“Her and Yet Not Her”
Women Authors Questioning Mussolini’s Fascist Regime on the ‘Terza Pagina’ of Italy’s Newspapers
1925-1936

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Abstract

My thesis examines the ways in which Italian female authors questioned the policies and ideologies of the fascist regime, led by Benito Mussolini. With the support of eight short stories written by authors Grazia Deledda, Ada Negri, Amalia Guglielminetti, Pia Rimini, Maria Luisa Astaldi and Marinella Lodi, my thesis draws connections between regime policy and the attitudes and actions of female citizens in Italy. Because women's short stories were some of the most visible and widely distributed forms of women's self-representation during the regime, they give us valuable insight into the criticisms and questions women had concerning its treatment of women, their bodies, and their destinies.

The stories examined in my thesis originally appeared between 1925 and 1936 on the third page, or 'terza pagina,' of two of Italy's most popular newspapers, the Corriere della sera of Turin and Il Giornale d'Italia of Rome. While women's writing was successful in other mediums, such as novels or collections of stories and poems, they enjoyed the most popularity and daily readership on the cultural pages of these newspapers. Because the regime had 'Fascized' Italy's media by 1926, driving social and political criticism and commentary off the pages of newspapers, short stories began appearing almost daily on the first two columns on the third page. This provided a valuable and highly visible stage on which women gave voice to issues affecting them.

Namely, in three separate sections, this thesis addresses women's responses to the regime's policies concerning the following issues: motherhood and marriage, the real and imagined needs of rural, peasant women, and the emphasis of
collective will and identity over that of the individual. Each of the themes is illustrated by short stories that delve into the lives of Italian women and how the policies and attitudes of the regime negatively affected them. Ultimately, our possession of and analysis on women's contributions to the 'terza pagina' of Italy's newspapers allows us to conclude that women did not meekly accept the role of the 'New Woman' that was forced upon them. Rather, they questioned and resisted the regime's laws, ideas, propaganda and policies. This resistance and criticism is vividly represented and brought to life by women's short stories, which, until recently, were forgotten by Italy and the world.
Introduction:

Four or five years went by. But a few days ago I saw her near the entrance to her apartment building. I don’t know how I was able to recognize her in the proper young lady who was coming home from school ... It was her and yet not her ... Older, bridled, weakened, her beauty spoiled, with her real first and last name written in rounded handwriting on the first page of her school notebooks and in her teacher’s grade-book.

-- Ada Negri

This excerpt from female author Ada Negri's short story, entitled “The Captain,” appeared on April 17, 1931 in Italy's Corriere della sera, a major newspaper based in Turin. It is a tale, seen through the eyes of a narrator, of a young girl's evolution from a dominant, firm, and sure-to-succeed child to a dull, docile and deadened adolescent. In “The Captain,” Negri directly condemns the education and after-school programs conducted by Mussolini’s fascist regime. Given that at the peak of Fascist censorship, the regime went so far as to ban reports of any event that would stir a negative response from citizens or tourists, such as shark sightings or the possibility of bad weather, let alone pointed criticisms of the regime, it is remarkable that Negri’s story escaped censorship.\(^1\) Italian newspapers had undergone a strict program of ‘Fascizing’ by 1926, wherein uncooperative editors were forcibly replaced with friends of Mussolini, political and social commentary disappeared from the news, and dissenting papers were driven underground.\(^2\)

In the same year in which “The Captain” was published, the regime abolished all non-Fascist youth groups, and the two sanctioned groups for young girls reached

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a combined membership of 741,302. In a speech the following year, Mussolini had the following to say about women's role in the state: "Woman must obey ... My idea of her role in the state is in opposition to all feminism. Naturally she shouldn't be a slave, but if I conceded her the vote, I'd be laughed at. In our state, she must not count." Despite the pervasive anti-feminism and censorship of the regime, Ada Negri was able to use the cultural page of the *Corriere della sera* as a site to perform an intense scrutiny of the regime's policies, as well as a stage on which to showcase her own talents as an author and valuable opinion as a woman. She was far from the only woman to do so. This thesis looks at "The Captain" and seven other stories by Ada Negri (1870-1945), Grazia Deledda (1871-1936), Amalia Guglielminetti (1881-1941), Pia Rimini (1900-??), Maria Luisa Astaldi (1899-1982) and Marinella Lodi.

It is only recently that historians have become interested in amending prevailing views of women's lives in Italy during Mussolini's reign from 1921 to 1945. Previously, it had been assumed that the regime was successful in limiting women's social, economic and political roles and that it received little resistance from women themselves. It has been argued that culturally productive women, such as fiction writers, perpetuated the Fascist image of the Italian 'New Woman' – a successful and prolific wife and mother to whom the realm of labor, education and other forms of productivity and betterment did not belong. Moreover, through post-WWII literary canonization, most female authors were forgotten; they were simply

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4 The dates of Lodi's birth and death are unknown. In fact, there is almost no available biographical information for the author.
stricken from or never entered into the record of meaningful Italian authorship from the first half of the twentieth century. These two developments – revitalized interest in women’s role in the Fascist state and the rediscovery of the work of several important female authors – inform the premise of this thesis.

The cultural page, or ‘terza pagina’ of Italy’s newspapers, were a widely read and influential forum wherein short stories by many women were made available to a large portion of a public that spanned the range of socioeconomic situations, occupations and regions. This thesis demonstrates the ways in which feminist and anti-Fascist themes in women’s short stories gave voice to the issues common to female experiences in modern Italy under the rule of Mussolini’s regime. Because women’s critical short stories appeared frequently on the cultural pages of Italy’s newspapers and enjoyed popularity there, the themes and issues around which the stories revolve offer us valuable insight into the ways that women questioned and opposed the regime. Women were not meekly transformed into the regime’s ideal ‘New Woman.’ Most women could not openly question Fascism; they lacked leadership in the regime, the church, school, and their families. If one looks to women’s short stories from the cultural pages of Italy’s most widely read newspapers, however, the questions and concerns women had about the policies and ideologies of the regime, as well as the social norms and expectations of their era, are strongly and directly voiced. These short stories dramatized the hardships and problems of daily life in a nation suspended between modernity and tradition.

Moreover, the ‘terza pagina’ was specifically tailored to appeal to readers of many different backgrounds and socioeconomic statuses. Pickering-Iazzi, *The Short Story ‘Elzeviro’*, 13.
To a certain extent, this applies to both men and women. Since this thesis looks only at stories authored by females and which address issues pertaining to the lives of women, however, my argument can only be strongly argued in the case of women. It is important to note, though, as I will in the following section, that Fascist gender policies applied to both genders; this is especially true of pro-natal and pro-marriage policies, two of the topics which the second section addresses. This fact lends some credence to my assertion that female authors' stories also would have been somewhat affective for a male audience.

My interest in Italian women's contributions to Italy's newspapers is due to scholar Robin Pickering-Iazzi's success in educating the contemporary English-speaking reader about meaningful female authors and their short stories. In a volume entitled *Unspeakable Women*, Pickering-Iazzi has beautifully translated thirteen fascinating short stories which were originally published between 1921 and 1936 in one of two major newspapers: the *Corriere della sera* of Turin or *Il Giornale d'Italia* of Rome. Iazzi has also presented the reader with biographical information about the women (where available), and addresses the sad process of post-WWII canonization by which these women were forgotten. All of the stories mentioned in this thesis, which I use to demonstrate the importance of several issues to Italian women, are taken from this volume. It is clear that to Pickering-Iazzi, the stories included in *Unspeakable Women* seem representative of female

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authors' work during this period. This has allowed me to confidently assert that the themes present in this small number of stories were salient for Italian citizens.

My thesis is unique because it connects women's short stories to the historical trends on which they reflect in a way that has not been done previously. My work is not merely an extension of Pickering-Iazzi's translations and his interest in the 'terza pagina.' There are valuable lessons to be learned from the themes and concerns expressed in these women's stories and the ways in which they articulated responses to events and policies that were effecting women's lives. Historians such as Pickering-Iazzi have established that the 'terza pagina' was a unique site of critical expression for Italian authors, while books such as Victoria De Grazia's on women under Fascism provide valuable information that indicates Italian women were not eager to fill the role of 'New Woman.' I am not the first to make the connection between the average woman's questions about and criticisms of the regime and the stories that represent those questions and criticisms. My thesis adds depth and focuses this connection because it examines the regime's and women's attitudes about three specific themes, using the stories to help illustrate these attitudes. These three themes are marriage and motherhood, issues specifically relevant to rural, peasant women, and the regime's emphasis on the collective will over the expression and cultivation of the individual will. The actions of women and the regime demonstrate the areas in which their desires and intentions diverged. It is through a close reading of the work of female authors from

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7 Both the introduction and afterward of Pickering-Iazzi's *Unspeakable Women* and a chapter of *The Short Story 'Elzeviro'* address the ways in which female authors were expressing the needs and concerns of women.
all over the country and of varying means and backgrounds that the contemporary reader can understand the emotions and perceptions of Italian women living under Fascism. The short stories published on the cultural pages of Italy’s most widely read newspapers hold the strongest support for my assertion that female authors served as the mouthpiece for the criticisms of Italy’s women.

There are now several volumes of Nobel-prize winning author Grazia Deledda’s short stories translated into English. They are, however, her early stories. Most of them were published before the rise of Fascism, and they did not appear in Italy’s newspapers. Rather, they were distributed in book form. These compilations, such as *Chiaroscuro and other stories*, originally published in 1912, reveal that Deledda was concerned with women’s issues well before the rise of Fascism. 8 This is true, of course, of the other women whose work is addressed in this thesis, and a large number of women of whom the Italian women’s movement was composed since the 1890’s. This subject will be addressed further in the following section of this thesis.

Although the novels and other short stories of these women and others like them are noteworthy and helpful in building a context for their attitudes and styles, as well as what else existed in this time period, their work on the third pages of major newspapers is the most interesting and can tell us the most about common citizens’ issues. The stage upon which these stories were set is what makes my

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8 Grazia Deledda, *Chiaroscuro and other stories*, trans. Martha King (London: Quartet 1994). *Chiaroscuro and other stories* is a volume that portrays the desperation and passion of Sardinian lives. Many of the stories specifically address the hardships of female lives, such as poverty and subjection to men, especially through arranged marriages.
thesis relevant and even possible. By 1910, the *Corriere della sera* was already reaching 200,000 readers daily, a leap and a bound above its original publication of under 10,000 copies in 1876, when it was first established. With growing literacy rates in the decade leading up to 1911, the *Corriere* and *Giornale*, two of Italy's biggest newspapers, were reaching a combined over 700,000 people a day.9

These short stories were read and discussed in all types of settings and by people of varying economic and social backgrounds. Furthermore, they were specifically written to appear on the third page of a newspaper – they intentionally targeted issues the people cared about. The 2,000-word limit imposed on them led authors to be direct and precise in their intentions for each story. In addition, a general lack of editorial input allowed authors to let themselves be directed only by public interest and their own ideas.10 The stories by these women and other authors of both sexes helped break down the nation's image of economic and social well-being and the rigidity of the 'New Woman' and 'New Man,' which were essentially returns to more traditional gender roles. That these stories speak to the common hardships of life under Mussolini's regime is central to this thesis. Men's short stories were also critical of the regime and Italy's social order. This thesis, however, focuses on women's stories because they more directly addressed women's issues and their authors received more negative attention. In light of their previous exclusion from the Italian canon, their work is also more important and interesting to bring to light.

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Towards the purpose of understanding the dominant women's issues during Mussolini's reign, the following section will explore the circumstances that informed the relevant women's issues of the time, such as the women's movement and Fascism's evolution as an anti-feminist regime. It will also delve into the history of the 'terza pagina,' or cultural page, in order to explain how and why women's short stories came to occupy a central and directly critical space there. The following three sections of the thesis will explore how Italian women writers used fiction to address the regime's contradicting and problematic definitions of the 'New Woman,' as well as the impossibility of reconciling their own feminist ideals with the anti-feminist stance of the regime. Specifically, section 2 will deal with the issue of motherhood and marriage, section 3 will deal with tensions and differences between the official impressions of and actual lives of rural women, and section 4 will address expressions of individual will and identity in a regime that emphasized the collective identity and the supremacy of its will.

In 1871, Grazia Deledda was born in Nuoro, a small Sardinian community that, in addition to being deeply entrenched in traditions and customs, had an illiteracy rate of about 90 percent.11 Young girls attended school for an average of three years, while for boys it was four. The dialect of Sardinia was vastly different than mainstream Italian, which Deledda taught herself in hopes of publishing work on the mainland.12 Although women’s movements elsewhere in Europe had already coalesced, Deledda was born well before the Italian women’s movement gathered speed and influence in the 1890’s. As such, when she published her first short story in L’Ultima Moda at the age of seventeen, her family and the people of Nuoro strongly disapproved.13 Although the twentieth century brought stronger connections to less conservative, modern styles and cultural practices through newspaper, magazines, and the radio, as a young woman in a middle-class merchant family, she was expected to focus on finding a suitable husband.14 Without the support of a women’s movement in Italy, Deledda’s choice to become an author jeopardized her chances of finding a man to marry and damaged her family’s reputation. Particularly scandalous were Deledda’s choice of amorous subject

13 In Deledda’s posthumously published autobiographical novel, Cosima, the author discusses the hardships of being a young writer in Nuoro: “Since she had begun writing poems and short stories everyone began looking at her with a certain suspicious amazement, if not openly make fun of her and predict a dire future for her.” 58.
matter and her desire to leave Nuoro in search of fame and fortune in Rome. When she did so in 1899 at the age of 28, she was still vilified and resented by her community, a situation that failed to change before she died of breast cancer in 1936.\textsuperscript{15}

Under the Fascist regime in Italy in the first half of the twentieth century, Grazia Deledda and many other women achieved the goal of becoming successful authors. This success is remarkable because Fascism forced the women's movement and feminism underground. The anti-feminist attitudes and policies of the Fascist regime and various academics, critics, and influential male authors made it difficult for women to choose writing as a profession. Although men authored the overwhelming majority of short stories published, however, women's contributions were neither insignificant nor rare. For example, between 1922 and 1936, Deledda contributed one or more stories to the \textit{Corriere della sera} each month. Ultimately, she wrote over 250 short stories and prose pieces.\textsuperscript{16} In addition, she was the second woman and Italian to win the Nobel Prize for literature in 1926. Despite her talent and success, the regime and male critics portrayed Deledda as masculine and sterile and her writing as frivolous and unworthy of attention because of her sex.

Deledda was not the only woman subjected to this treatment; it was common practice to discourage female authors and their readers based on writing's supposed negative effects on their capacity to reproduce or by claiming their

\textsuperscript{16} Pickering-Iazzi, \textit{The Short Story 'Elzeviro'}, 100.
writing was inferior due to their feminine style and sensibilities. Yet, as evidenced by the frequency with which their work appeared in Italy's newspapers, Deledda's and other women's stories were popular and received serious critical attention, both negative and positive. For example, Benedetto Croce, who often judged literature harshly, praised the work of Grazia Deledda, Ada Negri and other female authors.

In order to understand women authors' interest in the themes addressed in their stories and the importance of this interest, it is necessary to explore the circumstances that influenced women authors' choice of anti-Fascist subject matter and allowed them to reach an entire nation of readers from the pages of some of Italy's most important newspapers. The development of Italy's women's movement and its effects on the women who came of age while it gathered strength were somewhat unique. Over the course of Mussolini's rise to power as dictator, Fascism asserted itself as an anti-feminist and gender-defining regime in Italy, a fact which deeply affected the lives of both men and women. An examination of these historical trends will help me demonstrate that short stories during Mussolini's reign are indicative of a more silent, general defiance of and disagreement with the

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17 This practice was not new to Fascism. It stems from sociological, medical and political reactions to various women's movements in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. For example, in 1910, sociologist Scipio Sighele used pseudo-scientific language to decry women's emancipation in his *Eva Moderna*: "Those who aspire to emancipate themselves, those through intelligence, activity, or will have acquired a more or less legitimate reputation, have something masculine in their physical persons as in their moral physiognomy. One would say that in them a male soul lives and moves [...] Today, the reemergence of feminism is due in great part to the increase in the number of masculine women." Barbara Spackman, "Fascist Women and the Rhetoric of Virility" in *Mothers of Invention*, 102.

regime's constrictions and expectations of both the 'New Woman' and the 'New Man.' Finally, it is necessary to understand the circumstances that allowed short story authors to directly criticize Fascism at a time when censorship laws were restrictive and specifically targeted at some of the topics the stories addressed.

The Women's Movement in Italy: From Inception through WWI

In the first part of the twentieth century, many European countries went through a period of change in gender relations, spurred by women's growing knowledge of international trends and styles, as well as the success of women outside their own communities in fulfilling their aspirations. The speed and type of change that Italy's women's movement caused, however, was somewhat different than elsewhere.\textsuperscript{19} Italy's late Industrial Revolution of the 1890's and hands-off liberal social policies caused an uneven spread of change.\textsuperscript{20} Because of these factors and the deep influence of the Catholic Church in society, Italy came out of its Industrial Revolution characterized by a mixture of modernity and tradition.\textsuperscript{21} While Italians strove to become more modern, the importance of family and marriage remained deeply imbedded ideas in the collective identity of the nation.\textsuperscript{22}

Social problems such as the abuse of child and female labor were exacerbated by Italy's Industrial Revolution. Although women made up more than half of Italy's industrial labor force, worked in poor conditions and were paid far less than men – conditions which were being improved in other European counties

\textsuperscript{19} Willson, \textit{Women in Twentieth Century Italy}, 1.
\textsuperscript{21} Willson, \textit{Women in Twentieth Century Italy}, 1.
\textsuperscript{22} \textit{Ibid.}
during this period—regulatory labor laws were not forthcoming as they were elsewhere.\(^{23}\) For this reason, women who felt mistreated by their industrial employers were the first to adopt an emancipationist agenda. Thus, Italy’s women’s movement was born of the hardships of working and lower-middle class women—mainly factory workers, clerks, and teachers.\(^{24}\)

The popularity and success of women’s movements in other European countries influenced the rapid spread of the movement in Italy, which De Grazia also attributes to the improvement of the economic situation in the first decade of the twentieth century. Despite its increasing popularity, the emancipation movement was hampered by its division into Catholic, secular bourgeois, and socialist factions, all with different methods and purposes. That the movement did not have more success before Italy entered World War I in 1915 is due to the wedge driven between its branches by class separatism and differences in political opinion.\(^{25}\) However, regardless of the movement’s factionalism, its gathering influence sewed the seeds of emancipation for the women who came of age during the First World War. As in other European nations, the war marked an essential turning point for Italian feminism and emancipation because it gave women the chance to enter the

\(^{23}\) While paternalistic governments elsewhere passed laws meant to protect women and children from labor abuses, Italy’s industrialists successfully argued that backward Italy needed to take advantage of cheap labor in order to catch up to Northern Europe. Willson, *Women in Twentieth Century Italy*, 1 and De Grazia, *How Fascism Ruled Women*, 19-20.


\(^{25}\) For a longer discussion of the women’s movement in Italy until 1925, see De Grazia, *How Fascism Ruled Women*, 1-40.
This turning point in the lives of Italian women undoubtedly affected the women whose short stories are addressed in this thesis. They were born between 1870 and 1900; the oldest of them entered adulthood while the women's movement was gathering strength, the youngest in the aftermath of WWI and the subsequent ascent of Fascism. As such, the rise and suppression of the emancipationist movement was a formative experience in their lives, contributing to their critical approach to Fascism in their stories. In order to understand this formative experience, it is necessary to look at Fascism's development as an anti-feminist regime with an emphasis on policies concerning gender roles.

The Rise of Fascism and Debates Concerning Fascism's Gender Policies

When the First World War ended, men expected to return to their jobs; soon there was a strong national revival of a smaller pre-war campaign to remove women from the labor force and return them to their homes. This point is illustrated by a popular slogan of the time: "Women's employment is causing men's unemployment." An expansive process whereby norms concerning gender roles were institutionalized in society accompanied the expulsion of women from the labor force.

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26 Gigliola Gori, Italian Fascism and The Female Body: Sport, Submissive Women and Strong Mothers (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 37. Gori asserts that women's entrance into the work force during WWI was "the first concrete step toward their political, economic and social emancipation."

27 De Grazia, How Fascism Ruled Women, 25. Men with a strong moral agenda spearheaded the campaign; they aimed to return women to the home and decried the degradation of family life. They joined forces with Catholic leagues, blaming declining birth rates on urbanization and women's emancipation.

28 Gori, Italian Fascism and the Female Body, 50.
labor force. In the years in which Mussolini rose to and consolidated his power, his stance on women's emancipation evolved to adapt to this process. In the early years of Mussolini's political career, in which he was seeking election as the Prime Minister of Italy, he had made several illusions to his support for women's suffrage. In the span of a few short years, however, Mussolini's attitude changed. When he declared himself dictator in 1925, the regime aggressively started implementing anti-feminist policies and attempted to limit women to a reproductive role through laws, propaganda campaigns, and manipulations of public opinion.

The motivations behind Mussolini's adoption of an anti-feminist stance are a point of contention among scholars. The outcome of this debate is central to this thesis's conception of Italian's citizenry's response to Fascism. Although it remains clear that both prior to and following the First World War, many men grew frustrated with the increasing presence and permanence of women in Italy's workforce, it is unclear the extent to which this frustration acted as the motivating factor for the Fascist regime's preoccupation with gender roles and limiting women to the domestic sphere. Martin Durham makes the argument that the Fascist Party

29 Mariolina Graziosi, “Gender Struggle and the Social Manipulation and Ideological Use of Gender Identity in the Interwar Years” in Mothers of Invention, 31.
30 In 1919, when the first Fascist program was published, it stated that ‘integral’ suffrage for women was part of its agenda. For these reasons women were hopeful that the Fascist party would support the women's movement. Additionally, as late as 1923, Mussolini claimed to support women's suffrage: “As far as the government is concerned, I feel I am entitled to declare that, apart from unforeseen events, the Fascist Government stands firm for the right to vote for different categories of women, starting with local elections.” Gori, Italian Fascism and the Female Body, 52-58.
31 In 1925, certain Italian women gained the right to vote in local elections. However, Mussolini's declaration of dictatorship discontinued all elections, making this a meaningless victory.
was forced into adopting an anti-feminist position by social pressure and the need to produce more citizens in order to compete with the growth of other European countries. Under this argument, one could reasonably suppose that Fascism’s emphasis on defining gender roles was a boon for and reaction to the demands of Italy’s male citizens. Victoria De Grazia, however, argues that the opposite is true.

In her work, De Grazia examines the state of Italy’s families during Fascist rule and treats the ‘New Man’ as a category equally problematic as the ‘New Woman.’ Fascist gender policies created hardships and contradictions for women, men, and entire families. Although the regime’s propaganda and ideology created an opposing pair of gender definitions for men and women, the dynamics of male and female interactions were more complicated. For example, married couples often made decisions together that benefitted their families the most, especially considering the high rate of unemployment and low wages. Fascism’s policies did not merely reflect the desires of the male population or even the best interests of Italian families. Rather, families consciously chose to have fewer children and women left home to support their families and improve their economic status. In

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32 Martin Durham, *Women and Fascism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 167. Durham argues that both Mussolini’s and the regime’s policy concerning feminism was fluid and the object of much contention prior to 1925.


34 Robin Pickering-Iazzi, *Politics of the Visible: Writing Women, Culture, and Fascism* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1997). Pickering-Iazzi argues that we cannot look at the interaction between female and male culture as one of ‘binary opposition.’ For a more in-depth explanation of this conclusion, see page 32.

35 De Grazia, *How Fascism Ruled Women*, 49. De Grazia claims that the declining birth rate and the presence of women in the workforce were results of decisions made by married couples together.
addition, it became more common for both men and women to resist having children and deemphasize marriage as an important goal.\textsuperscript{36}

Also central to an understanding of Fascism's focus on gender definitions is how the concept of virility determined the virtues and characteristics of good Fascist citizens.\textsuperscript{37} Virile Italy was portrayed as masculine in character, defining itself as contrary to and defending itself against femininity. Virility, then, for Italy and its male citizens, meant labor and control over the family, while femininity was defined by procreation. Fascism's emphasis on virility cast working and intellectual women as masculine or sterile, a perversion of their intended role in the state, a practice that affected the lives of the women authors discussed in this thesis. Similarly, men who failed to support and control their families on their own were portrayed as feminine and impotent. Many of the stories discussed in this paper criticize the attitudes and actions of Italian men. This aspect of women's criticism, however, is not central to this thesis. Rather, it explores women's larger statements concerning the rigid definitions of gender that Fascism imposed on all of its citizens, including men. Because the regime's policies affected both men and women, the critical short stories published by women in Italy's newspapers resonated with women and many men. They demonstrate that Fascism's ideologies and propaganda campaigns were not as widely accepted as previously assumed by

\textsuperscript{36} In this period, Italy and other European countries experienced plummeting birth rates. De Grazia, \textit{How Fascism Ruled Women}, 45 and Willson, \textit{Women in Twentieth Century Italy}, 1.

historians. Women authors' short stories were a public representation of the silent resistance occurring in Italian citizens' homes and hearts.

A History of the 'terza pagina' and how women's stories flourished there:

In 1901, the Corriere della sera was the first Italian newspaper to use its third page as a medium for social and cultural material, creating a unique form of short story entitled the 'elzeviro' after its occupation of the 'elzevir' location, or the first two columns, of the page. By 1905, this model was well established among most of the country's papers. Until 1924, short stories only occasionally appeared on the third page. The remainder of the page consisted of reviews of events or literature and critical articles concerning political or social issues. The 'terza pagina,' unique to Italy in this period, soon became a vital part of its biggest papers. As literacy rates climbed in the first part of the twentieth century and inventors introduced more efficient newspaper technology into Europe, Italian newspapers continued to gain readership from a variety of socioeconomic classes with a range of interests.

Between 1922 and 1926, Mussolini undertook a program of 'Fascizing' Italy's newspapers. In a study of the media in Italy during this time period, Matthew Hibberd explains that newspapers fell into four categories: those that supported the rise of Fascism, those that weren't originally supporters but were Fascized without opposition, papers that were Fascized by force, and papers that went underground.

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39 Italian illiteracy rates dropped 10% from 1901-1911. In addition, the American Hoe rotary press arrived in Italy in 1906, making it possible to print, fold, combine, count and sort thousands of newspapers at a time. Pickering-lazzi, The Short Story 'Elzeviro', 7-8, 18.
as a response to censorship. For the most part, newspaper owners supported and were pleased by the ascendency of the Fascist party. It is doubtful, however, that they could have guessed the extent to which their publications would be restricted from commenting on government choices and national events. As part of the process of ‘Fascizing,’ the regime required that all political and social material in newspapers be subject to approval. Mussolini forbade the mention of several topics. Political material all but disappeared from the front sections of Italy's newspapers, and even the ‘terza pagina’ could no longer serve as a medium for open dialogue. This led the short story, which the regime found unthreatening, to dominate the ‘elzeviro’ position of the page. Interestingly, the Corriere della sera overtly supported Fascism and Il Giornale d'Italia was run by a personal friend of Mussolini. The fact that they were supporters of Fascism is fascinating in light of the fact that they published short stories by women with feminist and anti-Fascist themes in an environment where such criticisms were not technically permissible.

Through this process of ‘Fascizing,’ Mussolini sought to create a national, Fascist culture that would help create a uniform body of Italian citizens loyal to the state and its ideals. The influence and ready availability of foreign materials such

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40 Matthew Hibberd, Media in Italy: Press, Cinema and Broadcasting from Unification to Digital (Buckingham, GBR: Open University Press, 2008), 35.
41 Hibberd, Media in Italy, 34-35.
42 Among the forbidden topics were negative depictions of motherhood, denigration of the sanctity of the family, opposing the beauty of war, and suicide, an act which suggested the individual's will reigned supreme over that of the regime. Pickering-lazzi, The Short Story Elzeviro, 69.
43 For a more expansive history of the ‘terza pagina’ and the ‘elzeviro’ short story's development, see Pickering-lazzi, The Short Story Elzeviro, 1-33.
44 Hibberd, Media in Italy, 34.
as magazines, novels, radio and movies, however, thwarted this effort. Italian citizens were fascinated with western culture and modern fashions and trends, further enhancing their particular suspension between modernity and tradition. This interest in modernity and the contradictions of daily life in Italy extended to the ‘terza pagina.’ While events and government decisions could not be explicitly mentioned there – all content had to be approved – short stories enjoyed much less censorship. As short stories became a major mode of expression on the ‘terza pagina,’ male and female authors began using them to challenge Fascist ideals, such as the sanctity of the home, and ask questions the regime considered answered, such as how best to assure the economic and spiritual well being of the people.

Although this criticism often alluded to current events, due to inconsistencies in censorship practices, stories on the cultural page were not subjected to thematic censorship. Because they refrained from mentioning Mussolini or specific events by name, authors enjoyed an exceptional degree of freedom from the interference of the regime and newspaper editors. Additionally, women’s cultural production was frequently dismissed as unimportant by the regime. Only the interests of the reading public and the concerns of the authors determined the content of the short stories published on the third page. The popularity and continued contracting of

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45 Hibberd, Media in Italy, 34.
47 From 1920-1943, a group of women published a magazine called the Almanacco della donna italiana, which successfully escaped Fascist censorship because its status as a women’s publication rendered it ‘unimportant.’ Throughout the years of Fascist rule, it printed biographical articles about self-confident, intelligent, professional women with whom women readers could identify. Gori, Italian Fascism and the Female Body, 66.
authors whose work was critical of Fascism demonstrate the extent to which the common reader questioned the inviolability of the regime's ideology and practices.

Although it is clear that both male and female authors addressed issues relevant to life under Fascism, the following three sections of this thesis specifically engage the work of female authors. The issues they were concerned with had universal relevance, making them popular material for Italian newspapers' readership, and allowing them to serve as a representation of many citizens' questioning of Fascism. It is noteworthy, however, that the stories discussed in this paper approach the issues from a female standpoint, and many of them seem to denounce Italian men's attitudes towards women and gender roles. That Fascism silenced the women's movement makes these stories an important reminder that social and economic emancipation was still a concern for the women who had come of age before and during Mussolini's rule.
Section 2: Addressing Fascist Conceptions of Marriage, Motherhood and the 'New Woman' in Women's Short Stories

Several scholars have claimed that women authors perpetuated images of typical Fascist-era wives and mothers. In reality, however, there is a range of characterizations of women in women authors' stories; many of their stories are critical of Fascism's emphasis on motherhood as the all-encompassing identifier of Italian women. Most especially, many of Grazia Deledda's female characters have complicated relationships with marriage, motherhood, and identity. Notably, Deledda's and Negri's portrayals of themselves as young women in *Cosima* and *Morning Star* respectively reveal the difficulties both had in being recognized as both authors and women. They and other women authors addressed a wealth of female experiences that nullify the supposed lack of deviation from or happiness outside of the regime's narrow conception of the 'New Woman.' This section specifically addresses the range of experiences and opinions concerning motherhood, marriage, and the destiny of the modern Italian woman in order to understand women's responses to an aspect of the regime's conception of their identities as women.

Of the women whose stories are discussed in this section, Grazia Deledda (1871-1936), Ada Negri (1870-1945), and Amalia Guglielminetti (1881-1941) belong to the generation that had witnessed and participated in the rise of the women's movement. In Deledda's life, as in her writing, she was concerned with

women's issues. She believed in divorce and women's suffrage, and she abhorred forced marriages. The success of her career, considering her views on women, was unprecedented. It served as an inspiration for other Italian women, such as Amalia Guglielminetti, who made the following remark about Deledda's Nobel Prize: “Honorable men, think for a moment about the fact that this creature who is making our value emerge from the shadows, this creature of genius, is a woman.” Born in Turin eleven years after Deledda, Guglielminetti won fame early in her career as a poet, but during the Fascist period she was more famous for her novels and short fiction, which focused on conflicts in sexual relationships. She presented dominant and assertive female characters that “disturbed the conservative male literary establishment.” Although she published less frequently than either Deledda or Negri, Guglielminetti was the most prolific female contributor to Il Giornale d'Italia and also published in La Stampa, another popular newspaper from Turin. Negri was born in a rural area but later moved to Milan, vowing that her writing would be “direct and cutting like the blade of a knife,” which led her fans to call her “the daughter of the people.” Besides several popular novels and collections of poems, Negri contributed about eighty short stories on the ‘terza pagina’ of the Corriere della sera between 1926 and 1942. In her writing, she showed her deep concern

49 Pickering-lazzi, Unspakable Women 11. These themes are also addressed in many of her early stories, such as “Thirteen Eggs,” which is about the hatred and entrapment a young woman feels toward her husband after having an arranged marriage. Deledda, Chiaroscuro and other stories.

50 Pickering-lazzi, Unspakable Women, 11.

51 Ibid. 12.

52 Ibid. 9.

53 Ibid. 11.

54 Ibid. 9.
for women's issues, especially those of the lower classes. The marks of the women's movement remained with these three authors in their lives and writing, especially during the Fascist regime's rule. Of the authors whose work is examined in this thesis, their styles are some of the most direct and overtly critical – the anger and frustration they felt with Italian society and the regime is almost palpable in their stories.

Maria Luisa Astaldi (1899-1982) and Pia Rimini (1900-?) grew into adulthood as Mussolini took power. Astaldi was born in Udine and was a Professor of English Language and Literature at the University of Rome in the 1940's, where she published literary criticism. In the short fiction that she regularly contributed to newspapers and women's publications, she frequently used irony to dramatize conflicts of gender and criticize the conservative nature of the 'New Woman' in Fascist ideology. Although Rimini is much lesser known than the others, her contributions to the cultural pages of both Il Giornale d'Italia and La Stampa focused on gender issues and the socioeconomic and cultural marginalization of women under Fascism. Of the younger generation of authors, her body of work is the most dramatic and forceful commentary on the realities of living out femininity in modern Italian society – her stories frequently comment on societal conceptions of women as the objects of men's subjectivity.

Grazia Deledda's and Pia Rimini's responses to the subservient nature of women within the strict gender roles of the regime will be seen here in one story by

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56 Ibid.
57 Ibid.
each of the authors. With the help of these two stories, I will look at the realities of and women’s opinions of their status in modern Italy. There are strong connections between the authors’ criticisms and the lives of real women under the regime. In one story each by Amalia Guglielminetti, Ada Negri and Maria Luisa Astaldi, the authors question the supposedly inalienable nature of women as wives and mothers. Using these stories for support, I will explore the actions and attitudes of Italian women concerning the regime’s definition of the ‘New Woman.’ The legal and social responses of the regime to women’s actions and the attitudes expressed in these stories highlight the regime’s inability to keep women out of the workforce, force them to have children, or, most importantly, alter their conceptions of themselves as women.

Criticizing Women’s Subservience in the Domestic Sphere: Grazia Deledda’s “Baptisms” and Pia Rimini’s “A Boy”

In “Baptisms,” published in the Corriere della sera in 1926, Grazia Deledda inspects the institution of marriage, its effects on families, and its various motivations and pressures. The story is set in a small village, and begins with an older man who is in bed with his wife during a rainstorm, contemplating the recent marriage of their daughter. The man thinks about how fortuitous the union is; he shares his feelings with his wife in the dark:

I’m happy for our little girl, too. What more could anyone want? A good marriage with a rich, strapping, honest man. And best of all, they don’t live too close by [...] I know, you would have liked to keep your little girl tied to your apron strings your whole life – and her husband too! You women think everything is so easy, so simple. But life is hard.  

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As a man who lives in a society that believes a successful marriage to be the ultimate goal for young women, he is pleased that she has achieved her purpose. The man feels as if he has done his duty by keeping his wife and child protected and healthy until it was time that she separated from them. He has successfully completed the mission of a proper, male Fascist citizen.

By contrast, his wife lies awake next to him thinking about how much she misses her daughter, and worrying about her happiness. When a loud knock sounds at their door and the man goes downstairs to answer it, the woman’s heart beats faster. After a time, she hears her daughter’s scream from downstairs: “A panicked sense of terror kept her from getting out of the bed. But then a scream rose from the road...’Mama!’ The woman threw herself out of bed, and ran down the stairs to the doorway.”

The young woman had walked eight kilometers in a downpour because she felt she would die or kill herself if she stayed with her new husband for another moment. Deledda portrays the reactions of the mother and father in drastically different terms. Whereas the father worries about propriety, tradition, and the opinions of the neighbors while scoffing at the woman and her daughter for missing the comfort of each other’s proximity, the mother feels a distinct pain and wants to invite her daughter in to dry off. Ultimately, after her husband threatens to beat both she and their daughter, the mother recalls her daughter’s baptism and the solemn words of the priest: “I believe. I renounce.”

As she did then, she relinquishes her control over the fate of her child, allowing her husband to take their daughter back to the new husband who has made her profoundly unhappy in a

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way the reader is never made aware of. By focusing neither on the young girl’s thoughts nor the nature of her relationship with her new husband, but instead on the worries and attitudes of the girl’s parents, Deledda dramatizes the ways in which trends are continued into perpetuity, even by people who love each other.

While perhaps not explicitly denunciatory of Fascism, in “Baptisms,” Deledda reflects on the long and unbroken tradition of women’s subjection to authority in a society and culture led by men. In 1865, the Pisanelli Code had established that in the legal, social and religious spheres, women were of lower status than men. The Code was a document consisting of family law; it states that women were subject to the authority of the male head of the family. Once they were married, women were excluded from the economic responsibility of taking care of their children. In fact, they could not act in commercial or legal matters without the express consent of their husbands.\(^{62}\) The Pisanelli Code remained law throughout Mussolini’s regime. The campaign to return women to the domestic sphere that gathered strength in 1910 led into the Fascist regime’s construction of itself as an anti-feminist and anti-emancipationist movement.\(^{63}\) That “Baptisms” was published a year after Mussolini’s declaration of dictatorship and the regime’s decisive adoption of an anti-feminist stance makes it important. The timely publishing of this story notes that the new regime is ‘more of the same’ in regards to gender roles. Through her characterization of the typical reactions to the pain of a child, Deledda reveals the ‘New Woman’ and ‘New Man’ as nothing but a reiteration of tradition. With the closing paragraph, Deledda asserts that expectations for a man to control his wife

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\(^{62}\) Gori, *Italian Fascism and the Female Body*, 37.

and children and for both men and women to accept their roles in society are forms of violence:

After they'd arrived at the newlywed's home, and the two young people had made up, partly out of love, but mostly because they felt the inexorable power that already held them, the father, without wanting to, without even knowing it, felt himself close to the first great men who had used violence to create laws for their fellow human beings.64

As mentioned earlier, Deledda was also concerned with the compelling need to marry the person chosen for you and to stay in that marriage, regardless of the consequences for one's personal happiness. As seen in the closing passage above, the forces keeping marriages together are another aspect of Deledda's criticism in this story. In sum, Deledda's "Baptisms" was a response to women's role in modern Italy as a culture, not just in Fascism. It was, however, a condemnation of Fascism as a perpetuator of inequality and subjugation.

Several years later, in 1933, Pia Rimini further explored the theme of women's subservient role in Fascist society in "A Boy," published in Il Giornale d'Italia. The story relates the predicament of a widowed woman with a young son who feels so chained to her role as a mother that she must submit to every demand of the little boy; he rules her days and nights. In the face of his arrogant, childish displeasure, she feels weak and helpless:

She was his mother, and felt only weakness before him [...] She challenged him, shuddering since she knew how blind his fury could be, and thought maybe she could persuade him with kind words. But she also thought that by trying to coax him she'd be giving in to him. Who's in charge: she or he?65

64 Pickering-lazzi, Unspeakable Women, 46.
65 Ibid. 66.
As this passage illustrates, the woman feels continuous confusion over whether she
rules him or is ruled by him. At one moment, she asserts herself, and at the next she
cowers and acquiesces. Ultimately, she sacrifices her possible happiness in a new
marriage because her son imperiously commands it. She feels forced to refuse the
offer of a suitor in whom she is emotionally invested when her son becomes nearly
hysterical:

Tears were coming to his eyes, and he hid his face with his fists and yelled,
crying, ‘I don’t want this! I don’t! Tell him to go away! My mama! He wants
my mama!’ [...] ‘Call Luisa and tell her to send him away!’ He coaxed with a
meek, ingratiating voice [...] ‘Aren’t you happy with me? Why do you want
him?’”

Affected by this tirade, the young mother refuses her hand to the willing suitor and
immediately feels crippling grief:

She quickly stepped back into the room and ran to a corner, where she
collapsed into a chair. The boy heard only her deepening sobs, which she
smothered as she hid her face. ‘No mama, no...’ he stammered, feeling a little
guilty, but irritated that her tears might ruin his victory. ‘What do you care
about that man? Aren’t we happy, just you and me?’

As the supposed ruler of the domestic sphere, Italian women took control over the
household and decision regarding their children. Yet, the Fascist assignation of
gender roles also subordinated women to the will of their husbands and, ultimately,
their sons. At every turn, the regime undermined and demeaned women, even in
their roles as mothers; this made it difficult to inspire women’s confidence and
comfort in their assigned task. The lack of confidence and authority women felt in
Italian modernity is illustrated in “A Boy.” Additionally detrimental to women’s

66 Pickering-Iazzi, Unspeakable Women, 66.
67 Ibid. 67.
68 De Grazia, How Fascism Ruled Women, 73.
power in their roles as mothers was the Fascist education system. As all Italian schools were 'Fascized,' ideology and propaganda became common tools used in the classroom. It was a teacher’s duty to indoctrinate children. Laws were implemented beginning in the late 1920's that greatly lessened the influence of women on the education system and codified education to follow a strict, uniform set of ideologies and subjects. In “A Boy,” Pia Rimini mourns the loss of mothers' control over their children and, by extension, their own lives by portraying an ordinary Italian boy as commanding, angry, and possessive, preparing for his role as the ultimate controller of a future wife and family of his own. These characteristics would have been learned in part in the Fascist education system.

In stories that were written seven years apart, both Grazia Deledda and Pia Rimini take issue with the effects that the all-encompassing authority of husbands and even sons had on the lives of women in Italian society. While Deledda’s story was published at a time when Fascism had only just begun to influence family policy, it made an important point about the definitions of ‘New Man’ and ‘New Woman'; they were akin to those of men and women in the period just before Mussolini’s rule, wherein the women’s movement had attempted to subvert gender roles. Subsequently, Pia Rimini’s story concludes that women’s control over their lives had further deteriorated over the course of Fascism’s then eleven years in power; this was accomplished through both propaganda and indoctrination of children in the education system.

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69 Gori, Italian Fascism and the Female Body, 62, 94.
The very inherence of women's roles as wives and mothers is central to neither of these two stories, however. In fact, in 'Baptisms,' Deledda portrays the woman as almost viscerally connected to her daughter. While her husband worries about the neighbors and considers the possibility of their daughter coming to the house more frequently as profoundly negative, the woman feels emotional and physical distress at the sound of her daughter's wails and her bedraggled appearance. There were, however, stories that specifically challenged the inviolability of a woman's destiny as wife and mother. Several of them are addressed in the following subsection.


In Amalia Guglielminetti's "Sensitivity," published in *Il Giornale d'Italia* in 1933, the author criticizes the regime's impression on society regarding women's exclusion from intellectual stimulation and the singularity of their value as attractive candidates for marriage and procreation. "Sensitivity" is about a woman who wants to be valued for her intellect and 'sensitivity,' not her appearance or the various attributes that make her sexually or maternally appealing. The narrator recalls interactions with the beautiful protagonist, who tells the narrator that she has been engaged to be married on four separate occasions, but broken them all off because her fiancés were interested for the wrong reasons and told her to pursue 'women's activities.' For example, when she expresses interest in her scientist fiancé's work, he replies: "Go away! You're too beautiful to take an interest in these things. Studies, learning, culture, science are only suitable for ugly women who don't
have any more pleasant ways to occupy their lives.” The story concludes when
the narrator sees the young woman six months later and learns that she has married
a man who is blind and thus, she says “feels joy in my intelligence...enjoys my
sensitivity, and doesn’t think my intellectual curiosity is useless and
disagreeable.” This outcome, however, does not necessarily laud the man’s
attitude. Only without the ability to see his mate’s beauty is the Italian man able to
accept her intelligence and personality. This harkens back to the view that
intellectual women were somehow unsuited to wifehood and child-rearing, and that
the pursuit of knowledge or a career would make a woman ugly or deformed.
Without knowing whether his young bride is beautiful or not, the blind man is able
to appreciate her intelligence, which he otherwise might have been disposed to
disregard were he able to fully fulfill the role of ‘New Man’ himself. As a blind man,
who is neither able to recognize the physical beauty of his love nor as affectively
take care of a potential family because of his blindness, he comes to appreciate the
‘sensitivity’ of his wife.

Guglielminetti expresses the desires of young women who yearned for
recognition of their characters and intellects, rather than their appearances and
ability to be wives or mothers. The story addresses the frustration women felt
when the regime told them that they were useless for anything other than
procreation. Mussolini himself told representatives of the Fasci Feminili to: “Go back
home and tell the women I need births, many births. I wish that every year the

70 Pickering-Iazzi, Unspeakable Women, 40.
71 Pickering-Iazzi, Unspeakable Women, 40.
country would add to its treasure new and healthy lives." To achieve this goal, Fascist ideologues believed that women had to be singular in their purpose and goal: to procreate endlessly in wedlock. To that end, the regime spread the myth of maternity around the country, exposing women to image after image of mothers breastfeeding or surrounded by children. Ceremonies were held to celebrate mothers with the highest number of living children; they were awarded monetary prizes. In these ways, the regime made it known that a faithful female Fascist’s role was to successfully bring as many children into adulthood as possible. Six years later, the regime’s obsession with raising the birth rate and increasing Italy’s population to 60 million had obviously not abated; Guglielminetti’s “Sensitivity” illustrates the results of that social pressure in terms of women’s desires and goals.

Because the regime’s sociologists and ideologues believed that intellectual fulfillment would diminish women’s capacity to give birth and successfully raise children—in fact, they argued that it deformed women, making them sterile and masculine—women were encouraged to refrain from exercising their minds or engaging in paid work. Guglielminetti’s story responds not only to this general assertion about intellectual women, but also to criticism that hit closer to home, regarding authors such as herself. As discussed in the previous section of this thesis, female authors were primary targets for this form of criticism.

72 Gori, Italian Fascism and the Female Body, 60-61. This excerpt is from a speech Mussolini delivered to representatives from the Fasci Femminili on October 28, 1927. The Fasci Femminili were the women’s branches of the Fascist party.

73 Gori, Italian Fascism and the Female Body, 63.

74 An excellent example can be seen in a novel by Luigi Pirandello, which thinly veils Grazia Deledda in an “acerbic and bitter account of a woman writer and her supposedly subaltern husband.” The main character of the book, Attilio Raceni,
While Guglielminetti's story is more directly critical of the idea that the exercise of women's intelligence is detrimental to their identity as women, Ada Negri's "Woman With a Little Girl" questions whether a woman could be truly fulfilled by a life consisting solely of motherhood and childrearing. The Corriere della sera published "Woman With a Little Girl" in 1926, four years after the Fascist party's ascent to power. In the story, Negri delves into the thoughts of the narrator, who is looking at a portrait of a grandmother holding her young granddaughter on her hip. She describes the girl as "straight and solid...with an air of self-confidence and command," and adds that the girl "seems to say: 'Everything is mine and I am everything. Here I am.'" This is an example of the strength, self-awareness and confidence that many of Negri's female characters possess, such as in her autobiographical novel, Morning Star, wherein Negri characterizes herself as a child already seeking independence and an escape from marriage and motherhood. Negri describes the grandmother as appearing to have lived her years "in the hope that tomorrow would bring the gift she didn't receive today...It would come, it had to come. Otherwise, what reason would there have been for living?" Although the woman had successfully raised a healthy son and outlived her husband, however, she did not find what she was looking for: "It didn't come...And it won't come"

"casts scorn over all women who would presume to write poetry, novels, and even for the stage." Sharon Wood, "Locations, Re-locations and Dislocations: (Dis)placing Grazia Deledda" in The Challenge of the Modern, 3.

75 Pickering-Iazzi, Unspeakable Women, 92.

76 For example, Negri reflects on the disgust she felt when her peers expressed excitement about marriage. Although she recognizes that there are many women like this, she feels glad not to be one of them. Negri, Morning Star, 144-145.

77 Pickering-Iazzi, Unspeakable Women, 93.
because it's now too late.\textsuperscript{78} Here, Negri makes the point that not all women can be fulfilled by a life defined by motherhood; although she had achieved the goal set before her by societal expectations, she never found what she was looking for. The woman's son grew up and had this little girl, pushing his own mother aside, leaving her life empty and without meaning. This emptiness is a ringing statement that for many women, motherhood is not enough, especially once the children have grown up and moved away.

Even more compelling is Maria Luisa Astaldi's story, "Fog," which makes the statement that some women are not destined for marriage and children at all. "Fog" was published in \textit{Il Giornale d'Italia} in 1936, and as such, it was the latest to appear of the three stories discussed in this subsection. It also makes the most extreme statement via the most tragic events; an undertone of desperation and panic runs throughout the story – this is possibly a reflection of the extent to which the regime had negatively affected women's lives by the mid-1930's. The narrative follows a short period in the life of a young tutor who did not care about her appearance and lived in a small cottage in the country. Flowers were one of her greatest loves: "Flowers were a passion for her. She grew them herself in a small garden in front of her house that was so bursting with flowers it looked like a tiny cemetery."\textsuperscript{79}

Though a woman of learning, she is incredibly shy and absent-minded. One day, she goes to the home of the narrator's aunt and is induced to buy a long piece of beautiful white fabric in the hopes of meeting "the young man who's right" for her.

From this moment onward, the young woman's sanity deteriorates:

\textsuperscript{78} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{79} Ibid. 53.
She’d gotten odd, raving, like they say in other parts. At night people would see her in the garden, pacing up and down like a hen in the henhouse. She’d pick flowers, and put them in her hair and sing, like in church. The boys hid behind the hedge, making fun of her. Then in the evening, around the time for the Ave Maria, she’d go on down the road, in the direction of Cava. She’d sit there on the low wall. When a car came by she’d run into the middle of the road and wave her hands in the air, until the driver had to stop if he didn’t want to hit her. Then she’d say, ‘Excuse me, Sir, would you give me a ride to Milan?’ and she’d hop in.\textsuperscript{80}

All of this was in the hopes of finding a husband in the city, a goal that had become her obsession ever since so adamantly urged by the narrator’s aunt. Ultimately, one night the driver of a truck fails to see the woman when she flags him down, wearing a white dress and a crown:

\begin{quote}
This winter, poor thing, it happened this winter, just a little after the Cava crossing. She was stone dead, like a squashed frog in the middle of the road. It was the milk truck that ran over her. There was a thick fog, the kind we get around here. You couldn’t see past your nose.\textsuperscript{81}
\end{quote}

The man imparting this information to the narrator offers the following explanation for her descent into madness: “We found piles of books in her house. She read so much she ruined her brain. Because women aren’t like us. Books are bad for them.”\textsuperscript{82} With this decisive ending comment, the story dramatizes the wide gulf between the regime’s ideas about women’s temperaments and the reality that women themselves, like Astaldi, could see. In this situation, the pressure the young tutor felt led to her loss of sanity and eventual, tragic dead. Over the course of four pages, the reader learns that in six months, a peacefully and happily solitary young woman who delighted in flowers and reading could be completely transformed by

\textsuperscript{80} Pickering-lazzi, \textit{Unspeakable Women}, 56.
\textsuperscript{81} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{82} Ibid. 57.
the overwhelming societal expectation of marriage into a raving lunatic. Meanwhile, the explanation the man gives the narrator for the tutor's madness echoes the attempts of the regime's ideologues to portray women as somehow ruined by intellectualism.

The sentiments expressed in all of these stories – that women, as well as men, should be able to exercise their intellects, enjoy economic freedom, and remain emancipated from marital or reproductive requirements – ran counter to the ideas and goals of the regime. The government implemented laws and launched propaganda campaigns. As previously mentioned, women were given an economic incentive to give birth as many times as possible with the offer of a prize for having many living children, just one of the ways the regime put social pressure on women's reproductive choices. In 1926, the regime levied additional taxes upon unmarried adults of both gender in order to encourage marriage at an early age. In addition, women's presence in the labor force was limited by the regime with various measures over the course of Mussolini's reign. For example, also in 1926, women teachers were banned from the subjects of literature, Greek, Latin, history and philosophy. In the following year, the regime passed a bill to reduce women's wages to half those of men, sending the message that men were meant to be the primary earners for families consisting of wives and children. This bill was clearly intentioned to eliminate the possibility that women could easily remain single or economically independent. In 1928, female students at secondary schools and

83 Gori, *Italian Fascism and the Female Body*, 62.
84 Gori, *Italian Fascism and the Female Body*, 62.
universities were discouraged from continuing by a doubling of their taxes. Also in the same year, the incentive to have children was increased—families with six or more children were not only exempt from taxes, but also financially supported by the regime. The social pressure resulting from these kinds of measures is exactly what Astaldi vilifies in "Fog."

Female authors seem to have personally identified with the struggle to escape the pressure to marry and procreate. In Ada Negri's biographical novel, Morning Star, she characterizes herself as one such woman when contemplating her lack of desire to have children. Instead, she has strong desires to be free to provide for herself and succeed in writing. This desire is mirrored in Deledda's novel, Cosima—published posthumously in 1936—which frequently employs images of soaring birds to describe her desire to leave Nuoro and escape the trap of an arranged marriage. Although Morning Star and Cosima were successful, Astaldi's "Fog" was available to a much wider and multi-varietal audience in Il Giornale d'Italia in 1936, when Mussolini had been the dictator for eleven years. It boldly drew a correlation between the regime's definition of women's destinies as wives and mothers and insanity, even death. Many women, and even men, would have

85 Ibid.
86 "She does not love children. She has never noticed them. As a little girl, she never played with dolls. When she grew taller she never took a baby in her arms with the spontaneous passion of adolescents in whom the maternal instinct is already awake. She is indifferent to the mystery of the child. She feels no need to solve it." Negri, Morning Star, 121. Though Ada Negri did marry and have two children, her choice to portray her early psyche in this way is noteworthy.
87 "She felt, in the presence of the sea and above the great cliffs red with the sunset, like the kid of a crenellated peak of the rock who would like to imitate the flight of a hawk when instead it must return to the pen at the shepherd's whistle." Deledda, Cosima, 63.
been able to identify with this message. As mentioned previously, increasing numbers of Italian citizens remained unmarried or refrained from having children, despite the measures undertaken by the regime.

The stories of Deledda, Rimini, Guglielminetti, Negri and Astaldi resonated with women who were restricted and deprived of their rights. They are concrete reminders of women’s disagreement with the goals of the regime. In fact, in 1931, half of Italian families were still living on two incomes, proving that the incentives and propaganda were not widely effective. This continuing resistance to the will of the regime led Mussolini to make the following statement – meant to frighten and discourage men and women from defying their gender roles – in 1934: “With work a woman becomes like a man; she causes a man’s unemployment; she develops an independence and a fashion that is contrary to the process of childbirth, and lowers the demographic curve; man is deprived of work and dignity; he is castrated in every sense.” And yet, most tellingly, four studies conducted in pediatric clinics in 1938 showed that most young women’s deepest desires were to pursue independence, education and success in the public sphere, not to become wives and give birth unendingly. In the stories discussed in this section, female authors gave voice to these desires and the possible consequences of their restriction.

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89 Mariolina Graziosi, “Gender Struggle and the Social Manipulation and Ideological Use of Gender Identity in the Interwar Years” in *Mothers of Invention*, 40.
Section 3: Women's Responses to Propaganda and Welfare Programs
Concerning Peasant Women

While women's inequalities in larger society were a central theme in many of the stories written by women during the reign of Fascism, a smaller but relevant number of them responded to the specific plight of Italy's rural, peasant women. With the awareness some authors possessed of the conditions in which many rural, peasant women lived, they wrote short stories that brought true representations of their lives and issues to the forefront of the national consciousness. In “Man and Death” published in Il Giornale d'Italia in 1925, Marinella Lodi exposes the harmful nature of fascist moralizing disguised by ‘welfare’ campaigns. In “Portrait of a Country Woman,” published in the Corriere della sera in 1926 and thus, read by many urban, upper-class men and women, Grazia Deledda portrays female heads of rural households as wise and capable, negating the notion of peasant women as less capable in childrearing or in need of tutelage in their various responsibilities.

There is not much known about Marinella Lodi; all that is available to us is her work on the pages of newspapers and magazines.90 Her stories, such as “Man and Death,” go into the lives of women in detail – their thoughts and conflicts, for example. Her protagonists display strength and independent will as a desirable female trait, both in urban and rural settings.91 The fact that all information about her life has been stricken entirely from the historical record is noteworthy. Deledda's style and concerns have been established in the previous section of this thesis, but it is relevant to add that as a woman who grew up in rural Sardinia, she

90 Pickering-Iazzi, Unspeakable Women, 2.
91 Ibid. 14.
was able to use her knowledge of this environment and the people she knew there to give life to her characters and powerfully bring their concerns into the national gaze.

During this period, rural women bore the brunt of much of Italy’s hardship. While the regime held them up as a model for the nation, idealizing them as the willing and prolific source of its children, peasant women endured abuse, unequal treatment, and presumptions about their ignorance and lack of capacity to care adequately for their offspring. In fascist rural propaganda, peasant women were robust and healthy, wearing regional costume and surrounded by laughing children. Throughout the years of Mussolini’s rule, they were often paraded through the streets of Italy’s cities in order to advance the ruralization campaign that he carried close to his heart.\(^2\) The regime presented the country with the idea that through welfare and education campaigns, Italy’s peasants had been made healthier, more knowledgeable, happier, and more productive.

In reality, the peasants received little aid – most of it was merely propaganda in disguise. Many programs aimed at rural women offered free poultry, livestock, seeds, and technological education concerning new farming equipment.\(^3\) These handouts, however, were often given only once and were used as the means to draw women in so that they could be indoctrinated and moralized through newspapers and education sessions.\(^4\) Rural unemployment was on the rise in this period,


\(^3\) *Ibid.* 57.

stretching the resources of rural households and casting families into poverty. Of the various programs that were at the disposal of rural families, those programs that did offer aid had low budgets and offered very particularized forms of aid. Although families in rural regions were the most needy and reliant on government aid programs, they often had to turn to their families and larger community networks for assistance.

During Mussolini's rule, the lives of Italy's rural citizens remained difficult; most peasants were poor and suffered from ill health and the lack of a proper diet. Female authors sought to bring these issues to light by exposing the harsh realities of rural life and asserting that peasant women were neither ignorant nor incapable of raising children well without the aid of urban welfare programs or the 'wisdom' of the regime and its ideologues. Lodi's "Man and Death," published in 1925, addresses the theme of peasant women's isolation and the effects of Fascism's moralizing attitude toward them. On the other hand, Grazia Deledda's "Portrait of a Country Woman," published in 1926, is intended to demonstrate to an urban audience and the regime's ideologues that rural women are wise, strong, and capable. Although the two stories seem somewhat contradictory, we will see that, in fact, they work together to denounce the regime's presentation of rural women to the nation and the rest of the world, as well as the negative effects of the regime's moralizing propaganda directed at peasant women.

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95 Willson, Peasant Women, 8.
96 De Grazia, How Fascism Ruled Women, 81.
97 Ibid. 82.
98 Willson, Peasant Women, 8.
In the twentieth century, Italy’s peasant women enjoyed far less freedom than those in urban locations. While city-dwelling women could leave their homes and take active part in Fascist organizations (albeit with very little actual power), women in the country were greatly restricted in their movement and activities. Often, they could not leave the home unless escorted, and then, only to attend church, receive the small amount of schooling allowed to young women, or labor in the fields or on their property. The money they received for their labor invariably went to the male head of the household. Although they were expected to provide extra labor in the fields, in many cases they were not considered individual workers, but merely ‘helpers’ to men. Additionally, according to the application of the ‘Serpieri coefficient,’ women’s labor was worth only sixty percent that of a man. Beyond toiling in the fields as ‘helpers,’ women were also expected to be the caretakers of their homes – they raised rabbits, poultry and dairy-cows, produced handicrafts and tended to vegetable gardens. According to Perry Willson, the work women did was essential to the survival of their families. For example, they produced most of the food the family would consume, including the meat.

In addition to their roles as field laborers, food producers, and keepers of the home, rural women were encouraged to have multiple children and were lauded as the producers of Italy’s soldiers and future colonizers. However, in spite of the regime’s exaltation of rural mothers, social services’ propaganda and education

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100 Ibid. 17.
101 Ibid. 16.
102 Ibid. 17-18.
103 Ibid. 12.
efforts created an air of doubt about their inherent fitness as caretakers.\textsuperscript{104} Peasant women's endless labor made the care of multiple children a difficult task at best.\textsuperscript{105} Fascist programs failed to alleviate the problems of rural women because more funding and emphasis was placed on moralizing and propaganda, rather than on lasting medical or economic assistance.

Especially problematic for rural women was the method by which they were organized into the party; the regime gave the \textit{Fasci Femminili} the responsibility to organize and educate rural women, who were members of a much larger organization called the \textit{Massaie Rurali}.\textsuperscript{106} In 1920, the first female section of the PNF was founded; it and all of its subsequently established branches were dubbed the \textit{Fasci Femminili}. The \textit{Fasci Femminili} remained overwhelmingly urban and upper-middle class throughout their existence.\textsuperscript{107} In 1929, the \textit{Fasci Femminili} had about 100,000 members, and this figure eventually climbed to about 750,000 by the outbreak of the Second World War.\textsuperscript{108} Although they held virtually no political power and lacked the ability to make decisions, their membership in the organization gave urban women the ability to leave their homes and be active in social welfare programs. In the late 1920's and early 1930's, the \textit{Fasci Femminili} implemented welfare programs for rural women, a move which asserted a hierarchy by which rural women had something to gain from the 'wisdom' of urban women.

\textsuperscript{104} De Grazia, \textit{How Fascism Ruled Women}, 60, 73.  
\textsuperscript{105} Poverty and ill health led to high rates of infant mortality in rural areas. Willson, \textit{Peasant Women}, 17.  
\textsuperscript{106} \textit{Ibid.} 68.  
\textsuperscript{107} \textit{Ibid.} 21-22.  
\textsuperscript{108} \textit{Ibid.} 22.
many of whom had never stepped foot on farmland. Effectively, by the eve of the Second World War, 750,000 urban, middle or upper class ladies were instructing almost 3 million rural peasant women about childcare, farming techniques, and taking care of their homes, regardless of the fact that many of the former resisted having children of their own and held no knowledge of farm life.**

**Isolation and Hardship in Rural Italy: Marinella Lodi’s “Man and Death”**

In Lodi’s “Man and Death,” published in 1925, the narrator is a young woman living in an isolated village. Given the smaller amounts of freedom afforded to country-dwelling girls, Lodi begins the character’s narration with an account of her restricted movements and, as a result, lack of knowledge: “I didn’t go to school and went out very rarely. Instead I studied with a priest. I had hostile ideas about life [...] I had very vague ideas about everything, but there were two things I knew absolutely nothing about – men and death.”** With these first few lines, Lodi establishes that the religious and social isolation young women experienced in rural environments left them unprepared for encounters with men.

One summer, the young girl’s father’s cousin comes to visit with her husband, and the girl spends a lot of time with the woman – the house in which they stayed is one of the few places she is permitted to visit. When she beholds the behavior of the older man toward his wife, the young girl feels no longing for a husband of her own. Rather, she feels bewildered and repulsed: “Old hook-nose would nibble at her arms and say, looking at her and me with two bright little eyes, ‘You smell so good Maria!”

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110 *Ibid*, 68.
You smell like fruit!’ I couldn’t believe Maria would let him do that, and actually nestle her whole body against him like a hen.”\textsuperscript{112} As a result of her lack of knowledge, the young girl misinterprets the attitude of the man toward her. When her cousin’s father dies and the woman is in a different room of the house, preoccupied by her grief, the man takes the opportunity to sexually assault the protagonist, who offers the following account of the event:

The painful astonishment I felt turned to indignation and fear when I was forced to realize that he was touching me deliberately. I trembled and blushed, ashamed of myself and of him; my only instinct was to move away, but I couldn’t [...] What did he want, what was he doing, and why, then, did he continue to sigh? I didn’t dare look at him because I didn’t know what I would now find in those eyes of his, eyes I’d never really looked into.\textsuperscript{113}

Because the protagonist is ignorant of men, she finds it hard to understand that he is taking advantage of her. Finally, she gathers her strength and pushes away from him, fleeing into the room in which the dead man is awaiting burial. Lodi’s narrator concludes the story as follows: “When I won back my solitude, I became peaceful again, but I was no longer unknowing, and I had ideas about life that were even more hostile and clear. I’d come to know man and death, and had immediately preferred the latter.”\textsuperscript{114} Although the man is obviously not without blame – Lodi makes her opinion of assault clear with her portrayal of the man as hook-nosed, old, fat and ugly – with this story, the author also sends a clear message about young women’s isolation and lack of social education. That this story appeared in a widely read national new source is important – for a number of urban readers whose knowledge of rural life was limited to Fascist propaganda and idealization, this

\textsuperscript{112} Pickering-Iazzi, \textit{Unspeakable Women}, 34.
\textsuperscript{113} \textit{Ibid.} 35.
\textsuperscript{114} \textit{Ibid.} 37.
devastating portrayal of isolation and sexual assault must have been shocking and revealing.

Lodi's story can be seen as a direct response to the regime's lack of sensitivity to rural women's concerns and detrimental isolation. Although the regime claimed to understand and act to assuage women's suffering - creating happy, healthy women in the countryside - leaving welfare programs in the hands of the misguided and virtually powerless Fasci Femminili led to moralizing and propaganda, rather than legitimate aid. While urban women enjoyed greater access to birth control and knowledge about sexual activity, under male fascist leadership, the very same women were directed to adopt a moralist approach to rural welfare programs.¹¹⁵ For example, the regime was disturbed by the migratory nature of female rice workers who slept away from home in dormitories and were in other ways free of restraints.¹¹⁶ As a result, donne fasciste were given the task of bringing the group under control; they inspected dormitories and aimed to shape the workers' moral and political behavior by screening propaganda films, encouraging them to attend mass regularly, implementing a curfew and provide morally acceptable activities for them that would keep them away from socializing with young men.¹¹⁷ Although this kept them from assault and abuse while they were with the Fasci Femminili, it also left them ignorant of men's intentions. In the 1930's, the regime cast its net more widely, attempting to moralize and insulate

¹¹⁵ De Grazia, How Fascism Ruled Women, 52.
¹¹⁶ Willson, Peasant Women, 23.
¹¹⁷ Ibid. 24.
rural women en masse, ensuring their loyalty to the fascist cause of proper
motherhood in marriage.118

"Man and Death" is also a story that contradicts the regime’s presentation of
rural women’s lives as picturesque, simple, and happy. As previously mentioned,
propaganda showed the nation portraits of smiling, laughing rural women,
surrounded by children in beautiful, pastoral settings. Lodi demonstrates that in
reality, the isolation and solitary nature of rural life could be dangerous for a young
woman; it did not necessarily bring simplicity or happiness. Lodi was not the only
author to address this issue. In Paola Drigo’s novel, Maria Zef, published in 1936,
the author commented on the tragic nature of young women’s isolation.119 The
novel is about a young girl, Maria, whose mother is getting older and descending
more and more into herself in unhappiness. The young girl does not understand
what has caused such unhappiness until her mother dies and she is left alone with
her deceased father’s brother and her younger sister. When her uncle begins
brutally raping her, she realizes that this is the fate her mother had succumbed to.
She also realizes with horror that her young sister will probably be next in line to
receive this treatment. Because the small family lives in a very isolated area in the
mountains and is very poor, it would have been impossible for the two young girls
to escape. The desperation and terror that runs through the length of the novel is
the stark opposite of the sunny, cheerful propaganda images the regime used to
glorify the lives of rural peasantry.

118 Willson, Peasant Women, 24-25.
119 Paola Drigo, Maria Zef, trans. Blossom Steinberg Kirschenbaum (University of
Nebraska Press, 1989).
Strong, Wise Peasant Mothers: Grazia Deledda’s ‘Portrait of a Country Woman’

From the title alone, it can be seen that with ‘Portrait of a Country Woman,’ published in 1926, Deledda set out to give urban citizens a clearer picture of the life of a peasant woman. From the outset, the narrator establishes that Annalena Bilsini is the head of her household: “The Bilsini family was a large one, with five children, their widowed mother, and a brother of hers, who called himself the head of the house even though he was half-paralyzed, and didn’t have a cent of his own.” The events of the story occur over the course of a journey to a piece of farmland the Bilsini family has leased for a period of nine years; it had lain dormant for many more years and “was the only place where their youthful vitality and strength could be harnessed and converted into gold.” Annalena’s children and their families would work the land together, but first they had to carry all of their belongings across the country: “Annalena Bilsini drove the buggy, while keeping a constant eye on everything, to see that it moved along in an orderly fashion.” Deledda makes it clear in this opening passage that in the absence of her deceased husband, Annalena is taking capable and authoritative charge of her extended family’s wellbeing.

Further in the story, Deledda establishes that beyond being a strong authority figure for her family, Annalena also deeply loves them. During the journey, she contemplates the possible death of her second-oldest son, Pietro, in warfare and wishes he would come back home, regardless of his shortcomings:

120 Pickering-lazzi, Unspakable Women, 68.
121 Ibid.
122 Ibid. 69.
“Dear me! I’m the only one who wishes he would come back home. My heart is with you, Pietro, because you’re the weakness in my life, the wound that needs to be cared for, dear Pietro, though you’re so far away.” Although Annalena feels that Pietro is the child she has lost, the reader is reassured that she has raised all of her children with attention, firmness and no lack of love.

At another point in the journey, Annalena lets her mind wander, thinking about her lifelong desire to escape the country and her loveless marriage:

Her desire to go far away, to places she had never been before, surely sprang from the fact that she had never experienced or gotten any pleasure from love. Because her marriage was one of convenience, to a man who was already old, the only thing she had known of married life was the pain and joy of motherhood. So a sting of desire, the germ of an infectious sadness, flowed in her blood, without her even knowing it. But her love for her children, her ambition to see them rich and happy one day, filled the emptiness in her life.

Deledda’s character accepts the lot given to her in life – she toils endlessly to make her family happy and healthy. However, she desires more for her children and their children, believing in progress and betterment. Although the opportunity to do something different with her life has passed, she rebels against the attitude of the men in her family, who take the stance that life will take you where it wants to, regardless of the speed with which you move: “That’s not so! You get there late when you go slowly! And since we haven’t arrived where we’re going yet, Dioniso, let’s at least give them the chance to get there.” Annalena speaks these words as she watches her two young grandchildren speeding ahead in the road on their bicycles, but is thinking about her uncles’ lack of achievement that had destroyed

123 Pickering-lazzi, Unspeakable Women, 70.
124 Ibid. 71.
125 Ibid. 72.
their family's wealth. She "remember[s] how our family went to ruin because of our uncles, who loafed around and gave in to all their weaknesses."\textsuperscript{126} The story continues with a reminder that Annalena herself, however, will allow none of the same weakness in her children or grandchildren – when her two grandchildren begin bickering in the back of the wagon, she halts the buggy, gets off her seat and whips them, scolding their father, who is also her son: "'Now, you ought to get the same treatment, for not teaching your children how to behave,' she yelled at the young father, who couldn't believe his eyes."\textsuperscript{127} Annalena, unlike her brother or, evidently, her son, believes strongly in discipline and family cooperation. When her brother mocks her action and asserts that there will be argument between the two boys during their entire lifetimes, she retorts: "'Why should there be? Ever since they were little, my children have always gotten along. That's what I taught them to do, and that's how it has to be. There's strength in unity!'"\textsuperscript{128} In this exchange, Deledda portrays Annalena as the cohesive force in her family.

Finally, the family reaches their new home. Annalena's first action is to pray to the small figure of the Madonna that she finds there: "'I am here now,' she told the small Madonna, winking her left eye, as if speaking with an old acquaintance, 'so protect my soul, and make my family prosper.'"\textsuperscript{129} In this way, Deledda ends the story with a decisive action – as the head of the new household, Annalena Bilsini prays for prosperity and the happiness of her extended family.

\textsuperscript{126} Pickering-Iazzi, \textit{Unspeakable Women}, 70.
\textsuperscript{127} \textit{Ibid.} 72.
\textsuperscript{128} \textit{Ibid.} 73.
\textsuperscript{129} \textit{Ibid.}
In “Portrait of a Country Woman,” Deledda creates a powerful, authoritative and wise matriarch who is capable of protecting and overseeing a number of people without meaningful input from a man or, more importantly, the regime. Although the Bilsini family struggles with money, Annalena believes hard work and discipline will save them. Lower class, rural women were generally more in need of fascist welfare programs, which made them an easy target of their propaganda campaigns, which were often disguised as welfare. With this story and its title, Deledda asserted that peasant women were neither immoral nor intrinsically in need of education about childcare or responsibility. Rather, by characterizing the average ‘country woman’ as strong, capable, loving, and willing to sacrifice her own happiness for the greater good of her family, she seeks to impress upon urban readers, and maybe the Fasci Femminili, that moralizing propaganda meant to make women more loyal and which assumed that rural women were ignorant or weak was misguided.

Lodi’s “Man and Death” and Deledda’s “Portrait of a Country Woman” come to different conclusions – the former sought to expose the harsh realities of rural life and the detrimental nature of keeping women ignorant through moralizing propaganda and the isolation, while the latter asserted that rural women were strong, capable and certainly not ignorant. The two stories, however, complement each other as responses to urban and government attitudes toward and portrayals of rural women’s lives. “Man and Death” reveals that the image of rural women urban citizens were receiving was not real while Deledda’s “Portrait of a Country Woman” seeks to educate urban citizens about the strong character and capabilities of rural women. When taken together, these two stories establish that what rural
women who were often poor and isolated needed was not moralizing propaganda or the ‘wisdom’ or the *Fasci Femminili*. Rather, welfare programs that were meant to educate and indoctrinate rural women but instead were isolating and kept young women ignorant harmed many who were coming into adulthood under the reign of Fascism.
Section 4: Women Responding to Fascism’s Emphasis on a Collective Will and Identity

One of Fascism’s central ideological components was the importance of a collective national identity and the need to serve the interests of the nation to the exclusion of pursuing individual goals. The regime discouraged the cultivation of individual identities and wills. Italian elementary and secondary schools were given the mission of imparting these messages to both young men and women. The regime defined feminine identity particularly strictly – women should meekly accept their roles as wives and mothers to serve the best interests of the entire nation. Although young girls’ education was commonly terminated after elementary school, many girls joined after-school organizations such as the Piccole Italiane and the Giovani Italiane, wherein they were further indoctrinated with this message and barraged with images of the ‘New Woman.’ In several stories, women authors addressed the theme of women’s individual wills and identities versus the will of the state. While Ada Negri’s “The Captain” is the most direct and focused of the stories that address this theme, stories that were discussed previously in this thesis – Rimini’s “A Boy” and Deledda’s “Portrait of a Country Woman” – also contain elements of this theme.

In “The Captain,” published in the Corriere della sera in 1931, Ada Negri criticizes Fascist education for young people. Specifically, she condemns the process by which young women had been made to conform to the will of the regime by suppressing their personalities and desires in favor of meekness and obedience. By 1931, the regime had implemented several laws and created several organizations to ensure that Fascist education and indoctrination were uniform across the
country. In 1926, law 2247 established the ONB (Opera Nazionale Balilla), whose task was to create a uniform mixture of physical and moral education for Italian minors in order to mould them according to the principles of the regime.\textsuperscript{130} While the ONB controlled the academic school day, originally the non-academic indoctrination of young girls was left in the hands of the Fasci Femminili. In 1926, this women's body established three new after-school organizations for young women: the Piccole Italiane (for girls aged 8-14), the Giovani Italiane (for girls aged 14-18), and the Giovani Fasciste (for young people of both genders, aged 18-21).\textsuperscript{131} These organizations rapidly gained members. In 1926, the year of their founding, the Piccole Italiane had 35,000 members. Only one year later, this number had risen to 128,000. By 1929, the organization boasted 364,300 members, making the combined membership of the Piccole Italiane and Giovani Italiane 741,302 by 1931, the year in which Negri's "The Captain" appeared on the third page of the Corriere della sera.\textsuperscript{132}

When a young girl joined one of these groups, she had to swear the following oath: "In the name of God and Italy, I swear to carry out the orders of the Duce and to serve the cause of the Fascist revolution with all my strength, and, if necessary, with my blood."\textsuperscript{133} Considering the Fascist conception of women's role in society, in practice this oath committed a young woman to a life of subservience and childbirth. The evidence for this can be seen in the associations' rulebook. According to Article 4, young girls were to be kept from any "tendency not suitable to female nature and

\textsuperscript{130} Gori, Italian Fascism and the Female Body, 96-97.
\textsuperscript{131} Ibid. 99.
\textsuperscript{132} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{133} Ibid.103.
bodies," especially physical competition.\textsuperscript{134} Additionally, Article 5 warned, "in moral, political, civil and religious education special attention must be paid to infusing a deep sense of duty and responsibility, in order to nurture the perfect Fascist woman, conscious of the tasks allotted to her and in spiritual unison with the regime."\textsuperscript{135} Article 7 went on to establish just what these tasks were: "Girls and young women must be prepared to worthily perform their duties as wives and mothers: it is essential for young women to be prepared to organize and manage the household, raise children, and assist their relatives if the need should ever arise."\textsuperscript{136}

To further the goal of uniformity, in 1929, the ONB assumed control over the aforementioned Fascist youth programs and introduced new textbooks into primary and secondary schools.\textsuperscript{137} In the same year, all teachers in these schools were required to swear an oath of allegiance to Fascism; in 1930, this requirement was extended to university professors.\textsuperscript{138} Because the regime had implemented various laws to discourage women from continuing with secondary school or university study, after-school organizations were a main avenue of indoctrination; the ONB's takeover of their administration was an important tactical move.\textsuperscript{139} In order to eradicate the possibility of conflicting moral or social values, the regime abolished all non-Fascist youth groups in 1931. The regime used various methods to strongly encourage continued membership through the three successive Fascist youth

\begin{thebibliography}{139}
\bibitem{134} Gori, \textit{Italian Fascism and the Female Body}, 103.
\bibitem{135} \textit{Ibid.} 104.
\bibitem{136} \textit{Ibid.}
\bibitem{137} \textit{Ibid.} 94, 99.
\bibitem{138} \textit{Ibid.} 94.
\bibitem{139} For example, in 1929 the regime doubled the taxes of female secondary school and university students, \textit{Ibid.} 62.
\end{thebibliography}
groups, with impressive results (as previously seen in the membership numbers for 1931).  


Several of the stories discussed in this thesis address elements of the issue of Fascism's emphasis on uniformity and the collective will over the needs, ambitions and personalities of individual young women. In "A Boy," Pia Rimini reveals that by yielding to the role of mother, women were not necessarily serving a higher purpose. In the opening paragraphs of the story, a young widowed mother reflects on the emptiness of her life. With motherhood as her sole occupation, she feels lazy, bored and useless:

Chasing after memories made her feel lazy. As her mind descended backwards through time, she'd lose her thread of thought and pause in the iridescent margin of a fickle indolence, only to be suddenly surprised at feeling like she was her own enemy, and everyone else's enemy too, angry without knowing why, more irritated by not knowing the reason for it than by that vague sense of uneasiness that kept her teetering between tears and outbursts of anger.  

Rather than feeling pride and accomplishment in the name of the country, she feels anger at her indolence and her own tendency to fill her time with memories of her adolescence. Through conforming to the image of the 'New Woman,' Rimini asserts, women would not necessarily feel fulfilled and proud to serve the reproductive demands of the nation, with no activities that allowed their own identities and personalities to shine through.

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Additionally, the young widowed mother in the story serves the cruel demands and whims of her son, ultimately missing the chance at a happy life. Under the tutelage of educators who were sworn to impart the ideologies of Fascism, the young boy would be conditioned to become the 'New Man' – assertive and in control of his family. Essentially, he would be learning to command his own mother. Throughout the story, the little boy, Pietruccio, gives orders and demands information from both his mother and a serving girl: "'Why did you make me come in?' ... 'Where are you going?' ... 'Why are you running off?' ... 'Let me get by!' ... 'What are you waiting for? Have him come in! ... 'Hurry up! You make everybody wait!'" In Pietruccio's speech, Rimini shows us the beginnings of a commanding Fascist 'New Man,' indoctrinated by the school system.

In Grazia Deledda's *Portrait of a Country Woman*, the author denies the assertion that a woman's disposition as mother and household manager should be meek and yielding. Rather, she presents Annalena Bilsini as the willful and powerful head of a rural household. While asserting herself as the undisputed leader of her family, Annalena is also tender and loving: "It was easy for her to get lost in tender thoughts about her children." This tenderness and her obvious success in raising her children do not conflict with her strength of character and leadership in her family. On the contrary, because Annalena is the head of her family and must attend to its affairs and success, she is served well by her tender feelings toward her children and grandchildren. Not only does she desire economic success for the

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143 Ibid. 70.
family, but she deeply cares about the happiness of each individual that this success would bring.

Ada Negri’s “The Captain” is yet more critical of Fascist education, its stress on uniformity, and the negative effects these had on young women. Of the stories used to illustrate this thesis, it is the most direct and focused criticism of a set of Fascist actions. The narrator tells the story of a little girl whom she knows only as ‘The Captain’ because she is the “youngest, and often the only girl in a bunch of boys who would get back from school just dying to yell, raise a ruckus, roughhouse, and throw themselves into the wildest games.” The young girl was not just a part of this group; despite her size and gender, she was their undisputed leader: “Everyone obeyed her. You could tell at a glance. Not only that, but I think all of them were actually a bit afraid of her.” Under the rule of a regime wherein dominance was decidedly considered an unfeminine trait, this young girl’s assertive nature was assuredly startling. The narrator, though, approves of the young girl’s power and grace. She describes the young girl’s features – her hair and eyes, her freckles and upturned nose, her high cheekbones and full lips – as “powerfully vibrant,” “coarsely beautiful” and “more mature than her age.” The energetic and vibrant nature of the little girl is represented as a thing to be cherished; the narrator thinks of her fondly and theorizes that she has a nearly limitless future.

Likewise, the narrator imagines her as the dominant actor in romantic relationships: “Maybe, just as mysterious and romantic, the destiny that awaited

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145 Ibid.
146 Ibid. 28-29.
her; bizarre events and bizarre love affairs, in which she would have a firm hand and strong advantage, as she now had in games with her playmates. She would reveal and assert a dominating femininity and an intelligent, bold force of will.” The narrator enjoys imagining the girl’s future as a woman thoroughly in opposition to the definition of the ‘New Woman,’ who would most certainly refrain from affairs and would have assertive, intelligent traits stamped out of her.

That this conception of the girl’s future so deeply opposes Fascist definitions of proper femininity is not a coincidence. As an adult observer, the narrator (whose perspective likely represents Negri’s own) would have grown up during the women’s movement and probably nurtured hopes of Fascism asserting itself as a pro-feminist regime. Under a different, more democratic government, the narrator’s vision of the little girl’s future may have come true: “Theater? Dance? The movies? Who knew.” It is obvious, however, that under Fascism, the girl would probably have no such future. With complete government control of education and after-school activities, young women such as ‘the Captain’ became “older, bridled, [and] weakened” over time. With the passing of several years, the narrator observes that ‘the Captain’ has become a much-diminished version of herself:

It was her and yet not her. I could only tell who she was by her profile and her cheekbones, and by a hard expression of her mouth that still looked the same. Everything else about her had changed or disappeared [...] With slightly broad shoulders, she looked awkward in her brown overcoat, leaving her high forehead bare. Her freckles stood out more on her pale, withdrawn face; her eyes stared at some vague spot, indifferent and distracted. Her and yet not her.150

147 Pickering-Iazzi, Unspeakable Women, 30.
148 Ibid.
149 Ibid. 31.
150 Ibid.
Although she can see the same old hardness in the girl's look, the narrator is forced to conclude that her visions of the girl's future have been made impossible. Her dominating personality has been suppressed: "Commanding the rowdy kids' maneuvers on the street? Never in my wildest dreams. And what of her need to dominate, her inborn magnetism that had led me to imagine her becoming an actress, a dancer, a movie star? Nonsense! Out of the question!"\(^\text{151}\) According to Negri's narrator, Fascism's indoctrination and educational control had been enough to force the young girl into denying her own innate characteristics. Her own individual identity had been irreversibly replaced by the meek, indifferent nature of Fascism's 'New Woman.'

As a closing remark, the narrator reflects on the ubiquity of this fate for Italian girls: "The same old thing, the same wheel turns for so many poor, young girls, and it only stops the day when you're no longer anyone at all. Everything grows dull, becomes deadened, and adapts to necessity. Farewell, captain."\(^\text{152}\) This is an unbelievably pointed indictment of the regime's conditioning of modern Italian women in schools and after-school programs. With "The Captain," Negri criticizes Fascism's suppression of ambition, personality and individuality through the regime's campaign to create uniform female citizens answerable only to the needs of the nation – namely, subservience and willingness to surrender their bodies and minds to the service of the country and the task of creating lives.

\(^{152}\) *Ibid.*
In many ways, the effort to uniformly indoctrinate young Italian women epitomizes the regime's approach to women's gender roles. Although the generation of women that had lived through the women's movement experienced Fascism as a refusal of the values they had come to cherish and the goals they had hoped to achieve, girls such as the one that Negri's narrator knows as 'the Captain' were the product of a Fascist regime. In 1926, with 'Portrait of a Country Woman' Deledda demonstrated that women with powerful, assertive personalities were integral to rural society, especially in families where strong male leadership was lacking. As Fascist propaganda and policy-making targeted young girls and women in the late 1920's, however, stories such as 'The Captain' and 'A Boy' (published in 1931 and 1933, respectively) highlighted the negative outcome of this indoctrination. The woman that the little 'Captain' would become could not easily be seen in roles such as Annalena Bilsini's.

Yet, there were obviously forces at work that made young women ambitious and eager to resist the Fascist definition of their role to play in both the nation's future and their own destinies. As mentioned earlier in this thesis, it is significant that in surveys conducted in 1938, the majority of young women expressed the desire to be independent, pursue higher education, and learn a profession. Despite the disturbing trends remarked upon by Negri and Rimini in their stories, Italian parents' upbringings and other outside forces, such as the influence of surviving organizations that supported women's betterment, were allowing many young women to retain their individual desires and hopes for a future not limited to motherhood and a life in the domestic sphere.
Conclusion:

Through the 'terza pagina,' Italian authors under Mussolini's regime were able to do a remarkable thing – document the attitudes, questions and concerns of Italian citizens, which were clearly not in keeping with the images of social and economic harmony the government sought to present to its people and the world. The cultural pages of Italy's newspapers were the only highly visible and widespread forums in which this criticism could be voiced and heard. Many Italian families were quietly leading lives that directly contradicted government directives to have many children and keep women in the domestic sphere. Meanwhile, propaganda, official policies concerning marriage, procreation and women’s roles, as well as the administration of children's schools and after-school programs reproduced pictures of the 'New Man,' 'New Woman,' and the children who would one day assume these identities.

This thesis has addressed women's stories that speak to the themes of marriage and motherhood, the realities of rural life, and individual versus collective identities in the regime's conceptions of women's roles in the state. Although none of the stories directly mention events, specific policies or Mussolini, they are clearly responses to and criticisms of the aforementioned. In section 2, I looked at stories that addressed women's concerns with the regime's policies regarding marriage and motherhood as women's destiny. In 1926, Deledda's "Baptisms" looked at the institution of traditional Italian marriage and its negative effects on families. The author reflects on the long and unbroken history of women's subservience in marriage and in family life. A year after Mussolini's declaration of dictatorship, this
story established that the fascist regime was more of the same in regards to the limitations and restrictions in women's lives. Seven years later in 1933, Pia Rimini reminded readers that women were becoming yet more subservient under the policies of Mussolini's regime with "A Boy," in which a young widowed mother is subject to the desires of her cruel, young son.

While those two stories spoke to women's subservience to men in the home, Guglielminetti's "Sensitivity," Negri's "Woman With a Little Girl," and Astaldi's "Fog" questioned the inherent nature of women's roles as wives and mothers. Further, they tested the limits of these roles, seeking to establish women as intelligent and valuable beyond their reproductive capabilities. "Sensitivity" criticizes the regime's attitude that women are not suited to intellectual activities and it's discounting of the value of their personalities, characters and ambitions. Guglielminetti's female character expressed the desires of many young Italian women during this period. More specifically, the story satirized attacks on female authors who were primary targets for criticism concerning their public and intellectual actions. "Woman With a Little Girl" delves into the life of an older woman who had been limited to domestic duties and exposes the emptiness of that life. The story makes the statement that, for many women, motherhood itself is not sufficient to achieve fulfillment and happiness in life. Even more compelling is "Fog," in which Astaldi illustrates the assertion that some women are not meant for marriage and reproduction at all with the gruesome death of a woman straining to achieve this goal when continually encouraged to do so. These three stories give us a picture of
women's concerns about the definitions and limitations of their roles in modern Italy, especially under the fascist regime.

Female authors also sought to bring the plight of Italy's rural, peasant women to light. During this period, rural women experienced many of Italy's hardships. They endured abuse, unequal treatment, and presumptions about their ignorance and lack of ability to adequately care for their children that was coupled with reform programs that actually kept them ignorant, especially about sexuality and reproduction. Section 3 discussed two stories that looked at both sides of this coin. Deledda's "Portrait of a Country Woman" portrayed rural women as strong and wise in order to present urban readers with what she saw as a true picture of the characters of such women. Deledda constructs a character named Annalena Bilsini and makes her the undisputed head of a large household. She rules the house with an iron fist that relaxes into a compassionate enfolding arm when necessary. The author makes the case that rural women were knowledgeable and well suited to their roles as mothers and organizers of entire households because of the hardships they faced. Her story can be seen as a message to urban readers, especially the members of the Fasci Femminili who were responsible for the administration of rural welfare programs aimed at women – programs which were approached from the standpoint that rural women were in need of social control and propagandizing, rather than genuine monetary or resource-based aid.

With "Man and Death," Lodi looks at the effects these programs and church education in rural areas were having on younger women who may have been without a role model such as Deledda's Annalena Bilsini. The social and physical
isolation of the young character in "Man and Death" leaves her open to sexual abuse by a cousin's older husband. Her institutionalized ignorance of the world of men, which was one of the main approaches of women's rural welfare programs, failed her in a very important time of need. This story is a direct response to welfare programs' lack of sensitivity to women's actual concerns and hardships in favor of 'purity' and proper conduct upheld by the regime. Though these stories obviously come to vastly different conclusions – the former asserts that rural women were capable of taking care of themselves by virtue of the hardships and lifestyle they regularly endured while the latter criticizes the Fasci Femminili and the regime for idealizing rural women and failing to aid them properly, thus leaving them ignorant and unsafe – they complement each other. Deledda's character is the head of a poor family. Though she is resilient, intelligent and caring, she lacks the resources to ensure success and basic quality of life for her family. Due to the focus of rural welfare programs on moralizing, Annalena Bilsini would probably never really receive the aid she needed. Meanwhile, the young character in "Man and Death" is a recipient of the 'aid' of these programs and as a result, lacks the tools to protect herself from an assault. In this way, female authors responded to the specific plight of rural women concerning their image in the hearts and minds of urban citizens and the regime.

Finally, section 4 took a look at three stories that addressed the issue of women's identity in relation to their individual wills and the will of the state, as well as the state's emphasis on a collective identity and obligation to serve the needs of the state. Negri's "The Captain," the most boldly direct in purpose of the eight
stories discussed in this thesis, criticized Fascist education and propaganda for young people. Using the example of a young girl whose dominant and captivating nature is extinguished by the education system, she condemns the regime's suppression of young people's personalities and characters, especially young women, who were encouraged to become meek and complacent, replacing any individual aspirations they may have with the obligation to become wives and mothers. Rimini's "A Boy" explores the role of motherhood and its relation to the fulfillment of a national duty – rather than feeling fulfilled and accomplished, the young mother in the story feels lazy, bored and useless. With her empty time, she laments the lack of focus and purpose in her life. Additionally, she serves the cruel will of her young son, taught in the fascist education system to control his family in preparation for his role as the fascist 'New Man.' In Deledda's "Portrait of a Country Woman," the author asserts that a female head of a rural household must not be meek and yielding, but assertive and strong-willed. In addition, to serve her children and grandchildren most effectively, she must care for their happiness and success on an individual base. She does not take the will of the nation into account; her economic troubles and the hardships of her family members' lives do not allow her to do so.

These stories exposed the motivations behind women's choices; for the most part, they were fairly unconcerned about the will of the nation. Rather, they attended to their needs and individual desires, and when they did not, they led unhappy, unfulfilling lives. A story like "The Captain," however, insisted that fascist education and after-school programs were having a decidedly negative impact on
the generation of girls who were spending their childhood under its influence. This statement made by Ada Negri is astoundingly pointed.

Negri's story and the others addressed in this thesis are unusual given the various restrictions on feminism and women's cultural production under Fascism. In 1926, after Grazia Deledda met Mussolini and famously declared that art has no politics when asked to write a piece for the regime, the dictator forbade party members to purchase her work. Her novels and collections of short stories were banned from bookstores.\textsuperscript{153} Only on the third page could the public regularly avail themselves of her writing. In 1935, the \textit{Federazione Nazionale Laureate e Diplomate} that had been founded in 1920 to support women's intellectual pursuits was denounced for being too involved in feminist movements around the world and forced to cease its activities.\textsuperscript{154} In 1938, novelist Alba Cespedes' \textit{Nessuno torna indietro} (Responsibility Comes Back) slammed the regime's pro-natality campaigns, encouraging women to remain unmarried and deny the state the right to use them as vehicles for reproduction and population growth. In response, the regime heavily censored her material and decried her novel as contrary to fascist ideals and the agenda of the nation.\textsuperscript{155}

Ultimately, nowhere were women's issues as widely visible as in the \textit{Corriere della sera} or \textit{Il Giornale d'Italia}. For example, while Ada Negri's novel, \textit{Morningstar}, was successful – it sold 60,000 copies between 1921 and 1943 – her stories reached a daily audience of 600,000 in the \textit{Corriere}, while authors who contributed to \textit{Il

\textsuperscript{153} Jan Kozma, "Deledda: A Life" in \textit{The Challenge of Modernity}, 30.
\textsuperscript{154} Gori, \textit{Italian Fascism and the Female Body}, 65.
\textsuperscript{155} Despite the banning of de Cespedes' work, her novel \textit{There's No Turning Back} became a bestseller. Pickering-Iazzi, \textit{Mothers of Invention}, xix.
*Giornale* reached about 130,000 readers a day. On the cultural pages of Italy's major newspapers, short stories allowed women a measure of self-representation and the ability to reach out to the population through a major media source. This level of visibility is unparalleled by the small number of women who were able to make feminist statements and question fascism in other ways. These short stories counter recent historical arguments that Italian women either perpetuated the image of the 'New Woman' or failed to question the regime's policies and ideology. Rather, one can draw strong and direct connections between written expressions of women's attitudes toward the regime and the choices many women and families made in their daily lives.

The women who contributed short stories to Italy's newspapers left a valuable legacy behind, one that is rich in detail and illustrates the issues and concerns of Italy's women under Fascism. However, it is important to understand that their work is not automatically translatable into an assumption of widespread and open resistance. Throughout Mussolini's reign, Italian women were subjugated by a fascist regime that promoted ideas of male superiority. Any desires and aspirations that did not conform to the image of the 'New Woman' were discouraged and even legally outlawed. While many women continued to enter the labor force in order to help support their families during this period, they were underpaid, overworked, and also expected to raise many children. This is not to say that women did not make advances in this period; women such as Grazia Deledda and her peers are excellent examples of the kind of success and publicity that some

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women achieved. For many women, though, progress did not come until the decade after the Second World War. There was much that women authors' short stories could not do for women under the rule of Fascism. They do, however, illustrate the significant ways in which women were constantly questioning and criticizing their legal and social statuses at this time. Stories like Ada Negri's "The Captain" lament what her generation saw as the destruction of a generation of young women who matured under Fascist rule. Nonetheless, through constant exposure to stories that affirmed their desires and aspirations, young women were able to keep their hope and drive, an outcome that is far from insignificant.
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