

The Oedipus and Electra Complex in Italian Literature of the Late 19th Century

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Abstract

As Ellen Key outlined in 1900, the 20th century centred on the child and literary theory started analysing texts from a Freudian and Jungian perspective. Italian narrative texts from various authors of the late 19th century assert the Oedipus complex theory where the child's obsession with the mother deems the father a rival insofar as he exemplifies castration. Authors such as Luigi Capuana, Edmondo De Amicis and Carlo Dossi express this fear of losing the mother in autobiographical works which denote their seduction by the preferred parent. Certain literary characters such as Pinocchio or Rosso Malpelo lack this sense of security the mother provides; hence, they survive by substituting the biological mother with the fairy godmother or, as in Malpelo's case, by exalting the father figure with whom he identifies.

The Electra complex, the girl's psychosexual competition with her mother for possession of the father, is prominent in Sibilla Aleramo's confession of her childhood obsession for the father. This psychoanalytical approach developed later in the 20th century because, as Luce Irigaray states, the daughter has always occupied a marginal role in society. Sometimes the mother manifests ambiguous behaviour (*Gli spostati* and *Tortura*) given that she no longer feels obliged by nature to love her offspring. As a popular saying goes, "the hand that rocks the cradle rules the world" and these literary works epitomise the sheer significance of the parent-figure with respect to the child's psychological and social well-being.

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As Ellen Key states in her book *The Century of the Child* (1900), the 20th century was to mark an important landmark in that it gradually moved away from the centrality of the female figure, typical of the previous century, and focused more intensely on childhood. In such a context, the child became the fulcrum of psychoanalytical, sociological and literary studies. With Sigmund Freud's revolutionary theory of the Oedipus complex followed by Karl Jung's interpretation of the Electra complex¹, literary theory acquired a new perspective as scholars pondered on the child's

1 Freud himself explicitly rejected Jung's term because it "seeks to emphasize the analogy between the attitude of the two sexes", preferring the use of *feminine Oedipus attitude* or *negative Oedipus complex* in his own writings.

obsession for the preferred parent. Examples of this phenomenon can also be encountered in Italian narrative literature of the late 19th century and the first few years of the 20th century.

It seems strange to associate desire or sex with childhood but Freud insists that sex starts with life and not in puberty because the genital organs are already present in the early stages of life. Psychoanalysts see the mother as a symbol of love whereas the father represents castration and tends to ruin the intimate relationship between mother and son. The child's obsession to possess the mother is a process which instils feelings of guilt but triggers the instinct to seek pleasure. As Donald Winnicott points out, the child truly exists only when he benefits from his mother's attention while simultaneously becoming aware of the other people in the mother's life (Altman et al., 2002). These become fundamental for the formation of his identity especially because this conflict generates jealousy and triggers the development of his ego.

According to Jungian theory, it is natural for the child to feel nostalgic for the mother because there is in every one of us the wish to remain children under the protection of the preferred parent who represents Eden. The return to the mother becomes a quest for the child whose aim is to be reborn on a superior level. Until birth, the child is physically part of the mother and subsequently remains psychologically dependent on her. This explains why he seeks her in other women, as seen in the autobiographical confessions of Luigi Capuana (*Ricordi d'infanzia*, 1893) and of Edmondo De Amicis (*Ricordi d'infanzia e di scuola*, 1901). Both admit to listening to old tales which played on their imagination during the night. Capuana confesses that in this scary turmoil, the kind face of Facciabella appeared (which in reality is the statue of the Virgin Mary) and took him in her arms till he calmed down:

'[...] una bellissima signora, vestita di raso bianco con galloni e ricami d'oro. I biondi capelli le splendevano attorno al capo come un'aureola, ma i lineamenti del viso e gli occhi suoi erano immobili; pareva ch'ella avesse il viso coperto da una maschera di cera. S'inoltrò lentamente fino alla sponda del mio letto, guardandomi fisso, mi prese ignudo su le braccia e mi portò via con sé [...]' (1965, p.142).

Carlo Dossi narrates the Oedipus complex from an ironic perspective in *Amori* (1887), a semi-autobiographical novel that narrates the author's experiences of love between illusion and reality. As Graziella Pagliano explains, this process is a revelation of the self, a critical analysis of the self, compared to our sense of the Other. Dossi's first love is the Queen of Hearts, an annunciation of pure and genuine feeling for a woman who is far superior to common women. Ten-year-old Dossi feels the urge to possess her and the power she embodies, and he is invaded by a sense of rebellion at seeing other men touch her with their ugly fingers. Then his object of love becomes the Holy Virgin who hovers above his head; the boy cannot accept the sense of satisfaction experienced by her earthly husband, St Joseph, who

does not deserve such a lovely doll, a 'bambolotta in veste rosa e turchina' (1987, p.15). Kissing her gives him a sense of sexual orgasm as sensual emotions invade him and he sleeps happily as if he were an adult who appears satiated after sexual intercourse. It is evident that these female figures represent the mother whom the son is desperately trying to seduce. The alteration between illusion and reality materialises when he senses a hand on his forehead and sees his mother looking at him lovingly while fantasy locks with reality.

Another example of the Oedipus complex in Italian literature is Luigi Pirandello's short story *Un ritratto* (1922) where the relationship between mother and son is so strong that they intensely identify themselves with one another. Indeed, the author evokes a game of mirrors so as to underline the idea that one cannot live independently of the other: when looking at his mother, the son feels he is looking at his own soul, his double without flaw. This intimate bonding helps the child reach out to the outside world, as the mother 'filters' the harsh reality to provide her son with a sense of security. When this fails, the child becomes aggressive, everything acquires a feeling of illusion as he aches to return to his mother, who represents the roots, the origin of life. Yet Pirandello also stresses the adult's dependence on the child in the hope that the son becomes a better adult than himself. If this does not occur, the parent's desire for immortality is broken and the adult enters a moment of crisis (Biagini et al., 2002).

The son's obsession with the mother can also be encountered in Grazia Deledda's *Cenere* (1904) where feelings are as primitive as Sardinia, the island that serves as background to the story. Fifteen-year-old Oli gives birth to Anania, on whom she vents out all her anger after having been seduced and abandoned by a married man. The son lives only to win her love and understands that, being a 'bastard', he is the cause of all her tears. Although she abandons him, Anania is obsessed by his mother's memory, by the need to be treated as a son while questioning the reasons for his birth: 'Ma perché son nato io? Perché mi hanno fatto nascere?' (1973, p.197). This trauma provokes the loss of his future wife and the tragedy of Oli's suicide, in her desperate attempt to break the ties that bind them together.

The absence of the mother in a child's life results in an abnormal childhood and in a sense of loss as portrayed in Carlo Collodi's *Pinocchio* (1881). The puppet is given life by a male figure who has to provide food, shelter and affection; yet Pinocchio flees all the time, driven by nostalgia for the mother, represented by forest trees. The fact that he is desperately seeking his mother proves that the naughty puppet is capable of true love, denoted by his perpetual hunger. To a certain extent, the Fairy compensates for this yearning for maternal love, even though she is an ambiguous figure who performs various roles: mother, sister and child. She is an expression of strength, symbolised by her long hair like Samson in the Bible, and whose blue colour recalls the Holy Mother. Except for the Fairy, the book is populated by male figures and this explains the sense of solitude that overpowers the characters. Even in the 'Paese dei Balocchi', the land of play, the description of the boys playing alone instils

a sense of loss which culminates when they become donkeys. Many do not survive, but Pinocchio, who learns to love his father inside the womb of the whale, rises from the sea as a new being that has developed from the typical 'enfant terrible' to the desired 'ragazzo perbene'.

As in Collodi's fairytale, Giovanni Verga shows that the absence of the mother in the life of a young boy renders the latter so insignificant that others are compelled to take advantage of him. In *Rosso Malpelo* (1878), the young lad is considered unworthy of his mother's love because of the red hair that characterises him; Gregory Lucente explains that this is why he has no real name and why, according to the village people, he deserves to be treated as a beast (1995, pp.90-93). The young 'caruso' is surprised at seeing Ranocchio's mother cry for her son; his mother never touched him nor was she ever affectionate towards him. His need to counterbalance this loss makes him seek the love of another mother: the cave which binds him to his father. The cave becomes his reality, the physical space where dirt and ugliness do not matter, and where the colour of his hair, which usually marks him as an outcast, is in tune with the environment. The world outside the cave becomes alien to his real underground reality which strives to bind him with his father and where he can live his childhood. Malpelo's biological mother fails to accept him because he earns less than her husband did; this brings about a sense of guilt in the lad who is incapable of loving himself and who develops a fetish attitude towards his father's tools and clothes while touching them with devotion. Malpelo learns to identify with the father figure as, according to Eagleton, he 'symbolizes a place, a possibility, which he himself will be able to take up and realize in the future [...] the boy makes peace with his father, identifies with him, and is thus introduced into a symbolic role of manhood' (2008, p.134). In turn, the society to which he belongs rejects him; it follows in the mother's footsteps as is demonstrated by the workmates who abuse and insult him. At the end he chooses death inside the cave because down there he can maintain his uniqueness; it is where he belongs, inside the womb of Mother Earth who finally transforms him into a myth.

Whereas Verga portrays the identification between father and son, in the novel *L'innocente* (1892) by Gabriele D'Annunzio, there is a sense of rivalry between the two. The husband, Tullio Hermil, narrates with a realistic sadism how his wife's pregnancy – following an adulterous relationship – risks shattering their marriage. For Tullio, the child is an intruder and a usurper who wants to dominate his wife's life whereas for the wife, Giuliana, the son is tangible proof of her debauchery. D'Annunzio enhances the rivalry that set Tullio and the unborn child apart, especially the torment at the certainty that it will be a male child who will inherit his family name and become the rightful heir of the Hermils. The vocabulary employed evokes images of war: *lotta*, *nemico*, *avversario* (1968, p.254) as the 'father' prepares each and every detail of the child's death in order to remain the only male figure in his wife's life.

Although most literary works of the late 19th century focus on the son, in her second thesis *Speculum* (1974), Luce Irigaray questions parental ties and the marginal

role of the daughter in a society where the son has always prevailed. This explains why theories of the Electra complex developed at a later stage and concentrated on the relationship between father-daughter and mother-daughter as opposed to the studies about the son. Claude Lévi-Strauss shows in his anthropological studies that the daughter has always been considered a gift to the father, who can 'use' and 'exchange' her by marrying her to someone who will improve the economic and social situation of the family.

This attitude stands in stark contrast to Sibilla Aleramo's autobiography, *Una donna* (1906): her sense of security stems from her father's affection through which he transmits his virility and courage, upon elevating her to the apex of his world. The Electra complex is described in its full force as the daughter gloats in her realisation that she is the chosen love of the father. Their relationship is described with sensuous words that evoke incestuous allusions as the girl confesses that she lived only for his love, he who is emblematic of life's beauty:

'L'amore per mio padre mi dominava unico. [...] Era lui il luminoso esemplare per la mia piccola individualità, lui che mi rappresentava la bellezza della vita: [...] egli sapeva tutto e aveva sempre ragione. Accanto a lui, la mia mano nella sua per ore e ore, noi due soli camminando per la città o fuori le mura, mi sentivo lieve, come al disopra di tutto' (2007, pp.1-2).

She admits reaching the culmination of her senses each time her father took her hand in his as they walked together like two lovers. The writer confesses that, despite her young age, she actually deemed herself a seductive woman whose first victim was her father whereas her insignificant mother remained the Cinderella of the house. In her obsession with her father, she refuses to learn female chores and is oblivious to the village people calling her *demonietto* while making the sign of the cross when she passes by. Aleramo reveals her fear of being abandoned by her father, which in fact becomes reality when he engages in an affair. She consequently feels forced to seek the arms of a man who rapes her, while the father fails to accept that his child has been possessed by another man.

Hélène Deutsch sees the female development as exceedingly difficult and tortuous due to the fact that at some point she must transfer her primary sexual object choice from her mother to her father (and therefore to male figures), if she is to attain her expected heterosexual adulthood. According to Deutsch, the girl blames her father, not her mother, for the lack of a penis; so she stops identifying with her father and identifies herself with her mother instead. In the traditional mentality, the daughter discovers her mother only when she herself gives birth; in this way, destiny leads only to one direction which is not necessarily satisfactory, as proved by the female tragic figures of Verga's Isabella or Capuana's Giacinta. Hélène Cixous opposes this theory by saying that the mother's body can also be discovered through writing, because a woman writes not with a pen but with her milk:

Anche se la mistificazione fallica ha generalmente contaminato i buoni rapporti, la donna non è mai lontana dalla “madre” (che io intendo come ruolo, la “madre” come non-nome e come sorgente dei beni). Sempre in lei sussiste almeno un po’ del buon latte materno. La donna scrive con l’inchiostro bianco (1997, p.229).

The Electra complex is echoed in Pirandello’s *Zafferanetta* (1922) where the love of the father, Sirio, for his African daughter is far greater than the affection for his wife Norina and the son to whom she is soon giving birth. The girl is Sirio’s pride in spite of her peculiar talk (*bombo, bua, n’gu*), the strange colour of her skin, her squashed nose and her enormous lips. The girl is described enviously by the wife who fails to understand how her husband is obsessed by this *scimmietta* and whose appearance explains the nickname Zafferanetta, the colour of sulphur. The girl twists them all around her little finger and proudly describes her father as *mio* as he wolves her down with kisses. She even imposes on him to choose between his wife and baby in Italy and herself; by refusing to adapt to European life, the little girl manages to take him with her back to Africa where he can live exclusively for her.

This strong tie between father and daughter is the cause of tragedy in Francesco Mastriani’s *Medea di Porta Medina* (1882). Coletta, the main character, uses her daughter to blackmail the man who has seduced her, into staying with her. She feels like an outsider and considers her child Cesarina a rival while Cipriano consumes the baby with kisses. Coletta is a strange mother who feels excluded from the invisible bonding that ties her man to the baby. As Simone De Beauvoir explicates, the relationship between mother and daughter is complicated because it alternates between affection and hostility (1988, p.309). When the mother brings up the daughter like a copy of herself, she feels pride but also bitterness. As exposed in the novel, Coletta accuses Cipriano of loving the child more and takes out her anger on Cesarina when she understands that her lover is distancing himself from them. When Cipriano seeks the arms of another woman, Coletta fails to identify her daughter’s pain of abandonment with her own and takes revenge on the child during Cipriano’s wedding. Upon hugging her daughter to her heart for the first time, Cesarina ironically calls her *Pa* as he is the one who usually embraces her. Like a heroine of the classical Greek theatre or the tragic figures of Racine, the Medea (witch) strangles the baby he loves, bangs her head on the floor and hands the parcel to the newlyweds.

While this might seem obscene and unnatural, Elizabeth Badinter insists that a woman is not obliged by nature to love her child as it is not part of her instinct. It was Freud’s psychological assessment that rendered the contact with the mother the key to the child’s psychological health, which pushed women to feel this maternal instinct. Therefore, maternal love is a gift which a woman can refuse (Badinter, 1981, p. IX) and this explains why so many mothers abandoned their unwanted child, a mode of behaviour considered unnatural by society. An example of this can be found

in *Tortura* by Capuana, where Teresa refuses her unborn baby and describes him as *incestuosa creatura* (1988, p.314). She clings to the idea of abortion because she cannot love him and yet, she feels guilty about it. When forced to kiss her newborn son, she feels the lips of the man who raped her and psychologically rejects her son, a reaction which causes the baby's death after a long period of pain.

The above reflects how literature becomes a tool in the process of understanding how parents' roles have changed with time. In 19th century literature, the mother's role is stereotyped in that she is depicted as a symbol of equilibrium and, as the angel of the house, she is endowed with a level of beauty attributable to her good nature. During the 20th century, the mother shows signs of rebellion and fluctuates between feelings of jealousy and frustration, and is sometimes unable to love her own children. Jung states that the mother is no longer a myth and neither is she sacred because she has lost her archetypal and traditional role (1981, p.31). This ambiguous behaviour sees mothers treating their offspring like a pet, alternating kisses to feelings of irritation, thus further confusing the child, who in turn gradually loses his self-respect. In *Gli spostati* (1883), Matilde Serao presents a modern mother whose little son finds her awesome: he is fascinated by her lacy housecoat but she ignores him; at times he becomes her doll and she dresses him up over and over again, even like a female. Only appearances count as she forces the boy to accompany her in the carriage while men pass sensuous comments which the child fails to understand. His priority is to ensure that he is not abandoned by his preferred parent and his attempts at gaining her attention become fundamental to the development of a relationship within himself on the one hand, and with the world around him on the other.

As a popular saying goes, 'the hand that rocks the cradle rules the world', generally referring to the mother who is the child's first love, his original ruler, the centre of his universe. Yet the literary works analysed epitomise the importance of the father figure, at the centre of both the Oedipical and Electra complexes. As delineated, literature lists numerous examples of the significance of the parent-figure with respect to the child's psychological, emotional and social well-being.

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Bio-note

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