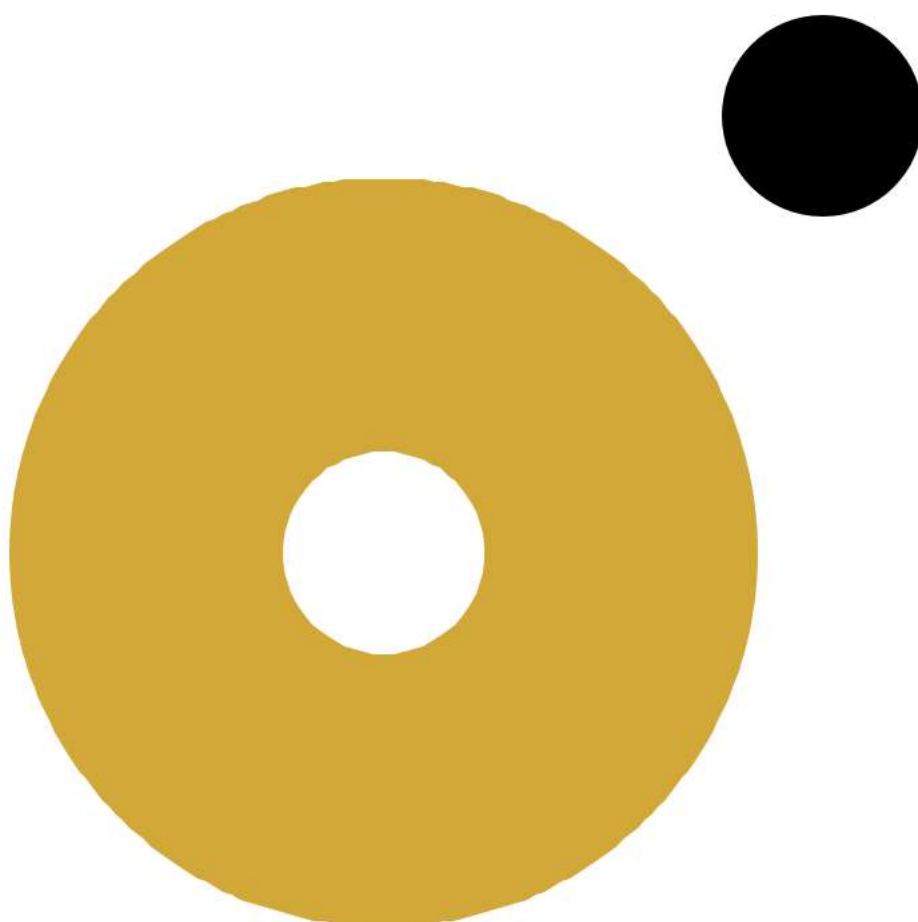


MEMORIA **SCOLASTICA**



The School and Its Many Pasts

edited by Juri Meda, Lucia Paciaroni and Roberto Sani



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Portraits of Headmasters and Headmistresses. How is School Authority Depicted in Children's Literature?

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1. *About the origin of school stories and the representation of school authority*

Stories with major school settings or backdrops to the lives of characters are deeply intertwined with the history of children's literature and constitute a significant legacy. In the 19th century, an interesting repertoire of boys' and girls' school stories began to emerge and received growing interest from the publishing market. For instance, in the 1800s and 1900s, thousands of British school stories were published¹. These stories have «long suffered from critical dismissal and public derision and it is only recently that their influence and merits have begun to be re-evaluated»². Even though many of these narratives were undoubtedly repetitive in plot structure, and had stereotyped characters and inauthentic adult-driving values, they also offered stimulating insights into the world of school, and played a significant role in the children's book literary, social, cultural, and political tradition³. The reason may be bound up with the fact that

[a] school story offers a setting in which young people are thrown together and in which relationships between older and younger children, between members of the peer group and between children and adults can be explored. Events and relationships can be imbued with an air of excitement and the possibilities for humour are never far away. 'Through reading an entertaining story, children can 'test the water', learn how people may react in specific situations and see what lies ahead'⁴.

Remarkable traditional examples of these stories are Sarah Fielding's *The Governess* (1749), Charles and Mary Lamb's *Mrs Leicester's School* (1808), Harriet Martineau's *The*

¹ Historical, theoretical and thematic analysis of this genre is to be found in works: R.J. Kirkpatrick, *The Encyclopedia of Boys' School Stories*, Burlington (VT), Ashgate Publishing Company, 2000; S. Sims, H. Clare (edd.), *The Encyclopedia of Girls' School Stories*, Burlington (VT), Ashgate Publishing Company, 2000; U. Pesold, *The Other in the School Stories: A Phenomenon in British Children's Literature*, Leiden, Brill Rodopi, 2017.

² R. Auchmuty, *Preface*, in Sims, Clare, *The Encyclopedia of Girls' School Stories*, cit., p. VII.

³ S. Ray, *School Stories*, in P. Hunt (ed.), *International Companion Encyclopedia of Children's Literature*, London and New York, Routledge, 2004, vol. I, pp. 467-480; M. Reimer, *Traditions of the school story*, in M.O. Grenby, A. Immel (edd.), *The Cambridge Companion to Children's Literature*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009.

⁴ Ray, *School Stories*, cit., p. 467.

Crofton Boys (1841) and Thomas Hughes's *Tom Brown's Schooldays* (1857), a novel that «helped to mark the transition from what has been called the Age of Didacticism to the Golden Age of children's literature in English»⁵. The impact of Tom Brown and his boys' boarding school on the children's school story tradition was enormous. The novel is about Tom, a student at Rugby School, who is mistreated by school bully Flashman before finally succeeding in overcoming his troubles and difficulties. In the novel, a crucial role is played by the headmaster of Rugby School, Thomas Arnold (1795-1842), a real educator whose tenure (1828-1842) saw Rugby become a top public school and profoundly influenced public school education in England. In the novel Hughes paid homage to Arnold by progressively pushing his protagonist, Tom, to adopt his headmaster's ideas and moral values. The novel is a milestone in the school story literary microcosm and influenced hundreds of successive children's books, both past and present, like J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter series, for instance. Interestingly, a number of scholars⁶ have been attracted by the intriguing parallels between the school adventures of Tom Brown and those of Harry Potter, such as ideological and organizational structure (students' empowerment, older students as "prefects", intellectual skills linked to moral awareness, sport, ecc.) and on the role played by school relationships (friends and bullies). School authority has also been examined. A comparative analysis of the headmasters in the two school stories – Doctor Arnold at Rugby and Albus Dumbledore at Hogwarts – shows that the two headmasters have many characteristics in common:

Both Hughes and Rowling also stress the important ties between the hero and the headmaster, an adult mentor who helps the hero develop into a functioning, useful young man of good character. [...] both the Doctor and Albus Dumbledore are adults our heroes come to trust and value, and who in turn support, protect, and guide the boys. They are portrayed as moral, fair, kind, and unusual men who at times face criticism from within and without but always have the best interests of their school at heart. [...] These two boarding school novels do not simply dismiss all adults or see them as impediments, but emphasize the necessity of strong, wise adult mentoring to the development of the students⁷.

Similarities to the 19th English language school stories' portrayal of school authority is also to be found in some classic Italian children's novels, such as characters in *Cuore*, [The Heart of a Boy] (1886), by Edmondo de Amicis, a fictional school diary of a young boy attending a 19th-century Turin school which describes the achievements, setbacks, pleasures and pains of a year at school and its social and cultural community life, or in *Romanzo di un Maestro* [Novel by a Teacher], published in 1890 by the same author, which offers a representation of the miserable conditions in which Italian teachers lived

⁵ B.L. Clark, *Regendering the School Story: Sassy Sissies and Tattling Tomboys*, New York-London, Routledge, 1996, p. 10.

⁶ P. Pinsent, *The education of a Wizard: Harry Potter and His Predecessors*, in L.A. Whited (ed.), *The Ivory Tower and Harry Potter: Perspectives in a Literary Phenomenon*, Columbia, University of Missouri Press, 2002, pp. 27-50; D.K. Steege, *Harry Potter, Tom Brown and the British School Story. Lost in Transit?*, in L.A. Whited (ed.) *The Ivory Tower and Harry Potter: Perspectives in a Literary Phenomenon*, Columbia, University of Missouri Press, 2002, pp. 140-156.

⁷ Steege, *Harry Potter, Tom Brown and the British School Story. Lost in Transit?*, cit., pp. 150-151.

at the time. These novels offer specific insights into the literary framework writers used to depict school authority and portrayed headmasters as strong, wise adult mentors, capable of understating, supporting, and fostering students' intellectual and moral development.

Representations of fictional school communities (peers, teachers, families) and the impact of these stories on the Italian historical, social and cultural contexts have been also enquired into. Research focusing on the representation of school in children's literature has paid considerable attention to portraits of teachers, the teaching process and its social, cultural and political implications, the role of schools settings, educational tools and the moral values and social norms of schooling⁸. However, little attention has been paid to the representation of school authority and to the figures embodying it, both male (headteachers and headmasters) and female (principals and headmistresses) characters.

My study aims to fill this gap. In this research⁹, I will analyse classic children's stories published in the 19th and 20th centuries in Italy and abroad. Then, I will compare extracts of these books, pinpointing some recurring representational characteristics – in terms of literary depictions – of headmasters and headmistresses. Finally, I will make some concluding remarks on the different, gender-biased representation of the concept of authority embodied by headmasters and headmistresses while exercising their role at school.

2. *Headteachers and headmasters: children's literature and the history of school*

In Italy, the head teacher role began to take shape in Italian children's literature in around the 1880s, namely when school management began to evolve, however confusedly. It would thus seem to be appropriate to start by looking at the children's books of those years. Whilst Carlo Collodi, the creator of Pinocchio, was more interested in town squares, hostelrys and home interiors than in the school classroom in his educational stories, the opposite can be said of a contemporary writer, Edmondo De Amicis, who accorded school a hugely important role, making it responsible for educating children and bringing them into the social fold as responsible citizens, just like in Tom Brown. The lessons emerging from De Amicis' work are highly specific social and political messages.

⁸ A. Antoniazzi, *La scuola tra le righe*, Pisa, ETS, 2014; Ead., *Da "Cuore" a "L'ultima possibilità". La scuola vista dai suoi protagonisti*, in M. Corsi (ed.), *La ricerca pedagogica in Italia. Tra innovazione e internazionalizzazione*, Lecce-Brescia, Pensa MultiMedia, 2014, pp. 365-372; S. Barsotti, *La scuola nella letteratura per l'infanzia di ieri e di oggi: l'immagine narrata di un luogo di educazione*, «Pedagogia Oggi», vol. 17, n. 1, 2019, pp. 143-158; P. Boero, G. Genovesi, *Cuore. De Amicis tra critica e utopia*, Milano, Franco Angeli, 2009; F. Borruso, *La scuola nella letteratura per l'infanzia del secondo novecento. Spazio materiale e simbolico di una pedagogia eversiva*, «Pedagogia Oggi», vol. 17, n. 1, 2019, pp. 159-170; E. Catarsi, *I maestri e il «cuore»*. *La figura del maestro elementare nella letteratura per l'infanzia tra Otto e Novecento*, Pisa, Del Cerro, 1996; I. Filograsso, *Bambini in trappola. Pedagogia nera e letteratura per l'infanzia*, Milano, FrancoAngeli, 2012; V. Spinazzola, *Pinocchio & c.*, Milano, Il Saggiatore, 1997.

⁹ This is part of the research work I carried out at the University of Padova for the PRIN research project "School Memories between Social Perception and Collective Representation (Italy, 1861-2001)".

Speaking of school and life in the classroom, he dealt with important social and political elements such as the need to bring the social equality principle not only into the school community but also into the Italian nation: children were to be as equal at school as adults were to be in society in general. If schools were to be up to the task of such progressive changes, competent, well trained people were needed, people of high intellectual, moral and cultural calibre. This was true not only of teachers themselves but also of those tasked with training, shaping and managing teachers.

In Italy the Casati Law (1859) focused on just a few of the elements considered to be crucial to training school principals. In secondary schools such head teachers were, at the very least, to possess high moral stature and consolidated experience in “managing youth”. In primary schools, on the other hand, principals were as yet undefined figures and the situation was an extremely confused one. The characteristics and skills required of those responsible for managing or coordinating schools were not clear and in the midst of this chaos many of these were shown to be unsuited to the task.

De Amicis breathed literary life into many of these figures. I believe it to be useful, at the outset, to examine certain pages of the well-known novel *Romanzo d'un maestro*¹⁰ (1890) in which a school headmaster is depicted. De Amicis depicts the latter as a cultured, educated, severe man, passionate about pedagogy studies, to the extent even of a belief in its omnipotence (i.e. of contents over methods), characterised by an austere, exacting but tolerant kindness and an extremely elevated notion of the teacher's role. He inspires spontaneous obedience, respect, gratitude and emulation, as an exemplary man. Megari, as he is called, is a head teacher (and also an excellent, cultured and well trained teacher) passionate about shaping a “new generation” of children and citizens of the world. The head teacher depicted by De Amicis is an educator who urges his students to take the cultural activism path (holding literary circles in his living room) with enormous pedagogical responsibility. He is an edifying model of the type of man best suited and equipped to manage a school¹¹. It is a model of enlightened, progressive, exemplary school authority conjuring up the headmaster model depicted in Hughes's novel.

This depiction of male school authority is present not solely in novels set inside boarding schools but also in novels whose main setting is primary schools. Take Edmondo De Amicis' novel *Cuore* published in 1886, for example. The novel's structure is well known. It is a diary of a school year (1882) narrated by a third year primary school pupil, Enrico Bottini. This novel «more than any other reflects the longing for education and cultural and civil growth which was such a feature of Italy in the immediate post-unification period»¹².

Against this literary backdrop, how did De Amicis depict the director? Whilst his description of his character is decidedly cursory, De Amicis' focus is the exemplary nature of the principal's behaviour by means of his actions and conversations with pupils and

¹⁰ E. De Amicis, *Il romanzo d'un maestro*, edited by A. Ascenzi, P. Boero, R. Sani, Genova, De Ferrari, 2007.

¹¹ A. Gramaglia, “*Il romanzo di un maestro*” di Edmondo De Amicis, Scandicci, La Nuova Italia, 1996.

¹² A. Ascenzi, R. Sani, *Storia e antologia della letteratura per l'infanzia nell'Italia dell'Ottocento. Volume II*, Milano, Franco Angeli, 2018, p. 171 (my translation).

family members. The novel's excessive moralism and sentimentalism notwithstanding the principal is portrayed in extremely positive terms. The novel tells of a melancholy but loving, sober, measured man with a generosity of spirit concerning children and education and a direct approach to school relationships, with both pupils and parents. His is a focus on dialogue and care [see, for example, his conversation with Enrico Bottini's father]. It depicts a principal who is occasionally verbose and melodramatic but also exceedingly modern and relevant: a principal who is open to dialogue, dedicated to education, willing to challenge himself fully, and attentive to the diverse needs of his students.

The same habitus, attitude and dedication accorded by De Amicis to Megari in *Romanzo d'un maestro* is present here too. Thus, the idea of a positive model to follow in both physical and psychological terms, in educational work with pupils and the general context is shown in the primary school, too.

Children's literature, both Italian and otherwise, also features another approach to the portrayal of school principals, however, a model hinging on a more negative characterisation of head teachers often depicted ironically as distant figures uninterested in pupils' needs whose priority is simply ensuring obedience to the rules with punitive methods and abuse of their power to personal ends.

An example is the principal in Vamba's (alias Luigi Bertelli) *Il giornalino di Gian Burrasca*. The story came out in 55 instalments in *Il Giornalino della Domenica* in 1907-1908, and was published as a complete book in 1912. In this case, too, the story is in diary form and told by a boy, Giannino, recounting his irresistible adventures at home and school. It is, however, a diary which turns the traditional school diary form on its head. Its author Vamba uses it to poke fun, with biting wit, at the facile conventions put forward by the adults inhabiting Giannino's world. The novel features both a headmaster and a headmistress, the latter of whom we will look at later on. It should be clarified right away that in *Gian Burrasca*, in contrast to *Cuore*, the headmaster's role is limited to a certain period of time, namely a period spent in a private boarding school to which Giannino has been taken by his father with the specific objective of correcting what the latter sees as his rebellious spirit. For Giannino the school is comparable with a prison and he stays there just one month before being expelled.

How does Vamba represent school authority? Mockingly. It is visible right away, in his physically caricatured headmaster, Signor Stanislao, who he describes as wearing a wig, «very very thin, very very tall, with a great greyish moustache which trembles all over when he gets angry»¹³. The principal is presented as ridiculous in numerous episodes. He is frequently subjected to insults and abuse by his wife who calls him «cretin» and «idiot»¹⁴. He is treated mercilessly by Vamba who uses Gian Burrasca's pranks to highlight the mean spiritedness of a man who abuses his authority for personal gain. Anything but a model, the headteacher is presented as pathetically bursting with vices and habits. Under the veneer of an apparently authoritative figure (an army type who speaks forcefully of

¹³ Vamba, *Il giornalino di Gian Burrasca*, Milano, Bur ragazzi, 2012, p. 256 (my translation).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 299.

commands and glares at his pupils), underneath it all he is inept, abject and incapable of truly acting as an authoritative and credible guide and mentor.

This necessarily summary analysis brings out two male embodiments of school authority in children's literature. On one hand we have a model headmaster, a figure with great moral and intellectual stature, total dedication to his school and pupils, a pedagogical model to be admired and aspired to, present in both the novels of the past, from the school stories of Hughes and De Amicis to Rudyard Kipling's anti-school stories, such as *Stalky & Co.* (1897) and modern novels, of which Harry Potter is emblematic.

In the other, by contrast, this model is turned entirely on its head. It takes aim not only at the very idea of a "serious" school and boarding school but first and foremost at its headteachers, making use of parody to underline the latter's ambiguity and pettiness. This model is also present, in various forms, in a range of children's literature genres, including outside Italy. Examples are Anthony Horowitz's horror fantasy school stories, *Groosham Grange* (1988) and *Return to Groosham Grange*, first published as *The Unholy Grail* (1999), whose principal is portrayed as a two-headed being in a single body with a vampire deputy principal resembling Frankenstein to some extent.

3. *Principals and headmistresses in the exercise of authority: a problematic turning point*

As Nancy G. Rosoff and Stephanie Spencer highlighted in their study¹⁵ of British and American school stories from 1910 to 1960, the depiction of female school authority in school stories is a multi-faceted and extremely complex subject. There is nothing random about the fact that whilst they highlight various cases in which a positive model of female leadership in the school context takes shape they also argue that «whereas sociability, responsibility, and domesticity might be easily recognised as markers of femininity, that of authority is more problematic»¹⁶. The traditional literary representation of the principal is an unmarried woman – and thus without a private life – all of whose attention is devoted to her pupils. Whilst in some ways this may have constituted an alternative lifestyle model for the women of the day – most of whom were expected to marry and have children – choosing to be a school principal offered «an example of a professional authority figure in contrast to the girls' mothers, none of whom engage in paid employment»¹⁷, it is equally true that such a choice implied a quasi-religious professional choice in which all energies went into the public dimension with no reference to any chance whatsoever for a satisfying private life.

The social and cultural terrain in which British girls' schools flourished was an extremely fertile one, from the 19th century onwards. There are a great many cases of

¹⁵ N.G. Rosoff, S. Spencer, *British and American School Stories, 1910-1960: Fiction, Femininity, and Friendship*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 165.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 175.

extraordinary school principals who left an important mark on the British school system, such as Frances Mary Buss and Dorothea Beale¹⁸. In fact an association was set up in Britain in 1874 whose purpose was to promote female school headships, the Association of Headmistresses (AHM)¹⁹. Its purpose was precisely to form coalitions, to encourage female principals to make common cause and increase their authority in the school world. This was to exert a certain influence in channelling the popular image of female school authority in school stories to the extent that the citations by female pupils used by Price and Glenday in *Reluctant Revolutionaries: A century of Headmistresses 1874-1974* would seem to have come precisely from girl pupils

who had attended some of the schools whose heads belonged to the AHM [Association of Headmistresses] in the later twentieth century reflected the characters of the headmistresses portrayed in both the American and British novels²⁰.

What portrait of female principals emerges from these studies of British women's school stories? What emerges is a principal who is seldom angry, who is both patient and reasonable, who speaks with a soft voice and is caring about her pupils, highlighting that «authority was not exercised through raised voices, or harsh punishment, but through effective use of acceptable feminine skills of patience and collegial styles of leadership that maintained the accepted hierarchy of institutions established over a number of years»²¹. This principal profile seems to converge on a psychological characterisation and predisposition for the care dimension and the building of friendly relationships. In many cases the women's vulnerability and fragility in certain situations comes across, to the extent that in some of these school stories there is an emphasis on their «fallibility [...] the headmistress is seen as fallible»²². References to professional training, disciplinary and organisational skills and professional know-how as regards the management and headship of the school institution itself, the desire to innovate school life, are much less frequent. Even in the most effective and positive literary models, such principals are depicted in ways which do not sufficiently focus on their intellectual stature, authority and managerial skills. Take Angela Brazil's novel *A Harum-Scarum Schoolgirl* (1919), for example, a novel which contributed positively to developing contemporary female literary figures as regards agency, independence, determination and assertiveness in school stories²³. However, her principal, whilst actively engaged in renewing her school, is extremely vaguely depicted.

¹⁸ J. Kamm, *How Different From Us: A Biography of Miss Buss and Miss Beale*, London, The Bodley Head, 1958.

¹⁹ M. Price, N. Glenday, *Reluctant Revolutionaries: A century of Headmistresses 1874-1974*, London, Pitman, 1974.

²⁰ Rosoff, Spencer, *British and American School Stories, 1910-1960*, cit., p. 171.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 190.

²² Rosoff, Spencer, *British and American School Stories, 1910-1960*, cit., p. 177.

²³ B. Lyon Clark, L. Dhingra Shankar, *When Women Tell Tales about School*, «Studies in Popular Culture», vol. 17, n. 1, 1994, pp. 17-28.

When it comes to the admiration of the Head, we can detect a novelty, however. Although the new reign is eventually acknowledged to be much more interesting than the old one, we have no complete admiration of the headmistress. Unlike the pictures of the godlike headmaster Arnold or the “downy Bird” Bates, the description of Miss Todd is, as noted, ambiguous²⁴.

Beyond this model, as in the boys’ school story tradition, an alternative, caricature depiction of female school authority exists in girls’ stories too. There are a great many examples of this. It may, in this case too, be worth comparing novels published in Italy and Britain.

Let us begin by comparing two Italian novels published in the late 19th and early 20th century. The first of these is the headmistress depicted in De Amicis’s *Un dramma nella scuola*²⁵, a story set in a girls’ school in Turin. The second is headmistress Geltrude, Signor Stanislao’s wife in the Vamba novel mentioned above. The extracts to be compared are shown below:

The headmistress, a large, approximately 45-year-old spinster, a sort of police inspector, a sort of bloated Juno clothed in a certain austere elegance, enclosed in a corset which held her up as stiffly as a suit of steel armour [...] She was much feared by her pupils, who she lined up by striking them with her umbrella, and whom she was never seen making the slightest kind gesture to and she was especially harsh with young, attractive mothers. [...] As regards her cultural stature, this was impossible for anyone to fathom as she concealed herself behind a veil of prudence and majesty. But the teachers said that she never read books because she was so full of herself that there was no space left for any new ideas or notions²⁶.

This headmistress understands nothing [...] She is very very small and very very fat, with a very red nose and makes grandiose declarations all the time, making a great deal of insignificant matters and never stops talking, running around and talking to everyone about everything and everyone, finding something to criticise in everyone²⁷.

These extracts shows that both authors focus in particular on the women’s physical and postural oddities as well as their relationships with others. Whether they are married women (very rare) or “old spinsters”, a term used disparagingly, the two principals are sour and repulsive physically and equally repugnant morally and educationally, embodying a model of headmistress which is ugly and brutish.

All this is also true of children’s novels published in Britain. Let us look at two cases. The first of these is Roald Dahl’s *Matilde*, published in Britain in 1988, which tells the story of a talented girl, a voracious reader, who does not identify with the habits, meanness and triviality of her family. A significant part of the novel is set at a school whose principal is Miss Trunchbull. Dahl describes her thus:

Now most head teachers are chosen because they possess a number of fine qualities. [...] Miss Trunchbull possessed none of these qualities and how she ever got her present job was a mystery. She was above all

²⁴ Pesold, *The Other in the School Stories: A Phenomenon in British Children’s Literature*, cit., p. 93.

²⁵ E. De Amicis, *Fra scuola e casa*, Milano, Treves, 1892.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 23-24 (my translation).

²⁷ Vamba, *Il giornalino di Gian Burrasca*, cit., p. 257 (my translation).

a most formidable female. She had once been a famous athlete, and even now the muscles were still clearly in evidence. You could see them in the bull neck, in the big shoulders, in the thick arms, in the sinewy wrists and in the powerful legs. Looking at her, you got the feeling that this was someone who could bend iron bars and tear telephone directories in half. Her face, I'm afraid, was neither a thing of beauty nor a joy for ever. She had an obstinate chin, a cruel mouth and small arrogant eyes. And as for her clothes...they were, to say the least, extremely odd.

She always had on a brown cotton smock which was pinched in around the waist with a wide leather belt. This belt was fastened in front with an enormous silver buckle. The massive thighs which emerged from out of the smock were encased in a pair of extraordinary breeches, bottle green in colour and made of coarse twill. These breeches reached to just below the knees and from there on down she sported green stockings with turn up tops, which displayed her calf muscles to perfection. On her feet she wore flat heeled brown brogues with leather flaps. She looked, in short, more like a rather eccentric and bloodthirsty follower of the staghounds than the headmistress of a nice school for children²⁸.

The second is Harry Potter, the story of the famous magician with the scar on his forehead. The school's headmistress makes her appearance in the fifth book of the series, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* (2003) with full power over the school. Her name is Dolores Umbridge, former teacher and supreme inquisitor, later principal of Hogwarts School. Rowling introduces her thus:

He thought she looked just like a large, pale toad. She was rather squat with a broad flabby face, as little neck as Uncle Vernon and a very wide, slack mouth. Her eyes were large, round and slightly bulging. Even the little black velvet bow perched on top of her short curly hair put him in mind of a large fly she was about to catch on a long sticky tongue²⁹.

These descriptions show an image which has remained virtually unchanged over hundred years. Of the various elements in common, what stands out most is the headmistresses' physical oddities: Miss Trunchbull is a masculine-soldier-like aggressive woman (bull neck, stubborn chin, cruel mouth, powerful thighs); Dolores Umbridge is compared to a toad, an animal which, in the Western literary tradition, is both poisonous and symbolically emblematic of ugliness, awkwardness and impurity.

Of the four headmistress depictions, then, what emerges is an image of an aggressive, animalesque woman incapable of empathy, brutally cutthroat, unjust and garrulous, uninterested in culture and the educational value of teaching, unsuited to the principal's role. It is, overall, a model which may be even more derogatory and demeaning than the grotesque male model described above.

²⁸ R. Dahl, *Matilda*, New York, Penguin Random House, 2007, pp. 76-77.

²⁹ J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, London, Bloomsbury, 2003, p. 146.

Conclusions

Traditionally, «the headteacher in the traditional school story, no matter how authoritarian or how kind and empathetic, embodies the rule of law and society at large. Power/knowledge resides in his/her person and leadership/management»³⁰. This study has analysed the representation of power embodied in the power of the headteacher for the purposes of enquiring into the various ways in which school authority is depicted in children's literature historically. Two distinct models – present in portrayals of both headmasters and headmistresses have been identified: on one hand a model which highlights exemplary headteachers and, on the other, a model which mocks them and casts them as grotesquely inadequate.

A comparison of these literary models via the various novels analysed has highlighted the way in which these portrayal formulas have crystallised over time and tend to re-emerge in diverse school stories published in the 19th and 20th centuries, such as in British and Italian literary traditions, for example. Over one hundred years, these depictions have not substantially changed.

It is worth underlining that descriptions of headmistresses differ from headmaster models in one specific element: a greater focus on the women's physical oddities, and a lesser emphasis on intellectual stature, on the cultural, social and political know-how of the headmistresses.

I would argue that this latter element is more problematical than the former as it constitutes a female power relationship model marked by considerable gender bias. Beyond a significantly lesser presence of headmistresses in children's literature³¹, what stands out most is the choice of identity shaping elements by which such headmistresses are portrayed as exemplary figures. In fact, whilst the «exemplary» model depicts enlightened and erudite headmasters of great intellectual and moral stature, a model which hinges in particular on their extraordinary knowledge and leadership abilities and makes them an «almost godlike figure»³², there is no corresponding headmistress model. There are certainly headmistresses worthy of admiration but their stature hinges primarily on their caring natures, their ability to listen, be empathic, show compassion, on their moral stature. References to scientific and pedagogical know-how, cultural and intellectual resources, capacity to effectively and farsightedly manage their school authority are, by contrast with headmaster portrayals, very rare. In school stories, what is most absent would appear to be precisely a model of headmistresses who are intellectually and culturally talented, competent, innovative, capable of strong and authoritative leadership and of going beyond the literary kindness and care stereotype to take on the challenges of institutional roles professionally.

³⁰ P. Thomson, *The uses and abuses of power: teaching school leadership through children's literature*, «Journal of Educational Administration and History», vol. 46, n. 4, 2014, pp. 367-386.

³¹ A. Trousdale, *Teacher as gatekeeper. Schoolteachers in picture books for young children*, in P.B. Joseph, G. Burnaford (edd.), *Images of Schoolteachers in Twentieth-Century America*, New York, St. Martins Press, 1994, pp. 195-214.

³² Pesold, *The Other in the School Stories: A Phenomenon in British Children's Literature*, cit., p. 39.

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The School and Its Many Pasts

History is not memory; both, however, affect the way we perceive the past. In recent years, an increasing number of studies have focused on memory in order to critically analyze shared narratives of the past and their implications. Memory studies not only allow us to expand our knowledge about the past, but also help us to define the way in which today's people, social groups and public bodies look at it and interpret or re-interpret it. In this sense, school memory is not only of interest as a gateway to the school's past but also as a tool to understand what they know or believe they know about the school of the past and how much what they know corresponds to reality or is influenced by prejudices and stereotypes deeply rooted in common sense. These volumes aim to address these complex issues and broaden the perspective from which the schooling phenomenon is analyzed to better understand the school and its many pasts.

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