

# DIGITAL WOMEN'S LITERATURE IN THE ITALIAN HIGH SCHOOLS: CANON AND INVISIBLE FEMINIST WRITERS IN STUDY PLANS

## LITERATURA FEMENINA DIGITAL EN EL BACHILLERATO ITALIANO: CANON Y ESCRITORAS FEMINISTAS INVISIBLES EN LOS PLANES DE ESTUDIO

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### ABSTRACT

The inadequate representation of Italian women writers in the Italian school curriculum has been a topic of concern over the last few years, raising questions about their exclusion from the literary school canon despite their contributions. Through an examination of the relationships between gender, literature, and education, altogether with the feminist critique work carried out since the 1970s, this paper seeks to explore digital learning environments that promote gender-related reflections in Italian secondary schools and to examine key factors that have contributed to the invisibility of Italian women writers in educational contexts. Through the specific quantitative analysis of the digital textbook *Letteratura Oggi*, tomes 3A and 3B, intended for the students of the Italian lyceum last year, this article addresses the presence of any improvements made for major equity between writers.

**Keywords:** literary canon, feminist criticism, women writers, secondary school curriculum, digital books

### RESUMEN

La escasa representación de las escritoras italianas en los planes de estudio de las escuelas italianas ha sido motivo de preocupación en los últimos años, por lo que se han planteado cuestiones sobre su exclusión del canon literario escolar, a pesar de sus evidentes contribuciones. A través de un examen de las relaciones entre género, literatura y educación, junto con el trabajo de crítica feminista realizado desde la década de 1970, este artículo pretende explorar los entornos digitales de aprendizaje que promueven las reflexiones relacionadas con el género en las escuelas de educación secundaria, así como

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examinar los factores clave que han contribuido a la invisibilidad de las escritoras italianas en los contextos educativos. A través del análisis cuantitativo específico de los tomos 3A y 3B del libro de texto digital *Letteratura Oggi*, destinado a los estudiantes del liceo italiano de último curso, este artículo aborda la presencia de mejoras realizadas para una mayor equidad entre escritoras y escritores.

**Palabras clave:** canon literario, crítica feminista, escritoras, plan de estudios de secundaria, libros digitales

## 1. Introduction

About a century ago Virginia Woolf, while secluded in a room, contemplated her womanhood declaring that “[...] it is still true that a woman, to write exactly as she wishes, has to face many difficulties”<sup>2</sup> (Virginia Woolf, 2022, p. 37). She reflected, mainly, on the marginalisation of women writers throughout history and the obstruction of opportunities for emancipation, as women were still stigmatised mothers and housekeepers committed to raising children and care for their families. These social conventions have been perpetuated over time creating barriers that resemble metaphorical “glass ceilings” in the hierarchical societies, which remain difficult to shatter. Fortunately, there has been a significant change to this extent even if it is still imbalanced (Criado-Perez, 2020; Espinosa & Ferreira, 2022): women in Western countries are now in charge in places of authority, they enjoy greater freedom of expression and successfully pursue careers even in scientific fields, traditionally dominated by men.

However, a lack of references marks a significant gap within the Italian literature context. Although in 1926 Grazia Deledda was awarded the Nobel Prize, the uniqueness of this fact discloses the evidence that Italian women writers’ heritage continues to be ignored in institutional places such as schools and universities causing inaccurate historical claims, and their contribution to the country’s culture is often relegated to small hints or short paragraphs in textbooks. Certainly, the issue of silencing women and driving them aside still has repercussions today and demands deeper inquiries: why is there an inadequate representation of women writers in the Italian school curriculum? Why does this curriculum still fails to fully acknowledge its importance as a prominent group with newfound literary influence? What are the main reasons because of which women writers have undergone such exclusion over time? This article delves into these inquiries by exploring their prior determining variables. It also seeks to examine digital educational contexts that encourage reflection on

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<sup>2</sup> Translated by the author.

gender issues, exploring the intersections of gender, literature, and education, and addressing the way women writers are represented in the Italian school curriculum.

One of the explanations relies on the so-called literary canon, whose nature and definition have been debated since the XIX century. The second part addresses the importance of the work done by female scholars and critics from Western countries since the 1970s during the second wave of feminism, a time in which women tried to understand the reasons behind this marginalisation. The last part of the article refers to the process of digitalisation of the Italian school institution and the quantitative analysis of the two-volume digital series textbook entitled *Letteratura Oggi* intended for students' lyceum last year.

Starting from the enduring literary canon debate, Harold Bloom's essay *The Western Canon* (1995) brings to life a reflection on those authors, 26 in total, worthy of inclusion among the "great classics". Even if these include women's names as Jane Austen, Emily Dickinson, George Elliot and Virginia Woolf, the author is reluctant to the opening of the literary canon by those metaphorically placed in the "school of resentment", as this act could lead to its deconstruction. In contrast, Bloom attempts, rather, to retrieve the now salient and acclaimed authors that make the canon permanent and inviolable (Bloom, 1995, pp. 13-41). This conception of the literary canon and its male-dominated transmission is also due to historical and societal facts as well explained by Maria-Mercè Marçal (2004), who claims that it is the patriarchy that suppress(ed) the creative power of the female principle, contributing to a male-dominated cultural and family genealogy. Even though the author frequently claims to be objective and omniscient, history—, which is understood as a memory that helps people understand the past and identify themselves as members of a community and culture—has typically been told from a male point of view. (Marçal & Ibarz, 2004, pp. 139-140).

The acknowledgement of this lack of feminine genealogy is discussed in the second part of the article. Such absence has raised concerns among women scholars of Western countries since the 1960s regarding the literary pieces written by women; it has been like an excavation, to uncover the merits that the critics—mostly men—have excluded from the literary canon; this issue has involved also the Nobel Prize merit (Engdahl, 2013), and all those writers who were deemed peripheral or colonial, neglected, underappreciated, or even forgotten (Guillory, 1993). Henceforth, with the rise of women's studies in Italy starting in the 1970s, in a climate of big changes on not only the social, but also educational and political fronts, the question of the canon became an object of interest: should it be expanded, overturned

or destroyed? Anna Maria Crispino (2003) states that, being always male-dominated, the literary canon attracted the most diverse attitudes, from abnegation to the desire to expand it or to create a new one that would include all marginalised authors, amongst them, women writers. The final part of the article addresses an effective operation to challenge the canonisation of knowledge dominated by men, raising questions about the almost absolute absence of women in the textbooks of literary history over time (Gualtieri, 2011; Sapegno, 2011) and in other types of textbooks found in the lyceums after the arrival of digital humanities (Cuna, 2020); doing so ultimately along with the analysis of the digitalised series textbook.

The representation of women in the Italian school curriculum, particularly within the literary canon, has historically been limited. This “occulted curriculum” (Carrasco Bengoa, Cristina et al., 2000) relies on a term that perfectly describes women’s marginalisation within society: it emerges from the neologism *cryptoginia*, coined from the union of two Greek words, *crypto*—hidden—and *gyné*—woman—(Pozo-Sánchez & Padilla-Carmona, 2021, p. 175), indicating the widespread phenomenon throughout history and the various cultures of women’s and female reference concealment, especially in the most prestigious social contexts. This particular attention on the issue started in the Italian context, according to Cristina Gamberi (2014), with the Montessori pedagogue Gianini Belotti, who criticised girls’ subalternation to boys in her *Dalla parte delle bambine (On the Little Girls’ Side)* in 1973. Since then many studies have been conducted on the subject of women’s presence in literary, historical, and scientific textbooks, as well as of the gender stereotypes that exist within them (Gamberi, 2014, p. 13-33).

Tackling this disparity is crucial as it has the potential to reshape educational practices and contribute to a more equitable representation of gender in literature; and, certainly, it is important to draw attention to studies conducted on textbooks used in primary school that highlight the presence of gender stereotypes since childhood. According to research conducted (Biemmi, 2009; Leonelli, 2011), these books tended to reflect and perpetuate gender differences, often based on biological assumptions. This involves discussing discriminatory practices and societal norms that shape gender biases, leading to unequal treatment, discrimination, and exclusion. It has also been observed that teachers tend to follow teaching approaches influenced by gender stereotypes during school and at university, thus conveying a stereotyped view of society to their students and creating “formative

segregation”<sup>3</sup> (Biemmi & Leonelli, 2017). According to Gigliola Ciummei Corduas (2014), this happens because “teachers, in their willingness to confront the many ways in which one can live one’s gender belonging, must rethink knowledge and relationships starting from their own identity as women and men”<sup>4</sup> (Corduas, 2014, p. 51). Considering this and that women have not been included in the canon of literature, educational institutions should convey to students respect for the differences and a sense of equality between men and women in the workplace and at home, with the aim of destroying the “glass ceiling” that for too long has been trapping women. In this way, schools should be considered a foundational setting where gender identity can exist

## **2. The Feminisation of the Canon: A Historical Excavation and Feminism Critics Revendications**

The term *canon*, originally restricted to the canon of Sacred Scripture recognised by the Church, became widely used in academic circles in the latter part of the XX century to denote the corpus of secular literary works that the established cultural authority considered deserving of being read and conveyed. According to Fatih Zakaria (2011, p. 122), religion and literature have interacted to create literary canons considered “secular”, with religious influences mostly starting in the past.

This secular canon, which was also impacted by intellectual movements and prevailing tastes of the time, established all the texts deemed canonical and worthy of conveyance; hence, the formation of the literary canon has been inextricably linked to educational curricula since ancient times, raising ongoing debates about how aesthetic judgments, cultural values, and social biases affect the ways these works are preserved and taught: every time that artists, critics, philosophers, or theologians attempt to fit an inherited corpus of writings, practices, or ideas to their imagined present and future cultural demands, canon becomes a topic of discussion, and “symptomatic of certain anxiety associated with the perceived disunity of contemporary society” (Guillory, 1993, p. 34). Besides, according to Frank M. Turner (cited in Gorak, 1991, p. 154-70), this fierce debate upon canon traces back to the Victorian era (1837-1901), as it presented some resonations with the literary canon formation: some generations of Victorian school teachers started to query the inflexibility of the canon, claiming the necessity of an opened one in favour of a more dynamic and

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<sup>3</sup> Translated by the author.

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responsive learning to be studied at school, as this stiffness could have endangered the growth of renewed established literary institutions.

This debate continued despite its contentious nature, and the literary canon's historical setting eventually reflected the prevailing cultural attitude towards gender narratives: even though it has been called a statistical list, it should be a flexible corpus of work that changes as society does since diversity seems to be a key component in the process by which work becomes great (Fishelov, 2008, p. 340). It also serves as a reminder that our perception of great literature is dynamic and subject to shifts in the views and values of our society. Nevertheless, as the paragraphs that follow demonstrate, this problem resulted in a notable underrepresentation of women in what has come to be regarded as "classic" literature, with a period of widespread revendications beginning in the 1960s in North America and extending throughout Western countries in the following years.

### **3. Revealing Empowerment in Second-Wave Feminism and Women's Participation**

#### **3.1. Feminist Literary Progression: From Challenging Genres to Shaping the Canon**

This section addresses feminist literary progression, exploring how it shaped the canon by challenging literary genres. The role of women writers in the literary canon highlights a history of discrimination and silenced academic accomplishments (Pozo-Sánchez & Padilla-Carmona, 2021; Russ & Crispin, 2018), a situation which is rooted in a patriarchal system. Women's education, even in the nineteenth century, was still deemed not comparable to that of men, and this conviction had a resonance in some academic circles (Avolio et al., 2024) until the end of the 1960s; in this quarrel, modern women have been depicted as marginalised writers in the literary field whose discrimination was primarily due to their social and gender identity. Joanna Russ (2018) highlights that women in the past were often excluded from literacy or genres that were considered worth publishing because of their perceived less talent. This was due to challenges resulted from writing, raising a family, and taking care of the house. Publishers also refused women's writing, as was the case of Emily Brontë, claiming that this way young women would focus on having babies instead. Additionally, women's career aspirations were often associated with male penis envy (Joanna Russ & Jessa Crispin, 2018, pp. 9-33).

Over the years, many scholars wondered why, among these factors of exclusion and patriarchal power, the definition of the literary canon and the selection of books reckoned canonical were the prerogatives of exclusively male scholars. This so-called *élite* class of European, male, and white individuals was the one that shaped the canon by imposing its political interests, values, and ideology on it, also establishing the literary criteria through which to evaluate a piece of writing (Abrams, 2004). To fully address these circumstances, Lillian Robinson (1983) advocates increased inclusion of women authors in the literary canon that has been inherently shaped by the perspective of privileged gentlemen, who judged women's works through their social class and gender perspectives, so "it is probably quite accurate to think of the canon as an entirely gentlemanly artefact" (Robinson, 1983, p. 84) that has foreseen not only women's socioeconomic status to be undermined, but also their literary merit.

To face this *élite* and white male-dominated literary canon precursors, a response came from emerging feminist critics from the 1960s in America that tried to subvert the way literary genres were intended. Its origins trace back to the feminism of the 1800s and 1900s, where first revendications of women's rights are reported by one of the most important feminist writers of all time, Mary Wollstonecraft, whose attempts to appropriate Enlightenment's reason language for her sex is one of the themes displayed in her work *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* in 1792. Here Mary Wollstonecraft strove to overcome a male-dominated culture that yet resulted in some echoed alienation, repression, and division, hindering the loss of feminine's inheritance and portraying herself as a middle-class woman who deserves to be treated equally within the literature production environment. Mary Jacobus (1979) noticed that Mary Wollstonecraft's insightful and ground-breaking essay would serve as the foundation for many women's right to publish their works, taking part in the greater critical discourse regarding women's representation in literature.

Thereupon, Virginia Woolf's essay *A Room of One's Own* (1929) highlights the fragmented writing of women in patriarchal societies, advocating for equal rights and inclusion in the literary canon. Here Woolf claims the need for a literal and symbolic space for women's literature, transcending social conventions that see women as passive recipients of ideas and relationships, and this book continues to inspire women and men alike who experience marginalisation. For this reason, Mary Wollstonecraft and Virginia Woolf have always influenced feminist movement(s) in due time. Before a third wave of feminism emerged in the early 1990s, a second wave saw a phase of enlivening feminist activity spread throughout



America and Europe in the early 1960s and 1970s, which lasted for about two decades, bringing attention to the underrepresentation of female authors in the literary canon.

### **3.2. Feminising the Canon: Tracing the Evolution of Women's Writing through Feminist Critique and Literary Challenges**

The second wave of feminism, according to Pilar Godayol (2021, pp. XVII-XVIII), encouraged early interpersonal and literary interactions between women, and challenged the millennia-old forced seclusion of their creative and leisure pursuits, thereby supporting the feminist newborn editorial exchange of ideas, concepts, knowledge, and experiences; it also gave rise to a significant corpus of writings thanks to the first translations, to their circulation, and to the feminist press, which provided a positive impact on publishing the most illuminating works, ranging from the suffragette movement's distribution of pamphlets to the feminist self-consciousness raising groups' symbolic readings.

Women writers often see their work overshadowed by the established literary canon. Their activities are often seen as a practical response to social norms rather than a pure literary achievement. Therefore, women's literary products are often considered more as social interaction tools than as literary works. To this extent, Janet Todd (1991) states that feminist literary history focuses on how women actively engage the culture, by influencing and being influenced mutually in different ways and across different periods, involving the mediation between individual subjectivity and the role its historical context played in the construction of the culture itself. In such a manner, the author presents the relationship between language and the consciousness of women as a "writer, speaker, reader or auditor" (Janet Todd, 1991, p. 18). In contrast, critics like Toril Moi (2006) argue that a masculine approach to women writers is oversimplified, as they are often seen as a separate group in a patriarchal culture. In contrast, Alice Eardley (2007) argues that analysing women's writing within the context of male writers does not help to understand their nature.

A key point about feminist criticism, remarkably, refers to the shifted focus on women's literature with the American critic Elaine Showalter, who in her work *Towards A Feminist Poetics* (1979) discussed an original analysis of women's writing activity in a hitherto male-dominated setting in which she defined gynocriticism from the French word *la gynocritique*. Instead of adapting male models and theories, the goal of gynocritics is to create a female framework for the analysis of women's literature starting from the study of the female experience and focusing on their experiences and perspectives toward the comprehension of the realm of women's authorship on its terms. Despite the attempts



to fit women writers into male-defined frameworks, gynocritical analysis foresees new women-focused models of interpretation and evaluation to emerge in the fields of history, anthropology, psychology, and sociology, as a separate and distinct group; in such a manner, feminist research has given rise to theories of a female subculture in the relationships between women “as mothers, daughters, sisters, and friends” (Showalter, 1979, p. 28). Nonetheless, despite this men’s historical predominance over the literary field, feminist theory responded to the stereotypes about women endured by these male-authored narratives, which intended woman “prescribed [as] a Perfect Lady, an Angel in the House, contentedly submissive to men, but strong in her inner purity and religiosity, queen in her own realm of the Home” (Showalter, 1977, p. 14); thus recalling the concept of the ideal Victorian woman criticised by Virginia Woolf who, finally, killed the Angel of the House (Virginia Woolf, 2022).

However, Showalter’s assertions do not align with Toril Moi’s critique: in her book chapter “Reflexiones teóricas”, Toril Moi (2006) questions Showalter’s interpretation of gynocriticism as it intends to establish a separate canon of women’s literature rather than dismantle existing ones; this approach appears to be contradictory and inadequately theorised, since the assumption of a new literary canon need not be any less repressive than the old one, and the feminist critics’ ongoing task should rather be paying close attention to the voice of the woman and her experiences; Showalterian gynocriticism may encounter a dilemma which arises from the tension between feminists challenging traditional theories, often attributed to men, and those of humanists, advocating more assertive political views, hence creating a complex dynamic within literary criticism itself.

As noted, the historical excavation of the feminisation of the literary canon reveals a complex interplay between feminist critics and the entrenched male-dominated literary canon formation. Yet, thanks to the feminist press and the translations of what were considered the “great books”, the feminisation of the canon started its formation, even if the struggle to redesign it involved challenging exclusionary practices and redefining the very nature of women’s writing within the broader context of literary traditions around America and Western countries.

### 3.3. Evolution of Italian Feminism: Pioneers, Challenges, and Literary Resonance

In Italy, today, mainstream culture and political representations still perpetuate and reinforce, willingly or not, stereotypes of the feminine and of women associated with care, beauty, seduction, and the role of a mother, coming along with the high percentage of ongoing gender-based domestic violence.

It was upon this perspective on the women's lives condition that Sibilla Aleramo, in 1906, published one of the most influential novels on this theme, *Una Donna* (A Woman), a quite autobiographical work in which the protagonist becomes aware of her state of subordination to her spouse and attempt to escape it. This book sheds light on the state of women at the beginning of the twenty-first century and Aleramo questions why, even if nurtured by an affectionate mother, a man may exhibit violent tendencies; Cristina Caracchini (2019, pp. 41-60) also queries why he might turn up violent with his mother, who imparts values of respect for others and makes significant sacrifices.

For these issues, this book is considered the very first attempt at social feminism that judges the condition of women's safety as inappropriate and condemns the State for not having adequate laws to prevent dangerous situations; later, it will become a manifesto of the feminist wave(s) that will spread throughout Italy; and even if since the 1970s Italian feminism appeared capillary and variegated, the common underlying idea was that women started to become aware of themselves, their bodies, and their sexuality, challenging their sole role in motherhood and domestic management to embrace a more active engagement in society.

The convergence of ideas of different feminist groups impacted society, especially at the end of the 1960s, when several social rebellions took place, notably in the university, demanding a more democratic school system. Carla Lonzi was one of the various prominent figures, considered an uncomfortable feminist and very outspoken in her statements. Carla Lonzi not only entered in contact with American feminism during a trip to the U.S. but was also responsible for founding the Women's Writing Revolt group that disseminated all the works she produced: worth mentioning *Sputiamo su Hegel* (Let's Spit on Hegel), 1974, *La donna clitoridea e la donna vaginale* (The Clitoridian Woman and the Vaginal Woman), 1974, and *E' già politica* (It is already politics), 1977; politically and pro-Marxist works that include sexuality and tabooed women body parts, all loudly denounce the precarious condition of women in all social, political and economic contexts. In contrast to European and overseas feminism,

Olivia Guaraldo (2023, pp. 138-139) claims that the feminism proposed by Lonzi is defined as “separatist” as it envisages the total exclusion of men and accuses philosophy, especially the Hegelian one, of consolidating and ennobling patriarchy by declaring female difference as complementary to male. Therefore, Cinzia Arruzza (2017) claims that this separatism should be considered a response to women’s exclusion instead of an “imaginary that separates women from themselves” (Arruzza & Cirillo, 2017, p. 22).

Even if from a different perspective, it is worth noting that Goliarda Sapienza, although she did not define herself as a true feminist, achieved success later after her most important work, *Arte della Gioia* (Art of Joy), which was concluded in 1974 but published entirely only in 1998. Born in Catania, she moved to Rome, the city scene of socialist and feminist revolutions along with Milan, where she also wrote works of Marxist origin—reporting Laura Ferro’s words, in her *Art of Joy* Goliarda Sapienza protests against “[...] [the] equalisation of woman and man that leads to the annulment of the female being, to the dissolution of the characteristics of a woman in the adaptation to the rules of patriarchy” (Ferro, 2019, p. 218).

In conclusion, these women writers share stories about women’s conditions in Italy even from different times and viewpoints. Aleramo’s early writing, Lonzi’s bold expressions, and Sapienza’s unique perspectives reflect how the evolving narrative of gender dynamics in Italy has changed over time. Their works are not just academic discussions; they tell women’s stories and struggles, underlining their challenges and victories over history. As the discourse continues to evolve, women writers are still working to be widely recognised and integrated into academic, educational, and societal settings. Therefore, it is essential to analyse how these challenges manifest themselves and are perceived throughout the school environment.

#### **4. Integrating Women into Italian Secondary Digital Literature with a Focus on Gender Discrimination in Literary Canon**

##### **4.1. Literary Canon and the School Curriculum: Revision and Social Exclusion**

The complex issue of gender biases and social exclusion arises when women and gender discrimination intersect with the literary canon and the school curriculum. John Guillory (1993) thoroughly explains that the literary canon impacts syllabus options, curricula, and choices at all educational levels, and necessitates establishing a premise regarding the terms *syllabus* and *canon*: the former denotes a corpus of texts for study given in class, whereas the latter is not readable to anyone, as it “is never other than an imaginary list” (Guillory, 1993, p. 30). In the current institutional context, revising the literary canon aims to shift the focus

of reading lists and curricula from older works to more modern texts written by women, minorities, and other underrepresented writers to reflect better diverse social identities and perspectives in the literature students read and study.

By Guillory, Mauricio Aguilar Ciciliano (2013) elucidates that, in the context of the school, the term *canon* refers to a category that describes the processes through which certain literary texts are incorporated into official curricula and others are left out of school knowledge as considered “marginal literary text” (Aguilar Ciciliano, 2013, p. 176), as well as he states that the results demonstrate how the establishment of the school literary canon turns into an ideological process whereby some social, cultural, and political organisations come together to preserve the dominance of certain groups and hegemonic powers. Jan Gorak (1991) adds that humanities teachers must endorse a limited number of works considered “literature” while concealing how these works serve as the foundation for the curriculum (Gorak, 1991, pp. 5-6). Furthermore, it can be argued that certain writings deemed worthy, even if non-canonical, should still be introduced in schools for study, and this implies that a wider range of literature ought to be taught in schools. This viewpoint challenges the established biases in the literature canon. It promotes a more thorough and equitable representation of various voices and narratives within the educational framework, especially the ones of women writers. As this discussion highlights the ongoing discourse surrounding the literary canon and the efforts made to diversify school curricula, it is appropriate to address the Italian school curriculum based on the national indications for lyceums, as by doing so, it can be assessed how these institutional frameworks reflect or challenge the broader discussions on canon formation, the inclusion of women writers’ marginalised voices for the promotion of more inclusive literary education.

#### **4.2. Overview of the Italian School Curriculum: National Indications for the Final Year of Secondary School Lyceum**

Shifting the focus to the Italian school curriculum, the National Indications for Lyceums, as stipulated in Decree Law 211 of 2010, form an integral part of the Lyceums Regulations. These indications, outlined in Annex A, refer to the cultural, professional and educational aspects of students’ curriculum, specifying that the profile of students enrolled in school courses is delineated by defined learning objectives and also transversal knowledge across all the disciplines. Specifically, the Directions and Profile sections provide the framework within which educational institutions create their curricula, the teachers organise their lesson plans,

and students meet the specific learning goals, acquiring the competencies expected by high school education and its articulations.<sup>5</sup>

The text continues by stating that each discipline should encompass the knowledge required for ongoing competencies development within the broader framework of that specific discipline (Ministry of Education, 2010, p. 3). These guidelines are outlined for each lyceum pathway (six in total) and each discipline, together with the topics to be covered throughout the five-year school cycle.<sup>6</sup> The cultural axes<sup>7</sup> represent a timely attempt to verticalise the study curriculum and to achieve a core of knowledge and skills common to all high schools (Ministry of Education, 2010, p. 4).

Regarding Italian language and literature, similar suggested contents are provided for the final year of schooling across all lyceum paths, yet both the school as an educational institution and the teacher have a certain autonomy in choosing syllabi that align with effective student learning; in detail, the sections dedicated to the Italian language and literature specify the authors deemed representative of the Italian literature heritage. Upon close examination to this extent, the lines on page 9 state that: “other authors and texts, in addition to those explicitly mentioned, chosen autonomously by the teacher based on deemed effective paths and the specificity of individual high school directions, will describe the literary *panorama*”<sup>8</sup> (Ministry of Education, 2010, p. 12). Continuing the reading, and specifically the passage concerning the fifth year, it is emphasised that “due to the 20th-century resonances of his work and, at the same time, the complexity of his position in European literature of the 19th century, Leopardi will be studied at the beginning of the last year” (Ministry of Education, 2010, p. 12). Then the text highlights the importance of studying the works of Pascoli and D’Annunzio, as well as the need to delve into the representation of the “real” in Verga and the deconstruction of novel forms in Pirandello

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<sup>5</sup> According to Presidential Decree 275/99, educational institutions that have been granted legal personality and autonomy in accordance with paragraph 1 and those that already possess these attributes are entitled to organisational and instructional autonomy that aligns with the goals of the national education system and national level standards, provided that the latter also applies to the sizing operations mentioned in paragraph 4. The school service can benefit from organisational autonomy in many ways, including increased flexibility, diversity, efficiency, and effectiveness, and the best possible use of structures and resources, including the introduction and adoption of cutting-edge technologies. Teaching autonomy is the ability of a school to use its own innovative teaching practices, technologies, and methodologies without relying on the government. Instead, it can follow state regulations and use its own unique set of procedures and techniques.

<sup>6</sup> Almost every secondary school path comprises distinct years division, namely the first biennium, the second biennium, and the fifth year.

<sup>7</sup> Teachers use cultural axes as unifying elements for diversity (epistemological) and integration (methodological), aiming to increase shared, diverse key competencies for learners’ basic and cultural orientation in the future.

<sup>8</sup> The following citations are translated by the author.

and Svevo: it should be pointed out that all these cited authors are men. The paragraph concludes by mentioning that “within the 20th century and up to the thresholds of the present, the course of poetry, starting with the decisive experiences of Ungaretti, Saba, and Montale [...], [and] the narrative path, from the neorealist season to the present, will encompass readings of significant authors such as Gadda, Fenoglio, Calvino, and Levi, and can be supplemented by other authors, such as Pavese, Pasolini, Morante, Meneghello, with a final recommendation for reading pages of the best essayistic and journalistic prose” (Ministry of Education, 2010, pp. 12-13). Notably, in the concluding part of the text, Elsa Morante, a remarkable writer, is only briefly mentioned in parentheses without specifying her name and being suggested as a possible alternative within the narrative trajectory, alongside various other authors.

As noted, the section dedicated to Italian writers hardly ever mentions a woman writer, even though, especially from the 20th century onwards, many of them have made significant contributions to Italian literary and cultural heritage. The sole reference to Elsa Morante raises awareness of the need for a more inclusive approach in acknowledging the role of women writers within Italian literature; it also calls attention to the gender bias throughout the recommended study list, urging for a more diverse representation of Italian authors. Regarding this issue, the Ministry of Education received several inquiries on the absence of women writers and Southern authors within the National indications.<sup>9</sup> Even if the protocol note replied emphasising the freedom of choice granted to the teacher and the teaching board in selecting the most suitable didactic content for students, in light of the current circumstances in Italy, where gender discrimination is evident, it would be appropriate to reconsider the approach to teaching by adopting a gender perspective and more equal National indications, expanding therefore the syllabi concerning non-canonical writers. This would enable addressing and reducing the gender gap that has become entrenched over time, offering students the opportunity to explore the world around them with a fresh perspective.

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<sup>9</sup> As outlined in Protocol Note no. 25184 dated December 23, 2019, the National Directions responded to such inquiries by reminding schoolteachers' board and individual teachers about the presence of a non-prescriptive framework that allows them to prepare literature curricula independently while accounting for regional variations and specific features. The text also claims that, given the large number of writers who made contributions to establishing the nationally acknowledged and valued literary and artistic heritage, the academic institutions offering all secondary school programs are invited to create a study, research, and some educational comparison situations for teachers and students that also encompass Southern authors and female authors as a recommendation.

In conclusion, the evolving role of Italian secondary schools in the 21st-century education landscape demands a holistic approach that embraces a more representative literary curriculum, especially in the digital environment that has been evolving over the last years, significantly affecting how students learn at school.

#### **4.3. Navigating the Digital Revolution: Challenges, Innovations, and the Evolving Role of Italian Secondary Schools**

The digital revolution continues to accelerate, and schools have faced the challenge of adapting their curricula to encompass evolving technological skills and the changing nature of student interactions and learning experiences. In this regard, Giuseppe Langella (2017) states that, whether positive or negative, the phenomenon has such anthropological and cultural importance that it is impossible to ignore it, and that teaching literature in the same way that was effectively taught before these digital devices were invented is almost impossible (Langella, 2017, pp. 5-6).

In contrast to the rest of Europe, the first digitisation attempts in the Italian education system only began in 2007, marking a significant shift towards integrating technology into teaching and school administration. Afterwards, Decree-Law No 1791 of 18 October 2012 (Government of Italy, 2012) amended Article 15 of Decree-Law No 112 of 25 June 2008, stating that the teachers' board will adopt exclusively digital or mixed books for the 2014-2015 school year, consisting of digital or paper-format texts and supplementary digital content accessible on the web. However, the digital transition in Italian schools has experienced a strong acceleration and diffusion since 2015 with Law 107/2015, Article 1, paragraph 56, along with the implementation of the 35 actions of the National Digital School Plan (PNSD in Italian), which was approved and combined with the European structural funds of the National Operational Programme 2014-2020. The PNSD<sup>10</sup> is a key component of Law 107/2015 and an operational vision that places the innovation of the educational system and the opportunities presented by digital education at the centre, representing the

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<sup>10</sup> Under the PNSD, schools were provided with action plans for multimedia interactive whiteboards (LIM Action), computer equipment for didactic experimentation (CI@ssi 2.0 Action), the establishment of WiFi networks, the presence of a digital animator in each school and teachers' training courses. These initiatives collectively formed the framework of the School 2.0 approach, seeking to integrate digital components, such as e-books and digital extensions alongside traditional printed textbooks, resulting in a series of innovations: the publishing industry established digital platforms, many school buildings started having classrooms and wireless connections, high-performance technological equipment and devices, from IWBs to tablets as such were entering classrooms, and also the setting of the classrooms themselves changed to adapt to the new learning environment to embrace these digital innovations.



government's position on the most significant challenges directed to the public system (Ministry of Education and Research, 2015, p. 6).

The digitalisation would inevitably affect teaching practice and question the following: were the teachers prepared to cope with such changes? Were the methodologies appropriate? Are they now? ICT (Information and Communication Technology)<sup>11</sup> usage has become indispensable as a support to the didactic in the classroom. In a society where students grow up in a technologically driven environment, educators and teachers must familiarise themselves with digital devices to understand the learners and implement ICT-based teaching methodologies. To prepare students for the demands of twenty-first-century citizenship, schools must acknowledge and adapt to the digital reality that is already prevalent and will persist in the future, imprinting students with skills that encompass not only technical but also cognitive and ethical aspects.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, as stated by Paola Bonvecchio (2017), in an area as delicate as teaching-learning, it is necessary to completely involve oneself in this fresh environment and utilise its tools. Still, it is also true that teachers are occasionally unmotivated and receive insufficient support when it comes to gaining the familiarity necessary to apply these means (Bonvecchio, 2017, p. 63), especially after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, as many teachers felt lost and overburdened with work and without the appropriate skills to deal with such an emergency situation (Canals-Botines et al., 2021; Grassi et al., 2017; Leproni, 2021;). As a result, due to challenges in administering distance learning, issues emerged affecting both instructional management and student learning objectives. In response, various webinars and teacher training sessions were organised to address this emergency and to teach all school educators how to handle learning and direct communication platforms while protecting the privacy of their students. Therefore, as pointed out by Gino Roncaglia (2020), the pandemic emergency has marked a turning point between the old and the new school: experimenting with new teaching strategies,

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<sup>11</sup> The term *information and communication technology* (ICT) is a general term that includes technologies used for information gathering, processing, storing, and sharing. It consists of different networks, hardware, software, and other digital tools that make data creation, access, and exchange easier. A wide variety of technologies, including computers, smartphones, the internet, software, and communication networks are all included in ICT.

<sup>12</sup> To foster educators and teachers' digital competencies, the European Reference Framework for Digital Teacher Competencies, or DigCompEdu, is based on work conducted in 2017 by the Joint Research Center (JRC) of the European Commission under the auspices of the Directorate General for Education, Youth, and Sports. The goal of the DigCompEdu framework, now at version 2.2, is to provide a coherent model that enables educators and teachers who are members of European Union member states to assess their own level of "digital pedagogical competency" and further develop it in accordance with a uniform model of content and acquisition levels: this framework outlines 6 areas and 6 levels of digital competence: A1 Novice, A2 Explorer, B1 Experimenter, B2 Expert, C1 Leader, and C2 Pioneer.

reconsidering classroom environments, allowing for more flexibility, and working in small groups offer fresh possibilities and challenges for a comprehensive rethinking of education in general (Roncaglia, 2020, p. 203).

#### **4.4. Italy's School Plan 4.0: A Decade of Educational Evolution**

As observed, Italy entered a decade of educational evolution, and investments under the PNSD continued to shape learning environments. These initiatives have redesigned the learning spaces in many schools, and the pandemic experience further increased the use of digital and blended learning. Post-pandemic, the Ministry of Education has aimed to invest EUR 2.1 billion under the plan School 4.0, initiative of the National Plan for Recovery and Resilience (PNRR in Italian) to foster the digitisation of the school and to enhance traditional classrooms and turn them into innovative learning environments with laboratories for future digital professions within 2025. The underlying purpose of School 4.0, endorsed by Education Ministerial Decree No. 161 on June 14, 2022, is to establish hybrid learning environments, and blending the instructional features of creatively designed physical spaces with the potential offered by digital settings (Futura, 2022, p. 3); it is meant to support educational institutions' actions under organisational, management, and teaching autonomy.<sup>13</sup> Simultaneously, under other specific financial compliances, the Ministry planned to promote a comprehensive digital transition training program for all school staff.<sup>14</sup> It is still uncertain what impact this plan will have in the upcoming years and what the outcomes will be.

To this regard, Martina Bastianello (2023, pp. 125-130) expresses her concern as, despite this plan not only outlines the specific distribution of funds but also presents a peculiar vision for the school that one may support or oppose, it still has not been examined or debated in recent months. Besides, there are some critical points regarding its applicability in a dynamic and complex context such as that of Italian schools, which in recent years have witnessed massive early school leaving and the so-called *digital divide*, an issue that Gennaro Balzano

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<sup>13</sup> The intervention consists of four sections: the "Background" section outlines Italy's digital transformation process, the second and the third section "Framework" provides design principles for Next Generation Classrooms and Labs, and the forth section "Roadmap" outlines steps for implementing the School 4.0 investment line (pp.3-4).

<sup>14</sup> Among the various regulations proposed by the PNRR are the Digital Education Action Plan 2021-2027: Resetting Education and Training for the Digital Era, and Article 24-bis of Law 233/2021, which provides for the updating of the National Training Plan for teachers at all levels of education. This plan should include, among its national priorities, the approach to learning computer programming (coding) and digital didactics, in line with the PNRR investment "New Skills and New Languages"; finally, there is the updating and integration of computer programming and digital skills in the specific learning and competence objectives of the National indications.

(2022, pp. 88-89) presents as the way learners struggle with adapting to new teaching methodologies and strategies, with consequent demotivation and failure to meet learning outcomes; this phenomenon was more prominent during the first lockdown in Italy in March 2020 for those who were denied access to the school didactic due to a lack of technology (devices and connections), hindering them from following the instructional activities remotely.

In conclusion, based on the premises formulated and the objectives to be pursued, if the digitisation plan is fully implemented, it will enhance teaching practices and equip students with the necessary competencies to navigate global and European jobs. Its full implementation is also expected to go beyond conventional boundaries and introduce an era marked by improved learning experiences, as a way of marginalising the phenomenon of early school leaving. If teachers adopt gendered-oriented approaches and innovative technology-based methodologies making effective use of ICT, teaching methods will likely improve, positively impacting learning outcomes substantially.

#### **4.5. Gender Perspective on Digitalisation in Italian Secondary Schools**

The issue of digital transition in school textbooks has also raised several uncertainties and fostered a still very active debate. According to Gino Roncaglia (2020), new educational technologies have shifted the focus from learning or teaching content to the electronic devices used in education. These devices should guide the organisation of their use and the strategies to be adopted to select and use them effectively in teaching (Roncaglia, 2020, p. XII). Even the traditional textbook, the guardian of knowledge and the main teaching tool, has undergone significant changes over the years. Because of aesthetic presentation, transformation and multimodality,<sup>15</sup> the content of the paper book has also been influenced by developments in digital transition. Several studies (Carioli, 2018; Pignagnoli, 2016) have examined the impact of the digital book (or *e-book*) in recent years and how it has affected students' learning process; the use of multimodal texts and various linguistic codes may cause significant distractions or disorientation. However, if teachers incorporate not only textbooks but also complementary digital resources effectively, the digital ecosystem could become a place where integrating digital and non-digital approach alongside these resources

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<sup>15</sup> In the context of education, multimodality is the utilisation of various channels or modes of representation and communication to transmit information and promote learning. Text, pictures, audio, videos, gestures, and other media types can all be used in these methods. Teachers try to provide richer learning experiences, improve comprehension, engagement, and retention, and accommodate a variety of learning styles and preferences by utilising a variety of modes. To effectively teach concepts to students with varying learning styles, a lesson may incorporate spoken explanations, animations, and diagrams in addition to written text.

would benefit the whole education system (Roncaglia, 2020, p. 123). Therefore, if diligently used, digital tools and resources would reshape the learning process providing students with the necessary competencies and interest to face the work field. Still, it is equally important to consider the role of education when it comes to digital literature anthologies and the implication of gender dynamics, as schools ought to be the places where students can acquire critical knowledge to develop their well-considered independent opinions and life choices.

In such regard, Maria Serena Sapegno (2014) argues that adopting a broader and more gender-conscious approach to reading literature may offer valuable insights into the fundamental dynamics of relationships that impact the lives of young people. This makes reading literature a challenge for women and an adventure for all. If a gendered perspective were adopted, it would be possible to see men's dominance over women and concentrate more on the relationship elements, particularly those involving hierarchical power, which forms the foundation of human society (Sapegno, 2014, pp. 96-98). From this perspective, it appears fundamental to convey knowledge with the appropriate use of gender-tailored digital resources, so that students can become aware of the necessity of ungendered roles and break down the stereotypes and prejudices that influence their decisions in life, especially in educational and working contexts.

Even though it was still in the experimental phase, in 2015 this perspective foresaw the adoption of the 2030 Agenda,<sup>16</sup> which emphasised the importance of gender equality as a central goal to achieve within six years. In particular, specific development goals five and ten focus on the willingness to achieve gender equality in all areas of human knowledge, and Legislative Proposal No. 2634 aimed to promote diversity and inclusion in school textbooks and establish a national observatory to monitor their developments. This proposal was submitted to the Chamber of Deputies' Culture Committee in 2020 to align with the *UNESCO Programme Document* for the 2030 Agenda, calling for gender equality textbook revisions (Aurora Savelli, 2022, p.24). If achieved, these goals will help promote a broader recognition of gender equality issues, positively influencing educational and social policies.

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<sup>16</sup> The 2030 Agenda refers to the incorporation of goals agreed upon by the 193 United Nations countries in school education. It presents seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that address global challenges such as poverty, gender equality, education and the environment. The aim is to educate students on these issues and encourage them to become responsible citizens for a sustainable future by integrating the SDGs into school curricula and promoting projects and activities related to the 2030 Agenda.

#### 4.5.1. A Case Study of *Letteratura Oggi* Textbook

This final section will examine the digital and Italian multimodal textbooks series entitled *Letteratura Oggi*, edited by Maria Serena Sapegno and Roberto Antonelli in 2023 and intended for lyceum secondary school. These textbooks present themselves as a fresh approach to the didactic, cultural, and educational issues that face today's schools. The textbook examined goes in two tomes, 3B and 3A, and is utilised in the final year of the lyceum. The analysis will focus solely on the digital format, although the material is accessible in both paper and digital versions.

Given its digital nature, this book presents the opportunity to deepen topics through the QR code and to watch lessons made by some experts easily, allowing all the students to learn in their best way. Specifically, the tome A has fifteen chapters and two introductory ones regarding the period's historical, social, linguistic and cultural context. Tome B presents eighteen chapters, two more introductory ones, and a final chapter with reading suggestions of contemporary Italian writers and those of foreign origin and second-generation immigrants. One of the book's most creative and intriguing features is the expansion of the literary canon by incorporating Italian women writers, who have been frequently overlooked or forgotten.

Maria Sapegno has developed specific sections titled "l'altra voce" (Volume A, pages 528-529; Volume B, pages 18-19 and pages 322-324) to explore the contributions of women writers to literature and various aspects related to womanhood. These sections outline the historical development from early origins to modern times. The books also include additional paragraphs discussing historical, cultural, and social perspectives on the status of women.<sup>17</sup> Finally, worth mentioning is page 28 in Volume A, which provides a historical account of the State's leaving examination held in the Italian lyceum at the end of the secondary education, and shows how the canon of educational literature has evolved alongside "the authors who made Italy".

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<sup>17</sup> Volume A "La letteratura femminile" (p.738); Volume B "Il movimento femminista negli anni '70" (p. 312).

#### 4.5.2. Methodology and Outcomes

The methodology employed in analysing this textbook is quantitative, involving tomes 3A and 3B. This investigation notes the percentages and numbers of women writers, men writers, genres, and critics. Concerning the analysis methodology applied, reference is made to the same used by Marianna Orsi (2021) in her investigation of female writers' presence in the first and second grades of secondary school anthologies.

Quantitative Analysis	Total number of writers	Men Writers	Women Writers	Tome 3A Women Writers (Chapter 4)	Authors with entire chapters dedicated	Total Critics	Women Critics	Men Critics
<b>Tome 3A</b>	33	26 (78.78%)	7 (21.21%)	Anna Zuccari, Maria Antonietta Torriani, Anna Franchi (3 writers)	6 Men writers (23.08%) 0 Women Writers (0%)	11	2 (18.82%)	9 (81.82%)
<b>Tome 3B</b>	45	36 (80%)	4 (20%)		4 Men writers (8.8%) 3 Women writers (6.6%)	9	0	9

Figure 1. Table of results.

As for Tome 3A, a reference to Virginia Woolf is found in Chapter 12, whereas in Tome 3B additional information regarding foreign women writers is mentioned in Chapter 2, Anna Achmatova, and Chapter 9, Simone de Beauvoir.

As far as literary genres are concerned, between the second half of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century, the volume presents women writers as favouring children's literature, the novel, epistolary literature, journalism and non-fiction, and this trend persisted beyond the period of 1921-1945, when genres such as poetry, fairy tales and rhymes entered the women's work production scene.

## 5. Discussion and Conclusion

From the analysis conducted, the willingness of the authors to extend the literary canon within these digital textbooks reflects the intention to subvert a system that has seen women as "cryptogenic presences" despite their numerous contributions to society. This led to the question: has a kind of equality of representation and visibility been achieved between male

and female authors? Unfortunately, Tome 3A and Tome 3B show gender disparities in the representation of writers, with only 21.21% of authors being women authors and 78.78% being men authors. This is due to women's adverse historical and social conditions from the first half of the 1800s to the first half of the 1900s. Tome 3A also has a higher percentage of male writers than women, do with only 20% of authors being women. Further, the analysis reveals a disparity in critics, with nine male critics in Tome 3A and nine female critics in Tome 3B. The lack of chapters dedicated to women writers in Tome 3A contrasts with Tome 3B, which has 6.6% that address Italian women writers. A positive aspect refers to foreign women writers such as Virginia Woolf, Anna Achmatova, and Simone de Beauvoir, making this literary syllabus more eclectic and suggesting a broader perspective on literary contributions beyond the Italian context.

Overall, these findings reveal a first attempt at offering an engaging way of transmitting the equality of merit between men and women through insights and rubrics dedicated to women's significant accomplishments, and also at trying to raise awareness within the educational institution and especially among students. All the contributions have made the cultural heritage so diverse and significant that approaching it with a gendered perspective allows understanding women's fundamental role in building the national identity through several areas of knowledge. Despite the recent efforts, there is still much work to be accomplished: guidelines that are more equitable are required to contrast discrimination and prejudice. A society built on education must acknowledge and transmit historically accurate facts recognising women's contributions, and the school curriculum must no longer overlook the merits and achievements of women writers. Over the past four decades, women have demonstrated perseverance and tenacity, breaking barriers across all sectors of society and no longer being subject to men's willingness.

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