

The image of women in Italian literature: “Elena” or “Maria”?



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Over the centuries, love has inspired many literary works and the woman, to whom this feeling was addressed, has been the protagonist. The role of women has undergone a complex evolution throughout history, and consequently literature also reflects these changes in mentality, outlining different female images.

The woman of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance was denied the opportunity to choose for her personal life, always and in any case on the fringes of a male society, considered superior. So the idea of love became detached from reality and the relationship between the two sexes was idealized in the poetic forms of **courtly love**.

The woman, in the Italian lyric poetry of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, from the “**Sicilian School**” to the “**Dolce Stil Novo**”, became the embodiment of a superior, sublime being, able to spiritually elevate man, and to infuse him with noble feelings. In **Dante** the mystical cult of women reaches its maximum: Beatrice is an angel woman.

In 1300 **Francesco Petrarca** instead brought to light the sensorial sphere of love describing the female figure of Laura with her physical beauty.

Furthermore, **Boccaccio**, a little younger than Petrarca, with his descriptions of carnal and adventurous loves, told in the “Decameron”, exalts women with their natural feelings.

To have an innovative female figure, you have to wait until 1751, the year in which **Carlo Goldoni** wrote the “Locandiera”, a comedy that presents Mirandolina. This is a complex character, guided by self-interest, determined and who derives satisfaction from being adored by numerous lovers.

In the 19th century, **Giovanni Verga**, the greatest exponent of Verismo, described the “Lupa”, which means wolf in English. She is the image of a primitive, disturbing and uncontrollable femininity.

Contemporary to Verga is **Gabriele D'Annunzio**. Women play a central role in D'Annunzio's life. In the “Pleasure” two types of women appear: Elena Muti and Maria Ferres. Elena, whose name recalls Helen of Troy, is the fatal, sensual and aggressive woman who embodies eroticism. Mary, on the other hand, who has the name of the Virgin, represents another type of femininity: pure, sweet and intellectual.

Two completely opposed natures, or perhaps two sides of the same coin, which have always enchanted and continue to enchant authors, poets, but also directors, painters, sculptors. It can be flattering to feel like a muse, to be what the artist chooses as the subject of his art. But perhaps literature has seen enough men who wrote about women, and now needs more women to write about men!

