempt to come to her aid, tried to assist in the delivery of the baby, which was brutal: “D’altronde la creaturina a pezzi e non si sa ancora se fosse vitale o già morta dentro” (95). Realizing that she was ill, he placed her on a donkey and brought her to the town to search for assistance. Although she left a trail of blood, she did not die. Thus, Bonanni once again attests to the strength of these people: “Non è morta, non ancora, è razza dura a morire” (97). The town’s response strikes Giulia as disingenuous. Illicit affairs, abortions, and infanticides were not new to them. Even Tata’s granddaughter was known to have had an abortion. Even married women were not exempt: “Le stesse maritate lo fanno secondo antiche ricette di beveraggi e manipulazioni, per non avere un figlio l’anno nel lungo periodo fertile” (96). The theme of numerous pregnancies is touched on again and is summed up with the final comment, “vai a far ragionare l’uomo” (96).

Given the numerous births, lack of efficient birth control, and fear of illegitimacy, the killing of a newborn baby is often justified in the eyes of the townsfolk: “E l’infanticidio—per ignoranza—per trascuratezza, per violenza, per paura - se non consumato deliberatamente con le proprie mani sulla creatura nata viva, non ha troppo peso” (97). This condition also points to the necessity of birth control, implied indirectly: “la natura è allo sperpero, si nasce a profusione” (97). Incest between brother and sister is considered so horrific, so disgusting, that it
enrages the villagers much more than incest between father and daughter. The authority of the father seems to continue to exert its power: “Eppure non allo stesso modo, lo stesso furore, se è un padre sulle figlie: patria potestà” (97). A daughter is seen as the property of her father, thus attesting to the power and dominance of patriarchy. Incestuous relations between brother and sister are a much greater threat to patriarchy, as Juliet Mitchell argues: “In sum, the brothers must refrain from incest; only then can patriarchy, in which they have a vested interest, thrive” (qtd. in Tong 170).

Giulia learns later that the young mother has died. If the authorities determine that the child was alive at birth, the brother/father will be incarcerated for life. This boy is seen as a wild beast in the woods, and Tata refers to him as “un pesce nudo” (98), alluding to the abundance of small fish before the war. These fish were sold for a pittance or thrown out, as they were almost worthless. The life of the young man is just as worthless: “È un pesce nudo: così la vecchia ha commiserato il povero bruto” (99).

Bonanni presents a scathing commentary regarding the human side of incest. Abhorred in society, incest is a strictly forbidden taboo. Shari Thurer, in The Myths of Motherhood, argues that the origin of this taboo is linked to the institution of patriarchy and refers to Claude Lévi-Strauss, “who attributed the subordination of women to the universal incest taboo; this forced men of different clans to exchange women in order to mate, thereby making women into objects of barter, like meat” (33). Incest is linked by definition to impurity and uncleanness. However, the human element is what attracts the narrator’s attention and evokes the reader’s
sympathy. As Giulia walks by the sea early one morning, she considers the extenuating circumstances regarding this alleged crime. She is struck and disturbed by the insensitivity and the driving rage, not only of the townsfolk, but also of the people vacationing there: “Ho saputo che alla vergognosa gazzarra contro il disgraziato bruto, hanno preso parte villeggianti cittadini, c’erano padri coi figli, c’erano donne” (98). The incestuous act of the twins inspires fear and loathing in the villagers. But Giulia looks beyond the crime and into the lives of these two abandoned children, trying to determine who the responsible parties are. During her tenure as judge, Bonanni witnessed many similar cases, some of which are documented in Vietato ai minori. The youngest citizens of Italy, children who lacked education, parental guidance, food, and proper clothing committed these crimes. As Bonanni demystifies these social taboos, she invites the reader to delve more deeply into the nature and motivations of these transgressions. Incest, abortion, infanticide, premarital sex, childlessness, and spinsterhood are constructs that many feminists, including Adrienne Rich, classify as inspired by patriarchy. 13

Bonanni introduces the reader to another cultural construct regarding homosexuality with the character of Ugo. Giuliano and his new friend arrive unexpectedly at their village home. He is described as “un muscoloso giovanotto con la testa rapata e la barba riccia, nerissimo a confronto del mio Giuliano che sembra glabro tanto è di pelo chiaro” (100). Giulia, suspicious from the onset, sees Ugo place his arm around Giuliano. When the two boys depart on his motor scooter, Giuliano does not turn and wave good-bye, as was his habit. His attention is focused entirely

13 See Adrienne Rich’s Of Women Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution, pp. 104, 186.
on Ugo, his new friend. Giulia realizes that although she had never been jealous of
her son's female friends, she now finds herself struggling with the possibility that
she is jealous of Ugo. A nightmare she has embodies her irrational impulse: “Dunque
la gelosia c'era, latente indeterminata, in stato d'incoscienza ha preso corpo . . . . Ma
l'avevo sentito così distintamente da poterlo rievocare al vivo: non fare l'incestuosa
Fedra, con la voce del padre. Vergogna del mio subcosciente” (103). She is perplexed
and ashamed of these inappropriate emotions. Here Bonanni touches on another
 taboo—a mother's excessive love for her son.

Giulia's concern for her son escalates: she is “nervosa come un gatto
allarmato” (103). She swims, takes long walks, smokes too much, and cannot sleep.
Although she has known all along that she would have to parent this child on her
own, she was not prepared for the difficulties that she would have to confront. Her
husband can only complain and criticize her. He blames Giulia for being too
permissive, thus encouraging Giuliano to become effeminate. In Giulio's eyes, this is
the worst thing that can happen to a boy.

Then one morning Giulia awakens with a startling thought. She suspects her
son is homosexual: "Di colpo l’idea agghiacciante di un rapporto innaturale. La
cosiddetta perversione” (105). Giulia knows she is not prejudiced and would love her
son regardless of his sexual orientation. She is not repulsed by this possibility and
abhors false moralizing. Bonanni’s many years of experience as a judge working
with troubled juvenile offenders has informed her views regarding many of these
cultural assumptions. She approaches these issues from a purely humane standpoint
and is well aware of society’s frequent response to diversity, as it fears what is
different and unknown:

È solo paura degli altri. La gente—gli stessi compagni e suo padre in prima
linea—non sopporta la diversità, tanto meno di questa specie. L’incesto ha in
sé del tragico, ispira un orror sacro, l’omosessualità è schifata e beffata, può
scatenare la medesima furia omicida. (106)

Giulia is concerned for the victims. Ostracized by society, they are misfits
condemned to live on the margins. The world must change its response to
homosexuality, as Giulia fears for her son’s life.

The mother is often blamed for her son’s homosexuality. Giulia grapples with
this issue. She knows her son is weak of character and wonders if Ugo influenced
Giuliano to the point of mimicry or if he was psychologically abusive. She is aware of
her son’s vulnerability and questions her decisions in his regard. She is forced to
confront these monstrous thoughts as she considers the choices a biological mother
might have made: “Forse le vere madri sono più tranquille, in un appagamento più
visceralè” (109). Throughout her mothering experience, Giulia suffers these
agonizing moments. Arcana argues that “the blaming of mothers for male sexuality
is all-encompassing. If the mother is loving and nurturant, she is labeled seductive
or smothering. If she is aloof and distant, she is castrating” (172). Certainly Giulia,
having received her degree in psychology, is well aware of Freud’s theories
regarding the formation of a homosexual son. Yet, Bonanni does not allow her
protagonist to dwell for long on her son’s possible homosexuality, and the question
is never fully resolved. Ugo quits the scene, as more pressing problems must be
confronted. The following pages describe Giuliano’s rapid decline both physically
and mentally, as a result of a developing drug addiction, and attest to Giulia's attempt to understand the situation and take action.

Experimentation with drugs and alcohol is not unusual among young teens. The youth counter-culture of the sixties and seventies was particularly susceptible to this conduct. Theirs was an idealistic movement toward equality for all and toward building a world of peace, and drug use became symbolic of their rebellion against the status quo. But drug and alcohol abuse wreak havoc in the minds and bodies of those who are subject to these substances. It is responsible for physical and psychological transformations all too familiar to Bonanni. These changes are documented in Giuliano. As he approaches age twenty, Giulia notices the undeniable symptoms of drug addiction, including lack of appetite, weight loss, apathy, frequent complaints of pain and fatigue, excessive smoking, occasional excessive eating with no apparent weight gain, bursts of hilarity, loss of facial expression, and a sloppy and unkempt appearance. Giulia is perplexed and feels unable to approach her son. At the dinner table, she realizes that she does not know the young man sitting across from her: “A tavola l'impressione di una presenza estranea, al suo posto vedevo il bambino di tanto tempo addietro” (111).

Giulia is not alone in experiencing the sense of distance between herself and her growing son. As long as the son is a small child, his mother will not have any problem in bonding and forming an emotional attachment with him. But society's view of masculinity has deemed it necessary for the son to detach emotionally from his mother in order to achieve autonomy. Throughout the adolescent years, the son

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14 In Vietato ai minori she refers to these youngsters as “Gli infelici figli dei fiori, gli amanti dell’ ‘erba,’ i disperati della droga” (227).
learns to move away from his emotional ties with his mother. As he becomes a man, the mother, by nature of her gender, cannot fully understand or connect with his maleness. Suddenly, mother and son may find that they are complete strangers.

Giulia, however, is a committed mother. In *Strong Mothers, Strong Sons*, Caron remarks, “A committed mother does not abandon a son if he gets into trouble, but gives guidance, sets limits, establishes clear standards and teaches survival skills” (74). In Giulia’s case, this proves a daunting task. She is a concerned mother struggling not only with her son’s personal problems, but also with a society that seems to be working against her. Some of the youth of this period rebelled against parental authority with excessive drug use, clandestine activities, acts of terrorism, and protests and demonstrations, all of which represented obstacles to even the most dedicated parent.

When one night Giuliano goes out and does not return, Giulia is distraught. The situation begins to affect her both physically and psychologically, and when she returns to her classroom, she experiences a mild panic attack. In the classroom that day, she cannot tolerate the normal chatter and activity of the children. Their behavior makes her physically ill. Feelings of nausea sweep over her, and suddenly she raises her voice with her students. Her screams frighten them, and the young students become fearful of her. She returns home sickened and panicked, “il panico per quello che c’è da fare, tutto quello che gli altri si aspettano da me” (118). The

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15 Bonanni herself suffered a nervous breakdown between 1964 and 1974. During this period she did not publish: “Ho avuto una nervosi acutissima. Sopravvivevo con gli psicofarmaci. È stato un periodo orrendo, dovuto a superlavoro dopo un’esperienza ventennale come consulente del Tribunale Minorile” (qtd. in Petrignani 63-64).
next day she refuses to get out of bed. After a long, meticulous and embarrassing examination, a doctor determines that her problems are hormonal. She is fast approaching menopause, and, according to the doctor, these symptoms are quite normal. She finds the doctor’s attitude almost offensive. As she contemplates hormones and pills, she recalls her youthful days sucking licorice stalks. Then she realizes that a change of scenery will be beneficial, and she leaves by train to return to her native mountains. However, her memories do not coincide with the reality she encounters, and the trip does not prove to be the healing experience she seeks. When she returns to Rome, she finds a husband aged and spent, who spends his days in front of the television. He seems to have given up on his son and has fully passed the responsibility on to his wife. Giulia describes his decline:

Non è più l’uomo gioviale, estroverso, dotato di simpatia umana, neanche esplode più nelle sue collere improvvisse e presto sbollite. Sembra già soffrire tutto il patema della vecchiaia. Cede all’età, gli fallisce la memoria, è colto da torpore alla fine del pasto. Chiuso in un egosimo fisiologico . . . . Al contrario della donna vecchia emotivamente agitata, insieme al declino del sesso nell’uomo si spegne anche l’affettività. (138)

At the supper table, she gazes at the two strangers sitting before her who are dependent on her for their survival—one is enclosed in a physiological cocoon, and the other in a psychological one.

Over time, Giuliano’s health and demeanor continue to deteriorate. Since leaving home, he develops a new routine; that is, he returns home only when he is sure no one is there. The smell of cigarette smoke alerts Giulia to her son’s secretive visits, along with his dirty clothes left in the bathroom. Still concerned for his health and welfare, she leaves him food in the refrigerator and provides clean laundry for him. He even takes the money she leaves him. Throughout the remainder of the
section, Bonanni provides the reader with clues to the declining state of Giuliano and to Giulia’s growing concern and fear for her son. Noticing that her son is affected by a “fame patologica” (127), “Questi ragazzi che stanno già invecchiando” (129), “è diventato indifferente” (131), and “ha preso il gusto dell’alcool, non si tratta più di birra né cerca più le aspirine” (139), Giulia feels that Giuliano’s behavior has become intolerable, and, having reached a point of exasperation, she slaps him, and Giuliano locks himself in the bathroom. A little later, he emerges with his hair slicked back, in a desperate but failed attempt to make himself more presentable; he appears “Deperito. Invecchiato. Malato” (140). She can no longer close her eyes to the inescapable truth: her son is sick and must see a doctor. She arranges to take him the next day, but Giuliano has disappeared again. The worst is not over yet.

**Parte quarta: “La droga”**

This section opens with Giulia’s visit to Santo Spirito, an ancient church in Rome dedicated to the care of the sick and abandoned. Giulia is desperately searching everywhere for her runaway son, hoping she will find Giuliano before it is too late. Giulia recalls Giuliano’s first experience with marijuana: “La prima paglia l’avevano fumata insieme al liceo, per scherzo fra studenti” (144). A brief history of marijuana and its effects follows. Although this drug was considered harmless, she concludes that students used it “[per] addormentare la coscienza” (145) and to overcome fear. “La paura” surfaces again in the Bonannian text as a prime motivator in the lives of her characters. A gripping fear of existence links Colombina, Berta, Palma, and Anna Falcone in a common bond. Thus, the use of mind-altering drugs
provides a means of escape and offers an artificial aid for casting out personal demons. Giulia’s ruminations end with a list of famous figures, real or literary, who were drug dependent, including Voltaire, Anna Karenina, Sherlock Holmes, Nietzsche, and, last but not least, herself and her son. As they attempt to flee from the harsh reality of their existence, they share one common goal: “l’insopprimibile bisogno umano di aiutarsi a vivere” (146). Giulia can empathize and understand this psychological dependence on drugs for survival. In her case, the dependence was overcome when she began to invest in the well-being of her son. The transference of focus from the self to the child emphasizes the notion that the child is an extension of the self. The bond that forms between mother and child is formidable and, in this case, even more remarkable in that Giulia and Giuliano are not biologically linked.

Mira visits with the news that Giuliano is nowhere to be found. Giulia’s thoughts return to her son’s mental instability and his tendency to be depressed one moment and enthusiastic the next. These highs and lows in Giuliano’s personality may indicate manic-depressive behavior, yet Giulia never takes her son to a psychiatrist. Perhaps she thinks that with her knowledge of psychology she can diagnose and treat her son. But clearly her lack of direct experience with drug users and her inability to decipher subtle signs prevent her from taking action. She comments on her son’s ability to hide his growing addiction, taking just enough of the drugs to “get high” but not enough to produce noticeable exterior effects. Giulia notes that drug addicts “sono abilissimi a nascondersi” (148). Thinking back, she realizes that she missed the unmistakable signs. She recalls her son locking himself in the bathroom and exiting without having showered or shaved, the strange odors
left in the bathroom—a tobacco smell mixed with something sweet but unrecognizable, the belt on the floor that was not his, his father’s wrinkled tie, and especially the missing spoon from her father’s silverware set. These are clear signs of a heavy drug addiction. At this point, Giulia questions her maternal instinct and her female intuition.

Giulia is single-minded in her attempt to learn as much as she can regarding drug addiction and methods for coping with it. Her collection of papers, articles, interviews, and letters create a horrifying picture of the decadence of the youth of her society. Again Bonanni uses Giulia as her mediator, seeming to address her fellow Italians, urging them to take action. Giulia recognizes the fact that society has marginalized these youths, and they, on the other hand, are capable of any criminal act—including drug dealing, prostitution, and even murder—to supply them with the money needed to support their habit. Thankfully, Giulia notes that her son never stole from her, nor was he in such desperate straits to sell his wristwatch. She deceives herself into believing that his situation is not hopeless. After all, he has only been gone for two weeks.

Before long, Giulia’s suspicions are verified. At the dinner table, Giulio informs her that he has learned from a nearby mechanic that Giuliano is trying to sell his car. She now believes that he probably sold his motor scooter and his watch. She learns the news from her husband, who continues to regress, becoming more and more inarticulate and withdrawn.

Then the nightmares begin. Flashbacks from the past haunt Giulia until she awakens with a start at the sound of her son calling her. She is bombarded with
newspaper photos and stories of weeping mothers holding dead sons—sons who succumbed to drug overdoses. She questions her role as mother and realizes that, in her naiveté, she believed she could rear her son in a normal fashion. She muses on the essence of her motherly behavior and on what it means to be a mother: “Essere madre troppo materna, indulgente permissiva, quando sarebbe stata necessaria una ingerenza più energica, un sostegno più previdente, una diffidenza più vigile” (154). She knows she must not give up, and she must help her son at all costs. Realizing that the world is the source of his problems, she wonders how she can possibly change the world for him: “Ma se è il mondo che lo disgusta e lo spaventa, come posso cambiarli il mondo” (154). Giulia’s thoughts regarding motherhood reveal an interior struggle that many mothers face. Perhaps she was too lenient. Was her approach to mothering her son too liberal? A more vigilant approach with more interference on her part might have been more effectual. Often a parent’s overindulgence is an attempt to fill in a perceived lack in the relationship. In Giulia’s case, she is not the biological mother, and her son has a disinterested and distant father. Over-permissive and overindulgent or not, Giulia’s decisions for her son are the result of her love and concern for his well-being and his future.

Communications between mother and son are by now reduced to brief phone calls. The tension between them escalates as Giulia becomes insistent that he return home. But while on the one hand she is urging her son to return, she actually fears his homecoming. Giulia is consumed by these conflicting emotions. She is well aware of the difficulties she faces and the necessity of maintaining a delicate balance. At one point in the story, she attempts to connect with another mother who also is in a
similar predicament: “Di nuovo ho tentato di avvicinarla e di nuovo sono stata respinta. Le madri dei clandestini” (157). But the attempt fails, as the other mother does not seem to share the same desire. And yet, through mutual communication and support, many mothers can survive the trials of mothering. Giulia lacks a mother support system. She has no female friends, no living mother or stepmother, no aunts, and no female colleagues with whom she can share her worries. She is alone, and her attempt to approach her colleague at work is an indication of her awareness of this void and the urgency of her situation: “E io che volevo parlarne. Abbiamo due figli portatori di bombe diverse e a tutt’e due gli può scoppiare addosso” (158). Once again, Bonanni gives voice to the importance of the community as a support system for mothers.

Giulia continues to contemplate the agony of mothering a child under these stressful circumstances. A young boy’s move from adolescence to adulthood is fraught with difficulties. Add to this the problems associated with drug abuse, and the task of parenting can seem insurmountable. Giulia comes to the sad realization that the little boy she once held close to her and protected is gone. In his place is a troubled young adult who is a stranger to her. She laments, “Non lo riavrò più. Il bel figlio buono aperto felice, quello è perduto” (158). Her anger and rage are now directed toward the insidious drug dealers who have the audacity to approach young children in the elementary school. Society has undergone many drastic changes, and, in Giulia’s eyes, they are all for the worse. She refers to this situation as the new calamity and plague of the times: “Una nuova calamità, la peste che attacca dal virgulto” (158). Nevertheless, she takes consolation in one important
fact: she did not give birth to him and bring him into this life. And for this she cannot be reproached: “Non ti ho messo al mondo ed è l’unica cosa che non mi puoi rimproverare” (159).

In the next chapter, Giulia learns from Mira that her son is in jail and has been arrested for suspicion of drug dealing. She is relieved that he is not dead, and she experiences a moment of consolation with the knowledge that he is safe. Mira informs her that, at the time of his arrest, he did not have any identification on him and has already spent a week in jail. As the only living blood relative, Giulio is the first called to visit his son. But Giulia, as his stepmother, soon follows. She understands that she will be the one to find a way to have him released, for Giulio’s mental and physical health has continued to worsen, and he has become less and less active in family affairs. Having suffered from a number of minor strokes, his speech is slurred and his memory is failing.

As a concerned mother Giulia, finds it imperative that she learn more about the situation so she can take action. Mira tells her that her father, a lawyer, will procure Giuliano’s release. Giulia is encouraged by her son’s insistence that he was not involved in any drug dealings. At this point, Giulia and Mira begin to form a special bond of woman to woman. Mira can supply Giulia with information regarding her son and attempts to assuage a mother’s fear for her son. At one point, they look at each other in silence, and Giulia realizes that they both in their own way care deeply for this young man. Finally Giulia has found the other female voice with which to bond. The joining of female voices is a major theme in the Bonannian opus. Bonanni recognizes the many difficulties a woman faces as she undertakes the
often-daunting problems and issues of mothering. If society cannot provide the assistance a mother needs, then she urges mothers to look to one another for emotional and practical support. Giulia’s attempt to dialogue with another colleague failed, but Bonanni provides her with unexpected assistance. In Mira she has found a source of unanticipated but valuable moral support: “A un certo punto ha detto il nostro ragazzo come se fossimo due madri” (164). Once again, Bonanni anticipates the concept of affidamento or entrustment. Solidarity among women is seen as essential for their survival. In her study “Between the United States and Italy,” Renata Holub argues, “Through the practice of affidamento, however, women can activate a liberatory project that is individual and collective at the same time” (247).

In the course of events, Giulia learns that her son’s decayed tooth has been extracted while in jail. A typical literary device of Bonanni is to highlight various themes or threads in her texts with relevant symbols. Giulia first notices her son’s decaying tooth early in the section. She knows she should suggest that he see a dentist, but is hesitant. She fears her interference will be interpreted negatively and so lets the occasion pass. Nevertheless, with each future encounter, Giulia cannot help but notice the increase in the decay. The decaying tooth symbolizes not only Giuliano’s psychological regression, but also the deterioration of the mother-son bond. The eventual extraction of the tooth by the prison dentist implies that

16 The entire premise of Il bambino di pietra: Una nervosi femminile is based on the elaboration of the symbolic significance of the child of stone. In this narrative, Bonanni focuses on the issue of childlessness, the other side of the maternal coin. The protagonist of the novel contemplates her decision to choose a literary career over motherhood: “L’irreducible paura della maternità? Rimozione? Avrò rimosso il bambino da cui ero ossessionata e traumatizzata? Il figlio rimasto inespresso come un feto calcificato? Questo il blocco che ho portato dentro: l’immaginario bambino di pietra?” (139).
Giuliano will ultimately heal. It is also an indication of the importance of society’s role in the rearing of a child. The enormous commitment of mothering should never be solely the responsibility of one unassisted person.\(^{17}\)

The tensions and anxiety Giulia experiences also affect her professional work as an elementary school teacher. She finds herself going to work as though on automatic pilot. She is unfocused and has trouble concentrating. The children in her classroom are quick to perceive the change in their teacher and understand instinctively that something is amiss. Giulia fears for the future of her young students. She understands that these children may be naive, but they are not entirely innocent. Their sexual curiosity is normal, as is their desire to experience and experiment with anything new. Indeed, prohibition inspires desire. Finding an effective means to stop them from experimenting with drugs and alcohol is daunting to Giulia. In the evenings, she retires to her private space in the hope that writing will provide a solution if not a release, but she cannot take her mind off the problem: “Passo la notte a scrivere per non pensarcì e finisco sempre a rigirarmi nella stessa spirale” (165).

Giulia’s apprehensions and preoccupations escalate to the point of physical manifestations of violence. The next chapter opens with a visit to her son in jail who immediately notices the scabs and healing wounds on her knees. Not wanting to alarm her son, she tells him that she fell. But the narrator reveals the details of the

\(^{17}\) Although Bonanni is most often concerned with the difficulties of mothering alone in a society that may not always recognize the particular needs of mothers, the theme of female solidarity is extended to all women and is documented in *Il bambino di pietra* when the protagonist states, “Non ho sensi materni. Quello che provo è solidarietà femminile e una sorta di ammirazione quasi intimidita” (166).
actual event a short time later. One day, running late for school, Giulia spots a
strange man conversing with a child in the deserted playground and realizes that he
is a drug dealer selling his poison to the child. Without hesitation, she impulsively
races toward the man, grabs him, and scratches his face, “con furia omicida. [Volevo]
accendarlo” (168). As he pulls himself away from her, she falls, but will not let go, and
is consequently dragged for a short distance. The perpetrator flees, and Giulia is left
with bleeding knees and torn stockings, barely able to walk. Only afterward did the
thought occur to her that she might have been mistaken, but she justifies her
actions. Whether or not he was a drug dealer, he was surely conducting
inappropriate business with the child.

Giulia’s concern for her son intensifies as she agonizes over the many
decisions that must be made in his regard. His dental health comes to mind again,
and she now considers more dental work to replace the extracted tooth. Again the
tooth is symbolic of her son’s psychological decay and her desire to make things
right. As a concerned mother, she knows how much more needs fixing and has no
illusions as to the difficulty of the task before her: “Non nutro illusioni, so quello che
mi aspetta” (170). Although she is filled with doubts, uncertainties, fears, and at
times experiences mild panic attacks, she is determined to save her son. Throughout
this ordeal, she never loses hope for his salvation: “Ma se è vero che se ne salva uno
su cento, quell’uno sarà il mio” (170). This has become her life mission as mother
and parent.

In the final pages of the narrative, Giulia is assailed by her fears and wonders
how she should proceed if her son returns to drugs. Perhaps she should restrict his
activities, search his room, and rifle through his clothing, looking for the now familiar signs of drug use. She understands that she must be vigilant and overcome these fears. Once again, Bonanni presents the underlying theme of fear as the prime motivator.

A phone call from Giuliano assuages Giulia’s anxiety. He has talked with his lawyer, and he does indeed want to return home, but not home to Rome—home to the family hovel at the seashore: “al mare, sicuro. Niente casa, niente città, niente macchina” (173). Giulia realizes that she is ready to leave it all—leave her house in Rome, her work at school, and even her aged husband. Giulio has become thin, sickly, and white-haired, and he has developed an unsteady gait. Nevertheless, she will provide for him. She will place him under the care of a governess: “La troverò qualche donna di mezza età, grassa, coi baffetti e le ascelle scure, che possa guardarla con piacere senile, ero tutta indulgenza per perdonarmi” (173).

Giulia and son will indeed return to the sea. Bonanni contrasts again the healthy country life with the unhealthy city life. Her earlier narratives take place in rural settings. The progression of settings from country to city does not occur until 1964 with the publication of *L’adultera*. The return to the purity and innocence of the country in *Le droghe* underscores Bonanni’s insistence on the beneficial aspects of nature. She ends her narrative with the same descriptions of flora and fauna that initiated Giulia’s voyage, among the ancient rocks, the huts facing the sea, the basil and parsley, the familiar odors of fresh fish, and the streets populated with women and children. Gone is the polluted and petrified city with its fast-paced life, the crowded streets, and the constant roar of traffic. Instead she sees a ray of hope for a

The narrative thus begins and ends with images of the sea, with its restorative and cleansing waters. Giulia imagines herself walking along the beaches and rocky crags with her son, with licorice stalks replacing the cigarette and the “fughe innocenti, inconsce” (174). They will walk and walk until they finally reach the pure and unadulterated sea, “fino al mare libero pulito” (174). Mother and son will begin a new life. Bonanni’s narrative ends with a promise of hope and assurance that some flights are necessary for survival. They will begin again. This mother’s dedication, her commitment and concern for her adopted son, and her relentless drive to succeed as mother give voice to Bonanni’s own commitment to the women and children of her native Italy.
CONCLUSION: BONANNI AND MOTHERHOOD: A FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE

In considering the works of Laudomia Bonanni, one is struck by the scarcity of scholarly studies on this writer. Indeed, much of the earlier scholarship consists of book reviews of her novels and short stories written in the mid-twentieth century. In recent years, a rise of interest in Laudomia Bonanni has occurred, and many fine critics, such as Alfredo Fiorani, Giorgio Bárberi Squarotti, and Gianfranco Giustizieri,¹ have revisited her literary production. The International Cultural Association—Laudomia Bonanni was established in 2005 to promote further studies on the writer. Bonanni is now beginning to receive the critical recognition she deserves.

Writing initially in the vein of nineteenth-century verismo, her keen and perceptive eye recorded the lives of her Abruzzi subjects. Indeed, she transcends the boundaries of what is traditionally considered verismo. In my investigation of her writing, I analyzed the themes regarding women—particularly their roles as mothers. A close textual reading of these texts revealed what I had hoped to find: Bonanni’s passionate interest in portraying women and their children, and the complex interactions between these subjects. These figures populate most of her works and are clearly at the center of her literary production. Motherhood was an experience denied to Bonanni, and her choice not to have children is one that she regretted all her life.

¹ For a complete bibliography, see Gianfranco Giustizieri, Laudomia: Scrittrice Senza Tempo, 205-20.
In her depiction of mothers, Bonanni was a visionary. Long before Adrienne Rich’s seminal study of motherhood as experience and institution, Bonanni had already noted this distinction. She wrote of mothers who dearly loved their children but who, at the same time, were trapped in an institution that oppressed them and silenced their voices. These women emerge in her work as paragons of strength. They are women who overcome adversity, women who are called upon not only to mother and care for their young, but also to take over when their weak or absent husbands fail to take action.

Throughout the texts I examined, men are almost always presented as the weakest characters. They are, for the most part, incompetent, rarely involved with childcare, at times absent, and frequently physically ill. Husbands and fathers are often tolerated and do not participate in an equal partnership with their wives. As a result of this lack of exchange with their male companions, the women look to each other for moral support. Once again, Bonanni anticipates another feminist notion, that of affidamento, or entrustment. Bonanni allows her women to speak by giving them a strong voice and, thus, a chance to be heard. Referred to as “le donne,” they remind the reader of the necessity of female bonding.

A comprehensive analysis of motherhood would not be possible without considering the children entrusted into women’s care. What stands out in Bonanni’s portrayal of the mother-child bond is her preference for the mother-son relationship. Her interest in this subject is another example of her ability to develop
important feminist themes. As Andrea O’Reilly points out, research in this neglected area is only now coming to the forefront of the critical debate.2

In recording the lives of her Abruzzi subjects, Bonanni exposed their misery, misfortune, and mistreatment. In so doing, she also gave voice to the two marginalized groups that occupied her thoughts throughout her literary career—women and children. My hope is that this study will encourage more scholarly research of the Bonannian opus, as her work represents a fascinating subject of analysis, both thematically and structurally.

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Laudomia Bonanni was born in 1907 in the town of L’Aquila. This almost-forgotten twentieth-century writer devoted her life to writing and to involvement with the youth of her native Abruzzi. In recent years, a resurging interest has occurred in this writer, whose merit is finally being recognized. In his seminal study of Bonanni, Gianfranco Giustizieri argues that Laudomia Bonanni is “una delle scrittrici più rappresentative del ‘900 letterario italiano” (9), thus placing her among the most notable Italian women writers of the twentieth century. The present research will help fill the lacuna of studies regarding this captivating writer.

Laudomia’s interest in books and reading began at an early age. In an interview with Sandra Petrignani, she claims that she learned to read when she was quite young, probably taught by her mother. She states, “chissà da dove mi veniva tutta quella passione!” (qtd. in Petrignani 60). Her passion for reading soon led to writing:

Fin dove arriva la mia memoria ho sempre scritto. Scrivevo da bambina.

Scrivevo, a quattordici anni, sul roverscio di bollettari, in un ufficio in cui stetti nei mesi delle vacanze. A diciassette, maestra con le trecce sulle spalle, in cima a una montagna, scrivevo su un banco di scuola dopo l’uscita dei bambini. (qtd. in Lombardi 7045)

Bonanni’s career as a writer began in 1925 when she published, at her parents’ expense, *Storie tragiche della montagna* (Lombardi 7045.) Much of her earlier works are labeled as children’s literature. In 1939 she had her first
encounter with Valentino Bompiani, with whom she maintained a long working relationship. Her more mature writing began with the publication of “Il fosso” in 1949. This story was awarded the Strega prize, “Amici della Domenica,” for a work by an unpublished author in 1948. Along with three others, this story was published in 1949 with the title *Il fosso* and was awarded the Bagutta prize in the same year (this was the first time the award was given to a woman). Another collection of short stories followed in 1954, with the title *Palma e sorelle* (it won the Soroptimist prize in 1955). With the publication of *L'imputata* (Bompiani 1960), awarded the Viareggio prize, and *L'adultera* (Bompiani 1964), awarded the Selezione Campiello prize, Bonanni established herself as a noted Italian writer.

In the years between 1964 and 1974, Bonanni remained silent on the literary scene. She later attributed these nonproductive years to “una nevrosi acutissima” (qtd. in Petrignani 63), which she survived with the assistance of medications and rest: “È stato un periodo orrendo, dovuto al superlavoro” (qtd. in Petrignani 63). Her first work after this long hiatus was *Vietato ai minori*, published by Bompiani in 1974, which deals with the problems of the misguided youth of contemporary society. It was awarded the Selezione Napoli prize, as well as several other prizes in 1975 (Lombardi, Milano 7065). This documentary work is followed by another collection of short stories entitled *Città del tabacco*, published by Bompiani in 1977.

The first novel written by Bonanni in the first-person narrative is *Il bambino di pietra: Una nervrosi femminile*, published by Bompiani in 1977. The last work she published was *Le droghe* (Bompiani 1982). Her final novel, *La rappresaglia*, was published posthumously by Textus in 2003. She lived her last years in Rome, where
she died in 2002 alone, forgotten by the literary establishment and no longer able to write.
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