

ASSAJOS I ESTUDIS

Mutilated Veterans: The Heroic Representation of Disability in Italian Children's Literature

Veterans mutilats: la representació heroica de la discapacitat en la literatura infantil italiana

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Data de recepció de l'original: 15/02/2025

Data d'acceptació: 03/04/2025

RESUM

Aquest article destaca el canvi significatiu en la representació de la discapacitat a la literatura infantil amb l'arribada de la Primera Guerra Mundial i el feixisme a Itàlia, amb l'objectiu d'aclarir l'ús de personatges veterans discapacitats amb fins ideològics. Durant la guerra, a Itàlia, es produeix un augment substancial en la producció de llibres amb temàtiques històriques i bèl·liques, així com biografies que subratllen l'heroisme i el sacrifici d'aquells que van defensar la seva nació. Moltes obres de literatura infantil pretenen implícitament educar els futurs reclutes en els valors del sacrifici per la pàtria, i militaritzen prematurament la infància i el joc infantil. L'entrada d'Itàlia a la guerra provoca un canvi fonamental en la representació de la discapacitat als llibres infantils: la gran quantitat d'invàlids de guerra impulsa una reavaluació sense precedents de la imatge de les discapacitats físiques, els veterans mutilats esdevenen una qüestió social legítima, i la seva representació adquireix una nova dignitat pública perquè els seus cossos porten les empremtes del seu patriotisme i valent sacrifici.

Tanmateix, la representació dels veterans discapacitats als llibres infantils és típicament unidimensional i serveix a fins ideològics.

PARAULES CLAU: Període d'entreguerres; literatura infantil; discapacitat; veterans mutilats; feixisme

RESUMEN

Este artículo destaca el cambio significativo en la representación de la discapacidad en la literatura infantil con la llegada de la Primera Guerra Mundial y el fascismo en Italia, con el fin de aclarar el uso de personajes veteranos discapacitados con fines ideológicos. Durante el período bélico, en Italia, se produce un aumento considerable en la producción de libros con temáticas históricas y bélicas, así como biografías que enfatizan el heroísmo y el sacrificio de aquellos que defendieron su nación. Muchas obras de literatura infantil buscan implícitamente educar a los futuros reclutas en los valores del sacrificio por la patria, y militarizan prematuramente la infancia y el juego infantil. La entrada de Italia en la guerra provoca un cambio fundamental en la representación de la discapacidad en los libros infantiles: la gran cantidad de inválidos de guerra impulsa una reevaluación sin precedentes de la imagen de las discapacidades físicas, los veteranos mutilados se convierten en una cuestión social legítima, y su representación adquiere una nueva dignidad pública, ya que sus cuerpos llevan las huellas de su patriotismo y valiente sacrificio. Sin embargo, la representación de los veteranos discapacitados en los libros infantiles es típicamente unidimensional y sirve a fines ideológicos.

PALABRAS CLAVES: Período de entreguerras; literatura infantil; discapacidad; veteranos mutilados; fascismo.

ABSTRACT

This paper highlights the significant change in the representation of disability in children's literature with the advent of World War I and fascism in Italy in order to clarify the use of disabled veteran characters for ideological purposes. During wartime, in Italy, there is a substantial increase in the production of books with historical and war themes as well as biographies emphasizing the heroism and sacrifice of those who defended their nation. Many works of children's literature implicitly aim to educate future recruits in the values of sacrifice for the homeland, and they

prematurely militarise childhood and children's play. The Italian entry into the war leads to a major turning point in the representation of disability in children's books: the huge number of war invalids drives an unprecedented revaluation of the image of physical disabilities, mutilated veterans become a legitimate social issue, and their representation gains a new public dignity because their bodies bear the marks of their patriotism and valiant sacrifice. However, the representation of disabled veterans in children's books is typically one-dimensional and serves ideological purposes.

KEYWORDS: Interwar period; children's literature; disability; mutilated veterans; fascism.

1. INTRODUCTION

Children's literature, as is now well established, has its own epistemological and scientific character and its own intrinsic complexity and problematic nature. Involving the literary axis on the one hand and pedagogical requirements on the other, it is a multifaceted and multi-perspectival field of study that must also take into account the function of children's literature as a vehicle for value systems and models of behaviour.¹

Children's narratives, because they are mediated by adults, necessarily represent an instrument for disciplining consciences, constructing social and civil identity, and controlling the imaginary.² This aspect, always present, becomes more pressing and evident in certain historical periods. This is the case for Italian children's literature in the period between the beginning of the First World War, the rise of fascism and the end of the Second World War. In comparison to the preceding period, there is a notable increase in the production of historical works, set in contemporary times, which portray heroic figures who have contributed to the glory of the Nation through their actions. Children's literature, particularly attuned to historical and cultural shifts, addresses a significant issue: the reintegration of the unprecedented

¹ FAETI, A. *Letteratura per l'infanzia*, Firenze: La Nuova Italia, 1977, p. 41.

² Cfr. FAVA, S. *Percorsi critici di letteratura per l'infanzia tra le due guerre*, Milano: V&P, 2004, p. 13. The author, referring to the fascist period, emphasizes the role of children's literature, with its constellation of cultural references, as a privileged observatory of the paths of the imaginary and a valuable interpretative tool for both explicit and implicit models conveyed.

number of war veterans into society. In this context, the figure of the mutilated soldier – returning wounded, disfigured, or blind as a result of his sacrifice in war – emerges and proliferates.

Many recent studies have highlighted the importance attributed to children's literature in the "nationalization" of childhood and the close relationship between narrative, war, and iconography.³ Despite this, representations of disability in Italian children's literature and the instrumental use of the disabled figure for ideological purposes remain mostly underexplored,⁴ and this historiographical silence extends to works published between the two World Wars. As a result, a period of significant intensity in the social history of disability and in the history of children's literature lacks adequate scholarly attention.

This contribution arises from doctoral research focused on the representation of disability in Italian children's literature. In this study, through bibliographic research and the use of primary academic databases, over 200 works featuring disabled characters were identified and examined using a specialized content analysis sheet. This paper aims to highlight the change that occurred during this historical period in the representation of disability,

³ Much has been written about the ideological use of children's literature during the Great War and the fascist period. See FOCESATO, W. *La guerra nei libri per ragazzi*, Milano: Mondadori, 1996; FOCESATO, W. *Raccontare la guerra: libri per bambini e ragazzi*, Novara: Interlinea, 2011; FOCESATO, W. «Nani, pinocchi e piccoli alpini. Il racconto della guerra», in CAMPAGNARO, M. (coord.). *La Grande Guerra raccontata ai ragazzi*, Roma: Donzelli, 2015, p. 90-105. Among the studies on the periodical press, see: MEDA, J. «Il Corriere va alla guerra. L'immaginario del "Corriere dei Piccoli" e le guerre del Novecento (1912-1943)», *Storia e documenti*, vol. 6 (2001), p. 97-114 and LA GROTTIERA, G. «Dal Corriere dei Piccoli: il fronte interno nel 1917», *Cahiers de la Méditerranée*, vol. 97, núm. 1 (2018), p. 153-162.

For the pervasiveness of this dynamic in education, as well as in children's leisure time and school publishing, see: ASCENZI, A., SANI, R. *Il libro per la scuola tra idealismo e fascismo*, Milano: V&P, 2005; GILFRÈ, M. *Il regime degli editori. Libri, scuola e fascismo*, Roma: Laterza, 2005; SANI, R. «Editoria scolastica e libri di testo nel ventennio fascista: dalla riforma Gentile alla Carta della Scuola di Bottai», in BOSNA, V., CAGNOLATI, A. (coord.). *Itinerari nella storiografia educativa*, Bari: Cacucci, 2019, p. 41-62; MEDA, J. «A scuola in tempo di guerra. Il regime fascista e la "nazionalizzazione dell'infanzia" durante la Seconda Guerra Mondiale (1940-1945)», in GALLO, S. (coord.). *Scuola e guerra. Insegnare la storia dei conflitti per una didattica di pace*, Pisa: ETS, 2010, p. 23-35; SANI, R. «Il potere delle immagini: l'iconografia della "Gioventù eroica" e dell'"uomo nuovo fascista" nelle illustrazioni dei quaderni di scuola del Ventennio», *History of Education and Children's Literature*, vol. XVIII, núm. 1 (2023), p. 479-489. On the campaign of "demilitarization" of childhood imaginary after the end of World War II, see MEDA, J. «Contro i "giocattoli guerreschi". La campagna per il disarmo del giocattolo italiano e la smilitarizzazione dell'immaginario infantile (1949-1955)», in DI CARPEGNA FALCONIERI, T., RITROVATO, S. (coord.). *Il racconto delle armi*, Bologna: Il Mulino, 2021, p. 249-270.

⁴ SCHIANCHI, M. «Due studi, ancori pionieristici, sulla disabilità nella cultura popolare e nella letteratura per l'infanzia», *Rivista di Storia dell'Educazione*, vol. 7, núm. 1 (2020), p. 19-29.

with particular focus on the role assigned to the character of the war veteran, emphasizing how, in a circular manner,⁵ the imagination has influenced the social history of disability and vice versa. In the following paragraphs, a general overview of the relationship between disability and children's literature will first be provided, followed by a more detailed examination of the roles attributed to characters with disabilities during the interwar period, including through the analysis of a particularly significant work for children: *Il romanzo di Pasqualino*.

2. DISABILITY IN ITALIAN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE: FUNCTIONS, CHANGES AND PERSISTENCE

The dual nature of children's works – on one hand, educational and, on the other, entertaining –⁶ is what constitute the vast heuristic potential of children's narratives for reconstructing a history of the collective imaginary of a historical period. They represent, in fact, precious evidence of «man's cultural production interconnected with his education, of yesterday and today»⁷ and useful devices for «handing down rules, notions, tastes, models and antimodels, stereotypes and fractures».⁸

Character choice, which facilitates young readers' processes of identification and immersion in the narrative, is certainly among the choices that have the greatest influence on the effectiveness of a children's text, as a means of achieving civil and moral goals. Characters with disabilities and physical impairments have always been widely present in children's literature and very often play an instrumental role in the work's implicit aims.⁹

⁵ D'AMATO, M. *Finzione e mondi possibili: per una sociologia dell'immaginario*, Limena: Libreria Universitaria, 2012, p. 17.

⁶ SEE NIKOLAJEVA, M. *The Rhetoric of Children's Literature*, Lunham: Scarecrow Press, 2002.

⁷ CANTATORE, L. «La letteratura per l'infanzia e le forme della storia», in CANTATORE, L., GALLI LAFOREST, N., GRILLI, G., NEGRI, M., PICCININI, G., TONTARDINI, I., VARRÀ, E. (coord.). *In cerca di guai. Studiare la letteratura per l'infanzia*, Bergamo: Junior, 2020, p. 14.

⁸ *Ibidem*. On this subject, see also CANTATORE, L. «Letteratura per l'infanzia e Storia dell'educazione: tangenze e contraddizioni di un rapporto complesso», *Annali online della Didattica e della Formazione docente*, vol. 6 (2013), p. 59-75.

⁹ For a more detailed discussion, refer to: LACHAL, R.C. «L'infirmes dans la littérature italienne destinée à l'enfance et à la jeunesse. Analyse typologique de 57 œuvres», *Enfance*, vol. 27, núm. 3 (1974), p. 287-312; GRANDI, W. «Fuori dal margine. Metafore di disabilità e di integrazione nella recente letteratura per l'infanzia», *Ricerche di Pedagogia e Didattica*, vol. 7, núm. 1 (2012), p. 1-12.

Throughout the 19th century and for a large part of the 20th century, in most cases, characters with disabilities appear in children's literature just as "roles" sketched only in outline: they are one-dimensional figures; narrative metaphors rather than full-fledged characters. In 19th century literature, which is characterised by strong moralistic-didactic intentions, characters with disabilities mainly assume the important function of arousing emotions and feelings of compassion, while simultaneously, encouraging virtuous behaviour and exhorting the reader to act uprightly.¹⁰ The attitude toward disability appears ambivalent: alongside the more purely pietistic view and the medieval echoes of rejection, ridicule, and disgust, there is a tendency to exalt characters with disabilities for their moral qualities and sacrifices.

From the "monster-body" to the "monument-body",¹¹ the physicality of the soldier lends itself to a rhetorically patriotic reading: the wound becomes a metonymy of courage, a tangible remnant of the combat experience.¹² In the interwar period, characters with disabilities fulfil a strong instrumental function, inheriting some of the elements that characterise the previous era but being bent to serve a more ideological purpose through the extensive use of exemplary figures of heroic soldiers and war invalids.

Although, in the history of Italian children's literature, the interwar period is a time rich in innovation and transformation,¹³ authors are clearly aware of

¹⁰ PACELLI, S. «Il "povero infelice": la rappresentazione della disabilità nella letteratura per l'infanzia tra fine Ottocento e inizio Novecento», in ANGELINI, C., LA ROCCA, C. (coord.). *La serie del Dottorato TRES* 2, Roma: Roma TrE-press, 2023, p. 101-110. Throughout the Italian Risorgimento, the focus of children's literature production was primarily on obedience, discipline, perseverance, patience, and modesty. Cf. FOCESATO, W. *Raccontare la guerra: libri per bambini e ragazzi*, Novara: Interlinea, 2011, p. 30. The "little sentinels" and "Sardinian drummers" in the novel by DE AMICIS, E. *Cuore*, Milano: Treves, 1886 are some of the key elements of an image of sacrifice and martyrdom, already in the Risorgimento era, as the highest aspiration of the child. De Amicis had already established a strong bridge between the army and the people, which was later fervently pursued during the fascist period. Cf. ISNENGHI, M. *Le guerre degli italiani: parole, immagini, ricordi, 1848-1945*, Milano: Mondadori, 1989.

¹¹ BRACCO, B. *La patria ferita. I corpi dei soldati italiani e la grande guerra*, Prato: Giunti, 2012, p. 11.

¹² Cf. SAVETTIERI, C. «Corpi feriti nella letteratura della Grande Guerra», *Arabeschi*, vol. 104 (2017), p. 104-117; RICCA, A.G. «Figure della mascolinità nell'immaginario della Grande Guerra», in GUIDI, L. (coord.). *Vivere la guerra. Percorsi biografici e ruoli di genere tra Risorgimento e primo conflitto mondiale*, Napoli: ClioPress, 2007; MONDINI, M. «The Construction of a masculine Warrior Ideal in the Italian Narratives of the First World War, 1915-68», *Contemporary European History*, vol. 23, núm. 3 (2014), p. 307-327.

¹³ STRUVE-DEBEAUX, A., LÉVÊQUE, M. «Introduction. Littérature pour la jeunesse de l'entre-deux-guerres: renouveau et mutations», *Srenae. Recherches sur les livres et objets culturels de l'enfance*, vol. 6 (2013), p. 1.

the potential of children's works for achieving civil and moral aims,¹⁴ and they treat these works with particular attention and caution. In this dynamic, the portrayal of disability continues to be used for educational purposes, such as transmitting the values of family, homeland, faith, and respect for hierarchies.

Yet, something begins to change in the collective image of physical disability and its representations during the First World War, with the homecoming of a large number of war invalids, estimated at over 450,000 to Italy in 1918.¹⁵ The causal nature of the deficit changes and leads to a new reading of disability as a «social claim»¹⁶ and a «legitimate, public and official social problem».¹⁷ The image of mutilated veterans is, therefore, connoted with a new public dignity, since they sacrificed themselves for the Fatherland and their bodies are a living testimony of this sacrifice. The mutilated body marked by war becomes a new vehicle for meanings, and the issue of veterans contributes, indirectly, to the integration into society of people with physical disabilities and to the redefinition of their social perception.¹⁸

¹⁴ In his essay, GANCI BATTAGLIA, G. *La letteratura infantile and G. Ernesto Nuccio*, Palermo: Boccone Del Povero, 1934, that childhood is «a fertile age in which every seed takes root with ease», p. 9. Giuseppe Fanciulli and Enrichetta Monaci Guidotti also argue that authors and publishers should be concerned about the content of children's books: «It is true that the child is the man in the making, but with this ideal concept the doctor could inject a child with an adult vial without thinking twice about it. Children's literature must also be dosed», FANCIULLI G., MONACI GUIDOTTI, E. *La letteratura per l'infanzia*, Torino: SEI, 1935, p. 11.

¹⁵ SCHIANCHI, M. *Il debito simbolico: una storia sociale della disabilità in Italia tra Otto e Novecento*, Roma: Carocci, 2019, p. 196. This number corresponds only to the veterans officially declared as mutilated and war invalids, while over one million of the six million mobilized sustained injuries of varying severity. For further details, see ISNENGHI, M., ROCHAT, G. *La Grande Guerra. 1914-1918*, Milano: La Nuova Italia, 2000. The numbers at the international level are staggering: more than 21 million men sustained war injuries, and approximately 13 million returned to civilian life with permanent disabilities. Cf. WINTER, J. «Le vittime: morti, feriti e invalidi», in AUDOIN-ROUZEAU, S., BECKER, J.J., GIBELLI, A. (coord.). *La prima guerra mondiale*, Torino: Einaudi, 2007, p. 447-457.

¹⁶ MEDEGHINI, R., VALTELLINA, E. *Quale disabilità? Culture, modelli e processi di inclusione*, Milano: FrancoAngeli, 2006, p. 33.

¹⁷ SCHIANCHI, M. *Il debito simbolico: una storia sociale della disabilità in Italia tra Otto e Novecento*, Roma: Carocci, 2019, p. 196.

¹⁸ SEE SALVANTE, M. «Italian Disabled Veterans between Representation and Experience», in COPPER, N., McVEIGH, S. (coord.). *Men After War*, New York: Routledge, 2013, p. 111-129 and PAVAN DALLA TORRE, U. «Storicizzare la disabilità: l'esperienza dei mutilati di guerra italiani e la costruzione di una nuova identità», *Welfare e Ergonomia*, vol. 1 (2021). As Medeghini and Valtellina point out, the sense of guilt and moral obligation lead society to invest in repair, prosthesis and rehabilitation in order to «bring the condition of the mutilated back to its origins», MEDEGHINI, R., VALTELLINA, E. *Quale disabilità? Culture, modelli e processi di inclusione*, Milano: FrancoAngeli, 2006, p. 29. The mutilated veterans contribute to the entrenchment of the belief that a deficit can, and should, be overcome, an idea which, with its pros and cons, will gradually extend to other disabled people.

3. WAR INVALIDS AND THE NATIONALISATION OF CHILDHOOD

Propaganda during and following the First World War portrays the marked body as the embodiment of the highest level of dignity. With the advent of fascism, «the difference is no longer so much about being normal or abnormal, but about being “true Italians” or “false Italians”; the question, from a medical biological psychiatric problem, becomes racial political ideological».¹⁹

After the tragic defeat at Caporetto in 1917, the State attempts to respond to this unprecedented social issue with a new regulation concerning the complex matter of assistance, pensions, prostheses, and the organisation of rehabilitation and vocational retraining activities. This attempt leads, in the same year, to the founding of the ANMIG, the National Association of the War Mutilated and Invalid.²⁰ Thus, the State finally comes to recognise the rights of persons with disabilities, but only those who sacrificed themselves for the Fatherland.²¹

Children's literature is involved in these changes and by the impact of a destructive event of unprecedented magnitude.²² The Great War – total, unlimited, mass –²³ leads to an increase in the production of stories with a historical background, stories with a war theme and biographies of great heroes and veterans who returned after serving the nation. These works aim to emphasise the heroic acts of those who fought to defend their country and

¹⁹ POLENGHI, S. «The history of educational inclusion», *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Education*, 2021, p. 8.

²⁰ Alongside the ANMIG, during the same years, were also funded the Committee of Action for Mutilated and War Invalids and the Proletarian League of Mutilated, Invalids, Veterans, Orphans, and War Widows. All of them operated by projecting a political vision of physical sacrifice onto the injured bodies of their members. Cf. ISOLA, G. *Guerra al regno della guerra. Storia della Lega proletaria mutilate invalidi reduce orfani e vedove di guerra (1918-1924)*, Firenze: Le Lettere, 1990 and BALESTRAZZI, G. *L'opera nazionale per gli invalidi di guerra in mezzo secolo di storia: 25/3/1917-25/3/1967*, Roma: Apollon, 1967.

²¹ SALVANTE, M. «Italian Disabled Veterans between Representation and Experience», in COPPER, N., McVEIGH, S. (coord.). *Men After War*, New York: Routledge, 2013, p. 121. Mussolini himself, having been wounded in 1917, recounted his experience in *Diario di guerra* [War Diary], published in *Il Popolo d'Italia*. Although the entries about his injury are few, brief, and not entirely faithful to the facts, journalists and admirers sanctified the wounds and consecrated the public debut of Mussolini's body. See MUSSOLINI, B. *Diario di guerra*, Milano: Imperia casa editrice del Partito Nazionale Fascista, 1923; ISNENGI, M. *L'Italia del fascio*, Firenze: Giunti, 1996, p. 411.

²² CAMPAGNARO, M. «Sulle “soglie” della Grande guerra. Visioni e rappresentazioni nella letteratura per l'infanzia», in CAMPAGNARO, M. (coord.). *La Grande Guerra raccontata ai ragazzi*, Roma: Donzelli, 2015, p. 21.

²³ GIBELLI, A. «Nefaste meraviglie. Grande Guerra e apoteosi della modernità», in BARBERIS, W. (coord.). *Storia d'Italia. Annali XVII, Guerra e pace*, Torino: Einaudi, 2002, p. 549-589.

to encourage young people, implicitly, to depart for the war and sacrifice even themselves if necessary.

«The Great War constitutes the first example of conflict in the 20th century in which children are given a special place in the adult war device»,²⁴ childhood is, in fact, the privileged recipient of patriotic, moralistic, and guilt-ridden discourses through vectors such as games, school, and narratives. With the advent of fascism, these instances are further reinforced in an early and total militarisation of childhood:²⁵ «to the pedagogical hypothecation, which has always been lit on children's stories, is added in Mussolini's twenty years of rule the hypothecation of fascist indoctrination. Children's books become an instrument of penetration among the young and the very young with the task of feeding, with stories of various exemplarity, the ideology of the regime».²⁶ The child becomes the protagonist of a «pre- and para-political and above all pre- and para-military mobilisation soon destined to become decisive in the policy of strength of nations, a biological guarantee of their vitality and therefore of their future».²⁷

Between the two wars there is, therefore, a profound pressure of the bellic event on children's imagery, also evidenced by changes in the representation of disability in children's works. In fact, characters with congenital disabilities almost completely disappear and are replaced by the “new” idea of heroic disability. The tone of the narrative also changes: «the Deamicisian dimension of pedagogical sobbing appears to have been overcome»;²⁸ the new Italians «must not weep but march».²⁹

²⁴ FILOGRASSO, I. «Infanzie e guerre. Tra dimensioni culturali e problemi educativi», in CAMPAGNARO, M. (coord.). *La Grande Guerra raccontata ai ragazzi*, Roma: Donzelli, 2015, p. 57.

²⁵ FILOGRASSO, I. *Bambini in trappola. Pedagogia nera e letteratura per l'infanzia*, Milano: FrancoAngeli, 2012.

²⁶ BOERO, P., DE LUCA, C. *La letteratura per l'infanzia*, Roma-Bari: Laterza, 1995, p. 168. Most of the literary experiences carried out during fascism reveal a sort of inability to even *desire* models, behaviors, and strategies (both textual and otherwise) other than fascism, and truly alternative to those permitted by the regime. Cf. GIGLIOZZI G. *La metafora pietrificata: studi sulle strutture narrative degli anni Trenta*, Roma: Bulzoni, 1987, p. 9.

²⁷ GIBELLI, A. *Il popolo bambino: infanzia e nazione dalla grande guerra a Salò*, Torino: Einaudi, 2005, p. 6. By the same author, see also *L'officina della guerra: la Grande Guerra e le trasformazioni del mondo mentale*, Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 2007.

²⁸ FAETI, A. *Guardare le figure: gli illustratori italiani dei libri per l'infanzia*, Roma: Donzelli, 2017, p. 243.

²⁹ *Ibidem*.

If, previously, the disfigured bodies had been looked upon with fear, pity, or embarrassment – and been narrated accordingly in children's works – with the First World War, these bodies become a symbol of national unity and unconditional devotion to the Fatherland. The novel *Vita semplice di Pippo Duranti*³⁰ [Simple Life of Pippo Duranti] features an ex-combatant who has lost a leg in battle and «who has a mark of courage and honour on his disfigured face, who stands on a crutch, but who still feels the strength to go through the streets».³¹ Bruno Angoletta's illustration shows the return of the soldier, who is welcomed with gestures of affection and admiration by his family. The man is standing upright, proud, holding a crutch and still wearing his military uniform. The entire illustration is in black and white, except for the soldier's uniform, which stands out in bright green and captivates the young reader's attention.

A similar scene appears in *Le memorie del merlo zoppo*³² [The Memoirs of the Lame Blackbird], by the important writer Camilla Del Soldato.³³ In the episode with the significant title *Il ritorno* [The Return], the son of an old woman returns blind from the war. The text recounts the moment when the man arrives at his mother's house, accompanied by his wife, and greets her and his children for the first time. The whole scene is deeply moving, as the author emphasises the woman's emotions, fluctuating between grief and admiration, while ensuring that the man's pride in having fought for his country prevails. In his words, there is no room for pity or sorrow. He is «upright, resolute, proud»³⁴ in his uniform: an example for the children of the «wonderful father who seemed to conquer the darkness with a smile and will».³⁵

Throughout the story, the man's condition is never explicitly mentioned: it is deduced from specific details of the narrative, such as his mother's poorly concealed emotion and the sudden interruption of the children's cries

³⁰ FRANCHI, A. *Vita semplice di Pippo Duranti*, Milano: Corbaccio dall'Oglio editore, 1941.

³¹ *Ibidem.*, p. 122.

³² DEL SOLDATO, C. *Le memorie del merlo zoppo*, Milano: Cogliati, 1920.

³³ The author's father is a man of letters, a patriot and steers his daughter's studies towards literature. Camilla Del Soldato, also, is an author for numerous women's periodicals, even though she is mainly known for her writing activity for children around the time of the Great War, with realistic-sentimental traits combined with fantastic elements, and for the production of her last years that reflects the sentiments of fascist ideology. For an in-depth biography, see FAVA, S. «Del Soldato Poggi Camilla», in CHIROSSO, G., SANI, R. (coord.). *Dizionario Biografico dell'Educazione 1800-2000*, vol. 2, Milano: Editrice Bibliografica, 2013, p. 472.

³⁴ *Ibidem.*, p. 149.

³⁵ *Ibidem.*

of jubilation when they find him. To refer to the character, the author uses *he* in italics, as if to indicate his importance while maintaining a respectful distance. The rhetoric in the narrative emphasises the willpower of the man who, despite his blindness, appears content and joyful and even supports the entire family, as is evident in the following passage:

- Mrs. Mom, here I am healthy and happy. How are you? Where's my usual chair?
- It's fine. Now give me Nicchio on your lap and come over here, all of you, for a brief examination. I want to see if you remember your lessons. You first, mommy. How do you feel?
- Young, young, - replied the grandmother like an obedient schoolgirl, but with such a beautiful tremulous voice that I could barely hear her.
- Good. I see you haven't forgotten. Ten with honours (...) Let's hear Alberto. Who are you?
- The little man of the house.
- Bravo! I like your voice, boy; it's become a steady voice. Give me your hand and squeeze it tightly; like this, like it's done between men.³⁶

Throughout the dialogue, the man urges all his family members, through his own example, to be strong and courageous. In the works of Camilla Del Soldato, there is a «good emotion; because always, beyond the pain, one feels a strength that wants to remain serene, bent a moment, not defeated. Especially the books born in the war years, and animated by such love of country, have these revelations flashing through the tears».³⁷

Therefore, in the interwar years, even through children's books, young people are taught that being wounded in war (for example, losing a limb) and sacrificing oneself for the fatherland is noble³⁸ and «natural».³⁹ As Debè and Polenghi recall, while in other European countries it was feared that the sight of mutilated soldiers would have a negative impact by discouraging enrolment

³⁶ *Ibidem.* p. 149-150.

³⁷ FANCIULLI, G., MONACI GUIDOTTI, E. *La letteratura per l'infanzia*, Torino: SEI, 1935, p. 294.

³⁸ POLENGHI, S. «The history of educational inclusion», *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Education*, 2021, p. 9.

³⁹ GIBELLI, A. *La grande guerra degli italiani, 1915-1918*, Milano: BUR, 2007, p. 232.

or producing repulsion towards war, in Italy, invalid veterans had to be seen: they elicited no shame or pity, but only pride.⁴⁰

An additional example of this type of narrative is the children's volume *Abecedario: omaggio al combattente* [ABC: Tribute to the Fighter], printed around 1917 by the Committee of Action for Mutilated, Invalids, and Wounded Veterans, with illustrations by Carlo Bisi, Filiberto Scarpelli, and Riccardo Salvadori. Using the letters of the alphabet, the book celebrates the achievements and battles of World War I, reconstructing the harsh life of the soldier and exalting work and sacrifice, including of one's own body, in the pursuit of victory.⁴¹

There are also a few rare works that combine a realistic backdrop with fantastic characters to contribute to this standardized representation. In 1917, Paolo Lorenzini (Collodi Nipote) wrote a novel titled *Il Cuore di Pinocchio. Nuove avventure del celebre burattino*⁴² [The Heart of Pinocchio. New Adventures of the Famous Puppet]. Pinocchio, in flesh and blood, secretly reaches the frontline and manages to enlist. Among the many *topoi* of literature for the internal front, the novel places an extreme emphasis on wounds and mutilations: Pinocchio loses both legs, which are replaced with

⁴⁰ DEBÈ, A., POLENGHI, S. «Assistance and education of mutilated soldiers of World War I. The Italian case», *History of Education & Children's Literature*, vol. 11, núm. 2 (2016), p. 234. An exemplary piece is an article by Vamba published in 1917. He aims to praise the work done by the military hospital in Florence, specialized in the care and assistance of soldiers wounded in the eyes. In the portraits of faces scarred by war, he also emphasizes how misfortune has not been able to erase the smile and joy of having made the most sublime of sacrifices. VAMBA, «Occhi e nasi», *La Lettura*, vol. XVII, núm. 8 (1917), p. 607-611.

⁴¹ Cf. MORANDINI, M.C. «I libri per l'infanzia: dagli alfabeti ai pop-up», *Espacio, Tiempo y Edication*, vol. 8, núm. 1 (2021), p. 115. As already highlighted, this type of narrative and imagery was widely used during the interwar period. Only some of the most significant examples have been presented in the contribution; among others, see also: AMBROSINI, L. *Sempronio e Sempronella*, Torino: Paravia, 1922; MARGA, *Piccolo Mondo Fascista*, Firenze: Bemporad, 1924; VISENTINI, O. *La zingarella e la principessina*, Milano: Mondadori, 1926; FARCI, F. *L'ultima tappa*, Torino: SEI, 1939; VALENTINI, G. *Il fiore sul fucile*, Genova: E. Degli Orfini, 1941.

⁴² COLLODI NIPOTE, *Il Cuore di Pinocchio. Nuove avventure del celebre burattino*, Firenze: Bemporad, 1917. In the title, the author seeks to «almost bring together the two great, irreconcilable, novels of our children's literature», FOCESATO, W. *Raccontare la guerra: libri per bambini e ragazzi*, Novara: Interlinea, 2011, p. 59.

true mechanical marvels, and later also loses his arms. The protagonist returns home to Geppetto but remains always cheerful and proud.⁴³

In line with the examples given, the typical portrayal of veterans is, nevertheless, one-dimensional, linked only to their heroic participation in the war, their courage, and their unselfish spirit of sacrifice. The physical and psychological pain of the veterans, the destabilisation of their image and identity, as well as the difficulties they encountered because they were unable to return to a “normal” life and were reliant on public aid, disappear from the picture. The wounded body of the soldier, in its physicality, is one of the most dramatic and complex sites of war memory in its ideological use.⁴⁴ The issue of care, recovery, and the return to a “normal” life for the mutilated assumed vast social dimensions and led to the necessity, on one hand, of exalting the sacrifice made, in order to give it a meaning, and on the other hand, of demonstrating the effectiveness of medical and welfare interventions.⁴⁵

4. DISABILITY, IDEOLOGY AND HEROISM IN THE NOVEL *IL ROMANZO DI PASQUALINO*

Among the works featuring characters with disabilities written around the time of the First World War, Teresah's *Il romanzo di Pasqualino*⁴⁶ [The Novel of Pasqualino] is particularly significant. In fact, the work summarises, in a particularly effective way, the main discourses concerning disability that can be found in children's literature during the period examined. The author, Corinna Teresa Ubertis, known by the pseudonym Teresah, was married to the

⁴³ Regarding the novel, Barbara Bracco writes: «In the midst of the war, even in our literature – which was not inclined to the gothic imagery typical of English-language fiction – a character like Pinocchio was reinterpreted by Collodi Nipote, replacing the famous wooden puppet with the wounded body of a young soldier; repeatedly injured, mutilated, and “repaired” by medical and prosthetic science, the soldier of the Great War, from a tender 19th-century puppet, transformed into a creature of flesh and steel of 20th-century modernity». BRACCO, B. «Il mutilato di guerra in Italia: polisemie di un luogo crudele», *Memoria e Ricerca*, vol. 38 (2011), p. 10.

⁴⁴ Cf. BRACCO, B. *La patria ferita. I corpi dei soldati italiani e la grande guerra*, Prato: Giunti, 2012, p. 10.

⁴⁵ The issue of the rehabilitation of the mutilated soldier, in addition to representing a moral problem, also had an important economic aspect: it aimed at partially recovering the incalculable loss of social capital. See, GALEAZZI, R. *Le moderne provvidenze sociali per i mutilati in guerra*, Milano: Ravà, 1915. Galeazzi, an Italian physician specialized in orthopedics, was very committed to the professional rehabilitation of the mutilated.

⁴⁶ TERESAH, *Il romanzo di Pasqualino*, Firenze: Bemporad & figlio, 1917.

politician Ezio Maria Gray, whose nationalist and interventionist positions she shared, and she wrote in the main trench newspapers, allowing her political ideology to seep from the pages.⁴⁷

In the novel, the young Pasqualino receives, as a gift, a box of wooden toys made by amputees. The box is a narrative device, and one of its toys comes to life in each chapter and tells the protagonist its story of a war hero. The disability-war connection in the book is presented through different pretexts, and the apparently fantastic scenario conceals a pressing ideological message for young readers and references to real figures. First, the toys received are the creations of war veterans in the real-life “Moncalieri Giuocattoli” factory. This factory was established through the work of Maria Letizia Bonaparte of Savoy,⁴⁸ who, during the First World War, turned her Savoy residence in Moncalieri Castle into a military convalescent home for war amputees and did a great deal of civil assistance work. Among the initiatives proposed, she created a workshop for the manufacture of children’s toys, with the aim of professionally rehabilitating soldiers and providing them with a commitment that was considered moral at the same time. The products were then sold for charity, further strengthening the link between childhood and the world of war.⁴⁹

One of the toy soldiers was carved by a veteran who had lost his hand and been equipped with a prosthetic wooden hand: «it took angelic patience», writes the author, «and a great invincible will to work. (What a fine example for those who have two hands and think of nothing but keeping them idle! said their father).⁵⁰ These are men who have lost everything, who have suffered for months without ever complain and whose greatest joy is to hear the news of the Italian advance.

Once again, the character with a disability serves an exemplary function in the story: to show the more “fortunate” his extraordinary moral qualities, his

⁴⁷ ASSIRELLI, S. «Ubertis Gray Corinna Teresa», in CHIOSSO, G., SANI, R. (coord.). *Dizionario Biografico dell'Educazione 1800-2000*, vol. 2, Milano: Editrice Bibliografica, 2013, p. 608-609.

⁴⁸ See FERRARO, M., PIOVANO, L. *Le stagioni di una residenza. Il Castello di Moncalieri attraverso i secoli*, Moncalieri: Amici del real castello e del parco di Moncalieri, 2020.

⁴⁹ The employment of war amputees is a widespread social problem. See POLENGHI, S. «Back to work. Riccardo Galeazzi’s Work for the Mutilated Veterans of the Great War, Between German Model and Italian Approach», in VERPOEST, L., ENGELEN, L., HEYNICKX, R., SCHMIDT, J., UYTENHOVE, P., VERSTRAETE, P. (coord.). *Revival After The Great War: Rebuild, Remember, Repair, Reform*, Leuven: Leuven Univ. Press, 2020, p. 218-237.

⁵⁰ TERESAH, *Il romanzo di Pasqualino*, Firenze: Bemporad & figlio, 1917, p. 37.

will to overcome the obstacle of his condition, his patience, and his «heroic serenity».⁵¹ The soldier is presented as a “saint”, a hero who never gives in to complaining or crying.

A work of this kind and with such aims naturally features one of the best-known disabled figures in Italian history: Enrico Toti. It is a miniature of Toti's “stamp” in the toy box that tells Pasqualino about Toti's adventures and his heroic sacrifice. Toti became an icon because, after losing a leg in a railway accident, he decided to enlist as a volunteer and fight against the Austrians, until he lost his life in battle, hurling his own crutch at the enemy in a final heroic gesture.

The character of Toti, which lies between myth and reality,⁵² is recounted and exalted between the pages because, as the author points out, «there must not be a child in Italy who does not know his history».⁵³ Toti, like the veterans, is portrayed as always cheerful and intent on encouraging others. Even in the account of his last moments, a laugh is described as lighting up his face:

Having lost his rifle, lost his bayonet, the dying Enrico Toti looked around. He was still standing halfway up his body: he was holding himself up by the prodigy of his one leg. All around him, the fallen piled up. He looked around, Enrico Toti, looking for a weapon to fight to the last, to die fighting. And he saw nothing. He only had his crutch under him...

Then he grabbed me and hurled me at the enemy. “Toh! Take that too!” he laughed. And he fell dead among the dead.⁵⁴

Enrico Toti, therefore, uniquely sums up one of the main stereotypes of patriotic heroism,⁵⁵ sealed by his extreme warlike gesture. The myth of Toti, which is also passed down through children's works, nourishes a large number of heroes during and after the war. With its almost religious aura, it is necessary in war propaganda to restore meaning to a sacrifice otherwise difficult to bear.⁵⁶

⁵¹ *Ibidem*, p. 36.

⁵² FABI, L. *Enrico Toti. Una storia tra mito e realtà*, Cremona: Persico, 2005.

⁵³ TERESAH, *Il romanzo di Pasqualino*, Firenze: Bemporad & figlio, 1917, p. 256.

⁵⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 261-262.

⁵⁵ FABI, L. *Enrico Toti. Una storia tra mito e realtà*, Cremona: Persico, 2005, p. 7.

⁵⁶ DEBÈ, A., POLENGHI, S. «Assistance and education of mutilated soldiers of World War I. The Italian case», *History of Education & Children's Literature*, vol. XI, núm. 2 (2016), p. 246.

Pasqualino's novel clearly shows the commitment of the period to involving childhood in a nationalisation practice that also concerns the world of the imaginary, from toys to narratives. This practise creates «effects of multimedia multiplication of the consensual messages hinged on childhood»;⁵⁷ as if «it appeared more and more urgent to burn the stages that lead from the cradle to the battlefield, to the formation of the perfect soldier, ready to sacrifice himself for the fatherland».⁵⁸ Children's literature thus participates fully in this process of «overlapping and identification between the external front and the internal front»⁵⁹ through a strategy of imaginary control and mobilisation.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The examples mentioned throughout this contribution are merely a few of the many works that follow the same narrative rhetoric: the exaltation of the character of the maimed soldier; the portrayal of the character in an 'angelic' and one-dimensional manner; the return to society and the acclaim from others as a hero for the sacrifice made for their homeland.

Certainly, even during the period between the two World Wars, with the advent and decline of the fascist regime, there are works and authors that did not contribute to the logic of consensus. However, these positions themselves in a sort of "free zone"⁶⁰ and are distinguished from the dominant trends.⁶¹ The representation of disability that emerges from the works in this period appears to almost homogeneously centre around the exaltation of characters with an exemplary and ideological function in an Italian literature that slowly manages to move away from educational moralism linked to specific political and cultural conditions.

⁵⁷ GIBELLI, A. *Il popolo bambino: infanzia e nazione dalla grande guerra a Salò*, Torino: Einaudi, 2005, p. 14.

⁵⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 34. See also, TODARO, L. «Tra pedagogia e propaganda: stereotipi narrativi, clichés letterari e modelli educativi nel racconto per l'infanzia in Italia negli anni della Grande Guerra», *Annali online della Didattica e della Formazione Docente*, vol. 8, núm. 12 (2016), p. 189-204.

⁵⁹ CAMPAGNARO, M. «Sulle "soglie" della Grande guerra. Visioni e rappresentazioni nella letteratura per l'infanzia», in CAMPAGNARO, M. (coord.). *La Grande Guerra raccontata ai ragazzi*, Roma: Donzelli, 2015, p. 28.

⁶⁰ Cf. BOERO, P., DE LUCA, C. *La letteratura per l'infanzia*, Roma-Bari: Laterza, 1995, p. 190.

⁶¹ FAVA, S. *Percorsi critici di letteratura per l'infanzia tra le due guerre*, Milano: V&P, 2004, p. 182.

This period marked a pivotal moment in the social history of the recognition of disability, granting it a social dignity never before possessed. Although still primarily associated with a specific group of people with disabilities, namely war veterans, this historical phase contributed to the emergence of a different perception of the disabled body.

Until then, disability had mainly been viewed with compassion or disgust; however, the experience of the world wars would lead to changes in orthopedics, medicine, science, social welfare policies, and also in the collective imagination and mindset. Furthermore, this historical moment contributed to definitively recognizing children's literature as playing a key role in guiding the consciences of younger generations towards desired values and ideals.

The maimed individuals suffered in their private lives from the need to accept their new condition and reintegrate into society, often facing an infantilizing or feminizing 'regression' that characterized the image of these disabled men. However, the association of these men with the world of the weak, and children in particular, fostered a public awareness of the issue of disability. However, the emotional and personal experience, with few exceptions, does not emerge in children's literature, which presents a seamless image of the war veteran. Children's literature has, therefore, contributed to a positive resemanticization of the wounded body, alongside posters, postcards, and even advertising.