

Less than Human. A true-life portrait of child abuse in Matilde Serao's (1856-1927) short story *Canituccia* (1883)*

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ABSTRACT: In the short story *Canituccia* (1883), Matilde Serao denounces the conditions of solitude and violence endured by abandoned children in the harsh farmlands of late-nineteenth-century southern Italy. The raw prose with which Serao portrays reality from life becomes a precious historical testimony. In *Canituccia*, we also read the writer's subtle unveiling of stigmas, their implicit connections to deeply held beliefs, and the ominous alibis they offer for violence against those considered weaker and, as such, perfect, expendable victims. Violence that continues to torment children, even today, perpetrated by those who are supposed to care for them.

EET/TEE KEYWORDS: Child abuse; Children's and youth literature; Matilde Serao; Italy; XIX-XX Centuries.

1. *Sentiment and Testimony*

Canituccia is a short story from the collection *Piccole anime* [*Little souls*] (1883)¹, which focuses on the unifying theme of childhood. In this short story, Matilde Serao narrates the conditions of unprecedented violence – including emotional and psychological abuse, as well as physical mistreatment

* This article is a revised and expanded English version of the essay: S. Carioli, *Meno che umana. Ritratto 'dal vero' della violenza sull'infanzia nel racconto breve 'Canituccia' (1883) di Matilde Serao*, «Giornale di Storia», n. 47, 2025, <<https://www.giornaledistoria.net/saggi/articoli/meno-che-umana-ritratto-dal-vero-della-violenza-sullinfanzia-nel-racconto-breve-canituccia-1883-di-matilde-serao/>> (last access: 13.03.2026).

¹ M. Serao, *A un poeta*, in *Piccole anime*, Milano, Libreria Editrice Galli, 1883.

and brutal beatings – inflicted on an abandoned seven-year-old girl, Candida, nicknamed Canituccia, victim of Pasqualina, who keeps her in conditions of poverty and semi-slavery. This short story also demonstrates Matilde Serao's concern for the plight of lower-class children living in the urban and rural areas of Naples and its environs, a subject previously overlooked by most Italian writers². Serao writes in the preface to the collection *Piccole anime*:

This little book, written for adults, always speaks of children in its stories. They are real children: I didn't dream them; they appeared to me in their reality. They lived with me for a year, a minute, a day, or an hour, with gaunt little faces or rosy cheeks, skinny little bodies or plump ones, satin dresses or rags through which the skin showed – and they were creatures at turns naive and thoughtful, fantastical and brutal, sweet and bitter³.

Jon R. Snyder notes that the critic Antonia Arslan considered Canituccia's story to be «the equal of any short story of the era, of [any work by] Maupassant or Chekhov»⁴ due to its «meticulous veristic impassivity»⁵ and the masterful depiction of sordid and dark background environments from which «the author's maternal pity towards the disembodied female body emerges with strong drama»⁶. This story condenses within it «the seeds»⁷ of the later works and authorial genius of Matilde Serao, who was nominated for the *Nobel Prize for Literature* in 1926 but did not win it, possibly because she had published a novel titled *Mors tua ...* (1926)⁸, «which was deemed anti-fascist»⁹. Portraying reality from life, denouncing scandalous events of supreme social injustice, combining historical data and current events with narrative, without ever separating narration from human understanding of the weakest – these are the essence of Matilde Serao's poetic identity. This drove her to engage with current events, breaking the silence of shameful abuses – as in the case of primary school teacher Italia Donati, who committed suicide, suffocated by the irrevocable condemnation that everyone passed against her¹⁰. With this work, Serao inaugurated:

² F. Millefiorini, *Onomastica infantile nelle Piccole anime di Matilde Serao. Canituccia, Aloe e Rosso Malpelo: l'essere e l'apparire*, «Rivista di letteratura italiana», vol. XXV, n. 3, 2007, p. 179.

³ Serao, *A un poeta*, in *Piccole anime*, cit., pp. IV-V. Translated by the author.

⁴ J.R. Snyder, *Matilde Serao, 'Canituccia' (from 'Piccole anime', 1883)*, «California Italian Studies», vol. 10, n. 1, 2020, <<https://doi.org/10.5070/C3101051301>> (last access: 15.09.2025).

⁵ A. Arslan, *Un destino femminile. Matilde Serao tra genio, tenerezza e dissipazione*, introduction to M. Serao, *Il ventre di Napoli e altre storie*, «Repubblica», Rome, 2004, n.p., <<https://www.repubblica.it/speciale/2004/biblioteca/intro/serao.html>> (last access: 14.09.2025). Translated by the author.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ P. Pancrazi (ed.), *Serao*, Milano, Garzanti, 1944, Vol. I, p. X.

⁸ M. Serao, *Mors tua ... Romanzo in tre giornate*, Torino, Fratelli Treves Editori, 1926.

⁹ U. Eco, *Carolina Invernizio, Matilde Serao, Liala*, Firenze, La nuova Italia, 1979, p. 93. Translated by the author.

¹⁰ E. Gianini Belotti, *Prima della quiete. Storia di Italia Donati*, Milano, Rizzoli, 2003.

a literary trend, that of short stories and novels dedicated to the stories of teachers and the vicissitudes of schools and public education in post-unification Italy, which would enjoy considerable success in the last fifteen years of the 19th century¹¹.

The value of sentiment, on the one hand, distinguishes Matilde Serao within the Verismo movement, to which the writer adheres alongside naturalism, as she liked to say¹², while, on the other, it links her to other contemporary Italian authors, writing in the aftermath of Italian unification¹³. A painful sense of compassion, observation «from life», and denunciation are elements that also emerge in her literary characters inspired by reality, as in the case of *Canituccia* or that of the little beggar girl in another story from *Piccole anime*, entitled *Una fioraia*¹⁴ [A Flower Girl], in which the writer reveals a marked influence from the fairy tale *The Little Match Girl* (1848)¹⁵, by Hans Christian Andersen, who when «plotted the storyline of his touching narratives, he started from an unavoidable and 'perceptible' data: the body of the little protagonists»¹⁶. Furthermore, *Dal vero* [From life] (1879)¹⁷ is Matilde Serao's first collection of short stories and sketches (then completely revised and republished), in which the Italian writer creates snapshot portraits of female figures¹⁸. In *Mosaico di fanciulle* [Mosaic of girls], a sketch from *Pagina Azzurra* (*Blue Page*) (1910)¹⁹, the reader is presented with a sequence of paintings depicting the profiles of girls from various social classes: «Apparite, o fanciulle, vive come vi ho viste un giorno, un'ora, un momento – e la vostra figurina si profili, si distacchi palpitante o immobile nelle mie parole»²⁰.

The text, despite its limited length, brings together portraits of nascent femininity in a comprehensive manner, including figures of commoners and lower middle-class women, including the description of a young duchess. This author's gaze on the entirety of society will remain one of Serao's distinctive traits in her subsequent works. [...] Equally essential is the space in which they are placed: interior, exterior, dark and cold, or conversely,

¹¹ A. Ascenzi, *Letteratura ed esperienza magistrale femminile nell'Italia di fine Ottocento: la costruzione di una difficile identità in «Scuola Normale Femminile» di Matilde Serao (1885)*, «History of Education and Children's Literature», vol. V, n. 2, 2010, pp. 93-135. Translated by the author.

¹² P. Giannantonio, *Sulla scia dei meridionalisti*, in G. Infusino (ed.), *Matilde Serao tra giornalismo e letteratura*, Napoli, Guida Editore, 1981, p. 36.

¹³ Among them, Edmondo De Amicis, with whom Matilde Serao shared the Milanese publisher Treves.

¹⁴ Serao, *Una fioraia*, in *Piccole anime*, cit., pp. V-IX.

¹⁵ H.C. Andersen, *The Little Match Girl*, Copenhagen, SAGA Egmont, 1848.

¹⁶ L. Acone, *Fiabe di corpi narranti. La poetica pedagogica della differenza*, «MeTis-Mondi educativi. Temi, indagini, suggestioni», vol. 12, n. 2, 2022, p. 49.

¹⁷ M. Serao, *Dal vero*, Milano, Perussia & Quadrio, Casa editrice sociale, 1879.

¹⁸ Ead., *Per le fanciulle*, in *Dal vero*, cit., pp. 182-189.

¹⁹ M. Serao, *Pagina Azzurra*, «La Rinascenza del Libro, Casa Editrice Italiana», Como, Firenze, Napoli, 1910, pp. 44-49.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

bright and airy. It may refer to their popular, bourgeois condition or to the great events of Neapolitan aristocratic social life²¹.

2. A classic of literature “about” children and “for” children



Pic. 1. Illustration from M. Serao, F. Negrin (illustr.), *Canituccia*, Rome, orecchio acerbo, 2017.

Although Matilde Serao explicitly addresses «grown-ups» in the preface to the collection *Piccole anime*, about childhood, *Canituccia* is also considered a classic of children’s literature²², recently republished by *orecchio acerbo* in a version illustrated by Fabian Negrin²³ (Fig. 1). This illustrated book is an example of careful literary work that poetically inhabits children’s literature and delves «into the truth of children’s feelings»²⁴. In narrative contexts where originality, startling honesty, integrity, and meticulous respect for the experiences of the kid characters are evident, the editorial quality and illustration selection reflect a vision of caring for the book that conveys concern for child readers²⁵. Matilde Serao has entered the catalogue of illustrated works of children’s literature that unreservedly narrates the incongruities, harshness, silences, discreet and private thoughts, and depths of childhood existence²⁶.

²¹ V. Mondini, ‘Chiusa come un baco da seta in un bozzolo filato’: la figurazione del femminile nella narrativa breve di Matilde Serao, Degree Thesis, Department of Linguistic and Literary Studies (Supervisor: P. Zambon), Padua, University of Padua, Academic Year 2016-2017, p. 12. Translated by the author.

²² Liberweb, *Classici. Almeno questi! Bibliografia di base della biblioteca per bambini e ragazzi*, «LI.B.E.R. Libri per Bambini e Ragazzi», 2020.

²³ M. Serao, F. Negrin (illustr.), *Canituccia*, Rome, orecchio acerbo, 2017.

²⁴ M. Bernardi, *La cura del lavoro letterario: può la letteratura per l’infanzia abitare poeticamente il mistero del sentire infantile?*. In *Sistemi educativi, Orientamento, Lavoro*, Lecce, Pensa Multimedia editore SRL, 2023, pp. 898-899. Translated by the author.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*

3. *An illegitimate offspring who inspires diffidence*

Matilde Serao's words clearly demonstrate how many and what abuses Canituccia suffers, defenseless as she is in the face of the harassment of a ferocious peasant woman, Pasqualina, who keeps her to exploit her but distrusts her. «As she sat there spinning, Pasqualina thought about Canituccia with a certain diffidence»²⁷. In fact, Canituccia is an illegitimate offspring, and therefore, it is even more likely that she is considered a «scellerata, assassina»²⁸ young girl. In other words, guilty of that “childish wickedness”, representing the anthropological assumption underlying dark pedagogy, aimed at instilling in children a sense of their own guilt and wickedness as early as possible²⁹.

Pasqualina stood on the threshold and called: – Canituccia! No one answered. Evening had come on this February day.

Pasqualina struggled to see in the darkness.

She called out again loud and long:

– Canituccia, Canituccia!

Mumbling curses, Pasqualina then went down the narrow walkway that, bisecting the vegetable garden, led from the door of the house to the front gate. [...].

“She must have dropped dead, that lousy girl”, Pasqualina muttered.

In reply, she heard a low lament. Canituccia was sitting on the step to the front gate; hunched over, with her head almost between her knees and her hands in her hair, moaning.

“Ah, so you're here, and you don't answer me when I call? Hang you for that! What? Why are you crying? Did they give you a thrashing? And where's Ciccotto?”

Canituccia [...] didn't answer, but moaned more loudly.

“Why'd you come back so late? And Ciccotto? Tell the truth: did you lose Ciccotto?”

The old peasant spinster's angry voice grew frightening.

Canituccia threw herself sobbing onto the ground face down, with her arms outspread.

She had lost Ciccotto.

“Ah, you scamp, you murderer of what's mine, you're nothing but the daughter of a whore! You

lost Ciccotto? Take this. You lost Ciccotto? Take that. You lost Ciccotto? Here's some more”.

Pasqualina punched, kicked and slapped the little girl. Canituccia struggled to try to shield herself from the blows, shrieking without crying³⁰.

The detailed depiction of Canituccia's brutal beatings sheds light on a not isolated situation that, as the narrator remarks, was common in some contexts.

²⁷ Serao, *Piccole anime*, cit., p. XVIII. English translation by Snyder, *Matilde Serao*, cit.

²⁸ Serao, *Piccole anime*, cit., p. XVI.

²⁹ I. Filograsso, *Bambini in trappola. Pedagogia nera e letteratura per l'infanzia*, Milano, FrancoAngeli, 2012; A. Miller, *Il bambino inascoltato. Realtà infantile e dogma psicoanalitico*, Torino, Bollati Boringhieri, 2010.

³⁰ Serao, *Piccole anime*, cit., p. XVI. English translation by Snyder, *Matilde Serao*, cit.

Pasqualina was surely no greedier or fiercer than other peasant women, but she was not so well off herself and only ate a bit of meat on Sundays. Sometimes she beat Canituccia, but no more often than the other peasant women beat their own children³¹.

When Pasqualina grew tired, she gave the child a shove and said in a hoarse voice: “Listen, you little good-for-nothing, I only let you live with me out of charity. If you don’t leave now and go look for Ciccotto in the countryside, and if you don’t bring him back home, remember that I’ll make you die on the street like the daughter of a bitch that you are”.

Canituccia, who was still shrieking from the beating she’d just been given, hoisted her ragged skirt – made out of red cloth – and set off barefoot toward the road for the church of the Blessed Virgin. As she walked, she looked to her left and right in the hedges and in the farmers’ fields, calling to Ciccotto in a low voice. She had lost him on the way home: she hadn’t realized that he wasn’t following her any longer. But in the dark of night, she couldn’t see anything. Canituccia walked on mechanically, stopping every so often to look around without being able to see. Her bare feet, which had turned a deep burgundy red in color from a whole winter’s worth of cold, no longer felt either the ground beneath them, which was growing icy cold, or the stones over which she stumbled. She was not afraid of the night or the lonely countryside: she just wanted to get Ciccotto back. All she could hear were Pasqualina’s threats not to feed her if she didn’t bring him home. She felt a gnawing, intense hunger that was twisting her stomach into knots. If she brought Ciccotto back, she’d eat: this was her one and only thought. So, she called and called to him, walking fast between the tall hedges, a tiny speck of motion in that nocturnal calm: “Here, Ciccotto! My darling Ciccotto, where are you? Come to your Canituccia! Ciccotto, Ciccotto, Ciccotto, come to Canituccia! If I don’t bring you home, mamma Pasqualina won’t give me anything to eat. O Ciccotto, o Ciccotto!” [...]. In the gloom of night, the road shone white, and the desolate child’s little shadow cast strange, distorted figures on the ground. Her voice grew weary. She began to run wildly now, calling to Ciccotto with all her might. Twice she sat down on the ground, defeated and in despair: and twice she got up and started to run again. Finally, [...], she heard something like a small grunt, then something like a little gallop, and Ciccotto came to brush up against her feet with his snout³².

4. *Less than human*

Canituccia, nickname of Candida – a name Matilde Serao uses to affirm this child’s innocence and purity of spirit, refuting the negative judgements held of her and providing a clue to her true nature³³ – seems born to atone. Forced by the primal need to eat to return home³⁴, to the one she innocently and despite everything calls *mamma Pasqualina*, the child ends up embodying

³¹ Serao, *Canituccia*, in *Piccole anime*, cit., p. XIX. English translation by Snyder, *Matilde Serao*, cit.

³² *Ibid.*, pp. XVI-XVII.

³³ Millefiorini, *Onomastica infantile nelle Piccole anime di Matilde Serao. Canituccia, Aloe e Rosso Malpelo: l’essere e l’apparire*, cit.

³⁴ Snyder, *Matilde Serao*, cit.

a denied, literally alienated childhood in a world both archaic and devoid of any kind of childhood feeling³⁵. Some passages show Pasqualina's inhuman insensitivity, accustomed to denying even the primary needs of the little girl, the «redhead's daughter» towards whom she unleashes all her anger and harshness, to the point where the narrator says that even «Don Ottaviano didn't want to give her communion because of the many sins she'd committed in her thoughts»³⁶. In the following extract, while Canituccia is literally suffering the pangs of hunger, Pasqualina appears indifferent and, again, with the rosary in her hands (as is also the case in the incipit of the story), devoted to a religion which, as Serao will also affirm in his other writings, has now become a «monotonous and heavy repetition of the same gestures, without character, and of the same words, without expression»³⁷, undoubtedly distant from that faith locked in the depths of the conscience, from which to draw «every good virtue»³⁸.

[Canituccia] soon reached Pasqualina and triumphantly handed the piglet over to her. In the darkness, Pasqualina grinned. They went back into the house and Ciccotto was put into his pen, where he ate and immediately fell asleep. Breathing heavily, Canituccia watched everything that Pasqualina did. The little girl too was hungry, like Ciccotto; she followed Pasqualina into the kitchen, looking at her with big wild eyes that were unable to ask. Then Canituccia sat down on the raised edge of the hearth, without saying a thing. The peasant woman had taken her place on the bench and returned to her rosary, praying in a passionless monotone. Canituccia, doubled over in order not to feel the spasms in her stomach, followed the prayer with her eyes. She was no longer able to think at all: she was just hungry. Only a half-hour later, when she had finished reciting the *Salve Regina*, did Pasqualina get up, open the cupboard, cut a piece of bread, put a few cold leftover beans on a little plate, and give Canituccia her supper³⁹.

While Canituccia's treatment appears to be cruel, unprovoked violence rather than a corrective measure, historical sources document that «fasting was widely used as an educational tool, indeed a corrective, for minor shortcomings»⁴⁰. This child's childhood, therefore, is without any rights: not to adequate nourishment, not to the affection of adults, not to interact with other children, much less to an education – a condition that was widespread in

³⁵ P. Ariès, *L'enfant et la vie familiale sous l'ancien régime*, Paris, Seuil, 1973 (trad. it.: *Padri e figli nell'Europa medievale e moderna*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 1983).

³⁶ Serao, *Canituccia*, in *Piccole anime*, cit., p. XX. English translation by Snyder, *Matilde Serao*, cit.

³⁷ M. Serao, *Parla una donna: diario femminile di guerra, maggio 1915-marzo 1916*, Milano, Fratelli Treves, 1916, p. 1.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Ead., *Canituccia*, in *Piccole anime*, cit., pp. XVI-XVII. English translation by Snyder, *Matilde Serao*, cit.

⁴⁰ G. Di Bello, *Le bambine cattive, le punizioni. 10. Le bambine povere, le orfane e le trovatelle*, in S. Olivieri (ed.), *Le bambine nella storia dell'educazione*, Bari-Roma, Laterza, 1999, pp. 283-284. Translated by the author.

late-nineteenth-century Italy, especially in Southern Italy, but not only. Even for «the abandoned Tuscan girls and boys, in the majority of cases, schooling remained a fantasy, disregarding the provisions already established in the Casati law of 1859 [...] and the subsequent law on compulsory education of 1877»⁴¹. More broadly, studies on the history of education document the extremely slow spread of schooling, especially in Southern Italy; the material conditions of great poverty; and, in many cases, institutional absence, in which financial difficulties were combined with the hostility of the ruling classes and the mistrust of the population⁴².

Snyder's analysis of *Canituccia's* story also emphasises the impact of a lack of education and beginning work at an early age:

Kept out of school and set to work at an early age, despite laws about *la scuola dell'obbligo* promulgated by the new Italian state, Canituccia is destined by her guardian for a life of illiteracy and poverty. Although Pasqualina attends weekly mass, recites the rosary every evening and sees herself as a devout Catholic, she displays no interest in providing Canituccia with even basic religious instruction, almost as if the latter were nothing more than an animal devoid of conscience, or a soul, or the need for morality and ethics. The ragamuffin is left entirely to her own devices in interpreting her world. When abruptly informed of her birth mother's death from typhoid fever, Canituccia has no intellectual or emotional means to process what is surely one of the greatest traumas that any child may endure. The little girl responds to the news blankly, without a word and without the least display of emotion: "Canituccia was told that her [birth] mother was dead, but the child didn't seem to grasp what was being said, as if she were deaf and dumb", or (we might add) almost as if she were somehow less than human⁴³.

5. *A perfect scapegoat*

Prejudice, superstition, resentment, and diffidence make Canituccia the perfect scapegoat, only a «little bastard» whose facial features are deemed by Pasqualina to be incontrovertible signs of her mother's sins. Therefore, her «small, white face, all spotted with freckles, with wiry hair, a little red, a little yellowish, a little dirty chestnut»⁴⁴ becomes a specious excuse for treating her less than lovingly:

[This] little servant was the illegitimate offspring of Maria "the Redhead", as she was known. With her flaming hair and carnation-red lips, Maria had first sinned with the cobbler Giambattista. But he had gone off to become a soldier, and Maria had become

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 288.

⁴² S. Santamaita, *Storia della scuola: dalla scuola al sistema formativo*, Milano, Mondadori, 1999, p. 23.

⁴³ Snyder, *Matilde Serao*, cit.

⁴⁴ Serao, *Canituccia*, in *Piccole anime*, cit., p. XVIII. Translated by the author.

the lover of Gasparre Rossi, a local gentleman. Then he too deserted Maria, although it was said that Candida – nicknamed Canituccia – was his daughter. There was no doubt that Maria, [...], had left Canituccia and gone off, [...] to work as a prostitute. Gasparre hadn't wanted to take care of the abandoned child, so she grew up in the household of Pasqualina and Crescenzo Zampa, who were sister and brother. But the girl's white face, all dotted with freckles, reminded Pasqualina of Maria the Redhead. Pasqualina – a thin and virginal spinster with bony red hands, yellow teeth, and coal-black eyes, who had never married because her brother had refused to give her a dowry – trembled with hysterical terror at the thought of Maria the Redhead's amorous follies, and didn't trust her little bastard child⁴⁵.

The red colour, recurring in Canituccia's rag skirt, hair, and freckles, suggests the subtle conditioning of prejudice that Matilde Serao intends to denounce. The Italian writer captures a somatic element—red—that throughout history has often been considered a stigma and interpreted as a sign of innate guilt. In Canituccia's case, red is the sign of being the daughter of a prostitute; it is the legacy left to her by her mother. This condition, combined with being a female child, makes Canituccia particularly dangerous, a being to be wary of, not only in the eyes of popular belief but also according to Lombrosian point of view, which considers children and women inferior and deceitful. The colour red, considered a symbol of evil and corruption, of lust and a pact with the devil, has justified mistreatment, oppression, and violence:

Seen negatively, fiery red is [...] associated with the flames of hell and the dragon of the Apocalypse, whose body is red like fire (Rev. 12:3-4). This red deceives and betrays, destroys and devastates, producing a light more disturbing than darkness, following the example of the infernal fire that burns without illuminating. By definition, this is the red of the Devil and his demons, who in miniatures and mural paintings of the Romanesque period often have heads of this colour. It will also be, a little later, the colour of traitors, who, in the image of Cain, Judas, or Renart, the hypocritical fox, will be equipped with red hair or a coat, as flaming and dangerous as fire⁴⁶.

The colour red is part of the primitive chromatic triad of the fairy-tale world, in which it symbolises danger⁴⁷. Then, it is present in much literature on and for children: think, for example, of *Poil de Carotte* (1894)⁴⁸ by Jules

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* English translation by Snyder, *Matilde Serao*, cit.

⁴⁶ M. Pastoureau, *Rosso, storia di un colore*, Milano, Ponte alle Grazie, 2021, p. 56. Translated by the author.

⁴⁷ M. Campagnaro, *Clothing the Child in Red: A Historical and Comparative Analysis of Italian Visual Retellings of the Grimms' Little Red Riding Hood*, «Strenæ. Recherches sur les livres et objets culturels de l'enfance», vol. 18, 2021, <<https://doi.org/10.4000/strenae.6423>> (last access: 14.09.2025).

⁴⁸ *Pel di carota* – a less than affectionate nickname given to the tormented protagonist of this novel – is one of the great classics of children's literature. It is also a milestone work because it allows us to reflect, through the vicissitudes of the protagonist, on human behavior, on the consequences that a lack of affection, cruelty, aridity of spirit inevitably bring with them, and

Renard and *Anne of Green Gables* (1908)⁴⁹ by Lucy Maud Montgomery, where the red hair takes on a stigmatising meaning. On the contrary, in *Pippi Longstocking* (1945), the red hair changes its meaning, helping to portray the protagonist's extraordinary nature and strangeness, similar to the protagonist of the American animated fantasy adventure film *Brave* (2012).

In the literary climate of Verismo, which breathes the positivist influence, the red colour becomes revealing of a character predisposition and a marked destiny, particularly evident in the physiognomic portrait of *Rosso Malpelo* (1880): «Malpelo was called that because he had red hair; and he had red hair because he was a mischievous and bad boy, who promised to turn out to be a real rascal»⁵⁰.

Returning to Canituccia's story, Pasqualina's prejudices, fuelled by dissatisfaction and personal frustrations, almost paradoxically reflect the profound connection between criminal anthropology, considered by Cesare Lombroso to be a "science" because it was based on direct observation and measurements⁵¹, and the proverbs and popular legends in which Lombroso enshrined the archaic "truths" of his research regarding evolutionary inferiority and weakness, which, he argued, were shared by women, boys, and girls, resulting in a tendency to lie and deceive:

Demonstrating how lying is habitual and almost physiological in women would be superfluous, so much so that it is even in popular legend. The proverbs that allude to it are innumerable and, in all languages⁵². [...] Overall, we can assert that in women, as in children, the moral sense is inferior⁵³.

It is worth noting that the positivist cultural context in which Lombroso's research activities emerged also served as the foundation for Maria Montes-

on the increasingly precious value of respect, understanding, and love (Colognola ai Colli (VR), Gribaudo, 2024. Note for readers, n. 6). Translated by the author.

⁴⁹ For Anne, red hair is a source of great displeasure – «People who don't have red hair don't know how difficult it is». The expression «red hair» also recurs in this novel with a ridiculing connotation. Translated by the author.

⁵⁰ G. Verga, *Rosso Malpelo in Vita dei campi*, Milano, Treves, 1880.

⁵¹ P. Guarnieri, *Un piccolo essere perverso. Il bambino nella cultura scientifica italiana tra Otto e Novecento*, «Contemporanea. Rivista di storia dell'800 e del '900», vol. 2, 2006, pp. 253-284; F. Borruso, *For a childhood story. Social representations, childhood memories and educational abuses Per una storia dell'infanzia. Rappresentazioni sociali, memorie bambine e abusi educativi*, «Education Sciences & Society», vol. 1, 2017, pp. 11-22.

⁵² C. Lombroso, G. Ferrero, *La donna delinquente, la prostituta e la donna normale*, Torino, Roux, 1893, p. 133.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 156. Original Italian version: «CAPITOLO VI. Senso morale. I. Menzogna. Dimostrare come la menzogna sia abituale e quasi fisiologica nella donna sarebbe superfluo, tanto è perfino nella leggenda popolare. I proverbi che vi alludono sono innumerevoli ed in tutte le lingue 'Lagrima di donne, fontana di malizia' (Toscana). [...] «Finto come una donna» (Roma). [...] 'Nec mulieri, nec gremio credendum (prov. lat.)' [ecc.], Lombroso, Ferrero, *La donna delinquente, la prostituta e la donna normale*, cit., p. 133. «Sintesi – In complesso possiamo asserire che nella donna, come nel fanciullo, il senso morale è inferiore», *ibid.*, p. 156.

sori's child-centered scientific and experimental education⁵⁴. Note that Montessori appreciated Cesare Lombroso's idea of saving minors from a criminal destiny through education⁵⁵ and that, more generally, Lombroso's theories and the positive school resonated as tools for eliminating or attenuating the causes that push minors to crime⁵⁶.

Montessori's child-centered pedagogy prioritizes children as the source of humanity's mysteries and directs scientific endeavours towards them. While maintaining the centrality of the scientific method and observation⁵⁷, Montessori gradually distances herself from positivism⁵⁸ from an excessively deterministic vision⁵⁹ and from the misunderstandings of the science applied to the school⁶⁰. She recognises the educability of children who were previously considered irrecoverable, psychically «abnormal» children, and thus the need to address the issue from a predominantly pedagogical point of view, rather than a predominantly medical one⁶¹.

Regarding child abuse, anticipating the findings of subsequent research, Maria Montessori condemned the use of punishment, which exposes children to public reprimands and the torture of pillorying. This constraint instills in them a mad and unreasonable fear of public opinion, even if unjust and erroneous. Such an approach leads to a sense of inferiority and to the creation of a state of self-distrust, which is then reflected in adults in the form of submissiveness and paves the way for a spirit of devotion. Education, thus understood,

⁵⁴ T. Pironi, *Da Ellen Key a Maria Montessori: la progettazione di nuovi spazi educativi per l'infanzia*, «Ricerche di pedagogia e didattica», vol. 5, n. 1, 2010, pp. 355-369.

⁵⁵ R. Raimondo, *La 'pedagogia riparatrice' secondo Maria Montessori: un ideale regolativo e educativo*, «Rivista di Storia dell'Educazione», vol. 1, 2016, p. 192. Maria Montessori writes: «[Alessandro Doria's reform] seems inspired by a marvellous breath of innovative power – which has a wholly Italian scent of genius: it springs like pure water from the mighty boulder of ancient penal law, avenging the sins that Cesare Lombroso had shattered», *Gli odierni riformatori pei minorenni corrigendi (La riforma Doria)*, «La vita», vol. 2, n. 156, 6 giugno 1906, p. 3.

⁵⁶ Original Italian version: «Studiamo, secondo le teorie lombrosiane, l'ambiente, muto d'ogni sapiente luce amorosa, dove si sviluppano i germi criminosi, preveniamo con tutti i mezzi di vigilanza, assistenza, custodia, come la scuola criminale positiva sostiene da tanti anni, eliminando od attenuandole cause, siano esse sociali che individuali, che spingono il minorenne al delitto, reprimendo poi, ma umanamente per non inaridire tutte le fonti di moralità». A. Segre, *La protezione dell'infanzia contro gli abusi della patria potestà*, Torino, S. Lattes & C. Librai-Editori/Firenze, Bemporad e Figlio, 1910, p. 131.

⁵⁷ Pironi, *Da Ellen Key a Maria Montessori: la progettazione di nuovi spazi educativi per l'infanzia*, cit.

⁵⁸ F. De Giorgi (ed.), *Nuova storia della pedagogia*, Brescia, Scholé, 2024.

⁵⁹ Raimondo, *La "pedagogia riparatrice" secondo Maria Montessori: un ideale regolativo e educativo*, cit., p. 192.

⁶⁰ M. Montessori, *Considerazioni critiche sulla scienza applicata alla scuola*, in *La scoperta del bambino* (1948), Norderstedt, Culturea Editions, 2022, pp. 9-29.

⁶¹ S. Polenghi, *Il diritto all'istruzione nell'evoluzione della scuola italiana*, in A. Lamberti (ed.), *Scuola, Università e Ricerca: Diritti, Doveri e Democrazia nello Stato di cultura*, Napoli, Editoriale Scientifica, 2024, pp. 417-433.

is equated by Montessori with a struggle between adult and child, a relentless war that embraces the living being at birth and accompanies it throughout its development. The child, defeated and subjugated, will perpetually carry with him the characteristics of that painful adaptation, which will have repercussions on deviations in moral character, on the admission of opposing moral principles, and on a justice that defends life and on that which destroys it.

6. *Loneliness and affection for the animal*

Considered less than human, placed below a slaughterhouse animal – «not surprisingly, the other protagonist of the short story is exactly that: the pig»⁶² – Canituccia is an unwitting, perfect, expendable victim. As Snyder notes, in the eyes of the poor rural society of Southern Italy, a little girl like Canituccia has much less value than a pig, whose body can be converted directly into money. It is noteworthy how the presence of Ciccotto in Matilde Serao's story takes on a completely different meaning than the real animals and fantastical creatures of much children's literature⁶³, including the contemporary *Le avventure di Pinocchio. Storia di un burattino* [*The Adventures of Pinocchio: Story of a Puppet*] (1883)⁶⁴. For this little girl, deprived of any human contact, Ciccotto becomes a constant and indispensable presence, lavishing all the affection she would reserve for the dearest being in the world. A deep, at times empathetic, attachment develops between Canituccia and Ciccotto, but it is interrupted by the animal's brutal sacrifice, bringing the theme of violence back to the centre of the narrative.

The unbreakable bond between the little girl and the pig stems from what emerges as the primary reason Canituccia was brought into their home by siblings Pasqualina and Crescenzo Zampa: to exploit her, making her do farm work, primarily herding the pig to fatten it up. Their bond is definitively sealed by the string with which Pasqualina ties «Ciccotto's foot on one end and Canituccia's life on the other, so that they would never be separated».

They spent the day together in the field [...]. Many times, Canituccia coaxed Ciccotto to a spot where she'd seen grass growing that he might like; [...]. They wandered together through the spring afternoon until dusk fell, and only separated when back at home, [...] Ciccotto had grown big and strong, while Canituccia was still skinny and weak. Sometimes Ciccotto ran too fast for the girl, and she felt herself being dragged along behind him over the cracked dry ground, worn out beneath the burning summer sun.

⁶² Snyder, *Matilde Serao*, cit.

⁶³ W. Grandi, *Draghi, fenici, cicale, formiche e altre meraviglie: gli animali fantastici nella letteratura per l'infanzia*, «Bibliomanie», vol. 57, n. 3, 2024, p. 1.

⁶⁴ C. Collodi, E. Mazzanti (illustr.), *Le avventure di Pinocchio. Storia di un burattino*, Firenze, Libreria Editrice Felice Paggi, 1883.

“Wait, Ciccotto, wait for me my dearest!” she would say, exhausted. [...]. By now there was no longer any need for the rope, because Ciccotto had become obedient. Canituccia had gotten a long stick with which to herd the pig and keep him from ending up under the wheels of the carts going along the main road. They would head back home in the evening, with Ciccotto coming along slowly and Canituccia a little ahead of him, driven by the insatiable hunger gnawing at her stomach. Once they tried to steal some bitter sorb fruit in Nicola Passaretti’s field, but the sorbs were terribly bitter and Nicola thrashed her like a little thief. Even worse, Nicola told Pasqualina Zampa about it, and she too beat Canituccia. The girl went off through the fields with Ciccotto, weeping and saying to him: “Pasqualina beat me because I’m a thief”. But Ciccotto shook his head and began to graze. Still, every so often, when an idea appeared in Canituccia’s closed mind, she spoke about it to Ciccotto. When they were heading home, she told him: “Let’s go home now, and Ciccotto will go to his pen and mamma Pasqualina will feed him dinner, and then she’ll give Canituccia some soup, and I’ll eat it all”. And in the morning: “If Ciccotto doesn’t run, and if he always stays near Canituccia, then Canituccia will take him up the mountainside, to our parish priest Don Ottaviano’s little tree, where she will get him lots and lots of apples to eat, while Canituccia eats some bread”. When autumn came, Ciccotto had become quite fat and hefty. Once he knocked the girl down with a blow of his head, but she got up, moved away from him, and showered him with stones. But that was the only time they quarreled⁶⁵.

Ciccotto’s company offers great comfort to Canituccia, who hungers for excitement and security, as well as food. With no one else to talk to during the day, she addresses the pig as if he were a dear and trusted friend, often using affectionate terms like «Ciccotto aspetta bello mio»⁶⁶ and «Ciccotto di Canituccia tua»⁶⁷ – tender words no adult has ever used in her life⁶⁸. With a sharp touch of narrative irony, the story’s conclusion leaves little doubt that their destinies have always been inextricably intertwined: neither children nor animals can survive for long in a world governed, above all, by the capitalist logic of exchange value that inexorably reduces beings to things⁶⁹.

That November, people in Ventaroli said that Maria the Redhead had died of typhoid fever [...]. Canituccia was told that her mother was dead, but the child didn’t seem to grasp what was being said, as if she were deaf and dumb. [...] Ciccotto had become so big and so fat that he could no longer be taken to graze far from home: [...]. Canituccia called to him, but in vain: he no longer had enough strength to come. The first time that she left him at home to go for firewood in the mountains, she gathered a heap of acorns in the woods, [...], and brought them to him. [...] Upon her return, before entering the kitchen she would go to greet him again. It scared the girl a little to see him so big – and so much bigger than she was, for she was as thin as a broomstick. One December evening, [...] she found the parish priest, Don Ottavio, engaged in a lively discussion with Nicola Passaretti and Crescenzo: the three

⁶⁵ Serao, *Canituccia*, in *Piccole anime*, cit., p. XVIII. English translation by Snyder, in *Matilde Serao, ‘Canituccia’ (from ‘Piccole anime’, 1883)*, cit.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. XX.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. XVII.

⁶⁸ Snyder, *Matilde Serao*, cit.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

of them then went to have a look at Ciccotto [...]. Canituccia did not understand. The next evening, however, [...] there was great commotion [...] knives, cleavers, and funnels were laid out on the kitchen table: Pasqualina, Teresa and Rosaria had put on shorter skirts and white aprons. Sabatino came and went with an air of self-importance. Canituccia saw everything but understood nothing. In a low voice she asked Teresa: “What are we doing tonight?” “Christmas has come, Canitù. We’re going to kill and butcher Ciccotto”. Although feeling somewhat shaky on her feet, Canituccia then went to squat in a corner of the courtyard to watch Ciccotto be killed. In the flickering light she saw them drag him into the courtyard, [...]. She heard the pig’s desperate squeals, because he didn’t want to die [...]. She watched them cut the pig’s head off by slicing through the neck all the way around, before laying it on a platter on a bed of fresh laurel leaves. [...]. She heard their cries of joy when the weight was announced [...]. They called her into the kitchen. Canituccia held back at the threshold, watching, but without entering [...]. Pasqualina, thinking that the child hadn’t eaten all day and that it was a festive occasion, took a piece of black bread and put a little bit of fried blood on it, before saying to Canituccia: “Eat this”. But the little girl said ‘no’ by simply shaking her head, even though she was dying of hunger⁷⁰.

Recently, the novel *Guarda dalla finestra* (2024)⁷¹ by the Slovenian writer Evald Flisar narrates the affection of the young protagonist, victim of an «unfortunate event», towards Porcello, his only friend and confidant, in a story in which the young protagonist’s thoughts are intertwined with the great questions that build the fabric of relationships between different but universal worlds, cultures, and feelings. The two narrative events, *Canituccia* and *Guarda dalla finestra*, are linked by the horrific slaughter of the pig buddy in front of the young protagonists’ terrified eyes, leaving them permanently traumatised. The terrible death of the pig, like in *Canituccia*, is followed by the serving of the dismembered animal buddy as food, all while the parents show heartless apathy and an inability to understand.

Despite their chronological and geographical differences, these two stories combine themes of deep wounds, vulnerability, loneliness, and the fundamental human desire for emotional relationships, as represented through a friendship with a cherished animal.

7. *The unspeakable severity of the issue of violence against children in our contemporary world*

As Snyder observes, «from today’s perspective, Serao’s short story is a tale of child abuse»⁷². Violence that, with changing circumstances, continues to

⁷⁰ Serao, *Canituccia*, in *Piccole anime*, cit., p. XXI. English translation by Snyder, in *Matilde Serao, ‘Canituccia’ (from ‘Piccole anime’, 1883)*, cit.

⁷¹ E. Flisar, *Guarda dalla finestra*, Nardò (LE), Besa Muci, 2024.

⁷² Snyder, *Matilde Serao*, cit.

plague childhood even in our present, especially at the hands of those who should take care of them, such as the family⁷³ or the operators of educational and training institutions⁷⁴. Recent statistical data show that violence against minors is on the rise⁷⁵, while news reports denounce the increase in cases of minors in educational services who are victims of aggression from adults, physical and mental violence, coercive methods, and repeated acts of humiliation, as shown by the crude images from the videos of the investigations:

They would yell at the children, even using obscene language, or they would slam them to the floor to force them to sit down, or they would wake them up by lifting them abruptly by the hip demonstrating with undeniable clarity [...] a total lack of self-control, [as well as] carelessness, insensitivity, and contempt toward the children. Insults and “target shooting” against the children: the nursery school owner and five teachers were banned. The investigation into abuse at a facility in the Milan area: [...] denigrating behaviour toward the children, many of whom were learning to walk and would be pelted with small objects to watch them fall and then mocked⁷⁶.

Beatings, pinching, tugging, and threats: the images speak clearly and highlight what happened in the nursery school when the teacher was alone with the children⁷⁷.

However, there remains a substantial invisibility regarding violence against minors to a degree, if possible, greater than that of gender violence⁷⁸.

The hypothesis underlying this contribution is that, despite numerous changes, the stigmas and stereotypes about childhood highlighted by Matilde Serao in her literary portrait of Canituccia have continued to creep in overtime as latent historical-cultural legacies, supporting mechanisms of denial and providing pretexts that lend a gap between socially accepted ideals and observed behaviour⁷⁹. Indeed, child abuse is one of the most difficult topics

⁷³ S. Carioli, *Historical legacies and use of corporal punishment of children in the home, in Italy*, «Rivista Italiana di Educazione Familiare», vol. 16, n. 1, 2020, pp. 25-42, <<https://doi.org/10.13128/rief-7853>> (last access: 14.09.2025).

⁷⁴ L. Paradiso, *Maltrattamento e abuso dell'infanzia nelle istituzioni educative e formative: dall'analisi del fenomeno alla definizione di azioni di prevenzione e di intervento per un modello di buon trattamento*, «Formazione & insegnamento», vol. 16, n. 1, 2018, pp. 109-120.

⁷⁵ Autorità Garante per l'Infanzia e l'Adolescenza – AGIA, *III Indagine nazionale sul maltrattamento dei bambini e degli adolescenti in Italia*, 2025.

⁷⁶ *Bimbi 'derisi e sbattuti per terra', inchiesta in un asilo nido a Vanzago (Milano): sei misure cautelari contro le maestre*, «TGCOM24», 28 Jan. 2023, <https://www.tgcom24.mediaset.it/cronaca/lombardia/vanzago-milano-maltrattamenti-asilo-nido-maestre-sospese_60214300-202302k.shtml> (last access: 14-03-2026). Translated by the author.

⁷⁷ M. Campani, *Violenza e maltrattamenti in un asilo nido: sospesa la maestra, titolare della struttura*, «ValdarnoPost», 5 July 2019, <<https://valdarnopost.it/edizioni-locali/violenza-e-maltrattamenti-in-un-asilo-nido-sospesa-la-maestra-titolare-della-struttura/>> (last access 14-03-2026). Translated by the author.

⁷⁸ B. Polini, *Punire i bambini: confini e vie di accesso alla genitorialità*, Milano, Ledizioni, 2024, p. 123.

⁷⁹ K. Bauer, Brüche, *Widersprüche und Konflikte: Die verworrenen Wege der Emotionssozialisation*, «Anthropologie der Emotionen», Berlin, Dietrich Reimer Verlag, 2023.

to identify and discuss because it is socially unpleasant, contradicts agreed cultural norms, and is even considered unacceptable in much of the literary world. As a result, the issue of child abuse is frequently ignored. Even the *Canituccia*'s story may appear far from contemporary adult readers' aesthetic standards, interests, and sensitivities.

In contemporary children's literature and literature about children, child abuse appears taboo, precluding the possibility of approaching such a painful yet real-life topic. As Eliza Dresang observes, «Young people encounter [...] abuse or other personal attacks from within the family or community»⁸⁰. Perry Nodelman's description of the consequences of the traditional absence of sexuality in children's literature, Dresang continues, could be likened to the consequences of the absence of the theme of violence against children:

We produce a children's literature that is almost totally silent on [these] subject[s] [...]. In doing so, however, we make it difficult for children to speak to us about their [...] concerns: our silence on [these] subject[s] clearly asserts that we have no wish to hear about it⁸¹.

This type of censorship may be seen in Italian children's literature, which fails to translate and publish books that address the issue in its various current interpretations. Including works by well-known authors of children's literature. Maurice Sendak's picturebooks, such as *We Are All in the Dumps with Jack and Guy* (1993)⁸², which depict violence as huge rats stalking orphaned children left in poverty and homelessness by an inattentive society, have yet to be translated into Italian.

Canituccia's story, tinged with pity and indignation, not only represents a source that gives voice to the most invisible and derelict conditions of childhood in late-nineteenth-century Southern Italy but can also speak to adults, especially those involved in the educational relationship with children. Indeed, it is impossible not to be disturbed by the profound and sensitizing sense of realism, which arouses empathy for the young protagonist and can lead an adult reader to confront and reflect deeply on the existence of distorted conceptions of childhood and education at the root of violent behavior.

⁸⁰ E. Dresang, *The Resilient Child in Contemporary Children's Literature: Surviving Personal Violence*, «Children's Literature Association Quarterly», vol. 22, n. 3, 1997, p. 133, <<https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/chq.0.1091>> (last access: 14.09.2025).

⁸¹ P. Nodelman, *The other: Orientalism, colonialism, and children's literature*, «Children's Literature Association Quarterly», vol. 17, n. 1, 1992, p. 30.

⁸² M. Sendak, *We Are All in the Dumps with Jack and Guy*, New York, HarperCollins, 1993.