

Literary Fiction from the Perspective of Romance: *Don't Move*

Francesca Pierini, *University of Basel*

Published online: September 2021

<http://www.jprstudies.org>

Although some of the most commercially successful and/or critically acclaimed works of literary fiction of the current century feature dominant romantic storylines, these have seldom been analysed in isolation. In this trilogy of short essays for the “Notes and Queries” section of the *Journal of Popular Romance Studies*, I read the construction of love and romantic relationships in literary fiction in the light of romance scholarship. These short articles constitute segments of a larger project currently under development.

This first note provides a concise analysis of the notion of rape in the novel *Don't Move* (2004) by author Margaret Mazzantini, one of the best-known works of fiction belonging to the tradition of the Italian *Romanzo Sentimentale* (*Sentimental Novel*).^[1] Associated with female authors such as Mazzantini and Susanna Tamaro, this specific genre emerged within Italian contemporary literature at the very end of the last century. Since then, these narratives have met with remarkable commercial success, within national borders as well as internationally.

Labelled and feminized as excessively commercial and consolatory, and unfavourably associated with romances, these narratives have only sparsely been the object of a rigorous critique. In this short article, I will contend that rather than representing the expected superficial sentimentality, these texts are saturated with deep personal disquiet, an all-consuming sense of guilt, and the attempt to tame and order emotive chaos by giving it shape through narrative.

Timoteo (Timo), the protagonist of *Don't Move* (the narration is entirely from his perspective) is a surgeon—successful, wealthy, and disillusioned. One day he sees Angela, his teen-age daughter, being brought, unconscious, to the hospital where he works. Angela had a serious accident while driving her scooter and is in urgent need of surgery. Timo, who cannot execute the operation himself, can only wait for its outcome.

During this time, Timo begins a long narration of his past and of the affair he had around the time Angela was born. Timo consigns his ‘truth’ to Angela in the attempt to exorcise her death. His narration immediately takes the form of a confession as his affair, fifteen years previously, had begun with a rape.

Timo, who at the time was already married to the beautiful and sophisticated Elsa, casually meets Italia, an underprivileged woman who lives in suburban Rome. Italia is

described, throughout the narrative, as unattractive and unkept, just as her apartment, her workplace, and the area of the city she lives in. Despite the sense of unpleasantness that seems to pervade the circumstances in which they meet, Timo is strongly attracted to Italia. Driven by a deep and overwhelming need to possess her, Timo rapes her, in a sequence that depicts the act in raw and brutal details.

Surprisingly, and indeed controversially, a love story ensues.

Several critics (Mazzoni 2002, Popham 2013, Alfano 2015) have argued that the novel is at its core a religious narrative telling the story of a personal journey from a logic of violence, selfishness, and patriarchy, to love for humanity. From this perspective, rape is a symbolic gesture of access to alterity that ignites realization in Timo: “Timo[teo] embodies the progression of the patriarchal man in his relationship to the feminine,” (Alfano 39) from a violent drive to possess, to the capacity to love.

Barbara Alfano illustrates with precision several of the novel’s central narrative and ‘discursive’ themes. Firstly, the story progresses ‘trauma by trauma:’ seeing Angela in danger of losing her life ignites in Timo the memory of the rape. Italia will also die, later in the story, under traumatic circumstances. Timo is used to the vulnerability of others, to intervening on and ‘penetrating’ the bodies of others with surgical instruments. When he meets Italia, he sees a vulnerable prey, a child-victim, a figure that belongs to Timoteo’s patriarchal culture and mentality, and that will continue being described, in the course of the narrative, through the symbolic imaginings of a patriarchal perspective on women: from prey to innocent child, from child-victim to prostitute, from prostitute to saint and salvific angel.

Timo, described by Alfano as “the wolf turned bourgeois,” (46) is repulsed by his deep instincts of subjugation as he is repelled by Italia’s poverty and her dreary surroundings. He is also equally attracted towards this unfamiliar world and the part of himself he has not experienced. Trespassing into these unknown dimensions will eventually change him. From this perspective, rape becomes allegorical: a purificatory act of violence towards himself as well as towards an ‘other’ from which he will learn and slowly shape a more authentic relationship with himself.

Of course, an existential path towards self-discovery and self-acceptance that seems to necessarily require, for its completion, the violent subjugation of others is a trope, however allegorically intended and received, that will remain poisonous to many readers. In this regard, Alfano argues that precisely because a political and/or ideological reading of the novel can only lead to a condemnation of its author, without helping our comprehension of the text, we must opt towards a reading of a different nature.

Following a similar logic, and perhaps necessity, of ‘understanding beyond condemnation,’ Angela Toscano, in her seminal article on the narrative uses of rape in romance novels, isolates three kinds of rape that recur in romances. If read in light of Toscano’s essay, *Don’t Move’s* rape sequence presents elements of the second type of rape, the rape of possession, insofar as Timo rapes Italia out of “unacknowledged love,” (Toscano 5) as Timo himself, in retrospect, recognises: “I did it because I loved her right away and I didn’t want to love her; I did it to kill her and I wanted to save her” (Mazzantini 113).

Timo’s rape of Italia, however, is truly a rape of the third kind—rape of coercion—as it is not an aggression Timo perpetrates mainly out of lust, or power, but out of a “desire to know the other,” “ontologically as she is beyond her body, appearance, or social role” (Toscano 9). In the novel, that initial rape sequence “serves to break down the barriers”

(Toscano 10) between himself and Italia. This interpretation does not make the sequence any less horrific or easier to process, but it does allow an understanding of it on a literary level.

Toscano's explanation of the rape of coercion seems to apply to our text in more than one way. Timo's sentence above ("I did it to kill her") acquires a new shade of meaning if read in the light of the nearness of this kind of rape to death that Toscano highlights in her essay. Discussing Georges Bataille's notion of love as a transfiguring force associated with crime and debasement, Toscano elucidates a kind of 'narrative' rape deployed to "function [...] as negation of the other and the self" (Toscano 12). From this perspective, rape is an act that erases previous identities: "rape in romance is the physical manifestation of what all love is about: the intrusion of the Other into the Self and the death that must precede their harmonious unification" (Toscano 14).

In *Don't Move*, love and abjection are always simultaneously present and love, in particular, "is not structured as an elevated experience outside of the material world, but rather [...] descends into the body, where it becomes part of the material world, neither separate from the body nor accessed through the body, but entwined with the corporeal world and subject to its degradations" (Toscano 11-12).

Of course, the issue of the redemption of Timo, as well as the "resolution of [...] core issues" (Toscano 9) necessary to a positive resolution of the sentimental storyline do not apply to this text. *Don't Move* is not a romance novel, but it represents an instance in which literary studies and romance studies could fruitfully dialogue to shed light on tropes that evidently do not only belong to a specific genre, but to a broader spectrum of literary imaginings and categories of thought.

Narratives associated to the Italian sentimental novel typically present quite discomfoting themes: parental neglect, loveless relationships, addiction, rape, and the struggle for emancipation from obsolete but still pervasive regimes of power productive of an episteme of sentimental relations very hard to destabilize. Considered together, these works are indeed 'sentimental,' as far as they are concerned with the description and workings of human feelings, they are not, however, mawkish or superficial, as they investigate such feelings with courage and analytical precision.

[1] Born in Dublin in 1961, from an Italian father and an Irish mother, Mazzantini worked as a stage actress before becoming a novelist. *Don't Move* (translated into English from the Italian *Non ti muovere*, 2001), is Mazzantini's commercially most successful novel to date, as it has sold more than two million copies worldwide and has been translated into 35 languages. In 2004, the novel has been adapted for the screen by Sergio Castellitto. The film stars Penelope Cruz in the role of Italia.

Works Cited

- Alfano, Barbara. "L'(in)efficacia dell'amore in *Non ti Muovere* di Margaret Mazzantini." *Forum Italicum*, vol. 49, no. 1, 2015, 38-55.
- Mazzantini, Margaret. *Don't Move*. Translated by John Cullen, Chatto & Windus, 2004.
- Mazzoni, Cristina. "Braiding Mysticism, Literature, Theory: The Case of Margaret Mazzantini's *Non ti muovere*." *Quaderni d'Italianistica*, vol. 23, no. 2, 2002, 87-99.
- Popham, Peter. "Don't Move by Margaret Mazzantini Trans John Cullen - A Knife in the Heart of Italy." *The Independent*, 21 July 2013.
- Toscano, Angela. R. "A Parody of Love: The Narrative Uses of Rape in Popular Romance." *Journal of Popular Romance Studies*, vol.2, no.2, 2012, n.p.