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FANTASY IN THE DOMESTIC SPACE

by

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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In my dissertation, I intend to explore the domestic space in which women were segregated. The analysis of the representation of the domestic space will lead to a peculiar aspect of it: the definition of a fantastic space within the domestic space. The critical analysis will be restricted to Italian women writers between the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, no later than the immediate aftermath of WWI. This project will be divided into three chapters.

In the first Chapter I give a general introduction to women's situation right after the Unification of Italy (1861) addressing particularly the necessity to kill the image of the Angel of the House. After this general introduction, I discuss the theoretical approaches that I use during my analysis of the literary texts. Butler's theory on performative gender and Cixous's idea of stolen bodies will help me to demonstrate the necessity for women to participate in the process of doing and undoing their own selves to start the re-appropriation of their own bodies stolen by the patriarchal system. In addition to that I also address De Certeau and Bachelard's sociological approaches.

In the second chapter I start the analysis of the fantastic space with what I define as *fantasma*, which is the space that women create within the domestic walls in order to survive the domestic tyranny. Through the literary works of Contessa Lara, Marchesa Colombi, Matilde Serao, and Neera, I argue that the fantastic space, and not the house, is the intimate space for women where they experience life and their real selves. The *fantasma* becomes the tactic to deal with the house that represents the strategy ruled by the patriarchy.

In the third chapter, I continue my analysis of the fantastic space through the narratives of Maria Messina and Sibilla Aleramo, showing how the *fantasma* slowly becomes a more defined space in the first two decades of the 20th century, even though women were still subdued by male power.

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INTRODUCTION

The intent of this dissertation started when I read for the first time one of Virginia Woolf's most famous books, *A Room of One's Own*, on my flight back to the United States after winter break. In conjunction with what I studied in a seminar on Italian Women Writers I developed a serious interest in exploring the situation for women within the domestic walls right after the Unification of Italy, 1861, until the first two decades of the 20th century. I felt that Woolf's book, published in 1929, was a good starting point for my analysis. While I was reading the novels I analyzed in this dissertation, I narrowed down the focus of my research to the specific space that female characters create within the domestic walls in order to survive the constructed rules imposed on them by the patriarchal system. Right after the Unification of Italy, women were segregated within the house and obligated to play the role of the "Angel of the House" devoted to take care of their families. The male tyranny of Italian society and consequently the surrogated domestic world were imprisoning women's bodies obligating them to perform a role that was prescribed for them. The discontent of this secluded life developed the need of denouncing it in novels written by female writers. In my investigation I show how this indictment increases and changes over the years in order for women in the second half of the 20th century to achieve independence, in terms of money and space, which Woolf held as fundamental for women's autonomy.

In the novels I analyze, women were not only lacking financial independence but more importantly they were lacking a private space for themselves within a space that was designated to them by the male-dominated system. This lack of space encourages

these female characters portrayed in these novels to create their own fantastic space within the domestic walls. I identify this space with the Italian word *fantasma* based on its etymological meaning, which harkens back to the Greek verb *phantazo* (φαντάζω) meaning “to appear”. The *fantasma* therefore defines the fantastic space created by women that secretly takes shape within the house. This space is not a reminiscence of the past but a parallel fantastic world where they can briefly be themselves pausing from performing their gender role. Trapped in married life, itself seen as the only way to leave the paternal house and the only sign of having gained one's freedom, women conceived a *fantasma* as a *tactic* to cope with the *strategy* implemented by the patriarchal system. The *fantasma* is their parallel world, where their real selves can finally have visibility. In these fantastic spaces women can freely daydream of the life they would like to have: through these daydreams they are able to denounce their discontent for their being made invisible by the patriarchal system. The *fantasma*, not the house, paradoxically becomes the place that shelters women and, consequently, their dreams. The daydream becomes a tool by which they survive, avoiding madness and extreme gestures such as suicide. Within the fantastic space, represented in their novels women writers can stop thinking of “the other” and start the process towards the necessary step of undoing their social selves in order to build up their own selves. This constant female battle, as Butler later on will define it, accompanies the women protagonists in all of the novels I investigate.

The house, therefore, is far from representing the nest that protects women; rather, it is more a *maison sale*, to use Duras' words, where women have to abandon their real selves and live for “others”. In addition to neglecting their real selves, women are exposed to physical and psychological oppression by men, who not only force upon

women a specific role, but also try to suffocate their desires and aspirations so as to not lose control over them. The instrumentalization of women deprives them of the possibility of being in charge of their own bodies and expresses the patriarchal system's fear of losing control over them. In recent years Italian society has been experiencing a resurgence of male domination facing the various cases of domestic violence which leads to the tragic events of *femminicidio*. This horrific phenomenon clearly reveals the incapability of the male world to deal with female emancipation¹.

I approach the analysis of the *fantasma* mainly using De Certeau's theory of *tactics* versus *strategy*. This *tactic* allows women to counterpoise the *here* in which they have to live with the *there* which is their own fantastic space. Through *fantasma* women are capable of letting their imagination free relaying on the irrational side of the human being as explained by Bachelard. The daydreams created by the irrational part in a different space become fundamental for them to survive the domestic tyranny. The *rêverie* within their *fantasma* is an important tool for women to start to denounce their imprisonment and invisibility in Italian society.

This approach is also supported by the feminist theory of Cixous which allows me to assert that in the domestic detention the patriarchal system effectively steals women's bodies, freezing them in a static role which prevents them from moving within the house and society. From here stems the need for the re-appropriation of their own bodies by breaking the mold imposed on their gender. This section of my discussion will be

¹ The topic of the *femminicidio* is not discussed in this dissertation work even though I believe these novels are useful to understand the development of the social discomfort the male society has in regards to the female emancipation of present day Italy. On this topic see Dandini, Serena. *Ferite e morte* (2013) and La 27 ora. *Questo non è amore. Venti storie raccontano la violenza domestica* (2013).

supported by Butler's theory on gender as a social construction and consequently on the necessity that women be part of the battle of doing and undoing their own selves.

During the textual analysis of the *fantasma* another aspect comes to light: the debates on emancipation among Italian women writers. Some of these writers such as Neera and Matilde Serao will take a strong position against emancipation openly affirming their disapproval of the emancipation of women. Notwithstanding the position they take in public debates, their novels seem to state the contrary. In my opinion the anti-emancipation position of these authors is a strategy to be able to take action in the Italian society without risking being ostracized by the patriarchal system and the cultural industry.

Finally, my investigation of the *fantasma* will provide a way to read and analyze women's own space within the house and consequently within society. The fantastic space will show the traces that women slowly and silently start to leave within the domestic walls.

The *fantasma* in the literary works of Contessa Lara, Marchesa Colombi, Matilde Serao, and Neera.

After the historical and theoretical introduction of the first chapter, the second chapter is dedicated to the analysis of the *fantasma* in the novels written in the second half of the 19th century after the Unification of Italy (1861). I investigate the fantastic space within the domestic walls in four different authors who were very prolific in the Italian literary context at the time.

The first author analyzed is Evelina Cattermole, better known as Contessa Lara. The novels I examine are *L'Innamorata* and *Il romanzo della bambola*, respectively written in 1895 and 1896. In both novels clearly emerges the duality between reality and fantasy, represented by the space of the house dominated by the patriarchal system and the fantastic space created by women to survive this tyranny. Even though *Il romanzo della bambola* was written a year after *L'innamorata* I start my analysis with the former since, as Arslan wrote, this is a sort of will of the author and, I would add, a clear representation of how women were defined by men during the Risorgimento. In the novel the female protagonist is a doll, Giulia, that after being purchased by a rich man for his spoiled daughter and having briefly lived a luxurious life, is abandoned and thus starts a long life journey. During this journey Giulia, the doll, had to create several fantastic spaces to be able to survive the brutality of the patriarchal system disguised in different ways. I retrace all the spaces that Giulia inhabits within the domestic walls and underline how these fantastic spaces will ultimately create a resilient character. A luxurious house represents the first domestic space. The happy nest, which at the beginning protects the doll, soon becomes her prison since she is first left alone on a chair and then in a dark wardrobe. It is the capability of creating her own *fantasma* that allows Giulia to survive. In this daydreaming state she recalls the *bei tempi* with her owner Mariuccia, and this parallel world puts her in a different time and space so that she can cope with a later despotic decision by Mariuccia, who represents the male dominated world. The second domestic space is Camilla's modest bedroom. In this secluded space where she lives with the young girl "like a nun in a cell", Giulia's daydreams are mainly reflections on the similarities between her life and Camilla's. In her daydreams Giulia feels compelled to

help Camilla to be happy, and this allows them both to accept their own sad reality. After Camilla's premature death, the doll is purchased by a scavenger and ultimately abandoned in a dirty attic. In the attic Giulia's *fantasma* allows her to see the positive side of her life realizing that she was deprived of futile and materialistic things in return for affection represented in the attic by the puppet Orlando. The last space she inhabits is the country house where she also ends her journey. Contessa Lara's novel is very innovative since represents the static position of women within the society through the metaphor of a doll. Women's bodies and lives are owned by the patriarchal system, and only the *fantasma* allows them to survive and to bear the brutality of life. Giulia's daydreams are reflections of her life, and these reflections are intended to save her.

In the novel *L'Innamorata* I analyze the two different domestic spaces inhabited by Leona and the two different representations of the *fantasma*. The first one is the house in Naples where Leona in order to cope with the despotic behavior of her lover creates her own space within the house through her music. While she sings and plays the piano she can live in a parallel world where she can be herself and recall the memories of her life in Spain and her working life in the circus. In her fantastic space Leona feels accepted and forgets all her sorrows. The second domestic space is the house in Rome where Leona, after several vicissitudes, reunites with her lover. The path seems to be the same, only this time Leona does not create her fantastic space through her music but she counterpoises to the domestic prison the fantasy of the happy nest which exists only in her mind. Leona allows her imagination, her irrational self, to create this world to continue to perform a role that the society imposes upon women in an effort to justify male behavior.

The second author that I investigate is Marchesa Colombi focusing on her novel *Un matrimonio in provincia* written in 1887. In the novel the female protagonist gives a perfect example of the creation of the fantastic space within the paternal house. Denza's *fantasma* is a tool for the young woman to escape the everyday life which she describes as "monotonous" and an "immense boredom". In this fantastic parallel world Denza also lives the fantasy of a fictitious love story with a clumsy and overweight young man. I argue that even though Denza's daydreams are important for her to cope with an apathetic life, they also express the desire of the young woman to have a more exciting and lively life. The *fantasma* will give Denza a real sense of mastery and will allow her to look at herself and become a different person. Denza will live in this parallel world for ten years. Within the domestic world she needs to perform according to the rules that the society imposes on her, but in her fantastic space she is gradually able to experience life, understand herself and her desires. In the fantastic world she performs herself.

The third author I investigate in this chapter is Matilde Serao, and analyzing her short story *La virtù di Checchina*, written in 1883. As was the case for Denza, the female protagonist Checchina, a very meek woman, creates her *fantasma* in order to escape the black reality of the house imposed by her dominating husband. Checchina's house is described as a cold, glacial and dusty space which resembles the life of the female protagonist. The fantastic dimension is once again instrumental in denouncing the discontent of the young woman and the necessity that something has to change *in* and *from* the house. The visit of Marchese d'Aragona starts to feed Checchina's fantastic world. Fantasizing of a possible romantic relationship with the aristocratic man, Checchina puts herself in a different time and space, acquiring an *aria trasognata*. In this

space she can experience emotions and discover her desires. The fantastic realm allows Checchina to feel powerful and to take action contrary to her real life where she is weak and immobile. The *fantasma* is the only place where she can live and leave her traces.

The last two novels I examine are Neera's *Teresa* and *L'indomani*. In the first novel, written in 1886, I focus primarily on the fantastic space which the protagonist, Teresina, inhabits within the domestic walls of the paternal house. While Teresina will sacrifice her whole life for "the other", and her *fantasma*, (which appears only when she has breaks from the house duties) will allow her to grow and to partially experience life. Teresina's fantastic space is a *fantasma agitato* that reflects the desire of a young girl to understand the secret of life. For Teresina the *fantasma* is the place where her real "I" comes out and helps her to survive a life full of sacrifices. At the end of the narrative after her father dies, the parallel world will empower her, and she will find the courage to leave her hometown and to follow her desires. Neera's protagonist shows a woman of her time who lives considering the otherness, setting herself aside but is saved by her daydreams and her parallel world.

L'Indomani (1889) focuses on Marta's life as a bourgeoisie woman who experiences the unhappiness of her marriage. Marta uses the parallel world to escape her life's routine and, more so, to understand life while seeking happiness. What is curious about this novel is that towards the end Marta's representation of the *fantasma* brings about two different reactions from the young woman. First, after being disappointed in her search for happiness and love she rejects the illusion of the parallel fantastic world. Then, after the rejection, Marta finds shelter in it again refusing to stop seeking both love and happiness.

The representation of the *fantasma* at the beginning of the 20th century in the literary works of Maria Messina and Sibilla Aleramo.

In the last chapter I investigate how the representation of the *fantasma* and consequently the situation for women changed within Italian society at the dawn of the following century. Even though women seem to still be segregated within the domestic walls and destined to the role of the “Angel of the House”, it is possible to see a transformation in the novels that I investigate. The first noticeable change is connected to the different positions that Maria Messina and Aleramo take towards the female situation. Through her description of the secluded and antiquated Sicilian society, Maria Messina is not afraid to denounce a reality that needs to be changed. The author narrates the discontent and the frustration of women within the domestic walls and even openly blames the despotic behavior of the men within the house. In her narratives, domestic violence clearly surfaces in the love triangle of *The House in the Shadow* and the rejection of an unconventional daughter by her family in *Her Father's House*. Sibilla Aleramo's *A Woman*, is a sort of manifesto of feminism within Italian society and a very innovative work which for the first time presents a woman closely linked to the author herself, taking action against the male dominated world and calling for the necessity of a secular sisterhood.

Within these novels the representation of the *fantasma* has the same function I have already detected: the necessity that women escape the sad reality of the domestic walls and have a space where they can be in charge of their own selves and lives. In their fantastic world women express fears, desires, reflections on life, and they feel free from the obligations imposed by the patriarchy. In Messina's novel *A House in the Shadow* the

protagonist, Nicolina, in her daydreams seems to reflect mainly on her deprived life and on how this life could have been if she had had a chance to live it differently without being imprisoned in her brother-in-law's house. Since Nicolina's life was stolen by the tyranny of Don Lucio, it is in this space that she tries to experience what life could be and to understand its secrets.

Conversely, in the short story *Her Father's House* the female protagonist Vanna tries to take action against the closed Sicilian mentality by abandoning her husband and her secluded life in Rome. During her stay at her father's house she feels her relatives' rejection, and after being isolated she only has her fantastic world in which to recover. In this space her thoughts are simple reflections on her life while she is looking at the familiar nature of her childhood. In this novel the *fantasma* starts to be delineated as a more tangible space within the domestic walls. Even though Messina is far from giving her female characters their own room, their daydream moments happen in a clearly-identified space: on the balcony. This space is the place where both Nicolina and Vanna can peacefully daydream even if for a few minutes. The fantastic space becomes, in a way, clearer and less abstract compared to the writers of the previous century. The balcony, a place between public and private, is the site where women can experience life through fantasy while still receiving a partial view of real life. While on the one hand the *fantasma*, created on the balcony, will save Nicolina, thus giving her hope of a change for the new generation, on the other hand it will kill Vanna. After experiencing the peacefulness of it, Vanna refuses to go back to her married life in Rome by giving her body to the Mediterranean Sea.

The main transformation in terms of acquiring a proper space within the domestic walls is represented in Sibilla Aleramo's novel *A Woman*. First of all, the novel talks from the perspective of a female character more sophisticated and with a different life experience. For this reason her daydreams are deeper reflections on life which tackle the main themes of emancipation developed later on by the feminist movement. Her *fantasma* is fed by books which she can freely read. This fantastic space allows her to bear the monotonous and despotic married life created by her husband. In this novel Aleramo is able to take action first by killing the concept of the "Angel of the House", since she will abandon the domestic life, and then she will acquire within the domestic walls her own study room, a place usually reserved only to men. Her *fantasma* appears in a room where she lets it arise whenever she needs it.

The representation of male characters in the novels.

In my investigation of the *fantasma* analysis in these novels another aspect merits critical analysis: the representation of male characters through the pens of women writers. The depictions of male characters can be divided into two main groups. The first group includes the ones with cruel and rational personalities, and the second one is filled by men with weak personalities. These two subgroups are gathered into one main group with a common characteristic: selfishness. The interesting thing to notice is that the second group dominates the first group since, in my opinion, only Don Lucio, in *The House in the Shadow*, and Vanna's husband, in *Her Father's House* have the cruel aspect of the patriarchal system. The two men rationally plan their lives and without any emotions

continue to impose their wills putting themselves over each member of the family. This behavior is very damaging in psychological terms for the female characters, to the point that that Don Lucio's wife will become crazy and Vanna will kill herself. Also, In Aleramo's novel, both, Sibilla and her mother try to commit suicide to escape their reality. The rest of the male characters are represented in the novels, despite their selfishness, as victims of their own male dominated world. Much like the female characters they also have to perform the role assigned to their gender. Their incapability to fully perform it well makes them very often violent physically and psychologically. The main examples of these men are Paolo Cappello in *L'Innamorata* and Sibilla's Husband in *A Woman*. All of these men are, however, led by the selfishness of not having to share their control of the world with women and consequently their visibility within the society.

First Chapter: Representation of Domestic Space

I.1 The woman within the society: a historical account.

It was 1931 when Virginia Woolf was called to give a speech on her professional experience to the Women's Service League². This work is particularly interesting because it highlights a peculiar aspect of women's life: the image of the Angel of the House. After publicly admitting, in 1928, that in order to write women need a room for themselves and economic independence³, Woolf was now denouncing the necessity for women to kill the phantom with whom they had to constantly deal in their lives. In other words they had to kill the image of the Angel of the House and what that image meant. This killing, according to Woolf, has to be a very strong gesture since it is much more difficult to kill a phantom than a reality. This fictitious alter ego, imposed on women by the patriarchal system, reduces the woman to a Vestal Virgin, a mere priestess of the domestic space. What does it mean exactly to be a "priestess of the domestic space"? Katherine Blunden claims that enshrining this image within the domestic space allows men to feel safe against the brutalities of the world. The priestess keeps away any sort of disgrace from the house, she is the Queen of the house, always ready to comfort her male companion and his offspring with her smile. Her reassuring and submissive smile is the best piece of

² Virginia Woolf's essay "The Profession for Women" came out two years after the publication of *A Room of One's Own*. This essay reinforces what Woolf stated in her previous book since the author expresses the necessity of killing the pernicious image of the Angel of the House. Woolf admits that she had to go through this process to be able to write. The Angel of the House is pure, caring, altruistic, sympathetic, incredibly charming, and unselfish: she needs to be killed. Her death allows the women writers to be free and to produce their work abandoning this alter ego who constantly reminds them of the submissive role of women in the patriarchal society.

³ In 1928 Virginia Woolf was invited to give several lectures at Cambridge University. These lectures were published in a book in 1929. In this work Woolf addresses the problem of women for centuries being less prolific than men in literature. The book is a reflection of this problem and Woolf does not try to offer a solution, but her intent is to incite her audience to think about it. For her the answer is very simple: in order to write women need money and a room for themselves where they can be alone.

furniture in the house. The Angel has to be segregated within the house so that she is not exposed to the malice of the world⁴.

John Ruskin clearly thinks that women and men have a different nature and a different role in society. In his lecture *Lilies of Queens Gardens*⁵ Ruskin states that women were made to be helpmates of men: he relegates women immediately to an inferior position, since he implicitly states that woman was created to complete man. The main characteristics that a woman has, according to Ruskin, are patience and wisdom. Women always have to be “faithful and wise counselors” and provide an “incorruptible and pure example”. Ruskin’s idea enforces the general notion of the time that a woman has to be the Angel of the House. In his lecture Ruskin seems to praise the female figure depicting her as a mate by whom a man can be heartened. In reality she does not really have any independence as a human being; she is just an instrument to console men in the domestic space.

The exploitation of women and their being at the mercy of men are also discussed by the American sociologist Thorstein Veblen. In his *Theory of the Leisure Class*⁶ (1899) Veblen asserts that for men the social symbol of power is associated with the possession of free time. A successful man makes other people work for him while he looks over all his assets as master. After a detailed explanation of his theory, Veblen lingers over the role of women, expounding a misogynistic perspective. He believes that the power of the master first started with the “ownership of persons, primarily women.” In this way, the

⁴ In this book Blunden gives an accurate historical account of the pain that women had to face for centuries. She addresses the profound laceration between their image and their reality.

⁵ On the Risorgimento see also: Riall, Lucy. *The Italian Risorgimento: State, Society and National Unification*. (1996); Rusconi, Gian Enrico. *Se cessassimo di essere una nazione*. (1993); Gentile, Giovanni. *Rosmini e Gioberti, saggio storico sulla filosofia Italiana del Risorgimento* (1958); Ravera, Camilla. *La donna italiana dal primo al secondo Risorgimento*. (1951); Gerratana, Valentino. *Il Risorgimento*. (1949); Croce, Benedetto. *Storia della storiografia Italiana del secolo XIX*. (1921); Franceschini-Ferrucci, Caterina. *Dell’educazione morale della donna italiana*. (1847).

⁶ The theory of the American sociologist and economist Thorstein Veblen is based on the concept that the economic power within society is driven by the social stratification of tribal society and not on social and economic utility. This is the reason why in contemporary society there are some consequences like the subjugation of women. Today the subjugation of women is viewed through the concept of the trophy housewife.

master can first demonstrate his ability to dominate and then his bravery to own other human beings while receiving praise for the use-value that these people as his possessions bestow upon him. Veblen compares women to slaves, because they are the master's property and they both confirm his wealth and provide a means to accrue wealth." Furthermore, he compares women to common slaves used for doing housework, and he then specifies that some of these women may be exempted from some of their duties once when they are married off. A wife is no longer merely part of the industrial process, a simple "employee" or a common slave of the master, but she is the last fundamental piece that completes his perfect life. A wife, in addition to her important role of completing the masters' life, is also the last demonstration of his power since she will always be her husband's chattel. Veblen's theory reinforces the idea that men and women are different by nature: this difference translates into the superiority of men, the stronger sex, over women. At the very end of the 19th century Veblen follows the pattern of his intellectual ancestors. The idea of the superiority of man, simply acquired by nature, has been asserted by male authors since the classical period. In the *Republic*, for instance, Plato creates a dialogue for Socrates staged in an imaginary period. Socrates and his opponent hold contrasting views; while Socrates claims that the physical difference between the two sexes does not preclude the possibility that women are equally capable in several fields, his interlocutor strongly argues that men and women are completely different by nature and for this reason they should have different duties in society. Through the words of Socrates, one can see an open position toward women, but his voice is unusual in the light of the chauvinist mentality leading the ancient Hellenistic society. The sexist opinion is stronger in Aristotle's *Politics* where the Greek author asserts that women are alive only to perpetuate the human species. The mentality of the Classic Age continues throughout the centuries and reinforces the idea of women's complete submission. In the 12th and 13th centuries the strong power of the Church depicted woman as more prone to create disorder because of her weakness and vulnerable

character. Woman was also seen as a bearer of sin, in particular for her beauty and her sensuality. These aspects of womanhood intimidated man since he was incapable of controlling gender conflicts. Throughout the centuries the intentional subjection of women clearly was a defense designed to protect men from their lack of self-confidence.

In his explanation of the eight stages of life, Erik Erickson states that the very first social crisis that a human being faces in his first years of life is the basic concept of trust versus mistrust while trying to answer the question: Can I trust the world? This stage is vital for a child to develop a genuine sense of trust. Erikson asserts that a parent's failure to communicate trust leads the child to experience mistrust, and this will influence his life and his future behavior⁷. The silent and submissive mother created by the Risorgimento's new mentality certainly did not help to develop trust in the child. Within the domestic walls the male child not only bore witness to the submission and the discontent of the mother but also experienced the despotic behavior of the father. The situation can render a man incapable of following the expectations of the patriarchal society and performing his gender role. In her novel *A House in the Shadows* Maria Messina gives us an example of this sense of mistrust created within the house and the incapability of the male character, Pietro, to keep up with the authoritarian figure of the father. In the novel Pietro is described as a very sensitive and smart young boy who is heavily affected by the family's complicated situation between his mother, his aunt, and his father. After all the family's vicissitudes, he still loves his mother and his aunt, but he cannot tolerate his relationship with his cold and despotic father who does not understand him and wants for him a life contrary to his own desires. For this reason Pietro will one day leave the house to visit a friend and he will take his own life with a gun. Here the situation is overturned. In most of the novels written by women between the 19th and 20th centuries, we see that

⁷ On the dynamic within the family in the 19th and 20th centuries see: De Donato, Gigliola. *La parabola della donna nella letteratura dell'Ottocento*. (1983); Jolanda, *Consigli e norme di vita femminile contemporanea*. (1909).

the female character may sometimes commit suicide, but this time the inner malaise is expressed by the fragile male character. Pietro abhors the fact that he won't be able to be himself in his future life and does not have the strength to stand against his prefabricated life. Pietro has experienced a sense of mistrust in the family due to the complicated situation created within the house by the father's presence and the love triangle between the mother, the aunt, and the father. This example showcases the weak characters of men and how male superiority is really a disguise of their insecurities.

Conversely, the frustrated mother's figure is harmful not only to the male child but especially to the female child. The mother's sense of sadness and dissatisfaction within the family works as a negative influence and, while in the male child it develops an unpredictable behavior towards women, in the female child it provokes a repressive anger and an inability to rebel. This incapability to rebel often leads to extreme consequences, such as suicide. The main problem is therefore a social-construct that prevents people from becoming whom they really aspire to be. This dynamic creates an insecurity mechanism in man and makes him incapable of accepting the fact that his physical strength does not make him superior to a woman. The idea that man bears certain connotations of courage, a sense of adventure, and command while woman brings to mind ideas of vulnerability, emotion, and submission, is still in part alive today as Raffaella Rumiati asserts⁸. Rumiati maintains that these connotations are acquired by the child during her development and by the age of ten these stereotypes are so ingrained and pronounced in the child that they already resemble their final versions as portrayed by adults. Although it is assumed that men and women have physical differences due to genetic attributes, it was however demonstrated at the beginning of the 21st century and is now finally commonly accepted, that men and women have the same intellectual abilities.

⁸ In *Donne e uomini (Women and Men)* Raffaella Rumiati wonders what makes the difference between men and women; her specific question is based on the question whether it is just a genetic difference dictated by nature or if there is also a cultural aspect to it. In addition to Beauvoir and Butler see also: Tietjens Meyers, Diana. *Gender in the mirror: Cultural Imagery & Women's Agency*. (2002); Fausto-Streling, Anne. *Myths of Gender: Biological theory about men and women*. (1992).

This concept was very well expressed by Judith Butler who made a clear distinction between sex and gender. In her first book, *Gender Troubles*, Butler claims that while human beings are born with sexual differences, due to their different genetic attributes, they are restricted to live socially constructed gender categories. Gender is viewed by Butler as a persistent impersonation according to which we play a well-defined role in society. This role is unanimously considered as real.⁹ It is clear at this point that human beings, born with different sexes, are imprisoned in defined categories that compel them to perform constructed gendered roles. Society is firmly attached to these imposed categories so much so that it declares dangerous and refuses everything that crosses them. There is no space in society for something that diverges from the common rules. For this reason a woman has to act within the prescribed categories articulated by the time, and this is especially true within the Italian context which I am investigating.

At this point it is also possible to better understand what Simon De Beauvoir stated in 1949: one is not born a woman, but rather becomes a woman. This point is crucial. Society tends to define what a woman is from a very young age and in her development, the young girl just follows the prefabricated pattern established for her. In *The Second Sex* De Beauvoir examines the difference between a young boy and a young girl, and she firmly asserts that even if the young boy dreams of a woman as a life companion, the woman will be for him an object of desire yet she will certainly not be an essential part of his destiny. However, the young girl sees the young boy as an escape, a person that can make her happy and liberate her. She sees him as superior and she consents to become his vassal. She learns early how to be compliant with the rules of society. In order to be accepted, a woman has to be resigned to what society has established for her. Society limits her intellectual ability, preventing her from having a

⁹ Judith Butler was the first scholar that deeply analyzed the question of difference between gender and sex. Her work is fundamental within this debate and she clearly states that it is gender that forces on the individual certain norms. Butler also affirms that these norms can be dangerous for an individual there where the individual cannot stay within the norms. This is the case, for example, of homosexual and transgender people that do resemble those norms and for this reason are rejected by and from society.

scholastic education, and it imprisons her with certain customs that do not give her independence. She has to internalize all of these characteristics in order to get married, her true and final goal. A woman who does not resemble this model is marginalized since she is a danger for society; she will frighten men. In this social construction there is no room for intelligent women with a strong character.¹⁰ The gender in which a woman becomes a woman is about doing, is about becoming, is about acting, as Butler said. The norms that constitute gender are also responsible for doing and undoing the woman because while she is a young girl she is simultaneously building herself according to those norms and undoing herself by blocking that part of her which is rejected by the society's norms. The relationship with the *other* becomes crucial, yet the *other* makes matters difficult. A woman has to undergo this struggle, since her process of doing and undoing is a constant battle.¹¹ Her life is characterized by trying to know her real self and at the same time to suffocate it; she has to fight against social norms, particularly, as we shall see, at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century.

Even if studies on the brain's development demonstrate an intellectual equality between men and women, the authoritarian mentality of the patriarchal society, where the male literary author generates with his pen the rules of the world just as he does in real life, controls women's world and gives birth to a forced submission¹². The "second sex"

¹⁰ Simone de Beauvoir in the *Second Sex* dedicates a chapter to "The Formative Years of a Woman". She retraces the story of a woman from childhood to adulthood. It is in this chapter that she affirms that "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman". De Beauvoir writes that only the interaction with another individual defines that individual itself as an *Other*. She anticipates Butler's theory which states that it is society that constructs the difference between boys and girls.

¹¹ In her book *Undoing Gender* Judith Butler deals with the topic of gender from a different perspective, exploring a way to undo the restrictive norms of society that are the cause of women's undoing. As human beings, a woman is subdued to a constant process of doing and undoing whom she is in order to find her real self. Butler affirms that gender norms are performative and the subject is in fact obligated to act. However, this performance is temporary, as Butler writes, and "it is opened to a displacement and subversion from within". For this reason the gender norms are a "social power" imposed on women by the male tyranny.

¹² Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar deal with the concept of the authority of man in literature in the essay "The Queen's Looking Glass" in *The Madwoman in the Attic*. They open the essay arguing against what the English poet Gerard Manley Hopkins says in a letter to his friend that the main quality of an artist, "masterly execution", is a characteristic of men that women cannot have. For this reason it seems for a long time the patriarchal society ruled over the literary world. Man was the father, the progenitor, and a

was trained, since birth, to deal and live with the idea of being inferior human beings, designed to please men. Mary Wollstonecraft agrees on the control the patriarchal society has over women as she writes: “Women are told from their infancy, and taught by the example of their mothers, that a little knowledge of human weakness, justly termed cunning, softness of temper, *outward* obedience, and a scrupulous attention to a puerile kind of propriety, will obtain for them the protection of man; and should they be beautiful, anything else is needless, for, at least, twenty years of their lives.”¹³ Women have to be obedient and good looking so that they might secure a good marriage, to become their husbands’ property and to follow them. They have no other possibilities in society; they can either be married or unmarried with only one destiny: to be miserable in both situations. In the words of Wollstonecraft we also see that, besides the physical aspect and in conjunction to be obedient, women must in a way learn how to perform the role of being weak. Even if they strongly support their husbands, live their miserable lives with resilience, and their husbands feel safe and comfortable within the house, women have to pretend to be the ones who need to be protected by men. Grazia Livi makes a similar remark in the 20th century admitting that the main characteristic for a woman has to be “docility”. A woman, she says, has to be there for everyone, she cannot and does not own her body but she has to stand there waiting for a male who will conquer her so that she will become his property. During her life a woman is trained to develop within herself a certain malleability of her soul. She is trained to be ready to accept an

procreator and the pen was a source of power, as Gilbert and Guber point out. This created for a long time a sort of anxiety in women when “attempting the pen” since those of them who tried were considered presumptuous because of their lack of “artistic gifts”.

¹³ In *The Vindication of the Rights of Women* Wollstonecraft argues against the mentality of the 18th century where women were considered incapable of thinking rationally because of their fragile nature and their susceptibility. Wollstonecraft believes that women should be educated rationally in order to contribute and to have a voice in society. She fights against Rousseau’s idea that woman had to be educated for the pleasure of man. It is important to mention this book to understand how the debate on women’s rights started earlier in other countries, such as England, compared to Italy where we started to have traces in literature of women’s voices only at the end of the 19th century.

enemy who will subdue her¹⁴. I think here the word *enemy* must be interpreted by its purely etymological meaning of being hostile or unfriendly to someone: in this case a woman within her own house. A woman is rarely capable of fighting this enemy because the rebellion against him would imply isolation, since women who rebel against the social norms are considered “different”. Male society rejects this “being different” because the patriarchal system does not want to lose its control over women.

In the 19th century in the Italian context, this idea is supported by the new mentality of the Italian Risorgimento, as Lucia Re asserts.¹⁵ The new bourgeois mentality seeks to redefine what a woman or a man is, confining the woman to the closed space of the house. Lucia Re correctly states that “The new Italy’s juridical discrimination against women was in fact based effectively on the notion of the different nature of women and men which is so eloquently phrased by Rosmini.” The notion that Rosmini articulates in his book *Philosophy of Rights* seems to be very close to what John Ruskin asserts on the same topic. Ruskin openly states that once a woman gets married, she switches from her father’s oversight and control to her husband’s protection, such that a woman in reality is nothing more than a piece of property or merchandise of exchange subdued first by her father’s then by her husband’s volition. Re observes through Rosmini’s theory that the two sexes are meant to complete each other through marriage. While women bring sentiment and feeling to this union, men bring rationality and intellect. This statement aims at reinforcing the controlling power of the patriarchal system and denouncing the inferior and unstable nature of women. The inferior gender needs to be led by the stronger one and to be restricted within the house so that it cannot be a threat to male

¹⁴ Grazia Livi in *Da una stanza all'altra* evokes Virginia Woolf’s concept of the lack for women to have a room of their own. She starts analyzing paintings that depict women. She notices that women don’t have a space that belongs to them even in the background of the painting. They are portrayed at any time of the day and if there is a door behind her, it is always open. They need to isolate themselves from the rest of the family but they cannot do it. A woman, Livi affirms, had to leave her soul opened so that everyone can have access to it.

¹⁵ See “Passion and sexual difference: The Risorgimento and the Gendering of Writing in Nineteenth-Century Italian Culture” in *Making and Remaking Italy*. (2001).

power. It is clear once again that in Italy as well as in other European countries, the patriarchal system feared its inability to control female ability and willpower, hence it considered it necessary to aggressively dominate women.

At this point of my analysis it is evident that bourgeois women were bound to live only in the domestic space at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century. This space was the only one where they were allowed to live but paradoxically it wasn't really their space, as nothing seemed to belong to them. What women were missing was a "private space" even if they had to live their lives in private. I think it is necessary to reflect on what the word "private" means. If we go back to the etymology of the word, the Latin language shows us that the word "private" derives from the verb *privare* and it was in opposition with the adjective *publicus*. The verb *privare* tells us that there is a separation between what belongs to the public sphere and what belongs to the intimate sphere such as the domestic space. The word itself obviously takes a different meaning during the course of the centuries, but particularly in the 20th century the meaning of private space is connected to the house which is a shelter for men to feel safe. In the 19th and 20th centuries the house starts to take on the meaning that is assigned to the word today. Architecture now takes an important place not only in defining the exterior design of buildings, but also in fashioning the interior, reflecting the new mentality of the Risorgimento. According to Gisella Bassani the bourgeoisie desires to establish order within the domestic space and to eliminate the disorder and promiscuity of previous centuries.¹⁶ As the defender of this nest a woman needs to learn how to keep everything in order and how to take care of her family. It is clear that with the term *private* we

¹⁶ In *Tracce silenziose dell'abitare. La donna e la casa* Gisella Bassani differentiates between *spazio ordinato* and *spazio disordinato*. With *spazio disordinato* (disorganized space) she defines a small space open to an extended number of people. In this kind of space everything is mixed up: private and public, men and women. The secrets of private life are shared with everybody else in the *spazio disordinato* and lived by the community within the house. On the other hand the *spazio ordinato* (organized space) is a space where each room has its own specific role. This last one she states is the bourgeois house. The intent of the 19th century is to put order where there was only disorder to eliminate the promiscuity of the *spazio disordinato*.

identify a space that is restricted and not open to everyone. The housewife is elected the queen of this space and for this reason the 19th century thus produces several manuals dedicated to teaching women how to become good wives and good housewives. These manuals aim to give advice on how to run the house; the usual audience beings middle-class women. In 1861, Isabella Beeton published *The Book of Household Management* in which she compares the mistress of the house to a military commander and adds that a woman needs to run the house with the same military severity. In this book Beeton covers every single aspect of the domestic economy creating a sort of factory-house¹⁷. The good management of the house is always conducted by the mistress on behalf of the happiness of the family. It is interesting to notice that this manual is missing a section dedicated just to the woman herself. In the private space of the house the woman, who is supposed to be its queen, is lacking something: the right to be a person. Beeton's manual, a female voice on women's duties, confirms again the Risorgimento's mentality that the role of woman within society is intended to complete and to serve man and the family. The house which should be the place where she is allowed to be herself instead becomes her prison. In *La vie matérielle* Marguerite Duras states that the work of a woman during the whole day is so difficult that it can be compared to a day at war. According to Duras, a woman's workday is much harder than a man's workday since her work does not have continuity. Every day a woman has to adjust her schedule to please different people in the family. This discontinuity becomes for her a silent continuity in obeying the norms of being a good mother and a good wife. It is in this manner that she appeases the man. Duras published this work in 1987, and, in the late 20th century, she still addresses the same issues on female submission within the house. There is a connection between men from

¹⁷ In her book *Il lavoro e la virtù. L'ideologia del focolare domestico* Katherine Blunden points out that the Industrial Revolution changed the mentality of people. In regards to the house, where everything now has to be put in order. The key word, she says, is now *management*. The 19th century therefore became the era of domestic manuals telling women how to take care of the house and how to do their housework well. The rhythm of the house has to be regular and methodical. The house has to resemble a machine. In this house-factory women are the work-force.

the Middle Ages to the contemporary age; Duras continues, they all feel accomplished within the house with a silent woman at their side who takes care of them in the same way she takes care of children. During her life a woman has to make many sacrifices, and quite often she has to abandon her dreams and her aspirations with the result that she ultimately abandons herself. This is a *maison sale* (dirty house) for Duras. A home where there is a woman who forgot who she really is.¹⁸ A *masion sale* is a home where a woman cannot leave her traces.¹⁹ In the following chapter I will investigate traces that a woman can secretly leave within the house or, better, in her own fantastic space within the house. Duras recognizes that a woman silently abandons herself to adapt to the norm of family life by performing the role created for her. My investigation aims to demonstrate the imprisonment of woman with the domestic walls and the necessity for her to create a fantastic space where secretly she starts to leave her traces. In this space she will enclose her dreams, her thoughts, her aspirations, her defeats, her fears, her tears. The fantastic space is the place where a woman can *be* her real self.

I.2 Methodological approach: space, psycho-sociological and feminist theory.

The Italian literary scenario opened to women, as I already mentioned in the previous section, only after the second half of the 19th century. During this century women started to improve their quality of life within society, as Antonia Arslan claims²⁰, even if just

¹⁸ In the autobiographical piece “La maison” Marguerite Duras discusses her struggle to be a woman and a writer. She admits to have thrown away several of her manuscripts since the male predominant literary world made her think that a woman could not produce good literary work. She suddenly realized that the act of writing was not a “crime” and that she did not want to live in a *maison sale*. Her desire was to be different from those blind women that live their lives doing what the patriarchal society wants them to do. For this reason she changed and she stopped burning her manuscripts and she decided to preserve them for her children.

¹⁹ The concept of leaving traces originates in the work of Walter Benjamin – *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*. In his discussion about interior design during the *Art Nouveau* period, he states that the house is an “expression of personality... In which the traces of the occupant also leave their impression on the interior.”

²⁰ See Arslan, Antonia. *Dame, galline e regine*. Pp.8-29 (1998).

inside the domestic space. This change gave birth to entertaining romantic novels written by other women with whom they could dream. Italian women writers called attention to the situation of women within the Italian context. Their narratives become essential to denounce women's discontent within the domestic walls and within society. This denouncement creates the necessity for a change, and this change originates from the house to then perpetuate this action in society in the second half of the 20th century²¹.

The main goal of this work is to analyze the fantastic space that women create within their own domestic space. I identify this dreaming space with the Italian word *fantasma* (ghost). As for *fantasma* I do not intend an entity that comes back from the past, but a recurrent abstract space created by women to survive their oppression. To fully understand this concept it is necessary to take into consideration the etymology of the word *fantasma*. As I discussed in the Introduction, *fantasma* has the same root as the word *fantasy*, because they both derive from the Greek verb *phantazo* (to appear). The etymology links the two words together as well as the fact that these words live in a dark space because they both are hidden from the naked eye. This *fantasma* is jealously hidden by women, since it is their only personal fantastic and private space within the house.

I will analyze Italian women's writings using theoretical approaches to space, since we are dealing with the internal space of the house. A sociological approach is also important considering the impact that this literature had on society. The psychoanalytic theory is useful to analyze the mental status of the fragile female characters I will investigate, who are abusively disturbed by the patriarchal system. These three approaches will shape and support my analysis.

One of the primary authors that inspired my research is the French scholar Michel De Certeau and, in particular, his book *The Practice of Every Day Life*. In my work, I

²¹ On this topic see: Introduction to *Italian Women Writers, 1800-2000: boundaries, borders and transgression*, (2014); Willson, Perry. *Women in Twenty-Century Italy*, (2013); Amoia, Alba. *20th-century Italian women writers: the feminine experience*, (1996).

will consider the relationship that he proposed between tactics and strategy²². De Certeau states that strategies are enforced by powerful institutions and that tactics are ways in which individuals create their own space within the space ruled by strategies. In the narratives I discuss, I take into consideration the institutional strategy codified by the patriarchal system that rules and controls the domestic domain within which women live. In order to survive women needed to create their own fantastic space that is, in this context, what De Certeau calls tactics. The tactic shapes the hidden space, within the house, which escapes the strategy of the patriarchal system. I will hence name this tactic as the fantasy space (hidden as a *fantasma*) that women needed to create in order to denounce their discontent and to survive. This particular analysis will lead me to explore, as De Certeau says, the everyday lives of these female characters who do not appear on the accepted surface of social interactions. It will move into another space and another "nowhen" that overcomes the socially constructed reality for women redefined by the Risorgimento. With this analysis I will enter into women's private space which will deal with their daydreams and their desire to understand who they really are. In the narratives the female characters face a *here* and *there*: the world in which they live and the world they will create. The *there* will be the obscure and the unknown space (the *fantasma*). This *fantasma* is the force that will slowly start a process in Italian society that eventually will revise the constructed world of the patriarchal system. This theoretical approach will be contextualized with examples from the narratives I have chosen for the second chapter of this work.

In order to examine the domestic space and, in particular, the nest-house that imprisoned women, it is also essential to consider the work of Gaston Bachelard, *The*

²² On the same topic see also: Highmore, Ben. *Michel De Certeau Analysing Culture*. Pp. 117-148. (2006); Warm, Graham (ed). *The Certeau Reader*. (2000); Buchanan, Ian. *Michel De Certeau Cultural Theorist*. Pp.86-107 (2000).

*Poetics of Space*²³. Bachelard's theory is strictly connected to my study of the fantastic space within the house. The French scholar proposes a clear distinction on the conflicts within the scientific analysis and the imagination linked to the irrational part of the human being. This concept will become so relevant to his theory that he will write the *Poetics of Rêverie* another crucial book for this work. According to Bachelard, human beings consist of two fundamental parts: the rational part and the dreaming part, which is irrational. The female characters of the narratives that I will analyze obviously are divided between these two selves, and their irrational side, created by their imagination, is the one that saves them and gives them hope for a change. The images that women create in their own fantastic space are projected into a different time and space within the house itself. Once again we have the *here* and *there* of De Certeau's theory. Bachelard claims that the house is the main locus in which these images can live since it is the place of protected intimacy. For all the women characters I investigate there is still more than this since the intimate space of the house becomes their own fantastic space within the house itself. Bachelard postulates that the house protects the dreamer for it allows him/her to dream in peace. However, going back to what Woolf demonstrated, this is a possibility allowed only to men since only *they* can have their own private space in the house. Therefore, a woman established with the house a relationship of love and hate, since the house is her nest and her prison at the same time.

My analysis of the *fantasma* intends to show how in the second half of the 19th century through the narratives I investigate, women start to acknowledge a real desire for change. Even if the patriarchal system for many years did not regard this literature worthy of consideration, the works written by female authors at least gave women the opportunity to realize that they were not alone. Their struggle and desire were the same as

²³ See also: McAllester Jones, Mary. *The Philosophy and poetics of Gaston Bachelard*. (1989) and *Gaston Bachelard, subversive humanist: texts and readings*. (1991); Tiles, Mary. *Bachelard Science and Objectivity*. (1984); Bachelard, Gastone. *The Flame of a Candle*. (1988).

those which other women were enduring, and this gave them the impetus to bring about a change. Women could identify with the characters in these novels. The process towards self-identification was quite active and involved as women could retrace their own dreams and desires in the fantastic spaces within the narratives. For this reason Bachelard asserts that the reader experiences his or her own life through the stories that the literary space produces.

The Bachelardian concept of the *rêverie* (daydream) also merits attention for my investigation of the fantastic space, since the *fataσμα* is connected to his notion of the daydream. Bachelard states that the *rêverie* keeps the subject connected to reality as opposed to nocturnal dreams which lead the character into a state of unconsciousness. The images of the *reverie* are produced while the person is still awake so that the dreamer can create his own parallel space within the reality in which he lives. In this new space the subject can experience something different and he can explore himself. The *rêverie* is not a duplicate of reality and does not re-emerge from the past²⁴. The *rêverie* will be an important tool for the women characters I analyze not only to escape their reality but also to realize, in a state of total consciousness, that they can create a better life for themselves. Women in the space of the daydream will start the process of knowing who they really are and of re-doing themselves.

Women's literature often denounces a world of discrimination. At the end of the 19th century, this charge is expressed silently and discreetly. In the narratives of female authors there is the desire to denounce that women's invisible lives were ruled and controlled by men. The patriarchal system made women invisible by secluding them within the house to guarantee the order of society. Uncontrolled visibility was considered a danger, a trap for men. The detention of women within the domestic walls prevented

²⁴ In addition to Bachelard, Gaston. *On Poetic Imagination and Reverie*. (1971) see also: Christofides, C.G. "Gaston Bachelard and the Imagination of Matter" in *Revue internationale de Philosophie* 66. (1963) pp.477-491; Dagognent, Françoise. "Gaston Bachelard, philosophe de l'imagination." in *Revue internationale de Philosophie* 51. (1960) pp.32-42.

women from interacting with each other and consequently from creating a sense of sisterhood that could lead them to take charge of their lives²⁵. The fantastic space reveals the first step towards gaining visibility. Within their own *fantasma* women will start the process of taking control of their lives.

In her work *The Laugh of Medusa*, the Feminist scholar Hélène Cixous analyzes the power of the phallocentrism in literature which makes women feel ashamed of externalizing their own internal desire and consequently of producing literature. Cixous incites women to write, not to hide their desire but to bring something new into the literary world, not to live in the dark but to come out publicly without being afraid of displeasing men. Cixous argues that men's desire to control women is connected to their fear of being castrated. The fear of castration²⁶ shows the weak side of men, they are afraid to let women be free because deep inside they consider them a threat. The mythic tale about Medusa and her power to turn men to stone coupled with the enchanting sound of the Sirens clearly illustrate this fear. Cixous asserts that only the fear of castration can explain the aggressiveness of men and the crimes they committed against women. The most horrendous crime committed by men against women is to put women one against the other, to make them their own enemies. For this reason women need to write, they need to kill the Old Woman (the Angel of the House) and to let the New Woman come out and shine. In the Italian context this process slowly starts at the end of the 19th century. Through writing women began the process of the re-appropriation of their own bodies which were confiscated since birth by men. Men had buried women into their own bodies and it is now time for women, Cixous claims, to take them back. For this reason,

²⁵ See Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish*. (1977).

²⁶ See Cixous, Hélène. "Castration or decapitation?" in *Sign*, 7,1: 41-55.

Cixous observes that a female text is always a subversive text since a woman will deploy her imagination in it. The text is her voice. It is this imaginary space created by women's fantasy that I am going to investigate. It is only with time that women writers will grant the female bodies the centrality it deserves. We will have to wait until the beginning of the 20th century and in particular the work of Sibilla Aleramo to see a real change in Italian women's literature.

The act of writing is certainly a way for women to denounce their inequitable situation but it is also a way to express themselves showing their own world. In this sense I agree with Cixous that a female text is subversive. If the act of writing is a subversive one we should also explore how it engages the female reader. As I investigate a specific aspect of the domestic space, this aspect cannot avoid taking into consideration the critical analysis of the author's work and the female readers' reaction.

Nowadays it is assumed that for women in the 19th century reading was a way to escape their reality and at the same time a means of education. In order to talk about women readers and what the act of reading means for them, it is necessary to discuss the work of the feminist scholar Judith Fetterley.

Starting from the assumption that for a long time women were forced to read as men and to adopt a misogynist point of view, Fetterley analyzes the woman reader as a *resisting reader*. The *resisting reader* approaches texts written by men in a very skeptical way since, according to Fetterley, she has to be on her guard constantly. She cannot relax while reading a text since she cannot afford to surrender to the ready-made representation of women in literature and art within the patriarchal system. Fetterly asserts that women bring a different perspective and consequently a different meaning to the literary text.

The act of reading is therefore affected by gender²⁷. When female readers deal with female authors I would say that they inquire about the text differently since they are exploring and establishing their identity through the text itself. Instead of fighting with the text, they grow with it.

However, the central focus of this work is not the reader but the female authors and their literary works. Careful distinction is to be made between the two different kinds of female authorships classified by Rita Felski: the madwoman in the attic and the masquerading woman.

In the first classification, the Madwoman in the attic, Felsky includes all the novels written by women writers, with scenes that feature the consequences of living in a home-prison governed by the patriarchal system. Felsky indicates *madness* as an act of rebellion and an expression of anger towards the male-dominated house²⁸. Through their characters women writers can express their own discomfort as writers working within patriarchal culture. The stories they narrate are often full of sorrow with a mixture of hope and despair. *Madness* expresses the inner pain with which these women have to live since the Italian word for madness, *pazzia*, is etymologically linked to the Latin verb *pator* which means *to suffer*. In the second chapter of my work I will address specific examples of this *madness* because this discomfort is strictly connected to the core of my investigation, which necessitates the creation of a fantastic space within the house.

The second kind of authorship described by Felski is the masquerading woman. It consists in allowing female authors to exit the attic and to explore different identities in

²⁷ See Fetterly, Judith. *The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach in American Fiction*. (1978); Felski, Rita. *Literature after Feminism*. (2003) pp.33-39.

²⁸ Felski, Rita. *Literature after Feminism*. (2003) pp.64-71.

order to have a broader perspective of the world including the male world, too. This concept is clearly connected to the gender construction first denounced by Judith Butler since the mask worn by a female writer gives her the chance to hide and reverse the constructed rules of gender and sexuality. I believe this aspect of authorship will blossom later in the Italian Women Writers Literature that I am going to investigate. In the second half of the 19th century, female authors begin to produce a narrative that shows them becoming conscious of their secluded situation. Here the authors are madwomen in the attic who before everything else try to raise self-awareness of their situation.

I will utilize three fundamental methodological approaches in my investigation. The main theoretical support is based on the theory of space, specifically, in the theoretical works of Gaston Bachelard and Michel De Certeau. Through their texts I will be able to analyze that fantastic space within the house, the *fantasma* that allows women to secretly dream and be free. This space cannot be fully analyzed without the input of feminist scholars and without taking into consideration the various aspects of what being a woman writer in this time frame means. A female pen is able to give voice to female characters reflecting the restricted situation of women. The pen becomes the instrument that advocates for women's emancipation between the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century. While discussing female characters who reflect the discontent of women in Italian society, in my analysis I believe it necessary to include the psycho-sociological aspect. This last aspect will show how these fantastic spaces created within the domestic walls will impact society and will allow women to slowly react against the patriarchal system. Focusing from the very beginning on the flourishing of Women Writers Literature in the Italian context I will address this transition from being

madwomen in the attic to slowly taking agency and deconstructing gender assumptions which although initially are just performed they will slowly become performative²⁹.

²⁹ See Brady, Anita and Schirato, Tony. *Understanding Judith Butler*. (2011); Jagger, Gill. *Judith Butler: sexual politics, social change and the power of the performative*. (2008) pp.17-49; Salih, Sara. *Judith Butler*. (2002).

Second Chapter: The *Fantasm* of the Domestic Space.

The intent of this chapter is to analyze what I previously defined as *fantasma*. As, I already mentioned, with this term I am referring to that specific space within the domestic walls that women had to create in order to survive the restrictions imposed upon them by the patriarchal system. The word *fantasma* is to be interpreted in its purely etymological sense as “something that appears”. The *fantasma* is, therefore, the fantastic space that women create within the house. This space is their one and only private space, and it will appear in several forms in the narratives I will be investigating. This analysis will also confirm the lack of freedom that bourgeois women had at the end of 19th and the beginning of 20th century. This lack of freedom is reflected in their writings through their characters. In this work I will not discuss the isolation of Italian women writers as compared to their colleagues of the opposite sex, but I will focus on the production of the fantastic space within the domestic walls. I will examine writings by Contessa Lara, Marchesa Colombi, Matilde Serao, and Neera.

II.1 Contessa Lara. *Il romanzo della bambola* and *L’Innamorata*.

Evelina Cattermole, better known by her nom de plume Contessa Lara, was active as a writer in the second half of the 19th century and her literary works include both poetry and prose. Evelina lived in different Italian cities and she also frequented some of the most famous social and cultural gatherings of the time. As a beautiful woman, she was courted by several men and her relationship with one of her suitors outside her wedlock will cause the end of her marriage and her isolation. After a very difficult time, during which she did not stop writing, she was able to regain her life and respect. Unfortunately, her life ended tragically when she was killed by a man with whom she had

a relationship for ten years. Her eccentric life did not go unobserved, as several fictional works were written on her life, leaving aside sometimes her important literary production³⁰. Her two main novels, *L'innamorata* and *Il romanzo della bambola* address the difficult circumstances of women of her time. Even though her writings often feature eccentric characters, such as the figure of the horsewoman, the subjugation of women is the focal point of her narratives. These women writers had the possibility to produce, but the recognition of their literary work is still in progress³¹. This disparity was also underlined by Antonia Arslan who credited female writers as an important part of Italian literature that has long remained in the shadows. In the prose works of Contessa Lara, Arslan sees as a theme the dualism between men and women that was characteristic of the culture of the time³². In fact this division constantly emerges in Contessa Lara's narratives and it also reflects the fragmentation of the female characters that have to deal with finding their real self and performing their gender role.

The conflicting themes are extremely present in Contessa Lara's works as well as in the women writers of this era. My investigation of Contessa Lara's works will be circumscribed to her two main novels *L'Innamorata* and *Il Romanzo della Bambola*³³.

³⁰ On Contessa Lara see: Armenise, Gabriella. *Contessa Lara*, in AA. VV., *Scrittrici italiane dell'Otto e Novecento. Le interviste impossibili*, (2013); Venzo, Manola Ida. *L'ultima estate di Contessa Lara: lettere dalla riviera (1896)*, (2011); Schisa, Brunella, *Dopo ogni abbandono*, Garzanti, Milano (2009); Dickie, John "La logica dello stereotipo: «Un omicida» della contessa Lara" in «Lettere italiane», XLVIII, 2, (1996); Lagorio, Gina. *Tra le mura stellate*, (1991); Maffei, Brunello. *La Contessa Lara*. (1991). Mazzei, Francesco. *Una donna in fiamme*, (1988); Storti Abate, Anna. "Una scrittrice di consumo nella Roma «bizantina»: la Contessa Lara" in AA. VV., «Trivialliteratur?». *Letterature di massa e di consumo*, (1979). Croce, Benedetto, *La Contessa Lara-Annie Vivanti*, in *La letteratura della nuova Italia. Saggi critici*, II, (1943); Freschi, Maria. *La Contessa Lara. Una vita di passione e di poesia nell'Ottocento italiano*, (1930); Macchia, Achille *Prefazione*, in Contessa Lara, *Novelle della Contessa Lara*, (1914).

³¹ In his book *La bambola e il mostro* Enrico Tiozzo pointed out that women writers had by the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century the same space within the Italian literary panorama. Women writers had the possibility to publish as much as their male colleagues without any sense of inferiority. He also asserts that the victimism of Italian women writers is a creation of 20th century scholars. I disagree with Enrico Tiozzo primarily because if this had been the truth women writers would have been mentioned in the main anthologies and studied along with male authors of the same century.

³² In her book *Dame, Galline e Regine* Antonia Arslan declares that this difference between man and women is very present in Contessa Lara's work and in particular in the short stories where, according to Arslan, the author tries to make an analysis

³³ In her book's chapter "Evelina e la bambola: il mito di Contessa Lara" in *Dame, Galline e Regine* Antonia Arslan asserts that Contessa Lara, more in the short stories than in the novels, gives a sorrowful

According to Arslan, the novel *Il Romanzo della Bambola* is a sort of testament of the author. Her vision of women, I would add, is enclosed in the figure of the *bambola*³⁴ since the *bambola*, which becomes, as I will show later, the Lacanian mirror as a reflection of the conflicting nature of the imaginary and the real.

Written in 1896, the novel tells the story of a doll, named Giulia, which starts her life journey in a luxurious store in Milan. A rich businessman from Tuscany buys the doll for his spoiled, beloved, and only daughter Mariuccia, who after showing off her new toy for a few weeks, gets tired of the doll and throws it in a corner, substituting her with a new toy: a pony. At this point the very tumultuous journey of the doll begins and Giulia leaves the life of luxury she had enjoyed until this point for a more modest one. The doll first moves with Mariuccia's cousin, Camilla, who will love the doll until her premature death. Then Giulia the doll lives her life with Rachele who will soon abandon her toy in an attic. Here, Giulia meets the puppet Orlando, and they both spend the rest of their lives having been married by two little country girls in a poor but happy house in the countryside. In this novel Contessa Lara describes the doll's feelings. The *bambola* is sharply humanized and struggles between being able to have feelings as a human being and being stuck in the body of a doll. The metaphor of the doll is a crucial symbol in Contessa Lara's novels. The doll's struggle is connected to the binary theme of mobility versus immobility: in other words, it depicts the impossibility for women of this time to be free within a male dominated society. The body of women is stolen by the patriarchal system and Contessa Lara denounces it through the metaphor of the doll. Women have to take back their confiscated bodies to overcome immobility. The female characters depicted in Evelina's narratives can be compared to *bambole* since they don't have the

analysis on the division between men and women within the society, analyzing the whole society not only the bourgeoisie.

³⁴ See Mazzoni, Cristina. "Treasure to Trash, Trash to Treasure: Dolls and Waste in Italian Children's Literature in *Children Literature Association* pp.250-265 (2012).

ability to choose their paths nor the freedom of doing things they would like to as the narrator explains:

Her body did not have the power of moving unless moved by someone else; her eyelids were closed as always when someone laid her down supine; and like that, mute, static. She seemed to be sleeping without having any feelings. Instead she heard and understood everything that was happening around her, suffering much from it. (21)³⁵

Women are split between the real life and the life they imagine. The *bambola* is a strong signifier in Contessa Lara's work: the inanimate protagonist of *Il romanzo della bambola* is the paradigm for several of her female characters. Contessa Lara's last work therefore encapsulates in the figure of the *bambola* the way womanhood was constructed at that time. Despite the submissive behavior of women, I believe that Contessa Lara's characters are resilient. They have to go through sorrow and pain in their life, but at the very end they are able to cope with the suffering inflicted upon them. They face life's adversity, and they are strengthened by it. The doll as well as some other characters, after many changes in fortune and after several wounds to their soul, can at last find peace and become aware of their own situation.

The opposition between reality and fantasy is fundamental in my investigation of the fantastic space within the domestic walls in this novel. The two female characters that create their own *fantasmi* are the doll, in the first part of the novel, and the young little girl Camilla hardly tested by life from a very young age. They both represent the inability of a woman to find freedom within the house and the consequent need to create a fantastic space.

Giulia appears at the very beginning of the novel. She is the gorgeous, luxurious and expensive doll displayed in the most beautiful toy store of Milan: "She was tall about a meter, dressed in a pale blue ballet costume. On her hair, combed *à la mode*, she had a

³⁵ [Il suo corpo non aveva potere di muoversi quando non lo maneggiavano; le palpebre le si erano chiuse da loro, come le si chiudevano quando la coricavano supina; e così muta, immobile, pareva che morisse d'un sonno senza alcuna sensibilità. Invece, udiva e capiva tutto quell che le accadeva d'intorno, soffrendone assai.]

bunch of white feathers; on her dress neckline and on her dress train she had folds of laces.”³⁶ (5). Mariuccia’s father bought the doll for his young, spoiled girl, who names her Giulia. This idea is well supported also by the novel:

...and when she (Giulia) had her little head full of hair, blonde like grain on her shoulders, she felt she had a soul; certainly a small soul, suffocated by the sawdust that prevented her from moving her body, incapable of doing a spontaneous movement, in the lighter vibration of her little steel muscles, but at the end a soul who has pleasant and sorrowful sensations, feelings of affection and aversion. (7-8)³⁷

Here Contessa Lara underscores that women’s bodies are the property of the patriarchal system; they do not belong to them. Finally women are becoming aware of this subjugation and they are starting their journey toward re-appropriating their bodies. I believe that the novelty of Contessa Lara’s work consists in starting the process through which women will take back their bodies and thus their mobility within society, which was stolen at birth.³⁸ The doll’s life was enjoyable for the first several weeks, and Mariuccia took very good care of her, showing her off and bragging about her to all of her friends. This dream life wasn’t meant to last for long since shortly thereafter Mariuccia got tired of the doll and left her abandoned on a chair: “Now instead she spent full days abandoned on a chair, thrown there with no respect... Then she relinquished in the shade that pain which nobody cared about: a pain, it is true, with no expression, but not for this reason less anguishing and sincere.” (33-34)³⁹. Afterwards, Giulia is closed in an old wardrobe where her feet are eaten by mice. First the bedroom and then the wardrobe became her only spaces within the big house. These spaces are places of deep

³⁶ [Era quasi alta un metro, vestita d’un costume celeste, da ballo. Su’ capelli, pettinati all’ultima moda, le si alzava un gruppettino di penne bianche; allo scollo, e su la sottana a strascico, portava delle trine tutte pieghe leggere.]

³⁷ [“E quando ebbe sulle spalle quella testolina dalla folta capigliatura bionda come il grano, senti di aver conquistata un’anima; un’anima piccolo, sì, molto soffocata tra la segatura che le riempiva il corpo, e impotente a manifestarsi in un movimento spontaneo, nella più leggera vibrazione de’ muscoletti d’acciaio, ma, in fine, un’anima che aveva sensazioni piacevoli e dolorosa, sentimenti di affetto e d’avversione;...”].

³⁸ Refer to Chapter one.

³⁹ [“Adesso, in vece, restava giornate intere sur una sedia, buttata là, senza riguardo... Poi abbandonava nell’ombra quel dolore a cui nessuno badava: un dolore, è vero, senza espressione, ma non per questo meno angoscioso e sincero”].

sorrow and pain for the doll and “she felt inside of her that something was consuming her heart, her soul, who knows?”(p.34).⁴⁰ Giulia seems to have human characteristics and resembles a real woman forced into a space where she feels lonely and where the time passes slowly: “In that loneliness hours seemed days and days months. Time never passes by when someone suffers!” (p.35)⁴¹ Within this space Giulia daydreams of the *bei tempi!* (good times!) when Mariuccia took care of her and paid closed attention to her beloved *bambola*: “Poor Giulia thought again of all this in the dark of the wardrobe, darker than a prison, she thought about the days when Mariuccia was sick, and how much she kept her good and faithful company, distracting her and amusing her”. (36)⁴² She knows that those happy times would never come back. In the wardrobe, after daydreaming of her good times and acknowledging the fact that she won’t have those times back, Giulia enters a state of unconsciousness and she falls into a deep sleep: “And she fell into a deep sleep, without dreams, the sleep of a thing, not the sleep of a being who feels, thinks, delights and suffers.” (37)⁴³ Within this constrictive space she creates her own little spaces where she recalls her pleasant memories, putting herself in a different time and space in order to survive. It is interesting to note that here the patriarchal system is disguised as a very young woman. I believe that Mariuccia’s selfish personality and aggressiveness towards her female peers is a clear example of what Cixous calls a crime committed on women by men: to put women one against the other⁴⁴. I see Contessa Lara

⁴⁰ [“...Ella sentiva, però dentro di sé, qualcosa che le andava consumando il cuore, l’anima chi sa?”].

⁴¹ [In quella solitudine le ore le sembravano giornate, le giornate mesi. Non passa mai il tempo quando uno soffre!]. [In quella solitudine le ore le sembravano giornate, le giornate mesi. Non passa mai il tempo quando uno soffre!].

⁴² [La povera Giulia ripensava tutto ciò nel buio dell’armadio, più nero d’una prigione, e ripensava anche ai giorni della malattia della Mariuccia, quando ella le aveva tenuto una compagnia buona e fedele, distraendola e divertendola.]

⁴³ [E si era addormentata d’un sonno grave, senza sogni, un sonno da cosa, non da essere che sente e pensa e gode e soffre.]

⁴⁴ In *The Laugh of Medusa*, Cixous affirms that male tyranny, not only "frigidified" women’s bodies but also led them to hate each other and to be their own enemies. Mariuccia’s character, which dominates her doll, is an example of the lack of sisterhood among women from a very young age. It is necessary, according to Cixous, to liberate the new woman from the old body trapped by the patriarchal system.

not only as an innovative author but also as a very subversive one for the time⁴⁵. The luxury house passes from the happy nest to Giulia's prison, and she could do nothing to leave; she is forced to wait: "She could not scream with her own voice, she could not raise her hands and knock, knock desperately as she would have liked, with her little tight fists... She would have to wait, as a piece of fabric, the time of the most atrocious pains..." (38).⁴⁶

Giulia's situation changes when she is going to be adopted by Mariuccia's sweet cousin Camilla. The *bambola* enters a different world. Camilla's room is very simple but there she was certainly surrounded by the love of her gentle young owner since Giulia is an object and as an object she is owned: "It was a very modest room, furnished with a small bed, with white cotton curtains, with a table where she would do her homework, with an old chest of drawers, and with three chairs... This little bedroom was so organized and clean that it was a pleasure to look at it..." (45).⁴⁷

Camilla lived in her room, which was the only place where she could have peace. Even if Camilla "used to stay in her room as a nun in her cell" (p.49)⁴⁸, that was also the place where she could read, sew, knit and take shelter when her parents argued. Her modest bedroom is her own private space. It is only here, while her parents are out that she could daydream of not being alone: she would gaze out of the window and admire the other children playing outside pretending to be with them and forgetting her loneliness: "Then her loneliness became so painful that she could not see herself anymore in that deserted room, and in order to deceive herself to be in someone's company, she would

⁴⁵ See Tandello, Emmanuela. "Tradition and Innovation in the 1880s: Annie Vivanti and Contessa Lara" in AA. VV., *With a Pen in her Hand. Women and Writing in Italy in the Nineteenth Century and Beyond*, (2000) pp.76-91.

⁴⁶ [Non poteva da sé sola metter fuori la voce, non poteva alzar le mani e bussare, bussar disperatamente come avrebbe voluto, co' piccoli pugni stretti... Bisognava aspettare, come un pezzo di stoffa qualunque, l'ora de' patimenti più atroci...]

⁴⁷ [Era una stanza delle più modeste, mobiliate di un lettino a tende di cotone bianco, d'una tavola, su cui la bambina faceva le sue lezioni per la scuola, d'una cassettona che aveva perduto il lustro, e di tre sedie... Ma c'era in questa cameretta tant'ordine, tanta pulizia che la si guardava con piacere...]

⁴⁸ [Stava nella sua stanza come una monachina nella cella.]

look out of the window, following with her eyes the children of her neighbors to whom her mother forbade her to talk because -- she used to say-- they weren't her peers" (49).⁴⁹ Camilla's daydreams are as simple as she is. She only has this intimate space, her room, to protect her and her secret dreams as well as her life with Giulia. From whom did Camilla need to hide her dreams? She should have been in a safe place: her house, with people who loved her. This wasn't the case for the young girl, though once again here Contessa Lara represents the patriarchal system masquerading as the figure of the mother who turns her anger and her dissatisfaction against her good-natured daughter. Camilla's mother was raised in a rich family, but unfortunately her husband lost his job and could not make enough money to give her the life style she was accustomed to. This made her mother very unhappy. She ruled the house in a very despotic way and imprisoned the little girl in her bedroom. She was forced to take care of the house and do all the housework since they could no longer afford a housekeeper. Camilla's loneliness is interrupted by Giulia's arrival so that the two souls could share a new intimacy: "A new life for her as well as for the little friend. They put together their loneliness, they made one heart of two hearts doomed to the silence, so that they might comfort each other." (p.52).⁵⁰

Camilla's bedroom, the only place where she could daydream and, with Giulia's arrival, feel loved, will soon turn into her grave. The nest that was supposed to protect her will imprison her life forever because of the mother's selfishness, the despotic patriarchal system. Giulia, the inanimate doll with a soul, sees Camilla as herself: "Camilla's destiny seemed like her own destiny; to live and have the appearance of a dead person; to feel and not be able to demonstrate that she had feelings; to have the desire to speak and be

⁴⁹ [La sua solitudine allora le diventava penosa al punto che non si poteva più vedere in quella camera deserta, e per illudersi d'essere in compagnia di qualcuno, s'affacciava anche lei dalla finestra, seguendo con gli occhi i fanciulli de' vicini, a' quali la mamma le proibiva di parlare perché – diceva lei – non erano suoi pari.]

⁵⁰ [Vita nuova per lei, come per la sua piccola amica. Avevano messo insieme le loro due solitudini; avevano fatto di due cuori, destinati al silenzio, un cuore solo; e così si consolavano l'una con l'altra.]

forced to always be quiet...” (73)⁵¹. Camilla, the human being, is immobile within the house like the inanimate doll. Her room is the only place where she can find happiness with her daydreams and with her imaginary relationship with Giulia, and it is also the place that embraces her while she dies prematurely.

With Camilla’s death, Giulia is sold to a scavenger who buys her for his daughter. Giulia’s life changes completely. She moves from the elegant store in Milan to the luxurious house of Mariuccia and then to the modest and simple room of Camilla. Even if in the scavenger's house Giulia is surrounded by people who are not only poor but are used to living in a state of disarray: “Giulia could not recognize herself anymore, sloppy, barefoot, greased.” (80)⁵² After being abused by Rachele, her young owner, and her brother Attilio, Giulia is closed up in the attic where she meets the puppet Orlando who eventually becomes her husband. The attic is humid and cold, and again Giulia is segregated in a place imposed upon her by the violence of Attilio. The only possibility for Giulia to survive is to daydream. Giulia’s daydreams are very sorrowful. She usually reflects on her fate and wonders why she could never have a little bit of peace in her life: “In the meantime the night came, and Orlando did not speak anymore, perhaps he was sleeping. Giulia started to daydream about her fate: why could she not have one hour of peace?” (100)⁵³. She thinks she is being punished by God for her vanity and her passion for futile things. After pondering this for a long time, she convinces herself that this must be the truth, in fact even her friend Orlando the puppet after travelling the world as a knight, is now reduced to a miserable life, being locked in the attic with her: “And comparing her life to the one of the other human beings, she realized that each one was punished for his sins.” (100)⁵⁴ In her frequent daydreams Giulia recalls the moments of

⁵¹ [Il destino di Camilla le parve il suo stesso destino; vivere e avere l'apparenza di una morta; sentire e non potere dimostrare che uno sente; desiderar di parlare e dover stare in silenzio sempre...].

⁵² [Alla Giulia pareva non essere più lei, scalza, sciatta, unta.]

⁵³ [Intanto era venuta la notte, e Orlando non fiata più; forse doemiva. La Giulia cominciò a fantasticare su' i casi suoi: perché non aveva mai potuto avere un'ora di bene?]

⁵⁴ [E confrontando la propria vita alla vita di tutti gli altri esseri, s'accorgeva che ciascuno era punito per l'appunto là dove peccava.]

her past with Mariuccia, Camilla, Rachele, and Attilio and she realizes that despite her sins, God did not forget her since she has the company of Orlando the puppet and she is not left alone:

Giulia was listening, pensive. It is true that God does not ever abandon those who suffer. When Mariuccia had forgotten about her because of the pony, Camilla, a creature full of kindness and affection, came to love her with all her heart and soul. Camilla's love ended with her death, and when Rachele kept her very badly giving her away for money to unknown little girls, and Attilio gashed her, Orlando arrived to keep her company and to comfort her. (102)⁵⁵

The dirty and moldy attic that imprisoned her gave her a friend: "She did not care now about the squalor of the place in which they had imprisoned her, and of the little light that lighten it obliquely, and of the repugnance of the whole things around her because of the mold, of the dust, the old junk and because of the soil? The affection of her pain mate was worthier than many beautiful pieces of furniture." (102)⁵⁶ The space where Giulia lives is imposed on her by the arrogance of Attilio who wanted to hurt his sister, and even if Giulia likes Orlando's company, she does not have time for herself until Orlando sleeps. In these moments Giulia can peacefully daydream and the attic, the prison, protects her secrets. Giulia can create her own *fantasma* within the attic through the use of daydreams. In her fantastic space Giulia is serene. Giulia's relationship with the attic is one of love and hate. This love-hate relationship with the place is a reflection of the binary relationship present in Contessa Lara's novel of reality between fantasy. Reality is represented by all the life journeys that Giulia is forced to take. She has to bear changes in her life that are far from the luxurious life she was made for as an exclusive doll. On the other hand, fantasy is represented by her daydreams in the different spaces she

⁵⁵ [La Giulia ascoltava pensosa. È proprio vero che Dio non abbandona mai chi soffre. Quando la Mariuccia s'era scordata di lei per il puledro, ecco che ad amarla con tutto il cuore e tutt l'anima era venuta Camilla, creatura piena di gentilezza e tenerezza. Finito con la morte l'amore di Camilla, quando la Rachele l'aveva tenuta male, dandola per denaro qua e là a bimbe sconosciute, e Attilio l'avea sfregiata, ecco Orlando a tenerle compagnia e consolarla.]

⁵⁶ [Che le importava adesso lo squallore del luogo in cui l'avevano imprigionata, e la poca luce che lo schiarava di sbieco, e il ribrezzo che le mettevano tutte le cose in torno per la muffa, la polvere, il vecchiume, la sudiceria? L'affetto del suo compagno di pena valeva certo più di molti bei mobili.]

inhabits. These two selves, the real and the imaginary, are what she is able to see in the mirror. The mirror will give her a more complete self in the end. The daydreams do not detach these female characters from reality and the *fantasmi* are the tools they have to explore themselves and to understand better what they want. The fantastic space is different there; it is what is beneath the surface, and it is an expression of discontent. I believe the *fantasmi* are a way for women to overcome the diasphoric relationship they have with themselves. The *fantasma* releases their anxiety and depression. Women's irrational part, which is connected to their imaginary spaces, is what saves them, is what enables them to survive.

In this novel, Camilla and Giulia are different female figures, but they both use their fantastic spaces to daydream. They both want to overcome loneliness. Camilla will be the victim of the arrogance of the patriarchal system that will ultimately cause her death. Her mother, the figure that should protect her, is manipulated by the patriarchal system and becomes herself the expression of it. In her short life the young girl had just her small fantastic space to comfort her, where she could really show her feelings and her real self without fear. On the other hand, there is Giulia, *la bambola*, tested by life, who will be able to cope with all the adversities of life and become stronger because of it. Giulia is a resilient character. At the very end, she will leave the gloomy attic with the puppet Orlando, and she will end up in a poor house in the country. Two young country girls will take care of her and Orlando, and they will also organize a marriage between them. Giulia goes through different spaces, and in each of these spaces she daydreams. At the very end of the novel, before entering the country house, she daydreams of her first luxurious life but these dreams are resentful because: "she knew the difference between the bad and the good of life, the bad is much more present than the good since it is easier to find it. She became experienced through her pain..." (112)⁵⁷. The experiences as well

⁵⁷ [Oramai ella conosceva il bene e il male della vita: il male assai più del bene, perché è più facile di trovar quello che questo; sì che fatta esperta dalle sue stesse sofferenze...]

as all the places within the houses she was forced to inhabit helped Giulia to grow, to be stronger, to know herself better and what she wants. Giulia's *fantasmi* are crucial to this process of strengthening. The imaginary and the real go together through all this consciousness process. The image that the mirror will give back is the one of a resilient doll/woman.

At this point of my investigation, it is clear that the doll is a symbol that represents the immobile women's bodies stolen by the patriarchal system. This figure often recurs in Contessa Lara's literary works as it does in the novel *L'innamorata* through the character of Leona.

Contessa Lara's novel *L'Innamorata* was published in 1985. This novel is the most well known work of the Italian author. It tells the story of Leona, a Spanish horsewoman who works in a circus. Because of her beauty Leona is courted by many aristocratic men in Rome and in particular by the young Count Paolo Cappello. Initially, Leona does not want to give in to the young man's advances, but after an accident where Paolo is hurt she confesses her love for him. The two lovers will move to Naples where they will lead an idyllic love story. After a few months the conflicts between the two different social classes start to emerge and the plebeian manners of Leona are no longer a source of attraction for Paolo. Paolo becomes very unpleasant towards Leona, and the Spanish horsewoman will be indirectly invited to leave Paolo by Caligaris, a family friend. She accepts the invitation and moves back to Rome. Caligaris offers a new and luxurious life to Leona among the Roman aristocracy. After several months in Rome, Leona will meet Paolo Cappello in one of the social gatherings she organizes at her house. The two will start a romantic relationship again, but very soon Paolo will start to act in a very despotic and unpleasant manner towards her. This time Leona does not leave him and stays in Cappello's house with the butler Nazzareno. At the very end of the novel Leona finds out accidentally by her friend Caligaris that Paolo is going to marry the niece of one of the wealthiest and most powerful men in Rome. The trauma of the news is

so strong for Leona that she is finally able to react and discover the secret romantic relationship that Paolo had with the aunt of the woman he plans to wed. The scandal cancels the wedding, and Paolo is injured in a duel. Leona decides to go back to her real life, the world of the circus.

This novel can be analyzed, like the previous one, by examining the binary theme of reality versus fantasy. Leona is divided between the space of her real life and the fantastic space that she creates to help her to survive. The strategy here is represented within the domestic walls by the despotic and arrogant behavior of Count Cappello who appears in the beginning to be the ideal partner, completely in love with Leona, but soon changing into an aggressive one. The first space Leona shares with Paolo is the house in Naples, and then the house in Rome in the second part of the novel.

We must also consider in this analysis that Leona inhabits another space that completely belongs to her both at the beginning and at the end of the novel, her space in the circus. Although my investigation focuses on the analysis of the domestic walls I have to mention briefly the circus to complete Leona's path as a resilient character, which is, as I previously mentioned, a characteristic of Contessa Lara's female characters.

The first space inhabited by her is the house in Naples. In the beginning this luxurious apartment is an ideal place for the young couple, but the idyllic love nest is not destined to last for too long. It is obvious that Paolo is attracted by the exoticism of Leona. He is curious to know how a woman like her could be able to love. For this reason he is looking for a mysterious and enchanting nest where he can live his first dream of pleasure:

... And just the thought that he was the only one able to seduce that woman, made him very proud of himself: furthermore, he was picturing that a woman so different from the others, could love in a new way, in a different and warmer manner, without the triviality and vulgarity of usual lovers. For this reason he would have loved to find a mysterious and enchanting nest, where he could hide his first dream of love and pleasure; where he could go to die from complete bliss,

from the euphoria and from the unspeakable ecstasy that this love was promising.(14)⁵⁸

To a careful reader, it is immediately clear that Leona represents for Paolo a temporary life experience. She is different from what he is accustomed to and so he wants to explore a different world. This is the reason why he is looking for “a mysterious and enchanting nest” to give to a mysterious woman, who needs to be explored, to escape the monotony of the aristocratic life. To reinforce this concept the author immediately states that Paolo's love is a “first dream”. The message of these two words is clear: a precarious and unreal love. The essence of the word “dream” is connected to the imaginary status of the mind and the adjective “first” insinuates that a second love will follow. Despite these premises Leona is enchanted by Paolo and the splendor of the house, and especially in the first few days she cannot stop admiring the house and the luxury of it. Leona and Paolo: “were living alone, far from the real world, without receiving or giving news, as in a dream”. (17)⁵⁹ Once again the author connects their story to a dream pointing out the ephemeral status of their relationship. Leona seems to be aware of this since: “A dark shadow, sometimes, appeared in her heart; but she was comforting herself saying that she did not have a reason to be suspicious of him.” (17)⁶⁰ To chase away these bad thoughts Leona starts to create her fantastic space within the domestic walls through her music. This is the way Leona detaches herself from her real life and she enters into the daydream state where she can be herself and show her emotions and her fears. The music is her *fantasma* in the house of Naples. Her music is simple, honest, not sophisticated, far from the elegant music that Paolo plays on the piano. Her music represents the real Leona and

⁵⁸ [E il pensiero che egli, solo, aveva saputo conquistare quella donna così diversa dalle altre, gli gonfiava il petto di un orgoglio delizioso: inoltre si figurava che una donna così diversa dalle altre, dovesse amare in un modo nuovo, pietoso e più caldo, senza le piccolezze e le volgarità degli amori di tutti. E avrebbe voluto trovare un nido misterioso e incantevole, dove andare a nascondere quell suo primo sogno di piacere e d'amore; dove andare a morire delle beatitudini, delle ebbrezze, dei rapimenti indicibili che se ne riprometteva.]

⁵⁹ [Vivevano così, soli, lontani dal mondo, senza ricevere e senza dare notizie, come in un sogno.]

⁶⁰ [Un'ombra nera, a volte, le sorgeva nel cuore; ma ella si consolava pensando che non aveva ragione di sospettare.]

her voice follows the path of her emotions when she sings: “when she was saying some sentences that were linked to her condition, her song was becoming something so pure, so winged, and at the same time so communicative...” (17)⁶¹. The music is the way Leona builds her fantastic space to escape, and this space becomes her tactic to survive the strategy. The superficial melody explores what is deeply rooted. Leona is afraid of losing Paolo, and she also fears that this life is not a reality for her. Leona’s fears are realized. After a few months Paolo will become annoyed by Leona and her plebeian authenticity. What before he found attractive in her creates now a nasty feeling toward the Spanish woman. The dynamic within the house of Naples changes, and Paolo becomes despotic and arrogant. Still deeply in love with him Leona suffers in silence, and she has just her music to escape reality. Paolo becomes “pungent and irritable” and Leona “used to shake as soon as she was hearing him returning back home” (28)⁶². The house in Naples is no longer a happy nest; it slowly becomes a prison and the only solace for Leona, besides her prayers, is her music: “Leona had only one solace in the bitter loneliness of her life: her songs” (28)⁶³. The moments in which Leona plays her piano and sings her simple songs are Leona’s own space where she can be herself and she can forget all of her sorrows: “she lapsed into the wave of her song: in the reminiscent sadness of her melody she seemed to see the poor area of Granada, the poor neighborhood of Zagatin...” (29)⁶⁴. While she is singing and playing the piano Leona daydreams of her happy moments when she was with her family in Granada. This space is Leona’s space, her *fantasma* that appears to comfort her, to allow her reprise from Paolo’s anger. In the house in Naples, Leona has just a few moments where she can daydream, and these moments occur when Paolo leaves the house and are all linked to her music. The first part of the novel ends

⁶¹ [Quando ella diceva alcune frasi che poco o molto si potevano riferire alla sua condizione, il suo canto diventava qualcosa di così puro, di così alato e insieme di così intensamente comunicativo...]

⁶² [... Tremava appena lo sentiva tornare a casa.]

⁶³ [... Leona aveva un altro conforto nella solitudine amara della sua vita: le sue canzoni.]

⁶⁴ [E allora, quasi dimenticando i suoi dolori, ella si abbandonava all’onda del canto: e nella evocatrice tristezza della sua melodia le pareva forse di rivedere un basso di Granada nel Zagatin, il quartiere dei poveri.]

with Leona leaving Naples after receiving the news from Paolo's family friend Gabriele Caligaris. Leona learns from him that Paolo accepted the offer of his mother of paying all of his debts provided that he end his relationship with Leona. After this devastating news, Leona sits at the piano and plays: "Gabriele Caligaris left the house. Leona, as in a dreamy state, stood immobile, with her eyes glazed, she approached the piano, she sat, and on a tender and infinitely sad melody she started to sing..." (36)⁶⁵. The pace of her music follows her feelings and she vents all her melancholy and disillusionment so that she can think and pray and leave the house, Naples and Paolo.

The second part of the novel opens with the description of the luxurious world of the Roman aristocracy and with Leona giving a social gathering at her house. Gabriele Caligaris, in love with Leona, provided for her after she left Naples and Paolo. It is here at Leona's dinner that the Spanish woman sees Paolo again after months. At the party, Paolo realizes that he no longer controls the woman and the desire of having her again comes to mind. Paolo's reaction agrees with the rules of the patriarchal system since he selfishly wants to control Leona even if he does not really love her. After his declaration of love, Leona innocently falls into Paolo's trap: "She will be mine again – he fell at her feet". (48)⁶⁶. After the first few weeks of happiness together, in which Paolo is kind to Leona, she is caught in the same constricting domestic scenario she experienced in Naples. This time Leona's reaction is different. She no longer has the music to comfort her, and her own space within the house changes. Leona seems to want to transform into a lovely nest the house-prison she inhabits with Paolo. Paolo soon becomes distant and indifferent to her presence. She feels humiliated, but at the same time she decides to devote herself completely to the housework with the butler Nazzareno, her only friend. Leona becomes submissive and this makes Paolo proud of her dedication to him. Taking

⁶⁵ [Gabriele Caligaris uscì. Leona, come trasognata, stette immobile in piedi, gli occhi fissi nel vuoto; poi, lentamente, si accostò al piano, sedette, e su una melodia di una tenerezza, di una tristezza infinita cominciò a cantare...]

⁶⁶ [Ella sarà di nuovo mia – e cadde ai piedi della donna.]

care of the house becomes her work. When she is alone and after finishing her housework, Leona stops and lets her mind become “a disorganized and unconscious running” passing through “all those places where she had loved and suffered” (60)⁶⁷. In order to survive and to convince herself that all women have to surrender to the selfish male authority, Leona needs to create a different place where she can be happy. As the summertime approaches Leona’s makes a habit of sitting at the window and daydreaming of her happy past: “Leona looked at the sky, at the trees, at the road; and slowly she let her soul daydream” (60)⁶⁸. Leona is happy and free, but her daydreams cannot last forever. In these moments Leona is aware of her two selves: the rational part that wants to inquire why she still loves this man and the irrational part that wants to continue to live with him at home and with his abusive behavior: “Now she was thinking of him with a tender feeling in her heart and with her eyes full of tears. Why? He was treating her so, so badly, that bad boy!” (60).⁶⁹ It is evident that the protagonist has a double relationship with herself and with the house. She is aware of her two selves but she cannot reconcile them. She needs to survive, to escape her sorrow, and to decline her own intimate space within the house, and this creates the duality between reality and fantasy. To this conflict, however, I believe it is important to link the dualism of the subject since the female character is split into a rational and an emotional part. These two selves have a love-hate relationship within the house that is, at the same time, a nest and a prison for Leona. Her character encompasses both of these dualisms. She continues to live in spaces she shares with Paolo. She suffers, but at the same time she wants to stay there, and she tries to persuade herself of her happiness:

She was chatting when she could, to convince herself that she was happy, happy in that house, neither more nor less of many other who are legally united to an

⁶⁷ [Ma dopo una corsa disordinata e inconsapevole... Per tutti i luoghi ove Leona aveva amato e sofferto.]

⁶⁸ [Leona guardava il cielo, guardava gli alberi, guardava la via, e a poco a poco si abbandonava con l'anima a fantasticare e a sognare]

⁶⁹ [Ecco, ella ora pensava a lui con un'onda di tenerezza nel cuore e con gli occhi pieni di lacrime. Perché? Egli la trattava tanto, tanto male, quel cattivo ragazzo!]

owner that treats them sometimes well and sometimes badly, according to his mood, to his work and to the weather. Paolo wasn't bad - she kept telling to herself – he was like the majority of men: selfish. (59)⁷⁰

Leona tries to justify Paolo's behavior and her own circumstances, saying that her situation was not different from other women who were married to an owner. Stressing the rapport of ownership rather than the bond of marriage underscores the sense of possession that men had over women so that women were considered objects, or, to use Contessa Lara's metaphor, dolls. Paolo treats Leona as a doll and steals her body. Leona is owned by him as Giulia, the doll, is owned by different people in her life. Leona is desired by many men but only Paolo is able to seduce her twice, again like Giulia who is desired by many young girls but only Mariuccia can have her. Paolo showed her off, he played with her until he got tired of her and threw her away as Mariuccia did with Giulia.

At the end of the story Leona is left in the house while Paolo is going to get secretly married to a wealthy young woman. A woman is therefore a doll who is owned by a man, she is objectified and moved about by the puppet master which is the patriarchal system. Through the metaphor of the *bambola* I believe these two novels of Contessa Lara are very revolutionary for the 19th century.

To conclude, the analysis of this novel demonstrates that Leona is a resilient character. She is able to use her pain to break Paolo's marriage denouncing the scandal of his affair with his aunt of his wife-to-be. Ultimately, Leona will go back to her world: the circus. The world she was daydreaming about within the domestic walls of the two houses. The simple life of the circus and its simple people make Leona happy and free to be herself. In the end she is different but serene. All the painful and humiliating vicissitudes she went through strengthened her: "She was sad, very sad; but she was feeling, at the bottom of her heart a huge peace, a sense of renewal, that one can feel in

⁷⁰ [... Chiacchierava quando poteva, per dare a intendere a se medesima che ella era felice, felice in quella casa, né più né meno di tante alter donne legittimamente legate a un padrone che le tratta ora bene ora male, a seconda dell'umore che gli danno la propria salute, l'andamento degli interessi, e le condizioni atmosferiche. Paolo non era cattivo – badava a dirsi Leona - era come la maggior parte degli uomini: egoista.]

convalescence, after a long and mortal disease” (76).⁷¹

I led my investigation of the two novels by examining the binary theme of reality versus fantasy. The imaginary and the real worlds are linked together because the female characters I analyzed are split between these two worlds. Their imaginary world is represented by the *fantasmi*, disguised in various ways. This world is where they can show their emotions and desires and also their discontent. The patriarchal system which stole their identity at birth rules the world of reality. Leona and Giulia start the process towards the re-appropriation by women of their bodies. The fantastic space, the expression of their desire, harbors a new sense of ownership. Two words are frequently used in the two novels: nest and prison. These two opposing terms represent the protagonists' lives. The prison is the house where they are segregated, and the nest that should embody the house, I believe, is transformed by their creation of *fantasmi*: becoming their fantastic space. This proves that the house for these female characters is not a secure nest, the intimate space that protects their dreams, as Bachelard asserts; instead, the fantastic space, the *fantasma*, becomes the expression of it. The house, the only place that women can inhabit, becomes the prison built by the patriarchal system. It is only the objectification of the fantastic space will set women free, and Contessa Lara initiates this process.

II.2 Marchesa Colombi. *A Small-Town Marriage*.

Marchesa Colombi, born Maria Antonietta Torriani, is considered one of the first feminists in the panorama of Italian Women Writers⁷². Even though Colombi never took

⁷¹ [Ella era triste, molto triste; ma provava, in fondo, una gran calma, un benessere di rinnovamento, quale si prova in convalescenza, dopo una malattia lunga e mortale.]

⁷² On Marchesa Colombi see: Valisa, Silvia. *Gender, Narrative, and dissonance in the Modern Italian Novel*, (2014) pp.97-112; Grazzini, Sara. *Marchesa Colombi*, in AA. VV, *Scrittrici italiane dell'Otto e Novecento. Le interviste impossibili*, (2013); Zambon, Patrizia. *La provincia nel romanzo realista di fine*

part in the lively debate on women at the time⁷³, she was able to denounce the condition of women and offer a realistic image of the female situation in the Italian context through her characters.⁷⁴ The author mainly worked in the second half of the 19th century and, as Arslan states, Marchesa Colombi analyzes the female society with a lucid sense of irony. In this part of my dissertation I will focus my attentions on the novel *A Small-Town Marriage*⁷⁵ written by Marchesa Colombi in 1885. This is one of her very well known novels along with *In Risaia*, written two years later, in 1887. The reason why I am focusing on *A Small Town Marriage*⁷⁶ is because the protagonist-narrator creates the perfect structure of a parallel fantastic space, which she inhabits for ten years with her family in order to escape the boredom of her everyday life.

The novel tells the story of Gaudenzia Dallara, called Denza, who lives in Northern Italian town of Novara with her father, her aunt, and her sister Caterina, better

Ottocento: Torriani, Zuccari, Serao, in AA. VV., *Letteratura e oltre. Studi in onore di Giorgio Baroni*, (2012) pp.220-224 and *Scrittrici: Scrittori. Saggi di letteratura contemporanea* (2011); Baldissone, Giusi. "Formazione e danneggiamento: scrittura e cultura femminile nella narrativa della Marchesa Colombi", in *Otto/Novecento*, (2003) pp.53-74; AA. VV., *La Marchesa Colombi: una scrittrice e il suo tempo*. (2001); Pierobon, Ermenegilda. *La Marchesa Colombi (1840-1920): profilo bibliografico*, in *Rivista di Studi italiani* (1999) pp.5-12 and "Fra questo sì e no son di parer contrario": affermazione di sé e nome d'arte nella Marchesa Colombi" in *Italian Studies in Southern Africa* (1999) pp.175-187; Cometto, Maria Teresa. *Marchesa Colombi (1840-1920)*, (1996); Barzon, Biancamaria. *Piccole donne e grandi doveri. Il mondo al femminile di Ida Baccini e La Marchesa Colombi tra precettistica e finzione narrativa*, (1995); Pastore, Anna. *Maria Antonietta Torriani. Marchesa Colombi*, in *Otto/Novecento*, (1992) pp.81-104.

⁷³ On Marchesa Colombi and the emancipation of women see Mitchell, Katharine. "La Marchesa Colombi, Neera and Matilde Serao: Forging a female solidarity in the late 19th Century journals for Women" in *Italian Studies* (2008) pp.66-67; Grazzini, Sara. *La Marchesa Colombi e il femminismo tormentoso e incerto* (2006); Neera, "La donna libera" in *L'Illustrazione italiana*, (1876) pp.210-220; Mozzoni Anna Maria. *La donna e i suoi rapporti sociali*, (1864).

⁷⁴ In her book *Dame, Galline e Regine*, Antonia Arslan amply discusses some of the most distinguishing aspects of Marchesa Colombi such as her irony and her sharp psychology of the time. Arslan also depicts the Italian author as capable of giving a realistic representation of women's situation through the female characters.

⁷⁵ For the quotations I am using the English translation by Paula Spurlin Paige.

⁷⁶ See Alesi, Donatella "Lunghe strade maestre, bianche di neve e di polvere»: la provincia in scena nella narrativa della Marchesa Colombi e di Natalia Ginzburg", in DWF (1998) pp. 66-89; Pierobon, Ermenegilda. "L' 'enormità' del reale: una lettura di «Un matrimonio in provincia» della Marchesa Colombi", in *Forum italicum*, (1996) pp.291-310; Santoro, Anna. *Il fatto è che ingrasso. Lettura di «Un matrimonio in provincia» della Marchesa Colombi*, in AA. VV., *Soggetto femminile e scienze umane*. (1993).

known as Titina. Denza's mother died when she was born. After a few years, her father re-marries an older lady with a very direct and practical personality who, despite her strict and matter-of-fact attitude, takes good care of Denza and Titina. The whole novel is centered on the imaginary love story between Denza and Onorato Mazzucchetti, an overweight, wealthy young man, who will end up marrying a rich girl, leading to the collapse of Denza's fantasies of marriage and a fantastic world. At the end of the novel, Denza marries an older man only because she was "already too mature" to wait for someone else.

In the analysis of this novel, I will address the meaning of the fantastic world that Denza creates within the house. What does this world mean to her? Why is Denza not able to detach herself from this *fantasma*? What does the figure of Onorato Mazzucchetti really represent to her? What is Denza trying to achieve with the creation of her parallel, fantastic world? During my investigation, I will answer these crucial questions in order to show how the fantastic space is a strong tool for women writers to voice their discontent with women's conditions.

The two sisters, Denza and Titina, live the first part of their lives in a very eccentric way because their father decides to keep them at home, to keep them out of school, and to teach them how to write, read, and count. Their daily life is punctuated by long walks that the two girls have to make with their father. He is convinced that walking is the only way to keep a healthy mind and body, and he is afraid of "too many hours of immobility" (Spurling Paige:7). Every day they walk for several miles in the countryside, and during this time they also receive an education in renowned works, narrated with enthusiasm by their father. Their favorite part of the day is the evening walks, when they go to the center of the town and see other people. When they are not outside walking, they spend their time at home with their aunt, the old-maid. They are not obligated to do

housework since they have a maid who does the cleaning and cooking. In the words of Denza, the narrator, we know that she and her sister are not unhappy, but at the same time they are not happy either, since she says: “What we felt was apathy, total indifference” (Spurling Paige: p.7).⁷⁷ These two words which Denza uses, “apathy” and “indifference”, are strictly connected and clearly testify to a lack of passion and emotion in the protagonist’s life. At a very young age, Denza passively lives her boring existence broken up by the ordinary routine imposed on her by her father. Denza admits in her narration her lack of interest in the very first sentence when she talks about her youth, saying that “it would be difficult to imagine a drearier childhood, or one more monotonous and joyless than mine”(Spurling Paige:3)⁷⁸. She lives the “endless boredom” of a “dead calm”. The house once again becomes a place of seclusion, where she feels imprisoned. There is no possibility for a young girl to discover what life is really like outside her house, to experience different things, and to live with passion. Denza needs to find something else that makes her feel alive. The only way for her to overcome the apathy of the house-prison is to dream and to create a fantastic space where she can actually live with intense fervor. Denza is curious to know the world, and when she has the opportunity to spend time with her cousins, Maria e Giuseppina, she finds them more emancipated than her; she feels embarrassed about not knowing the world outside her house, and at the same time she is anxious to experience life. Marchesa Colombi describes this depressing situation with a very soft tone. She does not openly attack the ruling patriarchal system with the use of strong words, but she lets the sad circumstances of women of her time come out through the narration of her characters’ life episodes. Marchesa Colombi is an alert psychologist⁷⁹ and witness of the female world that surrounds her. For Denza the family house becomes a prison: the house-nest that

⁷⁷ [Era un’apatia, un’indifferenza assoluta].

⁷⁸ [È difficile immaginare una gioventù più monotona, più squallida, più destituita d’ogni gioia della mia].

⁷⁹ See footnote 41.

Bachelard sees as the place that protects a person's space is again turned into a place without freedom for the young female character. The secluded space in which Denza is forced to live is defined from the very beginning of the story, when she stresses the lack of outside space: there is "no garden, or courtyard, or balcony where we could go for a breath of fresh air" (Spurling Paige:5)⁸⁰.

The novel opens with an ironic⁸¹ description of the house: "We had a house... heavens what a house!" (Spurling Paige:3)⁸². The reader is immediately introduced to the domestic space and this relates to one of the main points of my investigation: the importance of domestic space for women in the late 19th century. The female protagonist portrays the house in its entirety recording the minute details. Also, by placing the description of the house at the beginning of her narrative, Denza implicitly denounces the impossibility for most women to live in a different space than their house and, at the same time, she emphasizes the lack of personal space within the house itself. The description starts by introducing the entrance of the apartment that was "absolutely devoid of furniture" (Spurling Paige:3)⁸³ and without "even a place to leave your hat" (Spurling Paige:3)⁸⁴. Immediately after, she defines the living room as "vast, square living - bright, too bright, because it had no curtains... Was furnished with a sofa against the main wall opposite to the windows, four armchairs - two to the right and two to the left of the sofa, pushed up against the wall, and eight chairs along the side walls, four on each side. In the center of the room was a round table covered by a wool throw"

⁸⁰ [Non c'era un giardino, né un cortile, né un balcone per uscire a respirare all'aperto].

⁸¹ On the use of irony in Marchesa Colombi see: Barbarulli, Clotilde and Brandi Luciana. *L'arma di cristallo: sui "discorsi trionfanti", l'ironia della marchesa Colombi* (1998) and Arslan, Antonia "La Marchesa Colombi tra impegno e Ironia" in *Dame, Galline e Regine* pp.148-151 (1998).

⁸² [Avevamo una casa... Dio che casa!].

⁸³ [perfettamente vuota].

⁸⁴ [Non c'era dove posare un cappello].

(Spurling Paige:3-4)⁸⁵. After the living room, we come to the father's bedroom, where "a big double took up the whole room... On the other side of the big bed there were eight high-backed chairs, but they were neither antique not beautiful. Just old, and they were lined up like so many soldiers" (Spurling Paige:4-5) ⁸⁶. Then there is the description of "an enormous kitchen" (Spurling Paige:5)⁸⁷ where the aunt's bedroom in a small part of it. The last part of this description is reserved for Denza's and Titina's bedroom, as Denza narrates: "in the back of the kitchen there was a large low-ceilinged room, with whitewashed ... Our beds were the primitive kind, made of trestles and benches topped with a bed-sac and a mattress" (Spurling Paige:5) ⁸⁸. This "lonely bedroom" (Spurling Paige:13)⁸⁹ will become her shelter where Denza can daydream of her beauty and of Onorato. This description marks how Denza family's house is so plain and anonymous that it perfectly matches her feeling of living in a "dead place".

Another fact concerning the structure of the house merits analysis. When Denza is about fourteen years old, her father marries an "old lady". Whom we had known for quite a while, and of whom we were completely in awe" (Spurling Paige:10) ⁹⁰. After the marriage the "old, intimidating lady" brings her furniture into the house, and she starts to arrange the living area: "She had her own parlor moved into our living room. By

⁸⁵ [... vasta, quadrata, chiara, troppo chiara, perché non c'erano tende... era ammobigliata con un divano addossato alla parete principale di contro alle finestre, quattro poltrone due a destra e due a sinistra del divano, appoggiate al muro, ed otto sedie lungo le pareti laterali, quattro per parte. Nel centro della sala c'era una tavola rotonda, coperta con un tappeto di lana...].

⁸⁶ [... con un gran letto nuziale che la riempiva tutta. Dall'altra parte del gran lettone, c'erano otto seggiole a spalliera alta, ma punto antiche né belle, vecchie soltanto, e schierate in fila come tanti soldati].

⁸⁷ [una vasta cucina].

⁸⁸ [Dietro la cucina c'era una stanzona larga, bassa di soffitto, colle pareti imbiancate a calce... I nostri letti erano di quelli primitivi, fatti di cavalletti e panchette, con un saccone di cartocci e una materassa].

⁸⁹ [la camera solitaria].

⁹⁰ [una vecchia signora, che conoscevamo da un pezzo, e che ci dava una gran soggezione].

coincidence it was exactly the same as ours... Only ours were green and the bride's were red!... The bride solved the problem by putting the red furniture against the right wall, and the green against the left wall" (Spurling Paige:12).⁹¹

It is interesting to note how by "happy coincidence" the furniture not only has the same style but the same number of pieces that were already in the house and the pieces are exactly the same: "a sofa, eight chairs, four armchairs, and a round table" (Spurling Paige:12).⁹² The two living room sets are rearranged in the same room, one in front of the other, as a specular image of the two families: the old one and the new one. Another interesting aspect to observe, as Denza points out, is the color of the furniture, as one set is green and the other red: "there was no way to arrange them together; the two colors clashed terribly" (Spurling Paige"12)⁹³. This comment shows the feeling that Denza has toward the change: the two families cannot really bond together and the situation within the domestic walls is going to degenerate. The two opposing colors represent the conflicts between the two families that have to be merged into one. Denza starts her life journey here, and at the same time she starts to explore her own identity. She enters into a process that helps her gain a better knowledge of her identity as a woman. At the beginning, the image she sees in the mirror will hurt her. Only toward the end will Denza detach herself from that hurtful image and discover her true self. In the first days, Denza, her sister, and her aunt see the rearranged house's change as a possible positive transformation within the house, because Denza's stepmother starts to receive guests. Unfortunately the

⁹¹ [Fece portare nel nostro salotto tutti i mobili del suo, che, per combinazione, erano precisamente gli stessi che avevamo noi... Soltanto, i nostri erano verdi, e quelli della sposa rossi!... La sposa risolvette la questione collocando il salotto rosso contro la parete destra, il salotto verde contro la parete sinistra].

⁹² [un divano, otto sedie, quattro poltrone, ed una tavola rotonda].

⁹³ [non si potevano fondere; quelle due tinte urtavano terribilmente].

excitement does not last long since Denza, Titina, and the old aunt are excluded from these social events within the house. With her father's marriage, Denza's world becomes even smaller, and she is no longer allowed to participate in the evening strolls to town. For Denza and her sister, the house is now, more and more, a place of seclusion and exclusion from the outside world. Under these circumstances, the idea of the house nest as the place that protects her is far from true. At the same time the stepmother realizes that the two girls do not have any proper knowledge of how to take care of the house, so she starts to teach them what a woman needs to know in order to become the "Angel of the House" and to eventually get married. Once again the female world is reduced to housework and to the search to marry well. These were the goals of women at that time since, as the stepmother says, "girls don't have to be professors. Now's the time for them to learn to keep the house in order, to sew, to iron, to cook, to be good housewives" (Spurling Paige:14)⁹⁴. Denza and Titina become unhappy with their lives, and the following year is even worse for them because of the birth of the stepmother's baby. The new situation in the house provokes an increasing unhappiness in Denza's life and a renewed sense of imprisonment within the house. As anticipated by the clashing colors of the furniture of the stepmother, with the arrival of the newborn, the conflicts within the family start and the interpersonal dynamics change. The arrangement of the household changes again as well and the stepmother becomes obsessed with saving money for her only son. The living room soon becomes a pantry full of food supplies – flour, apples, potatoes, chestnuts, and rice – and the only area of the house reserved to welcome people now is the master bedroom, even though they presently have very few people visiting

⁹⁴ [Le ragazze non debbono diventare dottoresse. Ora è tempo che imparino a tener la casa in ordine, a cucire, a stirare, a cucinare, ad essere buone massaie.]

them. In conjunction with these changes within the domestic space, Denza is changing too. She turns sixteen, and she starts to desire new clothes and a different style, but, more importantly, she becomes aware of her beauty. It is now through her beauty that Denza starts to daydream and to create a separate fantastic world in the attempt to revitalize the monotonous life she leads. She starts to come into contact with the troubling specular image that the mirror shows her: the image of a beautiful young woman. As red and green are opposite colors, Denza sees her natural beauty and her reflection as opposites, because she does not have appropriate clothes for her age. In her domestic life to help her survive Denza begins to reproduce in her mind her own world taking the form of a *fantasma*. This process starts with the image she sees in the mirror and the positive comments on her physical aspect she hears on the street such as: “A handsome young woman...” “Beautiful face...,” “Lovely big eyes...,” “Fresh as a rose...” (Spurling Paige:17)⁹⁵. Denza begins to perceive herself holding her beauty too much, even though the stepmother advises her not to overthink it as she says: “it won’t make you better, or more fortunate, or more loved than anyone else” (Spurling Paige:18)⁹⁶. Counting on the charm of her image, Denza changes her behavior, and the contrast she initially sees between her physical aspect and the lack of appropriate clothes is substituted by a contemptuous attitude as she realizes that even with very modest clothes she attracts the attention of men. After becoming aware of it, Denza cannot sleep at night, and she often turns the lamp on and lets down her braids in front of the very small mirror she has in the bedroom. Now the object-mirror is physically present, and it becomes a crucial part of her fantastic world. While looking at herself in the mirror, the young girl daydreams of

⁹⁵ [Bel pezzo di giovane... Bella faccia... Begli occhioni... Fresca come una rosa].

⁹⁶ [e non ti farà né più buona, né più fortunata, né più amata d’un’altra].

what she can achieve with her beauty. In the act of daydreaming, she is in charge of her thoughts, and she is not detached from them as she would normally be in a nocturnal dream. She consciously needs to create this fantastic place for herself in order to survive within the house. Denza experiences the images she has produced in her fantasies. She projects these images in a different space and in a different time: her own timeless mental dimension. The creation of this parallel fantastic space and the fact that Denza is consciously in charge of it are illustrated by the episode of the lie. One night, while she is daydreaming in front of the mirror she tells her sister that she does not care about being beautiful or ugly. Denza knows she is lying and right after telling the lie she feels guilty and confesses to Titina. The next day, Titina asks her an important question, “What was the matter last night, with that talk about the lie? Were you dreaming?”⁹⁷ And Denza promptly responds “No, I wasn’t dreaming (Spurling Paige:21)⁹⁸”. This answer reveals that Denza is conscious of her actions when she daydreams of a parallel fantastic world. After the feeling of guilt for having told a lie subsides, that same night Denza keeps daydreaming of her beauty and of the young man who might marry her. She becomes so attached to this fantasy that she starts to fall in love with an image that she cannot even fully picture in her mind. This faint image of a young man becomes for Denza a beloved thought as she writes: “This nameless, formless figure, who remained vague even in my imagination, was my most precious thought” (Spurling Paige:21)⁹⁹.

What does this beauty which leads Denza to create a fantastic space really

⁹⁷ [Che cos’ avevi ieri sera, con quella storia della bugia? Sognavi?].

⁹⁸ [No, non sognavo].

⁹⁹ [Certamente, così innominate, incorporeo, indeterminato persino nell’immaginazione, era il più caro de’ miei pensieri].

represent? The answer can be read in Denza's words when she tells the reader "In that ugly house with its thrifty, hardworking ways, and be saddled with that tiresome brat with his little old man's face that showed his parents' age, I was dying to get married" (Spurling Paige:19)¹⁰⁰. According to a recurring pattern in the novels that I am investigating, the daydreams represent the desire to abandon the house-prison that Denza inhabits and where she feels bound to a life that she does not want. For Denza, marriage is a hope for a change, a promise of freedom, as it was for most women of the time. Denza wants to be free, and she thinks her beauty will save her, will open the gate to something more vibrant than the monotony of her house.

Denza's fantastic world can be divided into two spheres. The first part, as I have already said, starts with Denza's realization of her own beauty, while the second part is linked to the imaginary love story between Denza and Onorato Mazzucchetti. The female character begins to live her life combining two imaginary projections of it; the fantastic world she creates within the house is fostered by her imaginary love story. The encounter between her and Onorato happens for the first time at the theater where she has permission to go with her cousins because "it did not cost anything" (Spurling Paige:22)¹⁰¹. While at the theater Denza manages to see her image in a mirror, and she begins to pay attention to her beautiful face's reflection, and she cannot stop looking at herself: "It was more interesting to me than that was happening on the stage, which I didn't understand much and found intimidating, because it was the first time that I had

¹⁰⁰ [Io in quella casa brutta con quelle abitudini laboriose e casalinghe e quell'uggioso marmocchio sulle spalle, colla faccina vecchia da figlio di vecchi, mi struggevo a maritarmi].

¹⁰¹ [non costava nulla].

ever seen an opera” (Spurling Paige:22)¹⁰². It is evident that the mirror is a significant object in Denza’s life. She is now outside the house, but the mirror is there, and she cannot pull herself away from it. The mirror represents the life journey that Denza undertakes. She is trying to fill up the monotony of her life with the fantastic world that her beauty allows her to create. The episode of the theater is relevant to my investigation because here Denza attracts the attention of the young, overweight, and rich Onorato Mazucchetti, as her cousin Maria remarks, “Well, my beauty, you know that you’ve made a conquest, don’t you?” (Spurling Paige:23)¹⁰³. From that night on Denza’s world drastically changes. Her fantastic world is now fed by the creation of an imaginary love story with Onorato. It is clear that Denza needs to experience “otherness” to experience the sensation of fullness, to really understand who she is and to fill up the emptiness of the “laborious, domestic life” she hates. Denza’s life is marked by a sense of emptiness since she does not have what she thinks is meaningful, according to the social standards of the time. First with her beauty and now with the young man she fantasizes about, she tries to eliminate the absence. Her domestic life changes as she admits: “from that evening I began to live with my mind far removed from the housework and my everyday tasks. And having a new focus in my life, so different from nature from the thoughts that had absorbed me until now, did wonders to dispel the gloom of the house and to lighten the burden of my chores (Spurling Paige:26)”¹⁰⁴. Denza’s words are further evidence that the fantastic world she creates is her attempt to re-vitalize the “deathly calm” of the

¹⁰² [Mi attirava più dello spettacolo che non capivo molto, e mi sbalordiva, perché era la prima volta che udivo un’opera].

¹⁰³ [hai fatto una conquista; sai, bellezza?].

¹⁰⁴ [Da quella sera vissi sempre colla mente lontanissima dalla mia casa e dalle mie occupazioni. E l’aver un pensiero nuovo, e di tutt’altra natura di quelli che avevo avuti fin allora, mi alleviava di molto l’uggia della casa ed il peso delle occupazioni].

house, to overcome its “monotonous boredom”. The *fantasma* becomes the place she lives within the house, and real life, for her, is nothing more than “a mechanical force of habit” (Spurling Paige:26)¹⁰⁵. The only desire that Denza has is to find a way to see her cousin Maria again and to find a way to visit the young man, as she confesses: “All that was important to me was to see that young man and, consequently, it was important that I see Maria again. I had to go out with her so that she could point him out to me” (Spurling Paige:26)¹⁰⁶.

The rest of the novel is based on Denza’s idealization of this presumed love story. Denza needs this fantasy to accept her dull life, to survive it, and to feel better suited to the social expectations of the time because “It made me feel desirable, and marriagiable, like the elegant young ladies who had been to boarding school” (Spurling Paige:32)¹⁰⁷. Marriage was a sign of “freedom” for most of the women at the time. Denza is looking for freedom, and I think that “freedom” has to be interpreted here more as a “change” in state. With marriage, women are certainly not free, according to the mentality of the Risorgimento which was strictly patriarchal and pictured the woman as the “Angel of the House”. The fact that Denza’s potential marriage is synonymous with freedom for her is illustrated by the use of the Italian adjective *libera* (free) twice in the sentence. After meeting with her cousin Maria and setting up a plan to meet the overweight young man, Denza, home once again, with the complicity of her sister starts to live “days of excitement, of continuous fantasizing about the same theme” (Spurling Paige:31)¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁵ [maccanica abitudine].

¹⁰⁶ [Mi premeva soltanto di vedere quel giovane, e, per conseguenza, mi premeva di rivedere la Maria. D’uscire di casa con lei perché, incontrandolo, me lo indicasse].

¹⁰⁷ [...Essere desiderata e sposata, come le signorine eleganti educate in collegio].

¹⁰⁸ [... Altri giorni di orgasmi, di fantasticaggini sempre sullo stesso argomento].

During this daydreaming period, Denza openly says that with the possibility of getting married, she and her sister can finally be *libere* (free): “For if I was free, also my sister would also be free” (Spurling Paige:32)¹⁰⁹. In the same sentence, Denza also explains that they both have to be free, mentioning again their domestic situation, which is a particular burden for her, as we read: “... From my stepmother’s tyranny, from the tedious child, from everything” (Spurling Paige:32)¹¹⁰. The desire of leaving her father’s house is so strong that now she falls in love with the image of Mazzucchetti, who is going to substitute for the previous ghostly vision of the imaginary young guy. She is once again in love with the idea of having a lover. Denza’s idealization of this lover is therapeutic for her, and she compares this love to a re-habilitation. She emphasizes again that this love, mostly created in her daydreams, allows her to better bear the constricting habits of her household.

Even though the love story is mostly a projection of Denza’s desires, there are several episodes in the novel that tell the reader that Denza and Onorato have the opportunity to become acquainted. In one instance, Onorato confesses his infatuation with Denza to her. The two young people also have a brief physical contact when Onorato takes Denza’s hand. This episode is particularly relevant to my analysis, as it implicitly states the impossibility of a real love story between the two because of their different socio-economical status. In his own way, Onorato makes this clear to Denza in the episode of “la predizione” (the prediction). He tells Denza that an old lady once predicted that he would hurt the woman with whom he would fall in love and that the

¹⁰⁹ [Libera io, doveva essere libera anche mia sorella].

¹¹⁰ [... dalla suggestione della matrigna, dall’uggia del bimbo, e da tutto].

woman would also be in love with him. In her candor, Denza does not understand the meaning of this prediction so she becomes even more confident in this love and even more dependent on it. It seems clear that Denza takes delight in living in her fantastic world, and she wants and needs to live in it. Right after the episode of the prediction, her thoughts seem to reinforce her pleasure of living in the fantastic world she created within the house, as she exclaims: “ I was also anxious to get married before. But now that I have experienced all of these joys, I desire to savor them, to extend them a little bit, before marrying him¹¹¹”(p.27). To Denza the fantastic world represents the way to experience a life full of joys, a life filled with emotions, with fervor. She wants to stop living chained to the monotonous life that the patriarchal system, represented within the house by the conservative family, chosen for her. Denza is looking for freedom and joy. The word “joy” comes back again but with a different meaning than in the beginning. Finally, Denza seems to experience some of those “joyless days” that she says she missed in her life. The creation of a fantastic world is the only tool she has to feel alive and to be linked, if only imaginatively, to the life she desires. After meeting Onorato, Denza feels “blissful in the sense of security and trust that that love gave me”(Spurling Paige:54)¹¹² and she is so “absorbed in my new happiness” (Spurling Paige:54)¹¹³ that she can easily bear the “irritations of my life at home” (Spurling Paige:54)¹¹⁴. With this ideal love story, she can feed her fantastic world now even more so that she claims “I was happy in the mist of all these annoyances” (Spurling Paige:54)¹¹⁵. The fantastic world she is

¹¹¹ [Anch’io ero impaziente di maritarmi prima. Ma or anche ho provato tutte queste gioie, desidero di gustarle, di prolungarle un poco, prima di sposarlo].

¹¹² [fiduciosa di quell’amore].

¹¹³ [Assorta nella mia nuova gioia].

¹¹⁴ [Noie della casa].

¹¹⁵ [Ero felice in mezzo a quelle seccature].

experiencing shifts her mood from being “unhappy with her life”, as she stated previously, to being happy. She is content because her fantasies temporarily remove the “deadly calm” and the sense of immobility she feels within the house. With the fantasy of that love, Denza is pleased, and she can withstand “a rainy, dreary autumn” (Spurling Paige:54)¹¹⁶ and “a harsh winter” (Spurling Paige:56)¹¹⁷. Even though Denza appears to be somehow happy within her world savoring the imminent joy of marriage, she is completely detached from reality. She deceives herself with daydreaming all day long. This fantastic space, and not the house, becomes the dimension that protects her intimacy, and protects her, the dreamer. This imaginary world allows Denza to forget all of her “old complaints about my family’s patriarchal customs” (Spurling Paige:57)¹¹⁸.

Through Denza’s growing pain, the author was denouncing the general discontent of contemporary women and, consequently, claiming that the fantastic world was an important tool that women had to survive the patriarchal pressure within the domestic walls. Marchesa Colombi openly denounces the situation of women, and by the same token, she introduces to the reader a female character who tries to react against this situation by creating her own world. The stratagem of the daydream is a start, the first tool that women have to find the courage to react strongly against a constrictive environment and eventually change the situation. Women are slowly looking for mobility within the immobility of their lives, and the fantastic space demonstrates the action they take. In the Italian literary context, we have to wait for the novel *A Woman*, written by Sibilla Aleramo in 1906, to see a radical change, as I will show and explain later on in my

¹¹⁶ [l’autunno piovoso e triste].

¹¹⁷ [l’inverno rigido].

¹¹⁸ [...tutte le mie lagnanze passate per le abitudini patriarcali della nostra casa].

investigation. The rest of the novel continues with Denza fully living her *fantasma*. She is convinced that Onorato will marry her and she bases her whole life on this daydream.

Towards the end of the novel there are two episodes that demonstrate Denza's attachment to her fantastic world has grown to the point that it began to hurt her. At this point the fantastic world could become a dead-end place. After receiving an anonymous letter that Denza immediately links to Onorato, she sees him during an evening walk with her family and instantly notices that Onorato's glances have "something unusual... his expression was one of bitterness or melancholy" (Spurling Paige:64)¹¹⁹. That evening Denza goes home "upset" because she had the impression that Onorato wanted to tell her "something sad" (Spurling Paige:57)¹²⁰. The second episode is connected to Denza's first real disappointment when her only sister gets married. After Titina's wedding, the house, which was once a happy place due to Denza's daydreams, again becomes a place of "usual sadness"¹²¹. (p.35) The house again falls into a "deadly calm". Denza realizes that she has spent most of her youth attached to a "ghost vessel"¹²² (p.37). Finally, towards the end of the story, the word "illusion" appears twice. Denza's fantastic world collapses, and all of her daydreams collapse with it. After realizing that Onorato is going to marry someone else, Denza goes back to her monotonous life with the awareness that she has spent the last ten years of her life being "subdued" by her father and her stepmother.

After this long life journey, the mirror gives back another image of Denza. The fresh, hopeful image of the young girl changes into a mature woman who now describes

¹¹⁹ [qualcosa d'insolito, un'espressione di rammarico, di malinconia].

¹²⁰ [qualcosa di triste].

¹²¹ [solita tristezza].

¹²² [vascello fantasma].

herself as discouraged and one who sees her “romantic dreams vanishing” (Spurling Paige:84)¹²³. At the end of the journey, the mirror showed a split subject that is only possible to see at the very end. Denza is divided between her two selves: the one who wants to live the sentimental, dream-filled life and the other who has to recognize the reality and live with it. This is the reason why, even as a more mature woman, Denza is still *triste* (sad) that she is not able to indulge in her “sentimental dreams” anymore. Ultimately, Denza marries another man just because she does not want to repeat her aunt’s life story. She admits: “I was determined to marry him so that I wouldn’t be an old-maid” (Spurling Paige:84)¹²⁴. Denza is in charge of her fantastic world, in which she feels happy and alive. In her daydreaming dimension, she is not subjugated to the patriarchal system because she is the only one who can control it. The fantastic space gives her a sense of mastery, and it is a moment of jubilation, as Lacan would say. At the end of the mirror-journey Denza is a different person. The fantastic space represents for Denza an important tool to denounce her discontent and to try to find a way to survive the patriarchal system without becoming depressed or mad or trying to commit suicide. The fantastic space expresses the embryonic stage of the path for women towards freedom. Denza needs this space to survive and to overcome the “deadly calm.” Onorato and her imaginary love story feed her fantastic space; they are what she needs to complete the mirror journey. She needs “all those years of love, poetry, and romantic dreams”¹²⁵(Spurling Paige:88) to be able to cope with the reality of the imaginary world. Marchesa Colombi portrays a female character that represents the desire of freedom that

¹²³ [svanire i miei sogni sentimentali].

¹²⁴ [... ero risoluta a sposarlo per non restare zitellona].

¹²⁵ [... Tutti quegli anni d’amore, di poesia, di sogni sentimentali].

many women would like to have in order to finally set free the “mad woman in the attic.”

II.3 Matilde Serao. *Checchina's Virtue*.

In this third section I will investigate the work of Matilde Serao, in particular, her short story *Checchina's Virtue*¹²⁶, written in 1883. It is well known that Serao was a very prolific novelist and a successful journalist at the turn of the 20th century, and as Antonia Arslan says she was a “caso straordinario” (extraordinary example) of her time¹²⁷. I believe today we can define Matilde Serao as an advocate of sisterhood in the Italian context, even though she willfully kept her distance from feminist positions. In her activity as a journalist she was always very supportive of her female colleagues' works, and she enthusiastically promoted them in the male dominated literary world.

Checchina's Virtue tells the story of Checchina, a lower middle class woman with

¹²⁶ I use the English version translated by Tom Kelso in *Writing to Delight. Italian Short Stories by Nineteenth-Century Women Writers*.

¹²⁷ Mitchel, Katharine. *Italian Women Writers: Gender and Everyday Life in Fiction and Journalism, 1870-1910*, (2014); Sambuco, Patrizia. “Crossing Boundaries and Borders: Matilde Serao's Travel Writing” in *Italian Women Writers 1800-2000: Boundaries, Borders and Transgression*, (1992) pp.155-170; Ricorda, Ricciarda. *La letteratura di viaggio in Italia. Dal Settecento a oggi*, (2012); Carpentieri, Angela. “Elementi di modernità nella scrittura femminile: Matilde Serao” in *Moderno e modernità: la letteratura italiana*, (2009). Trotta, Donatella. *La via della penna e dell'ago. Matilde Serao tra giornalismo e letteratura*. (2008); AA.VV. *Matilde Serao. Le opere e i giorni*, (2006); Pisano, Rossella. “Nel sogno. Di Matilde Serao in *Critica letteraria* XXXIII, 2, 2006 pp.347-363. Arslan, Antonia. “Corpi di bambine, corpi di donne nell'Italia dopo l'Unità: Neera e Matilde Serao” in *Corpi d'identità. Codici e immagini del corpo femminile nella cultura e nella società*, (2005) pp.35-49; Zambon, Patrizia. *Il filo del racconto. Studi di letteratura in prosa dell'Ottocento/Novecento*, (2004); Fanning, Ursula. *Gender meets Gender: Woman as Subject in the Fictional Universe of Matilde Serao*, (2002); Kroha, Lucienne. “The Novel.” and Patriarca, Silvana. “Journalists and Essayists, 1850-1915.” in *A History of Women's Writing in Italy*, (2000) pp.151-176; Salsini, Laura. Gendered genres: female experience and narrative pattern in the work of Matilde Serao, (1999); Wood, Sharon. “The Sentimental Democracy of Matilde Serao (1856-1927).” In *Italian Women's Writing 1860-1994* (1995) pp.40-57; Fanning, Ursula. “Matilde Serao (1856-1927).” In *Italian Women Writers: A Bio-Bibliographical Source Book*, (1994) pp.386-394; Briganti, Paola. (1988); Bellochio, Paola. *Quel mondo dei guati e delle stoffe*. (1987); Banti, Anna. *Matilde Serao*. (1965).

a very submissive personality and a repressed desire to have a more exciting life: she wishes to escape from her boring everyday routine imposed on her by her stingy husband. Once again a fantastic parallel world within domestic walls provides the protagonist with a healthy way to escape reality in order to survive the male-dominated environment and to avoid extreme gestures such as suicide. The narration opens with the description of the house, specifically the living room. The meticulous description of this room testifies how the domestic environment was at the center of women's lives. Most of these female characters view the domestic space as the site of an epiphany since it is from there that they can start to denounce their discontent through the creation of their own fantastic space, of their own *fantasma*. The domestic space is a representation of women's subjectivity, and it is the place *in* and *from* which they react¹²⁸. The domestic space is a representation of women's subjectivity, and it is the place *in* and *from* which they react. The portrait of the living room is an expression of the "serious and placid aspect of a female without character¹²⁹" as we read:

there were four little armchairs covered with a cloth similar to that of the couch... The chair encircled around a round white marble... And then, in a dull black color, six wooden chairs that seemed to be forever dusty; – a grey marble shelf holding six white porcelain demitasses. a coffee pot and a sugar bowl... A small rug in front of the divan... It was very cold such as lamentable autumn morning, in that glacial parlor (Kelso:21-22)¹³⁰.

¹²⁸ In her article "Domestic space and the idea of home in auto/biographical practices" Kathy Mezei says that the house is the medium for investigating the writer's personality since it is the place inhabited by the author "*in* and *from* which one writes. The domestic effects reflect the writer's self and, according to Mezei, are vital to shape one's self.

¹²⁹ [... aria seria e pacata di femmina senza temperamento].

¹³⁰ [Vi erano quattro poltroncine coperte di stoffa simile a quella del divano... Stavano attorno a una tavola rotonda, dal marmo bianco... Poi: sei sedie di legno nero, dal colore smorto, che sembravano sempre impolverate – una mensola coperta di marmo bigio, su cui stavano sei tazze di porcellana bianca, la caffettiera e la zuccheriera... Innanzi al divano un piccolo tappeto... Vi faceva freddo, con quella lamentevole mattinata autunnale, in quel salotto glaciale.]

A careful reader is able to see how the house reflects the personality of the protagonist. Checchina is a simple woman; she does not have a strong personality, and, for the most part, she lets others control her within the house. She is pictured as a resigned woman, with a “phlegmatic and timid character” (Kelso:32)¹³¹ and with the aspect of “a poor, shabby woman” (Kelso:32)¹³² controlled by her husband. It is evident that this aspect of her is reflected in the living room presented to the reader as a *cold* and *glacial* space. These two adjectives reflect Checchina’s life, a life without emotions and interesting experiences. In the house, and particularly in the living room, we find the specular image of Checchina, the mirror that reflects her. For these women, the domestic space becomes the mirror that offers them the opportunity to investigate themselves and their subjectivity. A change is necessary, and it has to start *in* and *from* the house. Other elements in the description of the living room mimic Checchina’s apathy, such as the pallid colors of grey and black, as well as the marble material present in the room. These two elements, the colors and the material, are indicative of a plain and monotonous life that the female protagonist leads within the house. The room is “dusty,” like her life, since nothing happens outside of the daily routine. To reinforce this sense of apathy within the house and consequently in Checchina’s life, there is also the fact that these colors and the marble are also elements that symbolize funerals, and they might remind the reader of an Italian cemetery where tombs are usually covered by marble. For Checchina, the house is a place of death, a cold nest that imprisons her. It is once again a place of immobility, and the fantastic space is the only place where these women can

¹³¹ [natura flemmatica e timida].

¹³² [povera meschina]

have mobility and action.

The living room area comes back again during the narration when Checchina's husband Toto invites the Marchese d'Aragona for lunch. The familiar space of the house suddenly becomes unfamiliar, and at the same time produces scary and exciting emotions for the female character. For the first time Checchina is ashamed of her house, and she realizes the gloomy atmosphere of the room and how it resembles her. The room is described now as small and with no furniture and, with the Marchese in front of her, Checchina feels "the poverty of that room" (Kelso:26)¹³³. The deadly room is a reflection of the miserable life of the female protagonist, and it also resembles the "new wool dress in the color of fallen leaves" that she wears. (Kelso:32)¹³⁴. The author insists on using these gloomy adjectives to describe everything surrounding Checchina. Now she sees the place with different eyes; with the Marchese as her guest, the house becomes something unfamiliar, particularly when the Marchese starts to talk about his luxurious house that he also describes as *lonely* and *melancholy* and a place where he often dreams of "a ghost, a beautiful woman, simple and good, who I would adore" (Kelso:28)¹³⁵. The Marchese invites Checchina to visit him and, implicitly, to become his lover. The unfamiliar enters the room and fills up Checchina's fantastic space within the house. This new feeling is a source of excitement for the young woman, and at the same time it creates a sense of anxiety because it creates a dissonance within the domestic walls. Marchese's advances open up a new world to the young woman. Checchina's fantastic world within the house starts the day after Marchese's visit. For Checchina, this world holds the possibility of

¹³³ [la miseria di quelle stanza].

¹³⁴ [Vestito nuovo di lana foglia morta].

¹³⁵ [Un fantasma, una bella donna, semplice e buona, che mi volesse bene].

escaping her daily routine and Toto's stinginess and lack of interest in her. The following morning, Checchina is looking at herself in the mirror with an *aria trasognata* (dreamy face), without recognizing her image in the mirror. Checchina is now in her parallel fantastic world, and the image in the mirror is blurry and does not reflect the immobile face of a submissive woman. Checchina starts to have some mobility and action in her own space. For most of the day, she lives in the torpidity of her fantastic space. She tries to wake up and do some work in the house, but she is not able to stop daydreaming, to detach herself from her *fantasma*. Checchina daydreams of a "warm nest", a contrast from the "cold and glacial" nest where she lives. In her daydreams, she hears again Marchese's "deep, touching, caressing voice" that clashes with her husband's "rough voice" and the snoring sounds he makes when he sleeps. She is happy in her fantastic world imagining herself in Marchese's warm and scented nest. She experiences a new emotion, and she does not feel resigned; she is finally in control of her life in this fantastic space. When Checchina goes back to her cold bedroom, the dissonance between the unfamiliar space she wants to explore and the familiar place of reality hits her fantastic space and "a great melancholy invaded her" (Kelso:30)¹³⁶. Thinking of her miserable life and subjected to her husband's authority, Checchina feels "annihilated by isolation". Only in her fantastic world can Checchina experience her desires and her real self, while in the house she inhabits, she feels imprisoned and resigned to perform her gender role. Only when she daydreams can she be free, liberated from her husband and controlling maid. When everybody leaves, the house feels free: "Finally she was alone. For two hours she could come and go, and think; free at least in this" (Kelso:36)¹³⁷.

¹³⁶ [Una grande malinconia la invade].

¹³⁷ [Finalmente era sola, per due ore, da poter andare, venire, pensare, era libera almeno in questo].

Checchina does not have the freedom to leave the house when she wants nor does she have the freedom to think peacefully. At night, while her husband sleeps, Checchina can daydream and live in her physical space. In these moments, Checchina really makes plans to go see Marchese in his apartment, and she feels strong and capable of action. Her immobile gaze becomes a passionate gaze, and she feels brave. She does not feel threatened by her husband or the maid Susanna, and she imagines going to see Marchese, pleased by the idea of fooling Toto and Susanna. Here “and with the lucidity of vision typical of the brains that nocturnal wakefulness exalts” (Kelso:38)¹³⁸. Checchina is proud of herself in her fantastic space because she feels strong and active. The fantastic space gives her the courage to take action and leave the immobility that traps her. The daydreams, the night wakefulness, and the insomnia temporarily create a new person, a stronger Checchina as the narrator remarks: “She seems to have a new strength that she had never felt before, and great courage, and audacity that let her cheerfully overcome any obstacle, and a will so firm that nothing could conquer or break it. She laughed with pride in the night, hunching up her shoulders as if she wanted to try lift an immense weight, for fun, to test her strength” (Kelso:40)¹³⁹.

It is clear that the fantastic space charted in Serao’s work also testifies to the discontent of women’s situation that was coming to light at the end of 19th century. The courage that conjured in her own fantastic space is a “new strength”: this is the embryonic stage that should lead toward the abandonment of immobility. Even though

¹³⁸ [la lucidità di visione dei cervelli che la veglia notturna esalta].

¹³⁹ [Le pareva di avere una forza nuova che non aveva mai sentito in sé, un coraggio grande, un’audacia che fa superare allegramente qualunque ostacolo, una volontà così ferma che nulla poteva vincerla o spezzarla. Rideva di orgoglio nella notte, sollevando le spalle, come se volesse provarsi ad alzare un peso immenso, per giuoco, per provare le sue forze].

this process is momentarily limited to the fantastic space, I believe it is important to investigate it as the premise. However, its limitation is expressed in the short story because Checchina has these courageous thoughts only during her nightly daydreams, but when the morning comes “her will, her strength, her courage slowly dissipated” (Kelso:41)¹⁴⁰; during the day she cannot find the “audacity of her nocturnal vigils” (Kelso:41)¹⁴¹. Checchina experiences the frustration of her immobility, and during the day she is incapable of real action so that she feels “the pain of her inertia” (Kelso:341)¹⁴². She feels defeated, and she senses “the bitterness of an inglorious defeat, in a battle where she did not have the courage either to attack or to defend herself”(Kelso:41)¹⁴³. Checchina is aware of her inaction, of her passivity; she denounces her status in her fantastic world and when her plans become “dust” during the day she feels powerless. This sense of defeat and resignation will prevent Checchina from leading the meaningful life she would like to experience outside her fantastic space. She will never find the courage to cross the threshold of the Marchese’s house to explore that warm nest and leave her glacial prison. Checchina lives her life as an *automa* (robot) controlled by others, and she cannot really act outside of her space. Despite this, I believe it is important to notice that the character of Checchina is not a negative example for it shows that something is changing in Italian society, and the change has to start *from* and *in* the house. The house is the place inhabited by women, it is the place connected to women, and the Risorgimento puts women in this place even though they have no

¹⁴⁰ [Svaniva la sua volontà, la sua forza, il suo coraggio.]

¹⁴¹ [L’audacia delle veglie notturne].

¹⁴² [il dolore della propria inerzia].

¹⁴³ [L’amarezza di una disfatta ingloriosa, in una battaglia dove ella non aveva avuto il coraggio né di attaccare né di difendersi].

freedom in it¹⁴⁴. They are trapped in the house, and for this reason the change for them has to start first at home and at the same time their action has to begin from home. They need to abandon the house *leaving traces*¹⁴⁵ of their subjectivity without the imposition of the patriarchal society. Checchina is resigned, passive, and immobile within the house but becomes aware of her situation and she renounces it through her *fantasma*. Checchina is able to leave traces of her real self only in her fantastic space, and this is the first step for all women at the end of 19th century to leave the attic, to explore and to take action first within their own house and then in the world¹⁴⁶.

II.4 Neera. *Teresa*.

Anna Zuccari Radius, better known by her nome de plume Neera is, with Matilde Serao, the most prolific and successful woman writer in the Italian Literary panorama between the end of the 19th and the beginning of 20th centuries¹⁴⁷. She was very active as

¹⁴⁴ Refer to Chapter one.

¹⁴⁵ Refer to Chapter one.

¹⁴⁶ See Fanning, Ursula. "Angel vs. Monsters: Serao's use of the Female Double in *The Italianist*", VII, 7, 1989.

¹⁴⁷ See Mitchell, Katharine. *Italian Women Writers: Gender and Everyday Life in Fiction and Journalism, 1870-1910*. Through the fictional and non-fictional work of Neera, La Marchesa Colombi and Matilde Serao, Katharine Mitchell examines the involvement of Italian writers on the "woman question" in 1870-1910 and the denouncement in their literary works of the imposition of the patriarchal system despite their conservative position. In Chapter Three, "Gendering Private and Public Spheres" (pp.59-93), Mitchell addresses the space that women have within the house and how this space within the domestic walls is divided into public and private spaces. Also on this topic see Mitchell, Katharine and Helena, Sanson (eds). *Women and Gender in Post-unification Italy: Between Private and Public Spheres*. On Neera see also: Azzolini, Paola. *Di silenzio e d'ombra. Scrittura e identità femminile nel Novecento italiano*, (2012); Mitchell, Katharine and Ramsay-Portolano. *Rethinking Neera*, (2010); Azzolini Paola. *Il cielo vuoto dell'eroina. Scrittura e identità femminile nel Novecento italiano*". (2001); Folli, Anna. *Penne leggere. Neera, Ada Negri, Sibilla Aleramo. Scritture femminili italiane fra Otto e Novecento*. (2000); AA.VV. *Ritratto di signora (Anna Radius Zuccari) e il suo tempo* (1999); Arslan Antonia, *Dame, Regine e Galline. La scrittura femminile italiana tra '800 e '900* (1998): 85-147; Merry, Bruce. "Neera." *Italian Women Writers. A Bio-Bibliographical Sourcebook*. (1994): 86-294; Corda, Maria Grazia. *Il profumo della memoria: identità femminile e scrittura in Neera*. (1993); Zambon, Patrizia. "Leggere per scrivere. La formazione autodidattica delle scrittrici tra Otto e Novecento: Neera, Ada Negri, Grazia Deledda, Sibilla Aleramo" in *Studi Novecenteschi* XVI 38 (1989): 287-324;

a writer and as a journalist, and, as Antonia Arslan writes, she always made an important distinction between her private and her public life. She was an exemplary mother and wife and a sophisticated spokesperson for the female condition in her narratives. Neera, like the authors that I have investigated in this dissertation so far, does not depict revolutionary female characters but she definitely wants to denounce a discontent in society and the necessity for change. This is, I would say, the common denominator for female writers in this time frame. They first need to make women aware of their own situation in order to prepare the ground for future action. In her description Arslan asserts that her female characters are divided between the desire for happiness and their social impositions and they do not have the courage to oppose to social norms. Neera was very clever in showing to the reader how these weak and submissive female characters slowly take charge of their own thoughts, become aware of their small world, and realize things need to be changed. They feel the desire for freedom and for this reason I agree with Arslan when she defines Neera's female characters as heroines because they had the courage to analyze their situation silently, find a way to survive their lack of freedom, and react to it without resorting to extreme acts. I assert that the fantastic space is their weapon, a sort of passive action rather than completely surrendering to the patriarchal system. The novel I am going to analyze for this author is *Teresa*, written in 1886.

Teresa is not only the best known novel of Neera but I consider it her manifesto as a woman writer. The life journey that the character Teresa undertakes is very

innovative for the time, and it shows how the submissive female character is able to forge her way to freedom. The novel describes the life of Teresa, called Teresina, the older daughter of Signora Soave and Signor Caccia. She has a docile and submissive personality, like her mother, as the author points out at the beginning of the novel: “She was serious and warmhearted by nature” (King:15)¹⁴⁸ and also: “Teresina was calm and chaste”(King:31)¹⁴⁹. The female protagonist is immediately introduced to the reader according to the criteria of the Risorgimento that, as I have already explained, depicted the woman as the Angel of the House devoted to the family and the house¹⁵⁰. Teresina’s submissive nature is reinforced by the physical and character contrasts between Teresa and her sisters: the twins and the youngest one, Ida. Teresa has to play the role of a mother for all of them because of Signora Soave’s poor health, and she spends all of her youth taking care of the family. The twin sisters are initially described as physically stronger than Teresa who is tiny and delicate as her mother as the author tells us: “The twins, who had grown into two pretty young women, flaunted their seventeen years with a certain insolence... And in fact, Teresina’s small stature, her pale, calm face, were enough to make her disappear between those two giants, who had inherited their father’s strong coloring and wide shoulders” (King:155-156)¹⁵¹. In addition to the physical difference that puts Teresa in an inferior position, the different personalities also emerge for the twins are not quite as calm as the female protagonist: “Peace ended completely when the twins return from school. Then there was sure to be quarreling. Signora Soave

¹⁴⁸ [Il suo temperamento la portava alla serietà, e il suo cuore all’affetto.]

¹⁴⁹ [Teresina era calma e casta].

¹⁵⁰ Refer to Chapter one.

¹⁵¹ [Le gemelle, che s’erano fatte due ragazzone vistose, sfoggiavano con una certa insolenza i loro diciassette anni... E difatti la piccola statura di Teresina, il volto pallido e tranquillo, erano propri a farla scomparire in mezzo a quei due colossi, che avevano ereditato dal padre il forte colorito e le spalle poderose].

would lose her last remaining energy”¹⁵² (King: 30). The adjectives used to depict the twin sisters are the opposite of the ones used for Teresina since they are presented as capricious, envious, and malicious, while Teresina is good, candid, innocent, calm, and resigned. Teresina's isolation and her inferior position within the domestic walls are also underlined by the contrast with her youngest sister Ida, who was not only the preferred daughter but also the one who was allowed to study and to become a teacher.

Teresina never had access to an education even though she had wanted it from a very young age. In different ways her sisters take away from her everything she wanted, the marriage, the education and the emotions of her youth since “she had grown up in a tranquil family atmosphere in a quiet provincial town”¹⁵³ (King:15). Antonia Arslan asserts that Teresina is “a provincial girl like many, who does not characterize herself by anything: not particularly intelligent, nor beautiful, she is not an intellectual, she has no knowledge nor spirit nor particular talent”¹⁵⁴. Arslan’s words are accurate if we remain with Teresina's superficial representation. It is necessary to add to this comment that Teresina's simplicity is merely illusory because her candor reveals her desire to discover and experience emotions. I, on the other hand, would describe her as intelligent since the fantastic space that she creates to survive within the “modest and austere house” (King:167)¹⁵⁵ shows a curious woman torn by the “society telling her to refuse, nature

¹⁵² [La pace finiva del tutto con il ritorno delle gemelle dalla scuola. Allora erano liti sicure. La signora Soave vi perdeva gli ultimi avanzi d’energia].

¹⁵³ [Era cresciuta nell’ambiente tranquillo della famiglia, in quella cittaduzza di provincia, lontana da tutte le emozioni].

¹⁵⁴ See Arslan, Antonia. “Rileggendo Teresa, o l’immagine dello specchio” in *Dame, Galline e Regine* pp.137-144.

¹⁵⁵ [casa casta e severa]

crying out for her to accept” (King:152)¹⁵⁶.

Before starting the analysis of Teresina's fantastic space, I am going to investigate how the structure of the house plays an important role reflecting the cloistered life of Teresina. The bond between the female protagonist and the house is evident from the beginning of the novel. The first adjectives used to describe the residence are *modesto* and *provinciale*: they seem to reflect the female character since the domestic environment is also simple and not very lively. In this novel the description of the domestic space does not show in great detail the disposition of the furniture in the rooms, as in the previous authors, but the narrator points out the sharp contrast between the female and the male space within the house. The description of these spaces gives the reader a specular image of the personalities of its inhabitants. In order to understand it better, it is necessary to start from the detailed description of Signor Caccia's office:

It was a small room... The stark simplicity of the furnishing was in keeping with a certain bureaucratic importance, revealed principally by a bookcase of paper enclosed by a wrought-iron grill ... Against the wall, to leave more space, an old table covered with written and printed papers, a black ink bottle in the middle, two pens and the tax collector's glasses. Over the table the portrait of the King. Four chairs covered in a dark leather completed the furnishings, beside the old armchair shaped like a Roman chariot, where signor Caccia sat enthroned, often arrogant, always imposing (King:27)¹⁵⁷.

The description of Signor Caccia's study shows immediately his dominant personality within the family system. In describing this male space the author mentions some

¹⁵⁶ [La società che le dice respingi, la natura che le dice accetta].

¹⁵⁷ [Era questo uno stanzino piccolo... La più assoluta semplicità nell'arredamento non andava accompagnata da una certa burocratica importanza che si rivelava principalmente in una scansia piena di carte d'ufficio, chiusa, se non riparata, da un graticcio di fili di ferro... Addossato al muro, per non impedire troppo il passaggio, un tavolaccio carico di carte scritte e stampate con un calamaio d'osso nero nel mezzo, due penne e gli occhiali dell'esattore. Sopra il ritratto del re. Quattro sedie coperte di pelle scura completavano il mobilio, oltre il seggiolone vecchio in forma di biga romana, dove il signor Caccia troneggiava, spesso burbanzoso, imponente sempre].

elements that place Signor Caccia in a superior position: the King's portrait¹⁵⁸ and the chair shaped as a roman chariot. It is evident that he considers himself the King of the house, and, consequently, everybody else waits on him and obeys his wishes.

Additionally, the chair reminds the reader of the power of Rome, of a triumphant period in Italian history, and contributes to this sense of omnipotence within the domestic walls. The office represents his exclusive personal space and consequently his superiority in the family context. Another detail that demonstrates his power and the sense of terror that he exerts is the facts that his wife *timidamente* (timidly) enters the office every morning to clean it and the remark that Teresina calls him every day at four to eat "opening the door only half way" (King:28)¹⁵⁹. Signor Caccia's office shows the arrogance of the patriarchal system that controls women, makes them invisible and consequently less threatening to the male dominated world¹⁶⁰. If the narrator uses signor Caccia's office to showcase his arrogance, the contrast between his office which later becomes his son Carlino's *studio* (study room or study), and the *gineceo* (gynaeceum) is indicative of the division within the house between the male and feminine worlds. This separation allows for the patriarchal system to retain its power. Once again the house is not the place where women can express their agency or their influence in raising the family, as the Risorgimento asserted. The house is only a space of seclusion and segregation.

The study is occupied every day by Carlino, the only male child in the family, who is forced by his father to study precisely because since he is "his only son, the

¹⁵⁸ It is necessary to consider that the portrait of the King also has an important historical meaning. After the unification of Italy, Vittorio Emanuele II was proclaimed King of Italy. For a succinct analysis of this historical period see Riall, Lucy. *The Italian Risorgimento: State, Society and National Unification*.

¹⁵⁹ [Schiudendo l'uscio solamente per metà, coi piedi fuori].

¹⁶⁰ Refer to p.19, Chapter one.

offspring who had to transmit to future generations the Caccia's genius- heretofore unknown"¹⁶¹ (King: 28). As a male Carlino has the right to study, to explore life and the world, while Teresina as a young woman has only the possibility to dream about having access to knowledge and life's experience: "All those newspapers, all those letters were being brought to those destined for a world of emotions. In the postman's lather black bag were joy, sorrow, hope, elation, promise, curiosity, fantasy, affection -all the desirable things unknown to the young girl... A life's secrets were there" (King: 21)¹⁶². Teresina wants to know, to experience life, but she is not allowed to discover the world around her; she can only dream, looking out the window, what life and culture could mean for her.

The room reserved for Teresina and the other female family members is the *gineceo*. The room was placed in front of the study reserved for the work of men. The position of the house is already a sign of contrast. Putting these two opposite rooms, one in front of the other, implies an inevitable comparison between the two opposite worlds: the female and the male world. It is also interesting that the author purposely uses the term "gynaeceum", borrowing it from the Ancient Greek; a term defining the space within the house reserved for women to indicate their inferior position to men¹⁶³. At the

¹⁶¹ [Il suo unico maschio, il rampollo che doveva trasmettere alle future generazioni l'ingegno dei Caccia, rimasto fino allora sconosciuto].

¹⁶² [Tutti quei giornali, tutte quelle lettere portavano a chi erano destinati un mondo di sensazioni. Nella borsetta nera del procaccio c'erano gioie, dolori, speranze, ebbrezze, promesse, curiosità, fantasia, affetti – tutto l'ignoto, il desiderato, quello che la fanciulla non sapeva... Ogni segreto della vita era là].

¹⁶³ The concept of the *gynaeceum* goes back to the ancient Greek division of the domestic space. The gynaeceum was a part of the house reserved just for women and it was opposite to the *andron*, the portion of the house reserved for men. This gendered division of the house shows the inferior position of women in Greek society. In Neera, as well as in the other two authors I investigated, this gendered division is vastly present. Katharine Mitchell, in the third chapter of her book *Italian Women Writers*, underlines this sociological aspect and the role that these narratives have in making the female readers aware of the lack of space they have within and outside of the house.

end of the 19th century this space continued to have the same meaning:

Opposite the little study where Carlino did his enforced apprenticeship of budding genius, at the other side of the vestibule, was a large, oblong dark, shabby room, the women's room, where they sewed, ironed, added up the daily expenses... The furniture more or less resembled that in the study; instead of the bookshelf, a large wardrobe with white wood, a corner cupboard where bread and leftovers were kept, a table in the middle, a small, angular uncomfortable divan hard as a rock, several chairs of different shapes and colors (King: 29)¹⁶⁴.

Reading the description of the gynaeceum, it is immediately clear that there was no trace of education in it, since the pantry substituted the bookshelf. The room is a place where women can do the housework to better serve the house. This is not a private space for them, and it is far from being a room of their own. This is a women's room of "controlled invisibility". Women are trapped here, but it is from looking out the window of this room that Teresina starts to articulate her thoughts and becomes visible in her own fantastic space. Teresina's fantastic space is a journey to discover herself and to react passively to her father and to the rules of society. Time in the gynaeceum seems to stand still, the monotonous life imposed on women by the patriarchal system does not allow emotions and life in the room, as the clock and the little mechanical donkey on the wall testify: "the timepiece and donkey hadn't moved for a long time" (King: 29)¹⁶⁵. Teresina is trapped there, and must hide her desire to know the world. However, the room shows a sign of hope in the symbol of the windmill which, unlike the other two objects, is mobile and "like a restless ghost continued to wave its scrawny arms" (King: 29)¹⁶⁶. I believe here

¹⁶⁴ [Dirimpetto allo studiolo... Si apriva una gran camera bislunga, scura e triste, il gineceo della famiglia; lí stavano le donne a cucire, a ripassare il bucato, a fare i conti della spesa giornaliera... Il mobiglio poco su poco giú, somigliava a quello dello studiolo; invece della libreria, un armadione di legno bianco, un cantonale, dove si riponeva il pane e i cibi avanzati, la tavola nel mezzo, un piccolo divano incomodo, angoloso, duro come un macigno, parecchie sedie di differenti forme e colori.]

¹⁶⁵ [Orologio e asinello erano fermi da gran tempo].

¹⁶⁶ [Continuava ad agitare, come un fantasma irrequieto, le sue scarne braccia].

Teresina is like the windmill which refuses to surrender to “the dark and shabby room”: instead, she lives in her fantastic, parallel world and feeds it with her thoughts, daydreams, and hopes.

The *fantasma irrequieto* is Teresina’s space, where she starts to build up her visibility. Teresina builds within the house her own space, the fantastic space¹⁶⁷. In this space her real soul comes out and is protected¹⁶⁸. The fantastic space is a place where women can feel free within the house and can let their own self come out. In this space the “I” is unchained and not constructed by the patriarchal system. Here Teresina will abandon herself in daydreams, showing her real self, and starting to leave traces in the house. The creation of her own fantastic space starts with Teresina looking out of the window. Through the window of her house Teresina sees the life outside of her house. She looks at the other houses, daydreams of the life of her extravagant and mysterious neighbor Calliope, and sees the mailman and all the other people in their everyday life. This world is interesting and fascinating for Teresina since it is the only part of the outside world she can see. The window becomes the connection between her and the

¹⁶⁷ Martin Heidegger explores the concept of “Building, dwelling, thinking” asserting that not all buildings are made for dwelling, such as bridges, railway station, highways, etc. In addition to these there are also buildings that are built to be inhabited, since they give shelter to individuals even though they do not really dwell in them. Heidegger investigates how buildings belong to dwellings and how this dynamic is considered in architecture. I believe this concept can be connected to the domestic space I am investigating since the house is inhabited by female characters and gives them shelter, but the patriarchal system does prevent them from dwelling in the domestic space. For this reason these female characters need to build their own fantastic space, in which they can dwell while leaving their traces. It is also important to point out that the fantastic space is not always portrayed by a physical room but it is often represented by daydreams.

¹⁶⁸ Bachelard in “The House. From Cellar to Garret. The Significance of the Hut” (*The poetic of Space* pp.3-37) analyzes the house as a private space for individuals and the place where our memories and daydreams are protected. According to Bachelard, in the shelter of the house the non-I that is the one who we show to the outside world, protects the real-I that appears only in the shelter of the house. The house is viewed as a protected space where the real-I can be liberated. Once again this situation for the female characters is possible only in the fantastic spaces they create, since within the domestic walls they have to show the I that the patriarchal system created for them.

world she desires to experience, but at the same time it shows the separation between Teresina, as a young woman, and the outside world¹⁶⁹. Through the window she can see but a small part of the world about which she fantasizes in her *agitato fantasma*. In this world Teresina immediately thinks how it might be to leave the nest and fly away: “She thought it would be nice to fly like Don Giovanni on a nice April morning, with little travelling bag, fly away through the world into the unknown.” (King: 34)¹⁷⁰. In her daydreams, Teresa leaves the nest-prison of her severe house to create her own “sweet, small nest” to experience, to make the unknown known, and to escape the monotonous routine of her house. In her daydreams of a nest full of joy and a new life she sees marriage as her only possibility of change.

Teresina’s monotonous life experiences a pleasant break during a trip to her aunt’s house. This episode is important because for the first time in sixteen years Teresina experiences a room of her own and the joy of being away for a few days from her room and family’s duties. At her aunt’s, Teresina is able to sleep in her own bedroom. Teresina experiences something new, even though the room is just a regular bedroom, she sees everything with different eyes: “Waking up in the new room the next morning brought new pleasures... There was nothing special about the new room; but for Teresina everything was new, from the bed to the beautiful earthenware basin with blue

¹⁶⁹ Katherine Mitchell points out in her book *Italian Women Writers* pp.77-79 that the window and the balcony are depicted as public spheres in these narratives because they occasionally represent the only contact for women with the outside world and it offers the possibility to women to interact with the opposite sex. Later on in the novel Teresina will secretly meet Orlandi through the ground floor window, and Mitchell also states that she does not have a lot of time during the day to stay by the window due to the house duties. The window space is regulated for women and men in different ways since women have to keep a “proper behavior”.

¹⁷⁰ [Le sembrò che dovesse essere una bella cosa il volare, volare, volare, come don Giovanni, in un bel mattino d’aprile, con una valigetta in mano, via per il mondo, incontro all’ignoto].

flowers”¹⁷¹ (King: 43). The room is not very different from the one at home, but Teresina is for the first time on her own, “no one make[s] her anxious” (King: 44)¹⁷², and she feels free: “A whole room for herself, an unconfined area, absolute freedom” (King: 44).¹⁷³

The author anticipates Virginia Woolf’s years later claim that women must have a room of their own. Teresina needs this private space to start to discover herself, to get to know herself, to have, for the first time, the chance to look at herself. In this room Teresina’s journey starts; looking at herself in the mirror, she sees things that always belonged to her but she never had the time to see. Once again the mirror marks for a fictional character the first stage of the journey into herself, and Teresina sees a real person reflected in it. She becomes aware of her own body: “How white her arms were! She had never had time to look at them before... She couldn’t make out why they were white while her face and even her neck were darker. Even under her collar bone were her breast begun, the white reappeared” (King: 45)¹⁷⁴. Teresina feels surprised, and the mirror becomes the instrument that allows her to analyze her body, in particular, her face. In her father’s house, Teresina, the oldest daughter, has to take care of the household chores and has to share not only her space but also her life with the rest of the family. Teresina sacrifices her whole life for her ideal love and for others. In her house, Teresina does not have time to let her “I” be and exist. Her real self exists not in the house but only in the space she creates, in her *agitato fantasma*. Teresina devotes most of her time to “others” and only at

¹⁷¹ [Il destarsi, all’indomani, in una camera nuova, fu per Teresina sorgente d’altri piaceri... Non vi era nulla di speciale in quella camera; ma per Teresina tutto era nuovo, incominciando dal letto, fino alla catinella di una bella terraglia a fiori azzurri.]

¹⁷² [nessuno le faceva premura.]

¹⁷³ [Tutta la camera era per lei, vuota, un’ampiezza sconfinata, un’assoluta libertà.]

¹⁷⁴ [Come erano bianche le sue braccia! Ella non aveva mai avuto il tempo di guardarle... proprio non sapeva capacitarsi come fossero bianche, mentre il colorito del volto tendeva al bruno, ed anche il collo era bruno; solo scendendo sotto la clavicola, dove principiava il petto, il bianco riappariva.]

the very end of her life journey the mirror will give back the image of a different Teresina who focused on herself, getting rid of otherness. In order to understand fully the path of her life journey, it is necessary to analyze all the different steps that Teresina takes to regain charge of herself. The private room at her aunt's house gives her the courage and the opportunity to let her "curious happiness" (King: 46)¹⁷⁵ emerge. This curiosity was also present at her father's house when Teresina looked out the window and expressed her desire to know and experience life, even though the young woman did not have the freedom or the time to indulge it. The investigation of her own body makes Teresina wonder about her physical aspect; she becomes aware of her own defects but also of her own good qualities. What is more important, she starts to appreciate herself and talks happily to the image she sees in the mirror: "I'm beginning to get some self-*esteem*!" – she said smiling at herself in the mirror at the funny idea that she could *esteem* herself. She stood stock-still, struck by the sparkle she saw on her full red lips and dazzling white teeth" (King: 45)¹⁷⁶. The brief vacation at her aunt's is an important step for the young woman.

In addition to discovering her own body, Teresina experiences for the first time the courting of a young man, Cecchino. After attending her first ball, Teresina cannot stop thinking of the nice words Cecchino said to her while they were dancing. Teresa needs and wants to stay in her room and daydreams of the "the new person lodging in her" (King: 45)¹⁷⁷. For the first time Teresina experiences the mixed feelings of happiness and the melancholy of love. At her aunt's house she has the time and space for herself,

¹⁷⁵ [allegria curiosissima].

¹⁷⁶ [Incomincio a stimarmi anch'io! – Disse così, sorridendo a se stessa nello specchio, per l'idea buffa ch'ella potesse stimarsi, e restò immobile, colpita dallo scintillio che vide davanti a sé su quelle labbra rosse, tumide, e su quei denti di una candidezza abbagliante.]

¹⁷⁷ [nuovo ospite che albergava in lei.]

but things change when she goes back to her normal routine. Once back in her house Teresina is again overwhelmed by her life and the lack of private space. The invasiveness of her twin sisters takes possession of her memento of the ball, and consequently her memories of the young Cecchino cause her to have a nervous breakdown.¹⁷⁸ In her father's house Teresina is able to cope with her busy and invasive family's life through the daydreams that feed her *fantasma* during the day and at night after everybody is finally sleeping: "All summer long she rocked herself in thoughts of that love, nourishing extravagant illusions" (King: 55)¹⁷⁹. Teresina's fantastic world is the only dimension she has to discover and to experience her real self. The fact that her fantastic world is a journey is also attested by the fact that after Teresina goes to the theater to see the opera *Rigoletto* she stops dreaming of Cecchino and starts dreaming more generically about the concept of "love", which for the young woman is still "vague, mysterious, immense... Not yet entirely revealed" (King: 61)¹⁸⁰. It is evident that, for Teresina, Cecchino is the connection that ultimately enables her to explore what love and life are. For Teresina this is a journey to understand her real self and also to understand "*il segreto della vita*" (the secret of life) which for her lies primarily in discovering what love is. She tries to feed her *fantasia vergine* (virgin fantasy) with her brother, Carlino, and his friends' stories, and the daydreams become so real in her mind that she feels she knows them. Teresina's

¹⁷⁸ Later on in the novel Teresina will be seriously affected by a hysterical crisis. This crisis and consequently her neurasthenia are linked to her repressed and sacrificed life. Katharine Mitchell, in her article "Neera's Refiguring of Hysteria" gives an interesting and detailed analysis of how this neurasthenia of Teresa and Marta, the protagonist of *L'Indomani*, is linked to their repressed sexuality and the discovery of auto-eroticism. In the same article the author quotes the definition of *nervosismo* that Neera makes *Dizionario d'igene per le famiglie* which she co-authored with Mantegazza. The definition she provides stresses the conservative position that Neera takes. She believes that *nervosismo* is caused by the desire of female emancipation. For this reason she suggests that women resign themselves to the role of being Angels of the House. The anti-emancipation position taken publicly by Neera certainly contrasts with the denouncement of the repressed female situation in her novels. I think that Neera's position was her strategy in order to be accepted among the male literary arena ultimately voicing women's situation at the time. On the anti-emancipation of Neera see also: Raluca Larco, Ioanna. "Merging territories: (Anti)Feminism in Neera's *Una giovinezza del secolo XIX*". In *Altrellettere* 26.8.2014 and Seno, Cosetta. "Il dibattito sul femminismo nell'Italia post-risorgimentale. Neera e la voce emancipazione nel *Dizionario di igene per le famiglie*" in *Il Lettore di Provincia*, XLII, 137, 2011 pp.25-32.

¹⁷⁹ [Per tutta l'estate si cullò in quel pensiero d'amore, accarezzando illusioni stravaganti.]

¹⁸⁰ [vago, misterioso, sterminato... Non ancora interamente rivelato.]

fantasticherie (daydreams) appear while she is doing housework in the gynaeceum, but they don't last for too long since "a shout from Ida, a complaint from her mother, would brutally waken her" (King: 82)¹⁸¹. In addition to being disturbed by her household, her fantastic world is also interrupted by her father's voice and by the authority of the patriarchal system that recommends to women "modesty, humility, silent activity within the domestic walls, and obedience to the strong sex" (King: 83)¹⁸². Women have to obey men and be secluded within the house, so that men will have total control over them. This sense of control shows that the "strong sex" fears the "weak sex", since it sees women's freedom as a threat. Women are aware of men's weakness and the author clearly states it in aunt Rosa's words: "men are much weaker than we are" (King: 47)¹⁸³.

Teresina's fantasies become more intense when she meets the man she will love for the rest of her life, Orlandi. In the novel, Orlandi represents a hope for the young woman. On her trip to Marcara, Teresina meets for the first time Orlandi and the young man's free soul is immediately depicted in the words of the carriage's driver: "You meet him everywhere. Here today, tomorrow at Mantova. Morning dashing through the countryside in the sulky evening at Parma or Cremona. That's Orlandi" (King:39)¹⁸⁴. In the novel, the male character well represents men's freedom within the society. He is described as "crazy with youth and happiness" (King:88)¹⁸⁵ completely different from Teresina's meek and calm personality. After Orlandi's declaration of love, thinking of him becomes a fundamental part in Teresina's life, and he plays an important role in her destiny. Teresa's liberation depends on him and only through the idea of marriage

¹⁸¹ [un grido dell'Ida, un lamento della madre, la destavano bruscamente.]

¹⁸² [la modestia, l'umiltà, l'attività silenziosa nelle pareti domestiche, l'ubbidienza al sesso forte].

¹⁸³ [Gli uomini sono molto più deboli di noi].

¹⁸⁴ [Lo si incontra dappertutto, oggi qui, domani a Mantova; la mattina in sediollo per le champagne, la sera a Parma o a Cremona. È l'Orlandi].

¹⁸⁵ [pazzo di gioventù e d'allegria].

Teresina can bear her life in the house. Teresina sees the marriage as an escape from the house and as a premise of a better life. It is interesting to see that even though Orlandi loves Teresina and she is kind and pure, his life as a man does not depend on her. Society gives him the possibility to choose his destiny¹⁸⁶, to be the person in charge of his life as the narrator states: “He didn’t need that girl in order to be happy, but she was a complement to his happiness” (King” 141)¹⁸⁷.

Teresina’s fantastic world shows the desires and dreams of a young woman raised in fear and within the limitations dictated by the patriarchal society. For this reason she is in a constant process of doing and undoing herself according to the norms. She follows the rules of society, creating an identity that society expects from her but at the same time she deconstructs her real self and she suffocates it. Teresina starts to know her real “I” only in her fantastic space. I agree with Arslan that the female characters depicted by Neera are not revolutionary, but I believe that in her *agitato fantasma*, Teresina is able to begin to react to the patriarchal system since she refuses to get married to anyone but Orlandi without really fearing the label of *zitella* (spinster)¹⁸⁸. Since the day of her first

¹⁸⁶ Simon De Beauvoir, in the chapter “The Young Girl” of *The Second Sex* pp.329-370, addresses women’s lack of freedom in society. They are domesticated at a very young age. While the adolescent boy, she says, desires and dreams of a woman, she will never be the main part of his life. She is just a small part of it since his “male superiority” allows him to be free and to not depend on women. On the other hand the young girl looks at the man and consequently at marriage as her only possibility of escape and freedom. The only chance that a woman has to leave the paternal house and experience a different life is marriage. For this reason, De Beauvoir asserts that man represents the Other for woman, and the man becomes the essential for her.

¹⁸⁷ [Egli non aveva bisogno di quella fanciulla per essere felice, ma la trovava un complemento alla sua felicità].

¹⁸⁸ To better understand the social meaning of spinster in Neera see Lucy Hosker, “The Spinster in the works of Neera and Matilde Serao. Other or Mothers?”, in *Women and Gender in Post-Unification Italy* pp.67-91. Hosker retraces the concept of the spinster within the Italian society after the Unification where the spinster was considered an individual who failed according to social rules. This was particularly stressed in the historical period of the Unification which promoted the importance for a woman to be a good wife and mother. In addition to this Hosker points out that the spinster threatened the male world because of her relative independent position from men.

interaction with Orlandi and the stroll in the countryside with her brother Carlino, Teresina cannot stop thinking of him: “A thought came to keep her company-the familiar thought that for a month had stayed fixed in her mind, that accompanied her in her domestic duties, that followed her down the street, that lay with her all night, and the first one she found every morning on her pillow” (King: 91)¹⁸⁹. Teresina’s domestic life is changed. She can alleviate the segregation with these new daydreams, but it is for the young girl a way to learn the difficulties of getting fully rid of the patriarchal chains. To comply with social expectations, Teresina cannot reveal her emotions in front of the other members of the family; she has to think of otherness instead of herself and to learn “the great female virtue of self-control, the profound feminine aptitude of hiding anguish behind a smile” (King:98)¹⁹⁰. This isolation of her real self makes Teresina feel like a stranger among her family members, the only people she really interacts with every day. Teresina is secretly absorbed in her fantastic space while she is taking care of the household and the family’s duties; in these moments she forgets her miserable life and her *padre terribile* (terrible father): she just wants to daydream, especially at night when she can do it peacefully and without interruptions. Orlandi became the main focus of her daydreams from the moment she first met him until the end of the story. Orlandi declares his love for the young woman, and they start an intense correspondence through letters.

The window is still the contact between Teresina and the outside world, where every day she waits for the mailman to come bringing her hope. Teresina’s life is

¹⁸⁹ [Un pensiero venne a tenerle compagnia – il solito pensiero che da un mese le stava fisso nel cervello, che la accompagnava, nelle sue faccende domestiche, che la seguiva per la via, che si coricava con lei tutte le sere, e ch’ella trovava, ogni mattina, per il primo sul guanciale].

¹⁹⁰ [La grande virtù femminile del dominarsi, la profonda abilità femminile di nascondere un tormento dietro un sorriso].

enclosed in her fantastic world in “ecstasy of her dreams” (King”117)¹⁹¹. The fantastic world is the only sphere where Teresina experiences life, but this life is still seen through a window and she does not have a wide perspective. She learns the difficult role of being a woman, and she understands her mother’s sadness and the harsh *pretora*’s words on men. She realizes that a woman’s life depends on men and a woman has to take pleasure in it since this is what they teach young girls: “This profound desire of chains that torments the beautiful souls of women has an extraordinary will of its own” (King: 123)¹⁹². Teresina’s father will not give her permission to marry him, he will confine her within the house blocking her every contact with the outside world and with her beloved. Teresina refuses to marry anyone else, even though “she felt all the horror of isolation” (King: 157)¹⁹³. The house is her prison and everything around her is sad. Even sitting by the window is taking away from her and she has to hide the sadness and the desires of her real self: “She must pretend with her mother out of love, with her father out of fear, with her sisters out of shame¹⁹⁴(King: 155)”. Teresina keeps dreaming of spending her life with Orlandi in her fantastic space but her mute and profound sadness makes her desire death so that she might be free. Teresina touches lightly upon the thought of “morte liberatrice” (King:156)¹⁹⁵. Within the house and within the fantastic space Teresina starts to realize that “It’s awful being a woman” (King: 167)¹⁹⁶ and that “her state as woman required resignation to her destiny” (King: 168)¹⁹⁷.

¹⁹¹ [estasi dei suoi sogni].

¹⁹² [Questo profondo desiderio delle catene, che tormenta le belle anime di donna, ha in sé una voluttà straordinaria.]

¹⁹³ [Senti tutto l’orrore dell’isolamento.]

¹⁹⁴ [Ella doveva fingere colla madre per amore, col padre per timore, colle sorelle per vergogna.]

¹⁹⁵ [morte liberatrice].

¹⁹⁶ [È una miseria l’essere donna].

¹⁹⁷ [la sua condizione di donna le imponeva anzitutto tutta la rassegnazione al suo destino].

For Teresina the fantastic space is a way to discover herself and her real self; it is her journey within the domestic walls, and it makes Teresina a different and stronger person at the end. Even though the author does not depict a female character as a symbol of emancipation for women and she always maintains a safe distance from any explicit associations with the emancipation movement¹⁹⁸, Teresina is an expression of female emancipation. It is true that she sacrifices all her life for her family, but she does not accept any other possibility of escape by marrying another man. She stays faithful to Orlandi and to her idea of love. She survives the pain of being a woman through her fantastic space and her daydreams; she understands life and herself through it but only at the very end and after the “severe and chaste house” becomes “the deserted house”. Teresina stops living her life in the shadows of others and she finds her *libertà* (freedom) letting her real self emerge. She leaves the house to join Orlandi who is lonely and sick. She paid her whole life for this freedom. Teresina’s illusion in her fantastic world of being in control of herself becomes real, and she is finally able to break the chains of her existence.

II.5 *L’Indomani*.

It is also essential to analyze another work by Neera, *L’indomani*, written in 1889 a few years after *Teresa*. This book is part of the *trittico della fanciulla* along with *Teresa* and *Lydia* (1887)¹⁹⁹. In the *trittico della fanciulla*, as Silvia Valisa explains, Neera

¹⁹⁸ See Katharine Mitchell, “La Marchesa Colombi, Neera, Matilde Serao: Forging a Female Solidarity in Late Nineteenth-Century Journals for Women” in *Italian Studies*. In this article Mitchell specifically examines the journalism of the three authors and their contribution to several journals for women. The authors argue that despite their conservative views on women's lives Neera and the other two authors express the “emancipation sympathies” of the writers.

¹⁹⁹ Arslan Antonia “Neera, *L’Indomani* e la *revue des deux mondes*” pp.117-136, affirms that with *L’Indomani* Neera ends her ten-year project (1880-1890) of analyzing difficult female situations within the

describes the destinies of three different women who want to discover the world and have a voice within the patriarchal society²⁰⁰. *L'Indomani* focuses on the life story of Marta who was raised in a serene and conservative family environment, according to the rules of the patriarchal society. At the age of twenty-three she marries Alberto, an older man who lives in the countryside, and following the example of her mother she wants to become a *brava mogliettina* (good little wife) (Neera:8)²⁰¹ and please her husband. Marta resembles the Angel of the House since she is completely devoted to becoming a good wife and eventually a good mother. Within this role, however, Marta hides the desire to know and experience what love really is, and even if she is married, she seems to not be able to find the answer she desires. For her whole life Marta fights the feeling of being *la straniera* (foreigner) within her house and her married life: "Marta thought that she, the wife, was the foreigner among the owner, the male servant, and the female horse" (Neera:8)²⁰². In order to overcome this feeling and understand the real nature of love, Marta creates a parallel fantastic world within her house and within her married life. The answer she will find about love at the very end of the novel, while talking with her mother, will not be the one she was looking for, and, for this reason, she will not let go of

domestic walls in the Post-Unification Italy. Arslan claims that the authorial intent is to depict the sacrificed and secret lives of women. There are three novels that belong to this *ciclo della fanciulla*: *Teresa*, *Lydia*, and *L'Indomani*. Neera narrates the lives of three different women, Teresa, Lydia, and Marta, and their different ways to cope with the segregation of the patriarchal system.

²⁰⁰ In "Gendered Quests: Analysis, Revelation and the Epistemology of Gender in Neera's "Teresa", "Lydia" and "L'indomani" Silvia Valisa explains how the protagonists of these novels have three different ways to deal with their segregated lives. Teresina is able to leave the house at the very end and finally feels happier, Lydia will commit suicide after being humiliated, and Marta accepts the role predetermined by the patriarchal society. The article investigates how these three female characters seek the possibility of being in charge of their lives just like men. However, this goal does not present itself at the very beginning of the texts but comes to light through the narratives. In *L'Indomani* Marta will never achieve the "status of seeker", nor will Lydia. In different ways they will succumb to the predetermined role. Only Teresina will be able to achieve this status after sacrificing her youth.

²⁰¹ [brava mogliettina].

²⁰² [Marta pensò che lei, la moglie, era la straniera fra il padrone, il servitore e la cavalla].

her fantastic world.

In order to understand Marta's fantastic space I believe it is necessary to analyze Marta's personality through what her mother used to say to her when she was young: "Marta you are too sensitive, too exclusive, you feel too much, you think too much. This does not lead to happiness" (Neera: 9)²⁰³. From her mother's description it emerges that Marta from a very young age was a little extravagant, she used to think too much and, consequently, to daydream. Marta wants to comply with the rules of the patriarchal society, and she adjusts herself to them. However, at the same time, Marta wants her daydreams to come true and she does not surrender to the boredom and apathy of married life. Marta does not act like Teresina, who, after a life of sacrifices for others, finally finds her freedom. Instead, Marta tries to force happiness in her life, because she does not want to change societal norms and wants to find happiness within patriarchal norms. Marta likes leading her life as a *brava mogliettina*, and she is an idealist, certainly not a revolutionary character. She knows she has to live with *il fantasma del dovere* (Neera:7)²⁰⁴ cutting the *pastorie dell'immaginazione* (Neera:7)²⁰⁵ now that she is married and finally has her *nido* (nest). Marta will realize soon that, in order to be happy, she cannot give up her fantastic world and that she also needs it to survive.

Marta lives her life divided between two different spaces of different nature: *il nido*, her real space, and the fantastic world, the heterotopic space²⁰⁶ created in her mind.

²⁰³ [Marta sei troppo impressionabile, troppo esclusiva, senti troppo, pensi troppo. Ciò non conduce alla felicità].

²⁰⁴ [the ghost of obligation].

²⁰⁵ [the ties of imagination].

²⁰⁶ Michael Foucault creates the term Heterotopia to describe the space of the Otherness that does not function in a hegemonic way. Foucault gives the example of the mirror that creates an unreal space that opens behind the mirror. This space is unreal but real at the same time, as it is connected to the real space

Marta will never abandon these two spaces since she wants to live her life according to “the reliability of her education and nature (Neera:7)²⁰⁷”, and at the same time she realizes that her daydreams and her parallel world allow her to cope with the norms of the society and not to feel like a stranger in her own house. For Marta the fantastic space is also the place where she can fully be herself and let her mind wonder without boundaries. This space is connected to the reality that Marta lives which is concurrently suspended in another unlimited space and time. The real space in which Marta lives is what she calls *nido*, and she thinks that in order to have a *nido* it is necessary to love. The *nido* is Alberto’s house: it reflects the plain and anonymous personality of her husband as well as the monotonous life of the countryside: “the general aspect of the building and of the courtyard was that of an old bourgeois house, comfortable, where a succession of well-off and calm generations succeeded without tremors, without changes... Nothing refined or lavish. A big comfort in everything... A certain traditional but calm wealth” (Neera:11)²⁰⁸. Interestingly, the house that should be the place reserved for women does not reflect the taste of Marta; she has to accept the house the way it is and consequently adjust her lifestyle to her husband’s. Marta does not rebel against this since she wants to try to become part of her husband’s life even though he does not allow her to be completely involved and thus estranging Marta and making her feel like a *straniera*.

Marta creates a sense of happiness in her fantastic world, as she intends to be happy: “But Marta was happy: she was saying this to everyone, she wrote this to her

that surrounds it. I interpret the heterotopian space as the fantastic space that these women create within the real space of the house.

²⁰⁷ [La serietà della sua educazione e del suo temperamento].

²⁰⁸ [L’aspetto generale del fabbricato e del cortile era quello di una vecchia casa borghese, comoda, dove un seguito di generazioni agiate e tranquille si erano succedute senza scosse, senza cambiamenti... niente di ricercato nè di pomposo. Una grande comodità in tutto... una certa ricchezza tradizionale ma tranquilla.]

mother, she was herself very sure of this. If melancholy attacked her sometimes, it was a vague melancholy, a discouragement for which she did not blame Alberto, but herself” (Neera:16)²⁰⁹. In order to reach this state, Marta performs the role that society and subsequently her gender attribute to her. She blames herself for her feeling of vague melancholy and her non-involvement in Alberto’s life. Marta thinks it is important to perform her role in married life better, to hide her real nature and desires. Her real nature appears only in her fantastic world where she let her mind speak and daydreams about what she wants to believe love is. Marta does not want to be disappointed in her idea of love because she needs it to survive and to feel content. She believes she needs to perform according to her new life: “Perhaps Marta had dreamt a different change. According to her it was her own being that had to rise to a new life, born from a mysterious and powerful force” (Neera:17)²¹⁰.

Marta’s parallel world becomes a constant presence within the domestic walls after a conversation she has with her husband at the dinner table. To please her desire to understand love Marta starts asking to her husband questions about his experience with other women in his previous life. She wants to know if he loved them, since her “female mind” cannot envision the interaction with the opposite sex without real feelings. After her husband’s brusque reaction to another *domanda bizzarra* (bizarre question) Marta stops talking, and closes herself in “her abstractions, focusing with all her thoughts on that unknown that always escaped her, asking herself with anguish: “But what is

²⁰⁹ [Eppure Marta era felice; lo diceva a tutti, lo scriveva alla madre, ne era ella stessa convintissima. Se la malinconia l’assaliva qualche volta, era una malinconia vaga, uno scoraggiamento del quale non accusava Alberto, ma sè stessa.]

²¹⁰ [Forse Marta aveva sognato un cambiamento di un altro genere. Secondo lei era il suo proprio essere che doveva sorgere a una nuova vita, tocco di una forza misteriosa e potente.]

therefore love?” (Neera:18)²¹¹. Marta wants to understand love in order to understand life. Love and life are strictly connected for her, since she believes that a woman’s life is accomplished through marriage and that love comes through marriage. Marta cannot accept the idea that she was chosen by her husband only because she embodies the perfect Angel of the House, an honest, candid, and docile woman. She wants to be sure that Alberto chose her because he really loved her but she cannot find the answer she wants. For this reason “she became desperate while running restless around the house” (Neera:19)²¹². Marta cannot find the desired answer she always thought she could find once married. Marta is not happy but she disguises her sadness by performing according to the norms. Unlike Teresa, Marta will not be able to resist and find happiness. On the contrary she will always live suspended between these two worlds looking for the answer she would like to find. Her living in her fantastic space is also testified by the letters that she writes to her mother expressing how happy she is with Alberto. When Marta writes, her mind is in another time and space, and she describes the life she would like to have and not the one she really has, as we can read:

She exalted herself about the love that Alberto had for her, and she was describing herself as his treasure, his life; words that Alberto had never said, but with which she inebriated herself to the point that when she was done writing, putting on paper the love of which she was filled, she was relieved, imagining that Alberto was feeling everything she felt (Neera:25)²¹³.

This inebriation and the daydreams she has in her fantastic space have an opiate effect

²¹¹ [... nelle sue astrazioni, concentrando tutta se stessa verso quell’ignoto che sempre le sfuggiva, chiedendosi angosciosamente: Ma che cos’è dunque l’amore?]

²¹² [Si diprava allora, correndo inquieta per la casa.]

²¹³ [Si esaltava dell’amore che Alberto aveva per lei, e si diceva il suo Tesoro, la sua vita; parole che Alberto da parte sua non aveva mai pronunciate, ma di cui ella inebriavasi a tal punto che quando aveva scritto, versando sulla carta l’amore di cui era compresa, rimaneva sollevata, immaginando che Alberto provasse tutto ciò che ella stessa sentiva.]

on Marta's mind, and the discontent that she is experiencing in her real life starts to affect her body: "she was skinny, with lifeless eyes: she was suffering from long melancholies" (Neera:25)²¹⁴. Marta feels paralyzed but she continues to pretend to be happy, convinced by the other women that Alberto is a wonderful husband. She wants to accomplish her duties as a good housewife. It is only in her fantastic world that Marta lives a satisfying love. She idealizes love in her mind, but even if she loves Alberto she cannot experience the ecstasy of love with him. She needs her imagination for this and not to feel as a stranger in her own house. Marta becomes obsessed with knowing everything about her husband's past life and especially about his past love life. She thinks in this way she will connect with him more and she will be completely included in Alberto's life: "Everything that was related to her husband interested Marta very much; she had the impression of getting closer to him, of getting into his life not only in the present and in the future, but also with the memories of the past" (Neera:29)²¹⁵. Exploring Alberto's life reassures Marta of him being faithful but her discontent does not disappear. She becomes indifferent to everything and she cannot accept the conclusion that "happiness is an illusion" (Neera:48)²¹⁶. Even though Marta is experiencing a nervous breakdown, she keeps attending to her household chores as a *brava mogliettina*. Marta realizes that up until that moment she was "fantastic, ideal, and in the wrong" (Neera:48)²¹⁷. She seems to want to leave her parallel world after the disappointment and find happiness within the real space of the domestic walls but she cannot let go of the idea of the existence of love. At the end of the novel Marta becomes aware of her mother's opinion on different aspects of love, and she rejects her ideas. Her mother claims that a woman has different kinds of love in her life, such as the maternal and the religious love, without mentioning

²¹⁴ [Era magra, coll'occhio spento; soffriva lunghe malinconie.]

²¹⁵ [Tutto ciò che aveva relazione con suo marito interessava Marta moltissimo; le sembrava di attaccarsi maggiormente a lui, di entrare nella sua vita non solo col presente e col futuro, ma ben anco coi ricordi del passato.]

²¹⁶ [la felicità è un'illusione].

²¹⁷ [fantastica, ideale ed aveva avuto torto].

the romantic love. After first being disappointed and confused, Marta takes shelter again in her fantastic world denying the evidence of reality. She refuses to reside within the deserted nest and will continue to feed her fantastic space with the daydreams as an adult woman because: “everything dies, everything changes, everything is renewed... Wounded hearts give new blood and new pain to life” (Neera:55)²¹⁸.

Third Chapter: The *Fantasm*i of the Domestic Space in the 20th Century

In this third chapter, through the literary works of Sibilla Aleramo and Maria Messina I am going to investigate how the concept of the fantastic space within the domestic house is going to change in comparison to the previous authors. Women's circumstances at the beginning of the 20th century and in the years immediately after WWI did not really improve much in the years right after the Unification of Italy. Bourgeois women were still placed in a hierarchical scale within the house and their duties were still to take care of the family and the husband. The patriarchal mentality combined with the predominant catholic mentality around the peninsula continued to support the idea of women as devoted to house, husband, and family. Even though this female situation within the domestic walls did not seem to improve for the majority of women, I believe the indictment of this state of affairs increased drastically among women writers. We are no longer facing authors who deliberately shirk from being called “emancipated” or who simply prefer not to take a public stance even though they are pro-

²¹⁸ [Tutto muore, tutto nasce, tutto cambia, tutto si rinnova... i cuori insanguinati e piangenti danno nuovo sangue e nuove lacrime alla vita.]

emancipation²¹⁹. The female writers are becoming more and more militant towards the long process that Lucia Chiavola Birbaum will define as the *liberazione della donna*²²⁰ and more prescient of the later feminist motto *Io sono mia* (I am my own person)²²¹. This is very well proven by the autobiographical novel that I am going to analyze in this last chapter: *A Woman*, published in 1906 by Sibilla Aleramo, who makes an important step for women. I will also analyze the literary works of Maria Messina *A House in the Shadow* and *Her Father's House* which portray the secluded situation of women at the beginning of the 20th century.

III.1 Maria Messina. *A House in the Shadow*.

Maria Messina was born in a small town in Sicily in 1887. Even though she travelled a lot because of her father's job in central Italy, she spent the majority of her life in the south of Italy. Messina was a self-educated woman: she taught herself how to read and write, and as a writer she had but a little fame at the beginning of the last century. At the age of twenty-two she started an intense exchange of letters with Giovanni Verga, who can be considered her mentor. The influence of *Verismo* is very evident in her work and particularly in her novel *A House in the Shadow*²²². Although this is not the place to

²¹⁹ Refer to Chapter 2 for an explanation of the position of Marchesa Colombi, Matilde Serao and, in particular, of Neera's anti-emancipation ideas.

²²⁰ In the first chapter of her book *Liberazione della donna: Feminism in Italy* Lucia Chiavola Birbaum gives a general introduction to the female situation in Italy from the beginning of the 20th century to the feminist movement in Italy after 1968 focusing on Sicilian women as a "metaphor for Italian women" (p.xvi). This book is important to better understand Maria Messina's narratives since she mainly denounces women's oppression through the representation of Sicilian women.

²²¹ Patrizia Magli in *Corpo e linguaggio* reconsiders Descartes' postulate "Cogito, ergo sum" (I think, therefore I am), which Birbaum also explains in Chapter 17 pp.247-248 of her book, with "Io sono mia" (I am my own person).

²²² Literary allusions to Giovanni Verga are clear in the novel *A House in the Shadow*. They particularly refer to the Ideale dell'ostrica as it states "Here was aunt Nicolina, clinging to the house the way lichen clings to the rock and doesn't let it breathe" p.87. And to the *Teoria dei vinti* as we can read at: "He had been a weakling. Soon he would have been defeated" p.115. On the relationship between Messina and

discuss the details of this literary bond, it is interesting to underline in the context of my investigation that the literary remarks in the novel are made only by men. It seems that the author very finely tries to declare the impossibility for women to be educated, to learn, and consequently to be in charge of their own lives and thoughts. Conversely this opportunity was given to all men, even to the ones not so sophisticated such as the male main protagonist of the novel, Don Lucio. Messina's intention seems to be to declaim the fear that the patriarchal system has of female emancipation and therefore of the power that women can gain through education. For example, Vanna in *Her Father's House* points out that education is the main difference between her and her husband who had the chance to complete his studies. Even in the first two decades of the 20th century, the patriarchal system wanted to keep women ignorant and yoked to its domestic tyranny.

Verga and for the biographical information about the author see Sapegno, Maria Serena. "Sulla soglia: la narrativa di Maria Messina" in *Altrelettere*, I, 3, (2012); Gochin Raffaelli, Lara. "Tradition and progress, future and past in the novels of Maria Messina" in *Italian Studies in Southern Africa*, XXII, 1, (2009); Bartolotta, Lucio. *Maria Messina (1887-1944)*, (2006); Muscariello, Mariella. "Una straniera di passaggio". Lettura della novella *Casa paterna* di Maria Messina", in AA. VV., *L'occhio e la memoria. Miscellanea di studi in onore di Natale Tedesco*, (2004); Of the same author see also *Anime sole. Donne e scrittura tra Otto e Novecento* (2002) and "Una scrittura in transito. Maria Messina tra Verga e Pirandello" in AA. VV., *La civile letteratura* (2002) pp. 1-11; Pausini, Cristina. *Le «briciole» della letteratura: le novelle e i romanzi di Maria Messina*. (2001); Kroha, Lucienne and Haedrich, Alexandra. "Modernity and Gender-Role Conflict in Maria Messina" in AA. VV., *With a Pen in her Hand. Women and Writing in Italy in the Nineteenth Century and Beyond*, (2000); Bonofiglio, Anna Maria. "Maria Messina" in AA. VV., *Figure femminili del Novecento a Palermo* (2000); Barbarulli, Clotilde and Brandi, Luciana. "Le voci del corpo e il gioco della similitudine nelle novelle di Maria Messina" in AA. VV., *Reinventare la natura. Ripensare il femminile*, (1999); Magistro, Elise. "Narrative Voice and the Regional Experience: Redefining Female Images in the Works of Maria Messina", in AA. VV., *Italian Women Writers from the Renaissance to the Present: Revising the Canon*, (1996); Barbarulli, Clotilde and Brandi, Luciana. *I colori del silenzio. Strategie narrative e linguistiche in Maria Messina* (1996); Mazza, Antonia. "Maria Messina, tra Verga e Pirandello (1887-1944)", in "Lettture", XLIX, 505, (1994); Di Giovanna, Maria. "La testimone indignata e le trappole del sistema. Il percorso narrativo di Maria Messina", in AA. VV., *Donne e scrittura* (1990) and of the same author *La fuga impossibile. Sulla narrativa di Maria Messina* (1989); Magistro, Elise. Introduction of *Behind Closed Doors: Her's Father House and Other Stories of Sicily* pp.14-16, (1989); Maugeri Salerno, Mirella. "Maria Messina", in AA. VV., *Letteratura siciliana al femminile: donne scrittrici e donne personaggio* (1984); Leotta, Vincenzo. "Maria Messina", in AA. VV., *Gli eredi di Verga*, (1984); Egle, Palazzolo. "Maria Messina: una riscoperta" in "Palermo", *Il n.s.*, 12, (1982); Cataldo, Salvatore. "Una dimenticata scrittrice del primo Novecento: Maria Messina", in "Archivio storico siciliano", IVs., VIII, (1982); Garra Agosta, Giovanni. *Un idillio letterario inedito verghiano: lettere inedite di Maria Messina e Giovanni Verga*, (1979).

Messina's novel *A House in the Shadows*²²³ tells the story of Don Lucio Carmine, his wife Antonietta, and his sister-in-law Nicolina. The family lives together in a small town in Sicily where Don Lucio manages the land of a rich baron of the area, and where, later on, unbeknown to his family, he will become a usurer. The patriarchal system is represented here by the figure of Don Lucio, a very arrogant and selfish man who, although married to Antonietta, will seduce the young sister-in-law Nicolina transforming the space of the house into a promiscuous space. This novel offers a new aspect to the domestic space. First there are Antonietta's and Nicolina's fantastic spaces as expected, but then there is the promiscuous space of the house that Don Lucio created which will affect and change the dynamic within the house. In her narration the author represents the closed space in which women were still obligated to live. Once again they have just their daydreams and their fantastic space to escape the daily routine. The scenario did not really change, as compared to the previous authors, but the originality of this novel is that women start to outline a space of their own within the house. We are still very far from the concept expressed by Virginia Woolf²²⁴, since this will be a reaction to the pain that the patriarchal system inflicted on women, as I will better explain. However, through her female characters Messina begins to delineate the necessity of having this space. While this reaction is certainly not revolutionary, compared to the other female characters previously analyzed, it is a different way of coping with the house and the pain.

Since the very beginning of the novel the balcony is a recurring space which opens and concludes the narration in a cyclical process. This space that first belonged to

²²³ *A House in the Shadows* (*La Casa nel vicolo*) was translated in 1989 by John Shepley. I use Shepley's English version for all quotes from the novel.

²²⁴ Refer to Chapter one.

Nicolina and her sister Antonietta will be occupied at the end by Antonietta's two daughters, Carmelina and Agata. From the beginning until the end it will remain a female space. In *Italian Women Writers: Gender and Everyday Life in Fiction and Journalism*, Katharine Mitchell has recently noticed that spaces like windows and balconies are public spaces that once were used by women secluded within the domestic walls as a way to establish contact with the outside world in order to get married²²⁵. Even though I agree with Mitchell in considering balconies and windows public spaces most of the time, I believe, however, that the balcony assumes a different meaning in this novel. Considering that a balcony always gives a limited view of the outside world even when it is exposed to the main street where women can connect with said world, the view of the balcony of the *casa del vicolo* is purposely portrayed as “enclosed, almost smothered, between the narrow little street”(Shepley:1)²²⁶. This is the space where Nicolina, the young and unmarried character, can be alone with her thoughts and daydreams. This is certainly not a space for a young woman where she can encounter a future husband but a space where she can evoke her *fantasma* after “all her chores were done” (Shepley:1)²²⁷. Alone on the balcony Nicolina first unwittingly thought of the contrast between the claustrophobic view of the balcony of *la casa nel vicolo* and the balcony of her childhood's house *la casa tranquilla* “that overlooked the fields, under the open sky” (Shepley:1)²²⁸. The contrast between the two balconies is a specular image of Nicolina's life. The young girl who was full of hope and desires at her parents' house now lives the imprisoned life that her sister chose for her when she took her to the house in the shadow to have company.

²²⁵ See footnote 136 of Chapter two.

²²⁶ [... Era chiusa, quai soffocata, fra il vicoletto.]

²²⁷ [Tutte le faccende erano sbrigate.]

²²⁸ [...Spalancato sui campi, davanti al cielo libero.]

The balcony is not a joyful place, but it is the place where “her vague, and unfinished soliloquies” (Shepley:2)²²⁹ can surface in her mind for a few minutes escaping the monotony of the daily routine as we read: “ then it seems that her thoughts, regrets, and hopes came forward bathed in the same uncertain light that illuminated the sky” (Shepley:1)²³⁰. Nicolina’s thoughts are in the state of a dream. They are not clear since the young woman does not have the chance to experience life and the outside world. This blurry image of life will stay with her until the end. Later on, the balcony returns as a different image as this time Nicolina does not sit there alone, doing her needlework, but now her beloved sister Antonietta is with her. The balcony is portrayed again as the place where the two sisters go back in their minds to “the uniform past that now appeared in their memories with beautiful things never seen, never felt ‘back then’”²³¹ (Shepley:25) and that clashes with the unhappiness they both are experiencing in the *dark house*. The suffocated view of the balcony reflects the castrated lives of the two sisters. Sitting outside on the balcony they can see the quiet building in front of it and a very confused partial view of the city: “They had a confused, painful impression of the city, which they had barely glimpsed. The city ... was still remote, unknown, almost frightening”²³² (Shepley:26). The two women were living their lives like nuns in their cloisters. The dark house is far from the happy nest and, in the first two decades of the 20th century, the house for women is still compared to a prison represented here by a cloister. Don Lucio, the representative of the patriarchal system, is in control of the two women and imposes

²²⁹ [... I vaghi, incompiuti soliloqui.]

²³⁰ [Allora pareva che i pensieri, I rimpianti, le speranze, si facessero innanzi circonfusi della luce incerta che rischiarava il cielo.]

²³¹ [Dell’uniforme passato che ora si presentava alla memoria con bellezze non mai vedute, non mai sentite <prima>.]

²³² [Ebbero una confusa penosa impressione della città intraveduta appena. La città, la città rimase lontana, ignota, quasi paurosa.]

his domestic tyranny on them. He thinks women have to be creatures of habit and they have to be trained for the life the patriarchal system prescribed for them: “Nothing, nothing. It's better that life should run like clockwork, while women remain in their place” (Shepley:29)²³³. In his thoughts Don Lucio compared women's life to a clock²³⁴ that beats the time without changing and if it stops or does something uncommon, it has to go back to its constructed routine. Women have to perform according to their prescribed gender role; they have to continue to be Angels of the House, without trying to change their habit. The performance of domestic tyranny within the house keeps women within their prescribed role. Women are the “other” to be controlled and subdued²³⁵.

The balcony becomes primarily Nicolina's space. The young woman, who ironically describes herself as “a bride with no ring and no groom (Shepley: 24)²³⁶, deprived of a personal life, soon starts to daydream of something she will never have, of a life she will never fully experience or ever get to know. Her mind enters in “a thoughts floating” as we can read: “She lost herself completely in a tumult of sensations full of emotion and joy. She felt as though she were sleeping and waking, waking and sleeping” (Shepley:42)²³⁷. Through her daydreams, Nicolina is still in contact with reality and not

²³³ [Niente, niente. Meglio che la vita scorra come un orologio e le donne siano assestate.]

²³⁴ Also Neera in *Teresa* (p.29 of King's English version) talks about the presence of the clock in the gynaeceum, the room of the house reserved for women. It is interesting to notice that the clock in Neera's novel has not been working for a long time and this resembles women's imprisoned and static life. Women do not have the power of any free movement without the permission of someone else, just like the clock that needs the help of a human being to be fixed to start working again. In Messina's novel the clock works but under the control of Don Lucio and this still testifies that women's life, at the beginning of 19th century, is still controlled and manipulated by the patriarchal system and still does not have any freedom. Refer also to Chapter two for a better explanation of Neera's work.

²³⁵ Refer to chapter one.

²³⁶ [La sposa senza anello e senza sposo.]

²³⁷ [Si smarrì tutta in tumulto di sensazioni piene di turbamento e di gioia. La pareva di dormire e di svegliarsi, di svegliarsi e di dormire.]

in a state of complete unconsciousness²³⁸. The images that Nicolina has lived and experienced are in a timeless space. Through this crepuscular state of mind Nicolina can fantasize of someone to love, she can think of what she is for her brother-in-law, she can have different emotions, and go back to the memories of her cheerful childhood with her sisters and her family. These thoughts, even if they are produced by a profound sense of loneliness, allow her for a few minutes to live for herself and not just to serve others. Nicolina wonders what her life will be like and tries to overcome her loneliness: “And would her life always be spent in this way? Always? Like one of these silent, heavy, everlasting evenings? There are times in one’s youth when the soul is so weak that it cannot bear solitude. And solitude seems like a visible creature, a creature from a nightmare that squeezes the heart in its two open hands” (Shepley: 44)²³⁹. The balcony therefore is the different *there*, as De Certeau would say, separated by the *here* which is the house where she lives with the family. Her life on the balcony is not regulated by the dictated time of the *dark house* where everything is ruled by Don Lucio’s habits: “just as he kept his accounts and personal articles in order, Don Lucio kept his habits systematic. Life too was divided--like his little room and his ledgers--into several parts, each containing an activity, a habit, a need. For him there were no dark or uncertain sides to the future. Everything was methodically fixed, everything foreseen” (Shepley:37)²⁴⁰.

²³⁸ In Nicolina’s “tumult of sensations full of emotion and joy” it is also possible to read a sort of auto-eroticism especially when she thinks of what her brother-in-law could be for her. The self-discovery of sexuality has been very common in Italian women writers’ narratives since the end of the 19th century as K. Mitchell investigates in “Neera refiguring of hysteria as nervosismo in *Teresa* and *L’Indomani*” pp.8-11.

²³⁹ [E la sua vita sarebbe trascorsa sempre così? Sempre? Simile a una di quelle serate eterne pesanti e silenziose? Ci sono ore nella giovinezza in cui l’anima è così debole che non sa sopportare la solitudine. E la solitudine pare una creatura visibile; una creatura d’incubo che ci preme il cuore con le mani aperte.]

²⁴⁰ [Così, come teneva in ordine i conti e gli oggetti d’uso, Don Lucio teneva sistemate le proprie abitudini. La vita era divisa anch’essa – come lo stanzino e come i registri – in tante parti, ognuna delle quali conteneva un’occupazione, un’abitudine, un bisogno. Per lui non c’erano lati scuri nell’avvenire. Tutto era metodicamente stabilito tutto provveduto.]

Nicolina's life, as well as Antonietta's, is bound by Don Lucio's habits. Don Lucio fears change, his house is a well-regulated mechanism and women are just designed parts meant to make this mechanism work. For this reason the house, according to Nicolina, is not the place that protects the intimate images of the dreamer, as Bachelard would say, and the balcony now becomes the *image of intimacy*. The balcony is the space in between the public and the private spheres and is not fully controlled by Don Lucio²⁴¹.

At the end of the novel, because of the change of the dynamic of the house, the balcony comes back again but this time it is no longer the space occupied by Nicolina. Don Lucio creates a dissonance between the domestic walls, seducing the innocent Nicolina and starting a relationship with her. The order that the bourgeois mentality wants to restore within the house is broken here. Each member of the family no longer has his own place since Don Lucio demands the affection of the two sisters within the same house. The two sisters will become enemies and will develop a sense of resentment towards each other. For this reason, the balcony is no longer the space where Nicolina is accustomed to daydream and spend peaceful time with her beloved sister. Now, it belongs to her two nieces. The two little sisters, Agata and Carmelina, who hold hands and love each other, seem at the same time to represent what Antonietta and Nicolina used to be: "the two girls linger on the terrace, where aunt Nicolina used to sit... They hold each other by the hands and say nothing. What they think, and what swells their

²⁴¹ On public and private spheres see Mitchell, Katharine. "Gendering Private and Public Spheres" in *Italian Women Writers. Gender and everyday life in Fiction and Journalism 1870-1910*, (2014) pp.59-93. See also Mitchell, Katharine and Sanson, Helena. *Women and Gender in Post-Unification Italy: Between Public and Private Spheres*. (2013); Wilson, Perry. *Gender, Family and sexuality. The private Sphere in Italy 1860-1945*. (2004); Attfield, Judy. *Wild Things: The Material Culture of Everyday Life*. (2000); Davidoff, Leonore. *Worlds in between. Historical Perspective on Gender and Class*. Pp. 227-276 (1995); De Certeau, Michel. *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984); Habermas, Jürgen. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (1969).

young hearts, which on calm summer evenings beat like leaves caressed by the wind, is too soft and vague, and they have no idea how to express it” (Shepley: 124)²⁴². The balcony is passed along to the new generation of women, who are yet to experience life.

It is also necessary to mention that the view which the two young girls see from the terrace is very different from the one which is portrayed in Nicolina’s daydreams. It is no longer claustrophobic and gloomy, but vast and full of hope as they gaze upon the starry sky. The balcony, the space between public and private, harbors the hope for a change of women's conditions within society. The vastness of the outside world, represented here by the immensity of the sky which the two girls admire, contrasts the constricted space inside the domestic walls ruled by Don Lucio. Even though the sky is still portrayed during the nighttime the author underlines that it is illuminated by the stars. This testified the hope for change in women’s lives for the new generation.

The use of the balcony as space, therefore, shifts from Nicolina to the young girls, and at the end of the story, Nicolina tested by life will cut every contact with the outside world. The only place where she is now able to let her *fantasma* come out is her small bedroom. This becomes the place where she works and thinks, but her thoughts are only painful, and she is no longer curious and hopeful to daydream of what life will bring her: “Nicolina is in her own little room in the garret. No one needs her at this hour. She sews and thinks. Her thoughts are bitter, like a lump of tears that she cannot succeed in shedding” (Shepley:124)²⁴³. The journey that Nicolina undertakes from *la casa tranquilla*

²⁴² [Le due fanciulle indugiano nel terrazzo dove un tempo sedeva zia Nicolina... Si tengono per mano e non si dicono nulla. Ciò che pensano, e gonfia i loro piccoli cuori, che battono nella calme sere d'estate come foglioline accarezzate dal vento, è troppo vago e dolce e non sanno esprimerlo.]

²⁴³ [Nicolina è nella propria cameretta, di sopra. A quest'ora non hanno bisogno di lei. Lavora e pensa. Il suo pensiero è amaro, come un nodo di lacrime che non riesce a piangere.]

of her childhood to *la tetra casa del vicolo* to help her sister represents the confiscation of women's bodies by the patriarchal system. The author compares women to travelers who are looking for a better life, usually through marriage, but for most of them this journey culminates in a disappearance of their own selves: "the whole house, the old ship rotting in the port, full of travelers who have never seen the broad horizon, is soon wrapped in the shadow of night" (Shepley:124)²⁴⁴.

The other female character in the novel is Antonietta, Nicolina's older sister and Don Lucio's wife. Since she is married to Don Lucio, Antonietta's life within the house is different than that of Nicolina. The two sisters share the sense of nostalgia for the happy house where they lived with their parents, their childhood, and suffer a strong sense of loneliness that they feel in Don Lucio's house. Towards the end of the novel Antonietta will be able to create within the house her own little space: a space that only she will inhabit. In the presence of her husband Antonietta does not venture to have hopes or desires; she is a human being without will. Antonietta is chosen by Don Lucio for her character "meek and docile, made to be molded like fresh clay" (Shepley:20)²⁴⁵. Docility is the main characteristic that Don Lucio is looking for in his future wife²⁴⁶. The soul of a woman has to be open so that people can enter and shape it to their liking. A woman has to surrender to the men in her life. At the beginning of the novel the docile Antonietta is caught by a strong sense of guilt, because she needs to take care of her sick child and she does not have enough time for her husband. Antonietta is in awe of Don Lucio and completely lives for others. It is only in the second part of the story that Antonietta will

²⁴⁴[La casa tutta, la vecchia nave che marcisce nel porto, piena di viaggiatori che non hanno mai veduto l'ampio orizzonte, è presto avviluppata nell'ombra della notte].

²⁴⁵ [... docile mansueto, fatto per essere plasmato come l'argilla fresca.]

²⁴⁶ Refer to Chapter one.

develop her own private space within the domestic walls. Her *fantasma* appears as her real private space only after her son's death and after Don Lucio's creation of a promiscuous space destroyed the peaceful dynamic of the family. The house for the two sisters is now even farther away from the protected space, the happy nest. The womb of the house holds only anger and resentment inside of it. Don Lucio's narcissism of possessing both sisters creates a strong sense of discomfort between them, and consequently within the house. It is interesting to note that there is a regression in the novel in the use of the adjectives that the author uses to describe the house. At the beginning the house was called the *house in the shadow* or the *dark house* in contrast with the calm house of the two sisters' childhood. Then, it slowly becomes a *bad dream* but also the place that reinforces the bond between the two women: "the two sisters [Nicolina and Antonietta], finding themselves in the house in the city as though after a bad dream, became more closely attached to each other than ever" (Shepley:27)²⁴⁷.

Towards the end of the story, the degeneration of the family's interactions gives to the house the connotation of being a space where people live like perfect strangers. Nothing is familiar to them anymore, and they live every day like automatons: "Each person resumed their old habits, which were followed mechanically, like the movements of a hand as it sews. They all lived for themselves, with a great solitude in their souls; alien, indifferent to those who breathed the same air and cut the same bread, like people who live in the same hotel without knowing each other" (Shepley:123)²⁴⁸. The two sisters

²⁴⁷ [Le due sorelle ritrovandosi nella casa del vicolo come dopo un sogno pauroso, si attaccarono più fortemente l'una all'altra.]

²⁴⁸ [Ciascuno visse, per sé, con una gran solitudine dentro l'anima; estraneo, indifferente a quelli che respiravano la stessa aria e tagliavano lo stesso pane, come gente che vive nello stesso albergo senza conoscersi.]

who before were intimate with each other are now foreign and full of hate as it emerges in Nicolina's words of accusation to her sister: "There, she said while returning, you see what you have accomplished by letting your children hear your outbursts. They repeat *your* words. I'm an outsider. An enemy, in *your* house" (Shettely:68)²⁴⁹. The wound that Don Lucio inflicted to the two sisters cannot be mended. The promiscuous relationship created a dissonance within the gloomy house, and Antonietta and Nicolina cannot relate to this uncommon situation. What happened cannot be changed, but the two sisters need to find a new way to live within the house. In the new dynamic Nicolina abandoned the balcony and reserved her small room for her *fantasma*, while Antonietta created her own private space within Don Lucio's house. This space is not, as we are accustomed to seeing, secret and temporary, but it is the space where Antonietta lives the rest of her life: "Antonietta did not leave her room unless summoned... Antonietta, who had arranged a peculiar little altar next to her bed, thanked the Lord in her prayers, happy that her husband was finally leaving her in peace in her little refuge. She took notice of nothing and was not interested in anything" (Shepley:117)²⁵⁰. Antonietta created her little shelter within the gloomy house to reduce the dissonance of the house. As I anticipated this is far from Woolf's concept of having a room of one's own: Antonietta's space is a shelter she creates after having a nervous breakdown due to the death of her only male child and to the unconventional sexual relationship between her husband and her sister. She now lives in a state of mental insanity and only talks to sacred images escaping her everyday

²⁴⁹ [-Ecco- disse rientrando- quel che hai ottenuto facendo arrivare i tuoi sfoghi alle orecchie dei tuoi figli. Ripetono le *tue* parole. Io sono un'estranea, una nemica, nella *tua* casa.]

²⁵⁰ [Antonietta non lasciava la propria camera se non chiamata... Antonietta s'era fatta un bizzarro altare accanto al letto, ringraziò il Signore, nelle sue preghiere, lieta che il marito la lasciasse finalmente in pace nel suo piccolo rifugio. Non si curava di nulla, non si interessava di nulla.]

reality: “in the twilight beside the closed window, she goes on knitting and talking to the holy images, which she sees as kindly and beloved persons who have not betrayed her” (Shepley:123)²⁵¹. It is true that Antonietta can now live in her own space, but this space is only a consequence of her depression and not a free choice, a possibility that the domestic walls offer to women.

Throughout the whole novel Messina depicts the figure of Don Lucio as a very despotic husband who takes pleasure in being feared by his family members and particularly by the two women: “He felt a renewed pleasure every time he noticed how profound an influence he had on the two women, especially on Nicolina, who in the beginning had shown an almost exuberant and unpleasing vivacity” (Shepley:4)²⁵². He needs to be in control of everything and feels that everything within the house belongs to him, and for this reason not only does he seduce Nicolina but also prevents her from having her own life by refusing her the possibility of getting married. Don Lucio also owns Nicolina’s life and warns his wife against fostering her sister's fantasies: “Don’t put it into your head to tell your sister about this! Girls start imagining all kinds of things” (Shepley:46)²⁵³. Don Lucio wants to be in charge of Nicolina’s thoughts and daydreams as well. He fears the fantastic space that women can possibly create within the domestic walls since he does not know how to control them. For this reason he secluded the women of the house and kept them invisible and confined in *his* controlled space. In this way he can see them, and they can neither be seen by others nor can they see what is

²⁵¹ [Nella luce crepuscolare, dietro la finestra chiusa, essa continua a lavorare, parlando con le immagini sante, nelle quali vede care e buone persone che non l’hanno tradita.]

²⁵² [Egli provava una compiacenza sempre nuova ogni qual volta si avvedeva come fosse profonda la soggezione che ispirava alle due donne, specie a Nicolina che, sul principio, aveva mostrato di avere una vivacità quasi irruente e sgradevole.]

²⁵³ [- Non ti venga in mente – le disse, - di parlare di questo fatto a tua sorella! Le ragazze fanno presto a lavorar di fantasia!].

around them. As a creature of habit the invisibility of women guarantees his constructed order²⁵⁴. His wife, so docile and malleable, is his trophy and nothing more than another decoration for the house: “Don Lucio watched with satisfaction as his wife made two trips back and forth. Admiring the supple movements of his woman’s strong full hips, he was pleased with himself, just as he was pleased every time he paused to contemplate the expensive furniture with which he had embellished his house” (Shepley:4)²⁵⁵. Everything runs according to the habits he imposes in his domestic tyranny. Don Lucio does everything to please himself and his ego, and that he even takes pleasure in owning other people’s lives can be gleaned from his job as usurer. Women need to be shaped to the house according to the rules dictated inside of it “like a snail taking the shape of its shell” (Shepley:58)²⁵⁶. Even his only son’s death does not change Don Lucio other than to make him nastier. He imposes his supremacy on his young daughters and segregates them within his house so that he can shape them as he wants: “And he sought every opportunity to instill fear in his daughters... He meant to keep an eye on them. He intended to raise them himself, in his own way, to be docile, simple, ignorant, and without wishes, the way women should be” (Shepley:116)²⁵⁷. Ultimately, Don Lucio’s thoughts reveal the patriarchal system’s fear of giving visibility to women and losing its power and control. The author does not give a chance to Antonietta to escape Don Lucio’s tyranny, nor to Nicolina who continues to serve her brother-in-law. However,

²⁵⁴ Refer to foornote 131 Chapter one.

²⁵⁵ [Don Lucio guardava compiaciuto la moglie che andò e tornò due volte. Ammirando le molli movenze dei fianchi forti e pieni della sua donna, era contento di se stesso, così come era contento ogni volta che si soffermava a contemplare i mobili costosi de’ quali aveva abbellito la casa.]

²⁵⁶ [Come la lumaca che ha la forma del suo guscio.]

²⁵⁷ [E cercava tutte le occasioni per incutere timore alle figlie... Le voleva custodire. Le voleva formare lui, a suo modo, docili, semplici, ignoranti, senza desideri, come debbono essere le donne.]

hope is given to the two young girls Carmelina and Agata who, even though secluded within the house, are able to see the vastness of the starry sky from the balcony.

III.2 Her Father's House.

*Her Father's House*²⁵⁸ is a short story by Maria Messina which also merits analysis since the narrative “provides a link between women's imagination and history, both missing from the historical and literary record” as Fred Guardaphé underlines²⁵⁹. Messina tells the story of Vanna who returns to her father's house after escaping her rich and well-educated husband, Guido, and the city of Rome. When Vanna arrives in her hometown she immediately sees that everything has changed, and she feels rejected by everyone except by her sister-in-law Maria. The narration opens with declaring to the reader the restricted world in which women are obligated to live, since both her father and her brother find it uncommon for a woman to travel: “Why are you alone? Why did you leave so suddenly? I'll explain later Papa, answered Vanna, blushing. When they were all in the carriage Antonio said: ‘If you had let us know sooner, someone would've found a way to... What were you thinking? Coming by yourself?’” (Magistro:84)²⁶⁰. Her father and her brother immediately show their sense of embarrassment of seeing her without her husband and are not concerned about how she might feel. On her way back to her father's house Vanna looks at the landscape of her childhood in a dreaming state, and she is anxious to go back to the house where she was born, to see the familiar and well

²⁵⁸ For all quotes from the novel “Her Father's House” (Casa paterna) I used the translation by Elise Magistro in *Behind the Closed Doors: Her Father's House and Other Stories of Sicily*.

²⁵⁹ See Fred, Guardaphé's preface to *Behind the Closed Doors: Her Father's House and Other Stories of Sicily* pp. V-IX.

²⁶⁰ [-Perché sei sola? Perché sei partita all'improvviso? – Poi ti racconterò papà... rispose vanna arrossendo... Come furono tutti e quattro in legno, Antonio disse: - Se ci avessi avvertiti in tempo, qualcuno avrebbe trovato modo... Che idea venir sola!]

known house hoping to find shelter, to find that nest that will protect her:

Vanna was looking at the road that run alongside the sea, the crescent-shaped port that was quickly disappearing, the sleepy market with its collapsing tents and overturned stalls; she recognized a few flower terraces, the point on the beach where she once used to swim. In her discouraged face, in her sweet eyes full of sadness, a light passed that seemed feverish. She was impatient to arrive; restless and on the verge of tears, she gave a start every time the carriage hit a bump (Magistro:85)²⁶¹.

This passage is very important to understand how Vanna feels. The author sharply tells us that Vanna is not only sad but *mesta*. The adjective implies that Vanna already overcame the sadness and is resigned to the sorrow and the failure of her marriage because she is very unhappy in Rome with Guido. She also looks at the calm, static landscape of her childhood where she recognizes things, and pleasant memories begin to return to her. The calm life on the island clearly clashes with the chaotic and frenetic life of Rome which makes her feel lonely and insignificant since she does not know anyone in the city. Additionally her distant and snobbish husband makes her feel “like a worthless thing tossed in a corner. One of those rag dolls I used to make when I was little” (Magistro:86)²⁶². Vanna cannot cope with this, and she courageously decides to leave that life and live the one that she thinks will make her happier. On her way to the house of her childhood Vanna is experiencing what Bachelard in the *Poetics of Space* (p.7) describes as the effect of reverie: “When one dreams of the house in which one was born, in the

²⁶¹ [Vanna guardava la strada che costeggiava il mare, il porto falcato che s’allontanava, il mercato sonnolento con le tende afflosciate e i banchi arrovesciati; riconosceva qualche terrazza fiorita, un punto della spiaggia dove aveva fatto i bagni, una volta. Nel suo viso abbattuto, nei dolci occhi pieni di mestizia, passava una luce che pareva di febbre. Era impaziente di giungere; a ogni sobbalzo del legno trasaliva agitata e commossa.]

²⁶² [Mi par d’essere una povera cosa buttata in un canto. Una di quelle pupattole di cencio che facevo da piccola.]

extreme depths of reverie, one participates in that original warmth, in the well-tempered matter of the material paradise. However, when Vanna arrives at her father's house she sees that the house is different from her memories. It is not only rearranged to accommodate the bigger family, but it also does not have that warm original feeling of the native house. Despite these feelings, she thinks that her father's house is still *her* house. The house that Vanna is dreaming of has changed drastically, and she does not feel protected and welcome in it. Vanna does not have a place in the house since she does not belong to it anymore. The house changed its dynamic as did the family with the arrival of the other two sisters-in-law. Her bedroom, *la stanza rosa* (the pink room), is now her younger sister's room, and the only room available now for her is that one which was once called, *la stanza del gatto* (the cat's room). Her family does not want her there any longer and everybody is wondering at the same time "who was going to take responsibility for sheltering such a young woman who had run away from her husband's house?" (Magistro:89)²⁶³.

Vanna immediately realizes that the "original warmth of the house" will not embrace her as when she was dreaming. It is interesting to notice how, once again, the balcony will have a prominent role for the female protagonist. It is the only place where Vanna is able to show her real self and where she can daydream. The balcony first appears as the place where Vanna confesses her feelings to her only friend in the house, Maria: "the two of them talked in quiet voices on the terrace that overlooked the water.

²⁶³ [Chi si pigliava la responsabilità di ricettare una donna così giovane, fuggita dalla casa del marito?...]

Vanna spoke without bitterness²⁶⁴” (Magistro:90)²⁶⁵. This space between the public and the private spheres reflects Vanna’s life in between two lives: the one with Guido and the one she wants to have back at her father’s house. On the balcony Vanna can let her *fantasma* come out just by looking at the familiar sea of her childhood. In these moments Vanna feels happy and she seems to live in her own space and her own time. Her thoughts are mainly memories of her childhood which come back to her mind. Only the balcony protects her and her dreams, and it is the only space that accepts her. On the balcony Vanna fantasizes about the life she wants and escapes her reality. The balcony accompanies Vanna for the last few days at her father’s house. Her family’s embarrassment for the situation forces Vanna to stay within the house for the whole visit. The result is that the balcony remains the only place where she can be herself: “In the evenings Vanna would stay out on the terrace till late. She didn’t suffer being left alone. In the night’s silence she listened to the murmuring sound of the sea and the waves that crashed onto the shore. A random rose would sometimes brush against her hair. She felt that her spirit was at rest” (Magistro:97-98)²⁶⁶. Once again she finds peace looking at the same view and at that sea that she immediately recognized as familiar when she first arrived. Vanna’s brief interlude is in a space in between inside and outside. She does not have her own place because she is neither wanted at *la casa paterna* (her father's house) nor at her husband’s house. Vanna starts to realize that her father’s house is rejecting her:

²⁶⁴ The lack of resentment is to be connected to the Italian adjective “mesta”, previously explained. Vanna already overcame the sadness of the failure and of the disappointment of her marriage, and for this reason she seems able to tell her story to Maria in a rational and detached way.

²⁶⁵ [Discorrevano tutte e due a bassa voce, sulla terrazza che guardava il mare. Vanna parlava senza amarezza.]

²⁶⁶ [La sera Vanna restava sulla terrazza fino a tardi. Non si doleva di essere lasciata in solitudine. Nel silenzio della notte ascoltava il mormorio vasto e pauroso del mare, delle onde che si frangevano contro la riva. Qualche rosa le sfiorava i capelli. Sentiva che il suo spirito si riposava.]

“deep in her heart she felt that her father’s house, now altered and transformed, was slowly pushing her out” (Magistro:99)²⁶⁷. Only the balcony, where she creates her own *fantasma*, seems to welcome and accept her. The balcony, however, is not *the* reality but only *her* reality and for this reason its protecting function cannot last. Vanna is nothing more than a passing stranger in both her houses.

It is necessary also to underline that the patriarchal mentality of the time considered Vanna’s action as extravagant and intolerable. Vanna is able to find the courage to escape from a situation she cannot bear, but the tyrannical patriarchal system refuses Vanna’s choice of breaking its rules, and subsequently she is excluded and rejected from public and private space. The acceptance of Vanna’s action would give women the possibility of choosing and having control over their lives, yet this would demolish the male dominated world and its socially constructed rules for women. Vanna’s mother feels guilty because she was not able to train Vanna well according to conventional rules of feminine behavior: “Her mother felt the guiltiest of all. She had failed to inculcate in her Vanna those sentiments of submission and sacrifice that are a woman’s principle virtues” (Magistro: 96-97)²⁶⁸. Vanna is a rebel and for this reason needs to be hidden and re-educated to her duties.

Her brothers describe Vanna as a *cervellino da romanzo* (“clever little thing, right out of a novel” Magistro: 93), and she knows that she cannot share her story with the rest of the family because it would be considered a *romanticheria* (“a romantic nonsense”

²⁶⁷ [Nel profondo del cuore sentiva che la casa paterna, mutata, trasformata, la respingeva da sé, a poco a poco.]

²⁶⁸ [La madre si sentiva la più colpevole. Lei non aveva saputo inculcare alla sua Vanna quei sentimenti di sottomissione e di sacrificio. Che sono le virtù principali di una donna.]

Magistro: 95) and not a serious thing²⁶⁹. It is evident that Vanna can find some relief only in the restricted space of the balcony. When her husband arrives in Sicily, after humiliating her again and refusing to pay for her ticket to go back to Rome, Vanna feels suffocated and realizes she needs to escape again. This time she knows that her father's house cannot shelter her, and she immediately runs towards that sea that she recognized as familiar and as part of her *fantasma* in the balcony. Vanna knows now that she is rejected by her family and by her husband, but she cannot accept to be submissively unhappy so she decides to join the familiar sea: "Vanna started running towards the coast, headed straight to the water's edge. The wind was blowing through her hair. A surge of water swirled about her feet..." (Magistro: 105)²⁷⁰. Even though the author does not explicitly say it, the reader is led to believe that Vanna commits suicide, or rather she is murdered by the patriarchal system which refuses to return her body to her. For this reason she decides to give herself to something that is still familiar to her and makes her happy: the sea.

In this novel once again the male characters are portrayed as very despotic and selfish. Guido, Vanna's husband, is depicted as a successful Roman lawyer who constantly humiliates Vanna for being simple and poor. He married Vanna, but he does not care about her and about her presence in the house. He only cares about his social life and work life. When Vanna escapes he does not seem to want her back. Guido is mainly described from Vanna's point of view in her dialogues with Maria where she acknowledges that her husband feels ashamed of her: "He was deceived; he needed a

²⁶⁹ In this description of Vanna there is a noticeable influence by Bovarism on Messina. This phenomenon is a recurring motif in the narratives of Italian women writers.

²⁷⁰ [Vanna si mise a correre verso la costa. Andò davanti al mare. Il vento le passava sui capelli. Un fiotto s'avanzò fino ai suoi piedi...]

different kind of wife. Rich. Well-educated. I am nothing but a weight around his neck”

(Magistro: 91)²⁷¹. Vanna blames herself for her husband’s indifference and cruelty towards her, but she does not want to live with him anymore. Guido appears only at the very end of the story, and his indifference towards his wife is confirmed once again by his words: “I came because you wanted me to. I didn’t feel the need... to leave”

(Magistro:104)²⁷². It is noteworthy that Guido does not appear eager to keep his wife under his control, but he knows she needs him since she does not have any other space in which to take refuge. This is his way of being in control. He is totally indifferent to his wife’s needs and feelings, and he has a sadistic pleasure in humiliating her. Guido represents a way of practicing domestic tyranny through the humiliation and the indifference that leads Vanna not only to escape his house but ultimately her life.

III.3 Sibilla Aleramo. *A Woman*.

To conclude my investigation of the *fantasma*, in other words, the fantastic space that women create within the domestic walls I believe it is fundamental to analyze Sibilla Aleramo’s novel *A Woman*²⁷³. As several scholars have claimed, Aleramo can be considered the very first Italian feminist writer who fought for women's rights and for

²⁷¹ [S’è ingannato. Ci voleva un’altra moglie. Ricca. Più istruita. Io non sono che una palla di piombo al suo piede.]

²⁷² [Son venuto perché l’hai voluto tu. Io non sentivo alcuna necessità... di partire].

²⁷³ For the English quotation of the novel I use the translation by Delmar Rosalind. *A Woman* (1980).

their emancipation²⁷⁴. Her autobiographical novel, *A Woman*²⁷⁵, published in 1906, develops, referring to her life experience the discourse on the necessity of female emancipation. Before immediately diving into a discussion of how the fantastic space is portrayed in *A Woman*, I would like to focus the attention on how Aleramo at the beginning of the 20th century prepared the groundwork for the main debates among feminists in the following years. In her narration Aleramo anticipated both Woolf's concept of the necessity for women to have their own space and their financial independence and De Beauvoir's analysis of what it means to be a woman. Through her life's story, from childhood to the failure of her marriage and up until the forced abandonment of her only beloved child, Aleramo faces themes that will later on cause scholars to reconsider the concept of gender²⁷⁶. In this novel Aleramo also openly talks about the necessity of a sisterhood among women. To fully understand the innovation of Aleramo's work it is necessary to investigate more deeply the concepts she addressed. Even though since the very beginning of the novel we can see a woman that is far from

²⁷⁴ On the Feminism of Sibilla Aleramo see Calamita, Francesca. "Unspoken Feelings: Comparing the Feminism of Sibilla Aleramo's *Una donna* and the Social Battle of the Present-day Anorexic" in *Skepsi* Vol 4 Issue 1 (2011), pp.1-11; Antes, Monika. "*Amo dunque sono*" Sibilla Aleramo pioniera del femminismo in Italia. (2010); Zitani, Ellen "Sibilla Aleramo, Lina Poletti and Giovanni Cena: Understanding Connections between Lesbian Desire, Feminism and Free Love in Early-Twentieth-Century Italy" in *Graduate Journal of Social Science* Vol. 6 Special Issue 1 (2009); Caesar, Ann. "Italian Feminism and the Novel: Sibilla Aleramo's 'A Woman'" in *Feminist Review* No. 5 (1980), pp.79-87;

²⁷⁵ On Aleramo's autobiographical novel see Fanning, Ursula. "Maternal Prescriptions and Descriptions in Post-Unification Italy" in *Women and Gender in Post-Unification Italy: Between Private and Public Spheres*, (2013) pp. 13-37; Spackman, Barbara. "Puntini, Puntini, Puntini: Motherliness as Masquerade in Sibilla Aleramo's *Una donna*" *MLN* Vol. 124, No. 5, (2009), pp.210-223; Lorenzetti, Sara. "I luoghi della memoria nella narrativa di Sibilla Aleramo" in *Architetture interiori: Immagini domestiche nella letteratura femminile del novecento italiano*, (2008) pp.15-50; Chemotti, Saveria. "Il corpo come voce in sé. Sussurri e grida in *Una donna* di Sibilla Aleramo" in *Corpi d'identità: codici e immagini del corpo femminile nella cultura e nella società*, (2005) pp.51-72; Grimaldi Morosoff, Anna. *Transfiguration: the autobiographical novel of Sibilla Aleramo* (1999); Bassanese, Fiora. "Sibilla Aleramo: Writing a Personal Myth" in *Mothers of Invention: Women, Italian Fascism and Culture*, (1995) pp137-165. Buttafuoco, Annarita. *Svelamento: Sibilla Aleramo: una biografia intellettuale* (1988).

²⁷⁶ I refer here particularly to Judith Butler's gender theory. See Chapter one.

the female characters portrayed by previous authors, it is only in the second part of the novel that Sibilla starts to reflect on concept of emancipation. As the title of the book underlines, Aleramo talks about herself and her life but during her narration, she also examines what it means to be a woman. Aleramo understands the necessity that in order to be “a woman” the person has to be valued first as a human being. She openly rejects the patriarchal concept of patronizing a woman and obligating her to fully sacrifice herself for others, relinquishing her own personhood as we can read: “But a good mother must not be simply a victim of self-sacrifice, as mine had been: she must be a woman, a human individual” (Delmar:113)²⁷⁷. Right after this statement the narrator also reflects on the possibility that a woman might be the cause of the *malaise* of the society that drives men to patronize women and to desire to control them, stealing their bodies as she says: “I also began to wonder whether a sizeable portion of social evils might not be the responsibility of women. After all, how could a man who had had a good mother be a bully, betray the woman he claims to love, tyrannize his children?” (Delmar:113)²⁷⁸. In her flow of thoughts, after using the reflection on women’s conditions to denounce the male tyranny, the narrator laments women’s subjugation to men and to the rules dictated by society. In order to become “a woman” a female subject needs to be exposed to the same life experience of men, otherwise she will always be incomplete and unable to grow: “But how she could possibly become an individual if her parents handed her over, ignorant, weak, and immature, to a man unable to accept her as an equal, a man who

²⁷⁷ [Ma la buona madre non deve essere, come la mia, una semplice creatura del sacrificio: deve essere *una donna*, una persona umana.]

²⁷⁸ [E incominciai a pensare se a una donna non vada attribuita una parte non lieve del male sociale. Come può un uomo che abbia avuto una buona madre divenir crudele verso i deboli, sleale verso una donna a cui dà il suo amore, tiranno verso i figli?].

treated her like a piece of property, giving her children and then abandoning her to perform his social duty, leaving her at home to idle away her time – just as she had done as a child?” (Delmar:114)²⁷⁹. This incomplete woman is left alone to raise children and to instill within them a sense of trust, but she does not experience social life and she often discovers aspects of life along with her offspring. The woman that Aleramo questions as a potential cause for the sense of *malaise* within society is a child herself and as a child fantasizes and daydreams what life could be like. This woman is certainly a victim of the patriarchal system, and she needs to detach herself from it to gain control of herself and to be a better example for her children. In Aleramo’s novel we are clearly facing a female protagonist that is much more sophisticated. From a very young age Sibilla received, thanks to her father, some education, and for the whole novel she makes her audience aware that she has access to books even when she leaves the paternal house to live with her ignorant husband. Although Sibilla is more emancipated as compared to the previous female characters I investigated, for part of her marriage she surrenders to what the patriarchal system wants for women and plays the docile wife to please her husband. In this context it is also interesting that for the first time she is aware of the fact that she is playing a role to please her husband and that “docility” is a self-imposed characteristic that later on she will totally refuse. The melancholy of her marriage is saved by books and by her capacity to daydream and consequently to create her own fantastic world: “The direction in which my intellectual development took me was not in the least affected by intimacy with my husband, to which I depressedly resigned myself.

²⁷⁹ [E come può diventare una donna, se i parenti la danno ignara, debole, incompleta a un uomo che non la riceve come sua uguale; ne usa come d’un oggetto di proprietà; le dà dei figli coi quali l’abbandona sola, mentr’egli compie i suoi doveri sociali, affinché continui a baloccarsi come nell’infanzia?”].

Moreover, whenever in my readings or daydreams I encountered a woman, historical or contemporary, who had chosen celibacy, I saluted their splendid iciness, feeling myself to be one of them, their sister” (Demlar:118)²⁸⁰. The fantastic space that the protagonist creates through her books is again a place where she can detach herself from her real life and, in particular, from her marriage life. Sibilla’s *fantasma* is generated through books and, different from the other women, she uses this space to better understand what she wants, to take action, and to regain control of her own life and, consequently, her own body. At the end of the novel Sibilla will become that woman the De Beauvoir defines as a danger for the male world because she does not passively accept the rules imposed on her by society and eventually overcomes the male control. Aleramo uses her docility to perform her gender. She needs to experience the impositions in women’s life to become a better woman. She anticipates Butler’s analysis of doing and undoing a woman by first living her life to become what society wants for her: a good wife and a good mother. Sibilla’s protagonist will refuse to suffocate her real self. She proves, as Butler states, that a woman is fighting a constant battle of doing and undoing herself. The narrator has to sacrifice her son in order to become her own person and more precisely her own woman since as she states in the novel: “In fact *woman* as a concept is a product of male fantasy. When we look at reality we see that only women exist, and that they all differ enormously” (Delmar:126)²⁸¹. With this affirmation Sibilla points out the importance for women to support each other and to create a sense of sisterhood among them. The

²⁸⁰ [I rapporti con mio marito, cui mi rassegnavo con malinconica docilità, non turbavano il lavoro della mia coscienza. Allorché, nelle mie letture o nelle mie fantasticherie, mi trovavo dinanzi alle figure delle antiche e moderne ascete, splendidi nel loro candore di ghiaccio, non potevo per ritenermi un istante loro sorella.]

²⁸¹ [In realtà *la donna* è una cosa che esiste solo nella fantasia degli uomini: ci sono *delle donne*, ecco tutto].

female protagonist stressed again this concept expressing her interest in women as she admits: “But it was the women whom I felt the most inquisitive about: I wanted them all to be beautiful. The ones who sent me their portraits were certainly very pretty... Were these truly my sisters?” (Delmar:119)²⁸². Aleramo is the main innovative author at the beginning of the 20th century in the Italian contexts since she brings to light crucial concepts on women emancipation and she put these concepts into action. In her novel she openly talks about taking action by using specific words such as emancipation, feminism, and sisterhood. Messina, who writes around the same time frame, is not as emancipated as Aleramo, and we do not find in her work the same use of this terminology.

In her process of becoming a woman, Sibilla, after being trapped in a marriage at a very young age and after being isolated because of her husband’s jealousy based on a false accusation, will slowly start her journey towards independence. In order to reach freedom Sibilla needs to undo what she has become and experience life in Rome. There she will find a job as a writer for a women’s magazine “Mulier” after her husband lost his job. For a while she is the only one who supports the family, and since she can work from home and stay again “isolated” her husband is accepting of the new situation. Her husband’s fear of her gaining visibility in the outside world is alleviated by the thought that she will continue to remain isolated and not exposed to the world. After many years Sibilla is finally able to leave behind this form of imprisonment.

In the analysis of Sibilla’s fantastic space, first, we will discover that the female character’s imagination is more sophisticated than the imagination of previous characters and, more importantly, that Sibilla will have a room of her own in which to write and to

²⁸² [Le donne mi destavano maggior curiosità: le avrei desiderate tutte belle; talune mi mandarono i loro ritratti, e questi erano davvero tutti graziosi... Sorelle?].

think. In Messina's *A house in the Shadow* and *Her Father's House*, Nicolina and Vanna had the balcony where they could free their *fantasma*, a space that did not completely belong to them; Sibilla, on the other hand, will have a studio for herself. The investigation of her *fantasma* will prove that at the beginning of the 20th century Aleramo was able to gain financial independence thus reclaiming her own space and body. She kills the image of the Angel of the House to rebuild a new self. This process will demonstrate what Butler defines as a constant doing and undoing of the human being. The novel starts with a sentence that uses the word "*libera*", as we read: "I had an active, carefree childhood." (Delmar:3)²⁸³. This beginning is very important because for the first time we can see that the freedom that the narrator recalls about her childhood will reappear at the very end of the novel when she partially regains it²⁸⁴. The young female protagonist is allowed to read, and she has a strong emotional bond with her father who "supervised my [the protagonist] homework and my readings" (Delmar:4)²⁸⁵. This is the first reason why the fantastic space she creates within the house is connected to her books which generate fantasies in her mind: "some were like wine to my imagination, transporting me into a different world" (Delmar:5)²⁸⁶. Through her readings, Sibilla admits that she lives in another time and space and imagines being someone else. She

²⁸³ [La mia fanciullezza fu libera e gagliarda].

²⁸⁴ I use the word "partially" because, in order to escape the married life, Sibilla has to abandon her child as the law at that time that did not grant custody of children to women. For the topic of Aleramo and motherhood see: Moretti, Erica. "Beyond Biological Ties: Sibilla Aleramo, Maria Montessori, and the Construction of Social Motherhood" in *Italian Culture*, Vol.31 Issue 1 (2014), pp.34-49; Benedetti, Laura. *The Tigress in the Snow: Motherhood and Literature in Twentieth Century Italy*, (2007); Pickerin-Iazzi, Robin. *Women, Italian Fascism and Culture*, (1995); Buttafuoco, Annarita. "Motherhood as a Political Strategy: The Role of the Italian Women's Movement in the Creation of the *Cassa Nazionale di Maternità*." In *Maternity and Gender Policies: Women and the Rise of the European Welfare States, 1880s-1950s*, (1992), pp. 178-95.

²⁸⁵ [Dirigevo i miei studi e le mie letture].

²⁸⁶ [una specie d'ebbrezza dell'immaginazione e mi estraniavo completamente da me stessa].

does not dream of her future husband or her potential marriage, but she lets her *fantasma* carry her away into a different life as she recalls: “And then I was blushing, just as I blushed in that same armchair when I experimented with languid poses, making believe that I was a beautiful, seductive woman” (Delmar:5)²⁸⁷. It is interesting to notice that the main figure of her daydream is herself striking the pose of a very seductive lady who might control others through her sexuality. Her fantastic space seems to empower her and to detach her from the submissive role of the Angel of the House. In her daydreams Sibilla realizes that she is different from other women, especially those who adapt to what society dictates for them. She feels different from her mother whom she defines as “*Cenerentola della casa*”. The docile soul of her mother contrasts with the sprightly personality of the young Sibilla, and her mother’s resignation creates a feeling of anger in her. The protagonist has a controversial relationship with her mother, but later on she is able to understand her and to be sympathetic to her plight. Books, therefore, are the source of her daydreams. Different from other little girls, she likes to isolate and dedicate herself completely to her readings, which shape her fantasies: “Yet I didn’t feel that Father made any real attempt to understand me either. At times I felt completely alone. Then I withdrew into daydreams, the secret mainstay of my inner word.” (Delmar:7)²⁸⁸. In this passage another important concept merits attention. Sibilla has the possibility to have a space for herself where she can be with herself and have time for herself. In previous chapters I showed that women were not able to find a space for themselves since

²⁸⁷ [Arrossivo, come arrossivo di certe pose languide che assumevo nella stessa poltrona, quando mi accadeva un attimo di trasportarmi colla fantasia nei panni d’una bella dama piena di seduzioni].

²⁸⁸ [Soppraggiunta l’ora di preparar còmpiti e lezioni, mi ritiravo nella mia stanzetta o in un angolo del giardino, e di nuovo non esisteva più per gli altri, di nuovo afferrata dal gusto dell’applicazione intellettuale, pur senza alcuna brama di emular compagne o di meritarmi premî.]

they were inhabiting only the other space within the house. In Maria Messina's novel, the two protagonists are allowed to have the balcony as a transitional space between the public and the private spheres, but Sibilla can have both. She has a space in the yard, which is the outside space connected to the house and a space within the domestic walls of her room. Previously we saw that only men were allowed to have their own space within the house and women inhabited only common places and the kitchen or the gynaeceum. For this reason the narrator is very innovative, since she clearly claims a room for herself. During the course of this analysis, this space will grow with Sibilla, and in the second part of the text she is able to obtain a "studio" for herself. Through her readings she continues to detach herself from reality and to live only her own life. Sibilla's fantastic world even allows her to explore the unfamiliar space inside her house which she first describes as a painful reality and then as a sinister place. In her daydreams Sibilla thinks of her life focusing on only herself. She does not dream of marriage since she does not have the desire of getting married as she admits: "Calmly I assured her that *I would never marry*, that I would never be happy unless I could go on working, and that furthermore all girls should do the same as me..." (Delmar:29)²⁸⁹. This thought is another example of the emancipation of the female character for the period of time in which she lives.

During the first part of her marriage Sibilla tries to accommodate her personality to the rules of society. At the beginning she tries to become as "the other women" and to perform the constructed qualities that a good wife should have. She softens her personality and she tries to assume docility to please her husband. The female protagonist

²⁸⁹ [Tranquilla io replicavo che *non mi sarei mai maritata*, che non sarei stata felice se non continuando la mia vita di lavoro libero, e che, del resto tutte le ragazze avrebbero dovuto far come me...].

marries at a very young age, seduced and raped by a co-worker that she will marry. She is dragged into the married life, and for this reason, I think, she temporarily abandons her main characteristics. Sibilla soon realizes that she has been imprisoned by a man and more than that she belongs to him, as she claims: “Now I spent my days almost entirely within the silence of my little room. I prepared by trossieu and sometimes paused for long periods in a state of suspended reflection, watching my hand as they rested against the white muslin” (Delmar:43)²⁹⁰. Sibilla starts to experience the closed and monotonous space of the house that conflicts with the open and lively space she used to occupy before such as the house itself, the yard and her father’s factory.

Before starting her female performance, she is aware of the fact she is becoming a man’s property. She is accepting the “*rifugio*” that he is offering her and that she needs to let her “*libertà*” go. She soon realizes however, that for women a house is not the protective shelter, but the place that, imprison them and control them as we read: “I must never appear to the window; if a man came into the house... I must hurry to my room. I had been so used to freedom that occasionally I rebelled... I was only reminded more intensely of my sickening defeat” (Delmar:42)²⁹¹. Sibilla feels defeated by society and for this reason she accepts her circumstances and becomes obedient to her husband conforming to the expectations. Sibilla’s daydreams are the only moments within the house in which she shows her real desires and personality. Once again the *fantasma* is her *tactic* to bear the *strategy* that oppresses her. In her daydreams she recalls images of her

²⁹⁰ [Adesso le giornate scorrevano quasi per intero nel silenzio della mia stanzetta. Preparavo il corredo, e talora restavo per lunghi momenti sospesa guardando le mie mani posate sulla mussolina bianca].

²⁹¹ [Non dovevo affacciarmi alla finestra, dovevo scappare in camera mia se qualche uomo capitava in casa... La mia personalità fino ad allora così libera, ... Insorgeva a tratti, ma soltanto per farmi più sentire la sconfitta patita].

childhood when she was free and independent. These images are an oasis that detached the protagonist from the lifeless lives of the other married women in the town. Maternity will be for her another way to keep her distance from her real life, as she says right after her only male child's birth: "For a week I lived in a magnificent dream. I had boundless emotional energy, which warded off exhaustion and allowed me to think that I was beginning to take control of my life" (Delmar:62)²⁹². In her daydreams, Sibilla clearly expresses the desire for independence and for the right, as a woman, to dominate her life. Her performance of docile wife becomes every day more difficult and distant: "I was finding it increasingly difficult to maintain tolerable relations with my husband" (Delmar:70)²⁹³. The unhappiness caused by her marriage and her husband leads Sibilla to a new daydream that does not involve her child but focuses again on herself and her happiness. She is now fantasizing on a married man who seems intensely attracted to her. Her daily routine is revitalized by this new fantasy and she daydreams of him even when she is pleased by her husband: "I walked home with my husband through the wintry countryside weaving fantastic stories in my mind" (Delmar:73)²⁹⁴. The fantasies on the stranger keep her mind occupied night and day and she tries to imagine what he likes and thinks of her. It is clear that in her daydream Sibilla is seeking to reignite her emotional life: she is looking for something that would allow her to experience love without performing a fake role. Thanks to her daydreams Sibilla can live a more satisfying life in those moments escaping, the sad routine of the household and of her marriage: "I so much wanted to love and be loved, to give myself without reserve and to feel I truly

²⁹² [Per una settimana vissi come in un sogno gaudioso, in una pienezza d'energia spirituale che m'impediva di sentirmi estenuata, che mi dava l'illusione d'avviarmi al dominio della vita].

²⁹³ [sempre più gravosa mi riusciva la missione che m'ero imposta verso mio marito].

²⁹⁴ [facevo con mio marito la strada verso casa, nel rigore della notte invernale, fantasticando].

belong to a man. That way I would learn to live, would be born again” (Delmar:76)²⁹⁵. As the Flaubertian character²⁹⁶, the young woman is seeking to experience real love, but she cannot find it. This episode is particularly relevant since it will change Sibilla’s life within the domestic walls. Even though she never really has a relationship with the man, the jealousy of her husband will imprison her within the house for a long time and it will drive Sibilla to attempt suicide. Later on in the novel, we see here a pattern within women among the family since her mother, unhappy in her marriage, attempted suicide as well. Even at the beginning of 20th century suicide seems still to be the answer to the *malaise* of women as it was in the 19th century. While Sibilla’s mother after attempting suicide has a nervous breakdown that forces her to be secluded in a nursing home, Sibilla’s reaction will be very different. Differently to her mother Sibilla right after the terrible event is capable to remove the idea of dying because she realizes that she left indelible traces in her house. She realizes that she is the core of the house and the family and her presence is crucial. This is the first time that a female character talks about this important concept well analyzed later on by Walter Benjamin²⁹⁷. Aleramo is once again very original in her writing in comparison to the other authors I investigated and the literary traces she leaves will empower her as a woman²⁹⁸. After the alleged infidelity, Sibilla’s life is now secluded within the house but she is leaving traces of herself. Her husband becomes her “gaoler”, she is not allowed to enter any of the rooms facing the main road but she was not disturbed by her imprisonment. In her domestic jail Sibilla resorts again

²⁹⁵ [Oh amare, amare, darmi volontariamente, sentirmi di un uomo, vivere, rinascere!].

²⁹⁶ Bovarism has is a very strong presence in Italian women writers novels in the late 19th and the early 20th centuries even though it still remains a topic not sufficiently addressed. For a better understanding of the subject see De Goutier, Jules. *Le Bovarysme*. (1989).

²⁹⁷ See Chapter one.

²⁹⁸ See Chapter one.

to her daydreams to cope with her unpleasant and monotonous life as she confesses: “Yet my isolation seemed interminable; no one ever spoke to me; I had given up all hope and trust. When salvation came, it was in the form of a book”(Delmar: 99).²⁹⁹ Reading a book Sibilla closed in her room with her son, creates a parallel world that makes her feel lively again. In her daydreaming status rejects all her recent negative fantasies, and the book makes her feel protected within the house: “Gradually my new absorption into this work drove all my recent fantasies, all my despair, into the background. And I began to make a virtue of my isolation, feeling that at least it protected me from the realities which reminded me how irredeemable and wretched life was” (Delmar: 100)³⁰⁰. The daydream is once again the place that gives the sense of protection to women and not the house itself as it should be. Sibilla can pretend to be in another place, and in her fantasy she has an active role, where she thinks, speaks, reflects and feels happy. It has to be said that Sibilla has time and space to daydream. She is secluded in the house, but she can read in her room and daydream of the life she would like to have. The female character inhabits the house leaving traces and defining her own space. She needs her daydreams to feel alive, and this is her tool to react to the patriarchal system and to take action at the end of the novel. With this novel the author is slowly moving towards the process of appropriation of the house as a protected space for women. Sibilla's daydreams are sometimes unclear, especially in the morning: “Sometimes, on waking, we have the distinctive impression that we have spent a night densely packed with dreams and elaborate fantasies. In the fleeting moments between sleeping and waking we seem to

²⁹⁹ “In quei giorni d’infinita solitudine, nel silenzio di ogni richiamo umano, abbandonata veramente ogni speranza e ogni fede, trovai in un libro una causa di salvezza”.

³⁰⁰ “E quel fascino faceva indietreggiare in silenzio i recenti fantasmi disperati, rendeva benefica la mia solitudine, mi difendeva tra le piccole realtà ostetanti la loro piccola miseria”.

have lived a deep inner life. But we cannot reconstruct our vision and we cannot re-create our night time thoughts” (Delmar:103)³⁰¹.

The situation for Sibilla changes when from the small town of the Marches region she moves to dynamic urban dimension of Rome because of a clash between her father and her husband leading her husband, to lose his job. In Rome Sibilla can partially have back her freedom and sense of independence. In the capital she works for a women's magazine called *Mulier*, and now she is the only one who supports the family. Sibilla partakes in the process, that will allow women, to gain financial independence and a room of their own within the domestic walls. Until this point Sibilla always had a place to read and to daydream peacefully within the house contrary to many women at that time. In the Roman house she enjoys the privacy of a “*studiolo*” for the first time: “I remember one particular afternoon that November. I am sitting in a small study (*studiolo*), shielding my eyes from the sun with my hand” (Delmar:134)³⁰². For the first time in all of the novels that I investigated a woman not only supports her family, but also can freely call *hers* a part of the house that is normally reserved for men as it was in Neera’s novel *Teresa*³⁰³. Even though she can feel her husband's presence in the back of the room, she owns her room. In her study room Sibilla can work, think, and gain her freedom, and, more importantly, she feels joyful as she confesses: “When he left, I went to my study... I felt a joy the like of which I had never known before” (Dalmar:167)³⁰⁴. In Rome the female protagonist gained her space and strengthened her desire for freedom. She feels stronger,

³⁰¹ “talvolta, al mattino, abbiamo la sensazione nitida d’aver passato una notte densa di sogni e di fantasmi grandiosi, e d’aver vissuto in fuggevoli istanti di dormiveglia una vita profonda; ma non riusciamo a ricostruire le visioni né a rifare i pensieri notturni.”

³⁰² [Mi rivedo nello studiolo, in un pomeriggio di novembre avanzato, col sole che mi obbliga a farmi schermo della mano agli occhi].

³⁰³ See chapter two.

³⁰⁴ [Quando mi ritrovai sola nello studio... Una gioia m’invase, ignota fin allora].

even when she has to go back to the small town. Quite surprisingly, this room is set up by her husband to lesser her disillusionment, but Sibilla realizes that his kind gestures are just a way to keep her from leaving him and the house: “It wasn’t long before I discovered that his new good intentions were more of a burden to me than his old domestic tyranny” (Dalmar:185)³⁰⁵. In her *studiolo* Sibilla also creates her own world, and this parallel space is where once again she reflects about life. She is surrounded by ghosts from the past, by the image of her mother who sacrificed her freedom and lived imprisoned in a life controlled by others as we read: “I began to have hallucinations, in my work-room... I thought I saw my mother, a young woman standing by my sisters’ cradle, as she decided to accept her terrible fate... They were all blood-stained symbols of the delusions of sacrifice, terrible examples of the punishment in store for all those who deny their own feelings” (Delmar:202)³⁰⁶. It is clear from the very beginning that Sibilla's reflections in her own parallel world follow a coherent pattern: the search of freedom for herself and for women. This last fantasy denounces her fear to become fossilized and trapped in the role of the dutiful dissatisfied wife. She feels the need to refuse this performance and to regenerate herself. She clearly anticipated the necessity of killing the concept of the Angel of the House as well as the Catholic principle of female sacrifice, abused and manipulated by the patriarchal system. A woman’s life is divided between virginity and motherhood, so that a woman is owned by a man for her whole life. The experience in Rome brings back the genuine sense of independence that Sibilla had before her marriage. According to Sibilla women need to find a common secular

³⁰⁵ [E subito sentii il peso dei suoi buoni propositi quanto quello della primitiva tirannia].

³⁰⁶ [Fantasmi popolavano il mio studio... mia madre giovane accanto alla culla delle mie sorelle, in atto accettava la sua sorte atroce... Simboli sanguinosi della vanità del sacrificio, esempi terribili del castigo incombente su ogni coscienza che si rinnega].

ground in order to make their voices heard and to get rid of the common feeling of sacrifice imposed by the Catholic religion: “There was as of yet no widespread political solidarity between women. Only the Church, which had always demanded that women sacrifice themselves, was now encouraging some unified action among them – as long as this was under its careful supervision” (Delmar:153).

In the very last part of the autobiographical novel the female protagonist decides to abandon her role of wife leaving the family and her only son because the law of the time did not allow a divorce to bring her son with her even if she had financial independence. Even though she regains her freedom, Sibilla realizes that she is still the property of her husband and she cannot take her child: "I must, then said, remain the property of this man, and should count myself lucky if he didn't force me to return to him. Such was the law” (Delmar: 217)³⁰⁷. In the house right before leaving she daydreams again of freedom, of leaving the house with her son but this daydream will stay trapped within the house.

In addition to the way she secures a space for herself within the domestic walls, her fight for freedom, and her argument on what it means to be a woman, she also proposes a different image of men. It starts with her father's figure which, despite his despotic behavior toward his wife, seems to want to raise Sibilla as an independent woman even though will not allow her to continue her studies once the family moved to the little town in the Marches region. He initially gives her the freedom to work, to read, to try to know life, but the disappointment of her getting pregnant at a very young age will turn him into an absent and unconcerned father. In the description of her parents we perceive the contrast between the authoritative and impetuous temper of her father and the meek and submissive character of her

³⁰⁷ [Io restavo proprietà di quell'uomo, dovevo stimarmi fortunata ch'egli non mi facesse ricondurre colla forza. Questa era la legge].

mother. In the beginning the father's figure is, in a way, innovative, considering the relationship with the beloved daughter, even though he is very conservative in the marriage dynamics. The other male figure that attracts the attention in the novel is the weak figure of her husband. Since the onset he is described as a petty and ignorant man who abuses Sibilla in order to achieve a higher place in society. He rapes the young woman, and she must unwillingly accept to become his wife. He also has a sense of pride in conquering and overpowering her. In the episode of the rape Sibilla points out the weak and inane personality of the man in the way he reacts to the sexual violence on her: "I must have conveyed immense horror, for as he came toward me I saw his sudden look of fear and his hands clasped in a gesture of supplication" (Delmar:35)³⁰⁸. The gesture of supplication has to be reconnected to the fear the man has of losing his chance to climb the social ladder and certainly not to the brutal gesture he has committed. In describing her husband, Sibilla expresses her sympathy for a man whom she describes as ignorant and primitive and, subsequently, brutal. His lack of sophistication clashes with the lively intelligence of Sibilla which evidently makes him feel inferior. After their marriage, he feels the need to seclude his wife within the house until he is able to control her. Sibilla's intellectual superiority is apparent in the rational analysis she gives of her husband. She has to cope with the brutality of his physical and psychological violence, yet she seems capable of giving the reader an objective description of the man she married: "Sometimes I watched him... He seemed to lack all insight, so that he was as equally incompetent as a lover as an adversary. I thought him useless, extraneous to my existence" (Delmar:71)³⁰⁹. He does not belong to Sibilla's intimate life, as he stole her body through rape

³⁰⁸ [Dovevo esprimere un immenso orrore poiché una paura folle gli apparì sul volto, mentre avanzava verso di me le mani congiunte in atto supplichevole...].

³⁰⁹ [Lo guardavo talora... Privo di ogni intuizione, inetto alla carezza come nel rimprovero, inutile, estraneo alla mia vita].

to possess her and benefits from her social status. Sibilla's husband is never addressed with his first name to underline the lack of affection and intimacy she had for him. It is obvious that the man depends on her; he begs her in vain at the end not to leave the house as she writes: "Then suddenly he fell to his knees, clasping my legs and he cried out, "Don't leave, don't leave. Can you tell how much I love you?" As if delirious" (Delmar:212)³¹⁰. In the husband's confession lays the weakness of the patriarchal system and its fear to admit its dependence on women. This is the primary reason why it seeks to subjugate women through brutality. Sibilla's punishment rebelling against this brutality is losing her only child. Her husband instrumentalizes their son in order continue to maintain control over his wife. The female protagonist chooses her freedom to avoid madness and death which would have resulted from her imprisonment within the house and in the body of a fake self. With this novel Aleramo takes real action for women's freedom and emancipation. With her *gridi atroci* she was "not asking for recognition, but only to be listened" (Delmar:218)³¹¹.

³¹⁰ [Non lasciarmi, non lasciarmi! Ti amo tanto vedi!"]. E mi afferrava le ginocchia. Continuò a scongiurare, come in preda a un leggero delirio].

³¹¹ [Io non domando fama, domando ascolto].

CONCLUSION

In my dissertation, I investigated how the domestic space was represented by Italian women authors at the end of the 19th and at the beginning of the 20th centuries. I mainly focused my analysis on the fantastic spaces that the female characters created within the domestic walls in order to survive the tyranny of the patriarchal system. After an historical and theoretical introduction, I entered the core of the analysis of what I defined *fantasma*. Within this time frame, the fantastic space became a fundamental tool for women's survival. Daydreams provided women with a parallel space that allowed their real inner selves to appear and to slowly start the process towards female emancipation. This space empowered them and it acknowledged the necessity for a change that had to start *from* and *in* the house. It was through the *fantasma* that women started to leave their traces within their everyday lives and promote the necessary process of shaping their selves. The investigation of the *fantasma* brought to light the necessity of analyzing the description of the house and its furnishings since they reflected the seclusion of women and their unhappiness with the house and the marriage.

The articulation of the analysis between the two centuries, gave me the opportunity of underlying how the representation of the fantastic space changed over the years and how the female characters, especially in the literary works of Maria Messina and Sibilla Aleramo, gained more defined spaces within the house where they could let their *fantasma* be free.

This investigation allowed me to prove that, after the Unification of Italy, the intention of the *Risorgimento* of redefining the perfect Italian citizen gave power and

mobility, within the Italian society, only to men granting them power over women who were once again secluded within the house. The domestic tyranny forced upon women created discontent and serious consequences in the mental state of many of them. The narratives I analyzed are a clear denouncement of this situation and an acknowledgement of the necessity for change. This change starts slowly within the fantastic space that the females characters create to express their unhappiness and, at the same time, to start to explore what their desires are and who they really are. In other words, they start to create their own selves. In their *fantasma*, women slowly gain their bodies back and consequently they receive visibility within the Italian society. Only within this space are women in charge of their own lives and feel free since men have no jurisdiction in this space and thus do not own them. In the fantastic space they can start to experience what life could actually be like and interrogate themselves regarding the “secrets” of life. The literary work of women writers is therefore a sociological analysis of the society of the time. On one hand their narratives give a view on the female situation and their imprisonment within the domestic walls, and on the other hand they allow the female readers to identify with the characters and they empower them to take action.

The analysis of the fantastic space also confirms that the control that the patriarchal system exerts on women is an expression of its fear to be castrated and consequently to admit its inferiority. Through the fantastic space women are also able to take the necessary steps towards the creation of sisterhood, stopping the crime of the male dominated world whereby women are pitted one against the other. Even though Sibilla Aleramo in *A Woman* points out that the society of the time is missing a laic sisterhood, I believe that through the identification of women with the fantastic space

created in the fictional works, they can finally understand that they all share the same struggle and the same imprisonment. This is the start that will lead women toward their *liberation*.

At the end of the journey of my investigation, the analysis of the fantastic space proves that right after the Unification of Italy, women start to take agency within the Italian society denouncing their discontent and the desire of undoing the role of angels of the house rebuilding their new selves in an un-chained body.

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