

## Presentation research- Sibilla Aleramo. Women in Italian politics, patriarchy.

Slide 1:

Title page: Patriarchy, social and political control in Sibilla Aleramo's '*Una Donna*'

Slide 2: Mairead

Introduction:

- We will be analysing and highlighting instances of political and social control in '*Una donna*,' referring to legislation in Italy at the time such as the Napoleonic and *Pisanelli* codes and the influence of the catholic church.
- Main argument: political control necessarily oppressed women for familial and maternal reasons. This can be seen in *Una Donna*.

Slide 3: Bea

Background Information:

- Sibilla wrote the autobiographical novel in 1906 after leaving her husband and Son and moving to Rome. She had already been writing feminist articles since 1897 which was the beginning of Italy's most industrially productive decade.
- Sibilla Aleramo had an unconventional childhood considering this period in history, working with her father in managing a glass-making factory which led her to see her father as a role model, and therefore identify with him.
- She recognises in the novel the discrepancies between the roles of her father and mother and begins to question social norms in Italy at the times '*Egli era con la mamma pieno di riguardi, condiscendente, quasi carezzevole... ma io percepivo una punta di rassegnazione nel modo con cui accettava la melanconia persistente di lei, di lei che scoprivo oppressa dal desiderio timido e accorato d'un ravvicinamento.*'

'In his treatment of her he was full of concerns; condescending, almost caressing of her... but I noticed a hint of resignation in the way he accepted her persistent state of melancholy. I thought her oppressed by a timid and heartfelt desire to be reproached'.

- She was a member of the *Unione Femminile* which organised training for working women and operated as a centre for help and advice.

Slide 4: Mairead

The Napoleonic and *Pisanelli* codes and the Church- women's rights & quotes from book

- The Napoleonic code was created in France under Napoleon which was a set of laws that legislated the rights of citizens including, birth, religion and jobs.
- The Italian state adopted aspects of this code in 1804 and extended it to include gender roles creating the *Pisanelli* code. Saraceno states that the law ensured that 'men and women of the same class did not have the same rights either in society or in the family' - cited in 'Una donna': "*visione della vita ristretta che mi attendeva*" (p.32) - she is aware that when she gets married, her life will be restricted and that she will have less right and responsibilities. Therefore, patriarchal control within the family was further reinforced by legal and social requirements, allowing the male sex to maintain hierarchical and political control.
- The *Pisanelli* code divided the roles of men and women within the roles of society and then family. Divorce was forbidden (due to influence of the Church) and women required their husbands consent - entered into a relationship of dependence with husbands - Sibilla highlights this in her quote ' *Appartenevo ad un uomo, dunque?*' (pg 27) - shows her recognition that once she has lost her virginity and is destined for marriage, she now becomes 'part of the man' or a companion for a man within the home, deprived of her own identity and autonomy, restricted by the laws in place.
- In her essay Saraceno comments on how 'all women were placed under their husband's authority'; an example of this in the book can be seen when Sibilla writes '*la mia vita fancilla era finita.*' p.27 Once she is raped she understands that her childhood and freedom is finished and she is under the ownership of her assaulter. Women at this time were deemed to be ruined if they had had sex before marriage and often were forced into 'reparatory' marriages in order to maintain '*la famiglia nucleare*', social order and childcare undertaken by women.
- Chiara Saraceno draws attention to the inequalities intrinsic in these laws, women were excluded from work and were primarily seen as wives and mothers. This is expressed in the novel where she compares her mother to an 'ideal' type mother-figure, '*verso gli otto anni avevo come lo strano timore di non possedere una mamma "vera"...*' p.5 - who is expected to have unconditional love, evidence of societal beliefs being shaped by church and state values.
- Goes on to say '*lo ero del resto ormai isolata della vita paesana*', shows she feels restricted due to being betrothed, '*rinunce assurde*' shows her recognising the unfairness of restrictive laws imposed on women which drew attention to them.

- Important when Saraceno notes that "For these women [...] being identified solely as potential wives [...] condemned them to insecurity and submission within the family" - confined even in the private sphere. Sibilla notes this when she refers to her rape as '*la tragedia silenziosa*' (p.33) - showing that she cannot even tell members of her family about what happened to her and instead she is forced to marry the man. Her family would condemn her for not following the conventional path of a woman as a wife and a mother, ideals that were continually reinforced by laws.
- There was a law introduced in 1902 protecting working mothers in factories but there were still many inequalities and many exceptions (for example women were paid less than men) and women were still seen as less capable adults because they were limited to being seen as mothers and limited by their rigid and continually enforced domestic responsibilities (Saraceno, 1990).

Slide 5: Bea

#### The *Pisanelli* code and the Church

- The Catholic Church has a long history of interest in controlling the private lives of citizens, including sex and marriage where there was potential for sin. This involved reinforcing the role of sex only within marriage and maintaining women's primary roles as mothers with a family context and a wider patriarchal setting, Perry Wilson 2004
- In her early writings Sibilla adopts '*conventional piety of Catholic rhetoric: 'the holy and divine function of motherhood' or indeed 'the divine domestic function of women'*' - Ann Caesar, 'Italian Feminism and the Novel: Sibilla Aleramo's *A Woman*', *Feminist Review*, No.5, 1980, 79-87
- This ideology she adopts is evidenced where she judges her mother for not being a true mother with an unquestionable love for her children '*la mamma vera...col loro amore, una gioia ineffabile*'.
- The Catholic Church had a strong influence over the *Pisanelli* code and so played a major role in defining laws surrounding gender roles- divorce was permitted according to the Napoleonic code but this was amended according to Italy's religious context.
- Having highlighted the political and social climate, we would like to agree with Joan Scott in her essay on gender '*Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis*' where she suggests that both the church and the state

were patriarchal institutions that legislated private family life in order to maintain power. She quotes Louis de Bonald the French politician and counter-revolutionary, from his 1816 speech arguing against divorce- *‘Just as political democracy “allows the people, the weak part of political society, to rise against the established power so divorce, “veritable domestic democracy” allows the wife, “the weak part, to rebel against marital authority” ...’* *“In order to keep the state out of the hands of the people, it is necessary to keep the family out of the hands of the wives and children.”* Cited in Roderick Phillips, “Women and Family Breakdown in Eighteenth Century France: Rouen 1780-1800”, *Social History*, 2 (May 1976), 217

- With this statement Bonald refers to historical and religious arguments about the control of family as the foundation of state control that in Italy also included dominant force of the Catholic Church.
- This is evident in the book when Aleramo is working in Rome as a journalist when she explains how the church has always imposed a certain role on women but allowed them a limited amount of freedom:
- *" Invece, il cattolicesimo, che aveva sempre imposto alla donna il sacrificio, consentiva ora ad una certa azione muliebre, ma sotto la propria sorveglianza" (p.116)*
- Scott goes on to suggest that *‘These actions and their timing make little sense in themselves; in most instances the state had nothing immediate or material to gain from the control of women.’* Therefore these actions can only be made sense of as part of an analysis of the construction and consolidation of power.
- She highlights that *‘...the democratic regimes of the twentieth century have also constructed their political ideologies with gendered concepts and translated them into policy; the welfare state, for example, demonstrated its protective paternalism in laws directed at women and children.’* This highlights that political structures have deeply embedded gender roles that implemented policies that oppress women and maintain hierarchy within society, which also applies to Italian law at this time.
- She goes on to say- *‘Attention to gender is often not explicit, but it is nonetheless a crucial part of the organisation of equality or inequality. Hierarchical structures rely on generalised understandings of the so-called*

*natural relationship between male and female.*' This relates to Caldwell (2001) who highlights the rhetoric of church and state ideologies in Italy of women as primarily biological reproducers and nurturers which laws like the *Pisanelli* code are examples of.

This is evident in the book when Sibilla writes of the distinct roles prescribed to women: *tra la vergine e la madre* (p.116): which are both centered around maternal and pure characteristic traits: she recognises the imposed role for a woman is centred on that of being a mother.

Once she has moved to Rome, trying to continue with her chosen way of life, Aleramo is always reminded by others of having left her son and the socially constructed maternal role that she has neglected;

*"Tutto il mio essere insorgeva come un mostruoso pericolo lo minacciasse: reclamava la vita, la liberta. Chiudendo occhi e orecchi all'appello delle ragioni altrui, degli altrui diritti e bisogni, un'unica visione mi atterriva. Ecco: brutalmente, mi si chiudeva la via dell'avvenire, mi si riconduceva nel deserto. E con me mio figlio, che avevo voluto salvare dalle influenze dell'ambiente nativo (p.121)*

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Conclusion:

- Lack of women's rights and gender roles were rigorously and purposely reinforced by Italian authoritarian and patriarchal institutions at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in order to maintain power.
- Aleramo's book brings explicit attention to these inequalities, focusing on the laws themselves.
- Gender roles and the patriarchy were deeply embedded ideologies in Italy and perhaps still are today; '*Feminismo!...Organizzazione di operaie, legislazione del lavoro, emancipazione legale, divorzio, voto amministrativo e politico... Tutto questo, si è un compito immenso, **eppure non è che la superficie**; bisogna riformare la coscienza dell'uomo, creare quella della donna.*'
- '*Feminism!*' she exclaimed, '*organizations of working women, protective legislation, legal emancipation, divorce, the vote in local and parliamentary elections...All this will certainly be a massive task, **but it will only scratch the surface**: we have to change men's consciousness and create one for women!*

