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## HISTORICAL METAFICTION: ELENA FERRANTE'S *NEAPOLITAN NOVELS* AS A POSTMODERN RETHINKING OF HISTORY

### Abstract

The *Neapolitan Novels* (2011–14), translated into English by Ann Goldstein, are a prime example of postmodern literature, distinguished by Elena Greco's unique style of narration, structurally and ideologically. Elena Ferrante utilizes multiple narrative techniques, including unreliable narration, self-reflexivity, and paradoxes, to challenge existing literary and historical narratives' rigidity and present various possible ways of retelling history within the text. This study draws on Linda Hutcheon's postmodern theories of history and historical metafiction to examine the representation of history in the *Neapolitan Novels*. Specifically, it analyzes the novels' metatextual, intertextual, and metanarrative aspects, exploring how they challenge traditional historical narratives and present alternative perspectives on the past. By providing insights into the representation of history in postmodern literature, this study contributes to the broader discourse on the relationship between history and fiction in contemporary literature.

**Keywords:** *Neapolitan Novels*, Elena Ferrante, Linda Hutcheon, historical metafiction, postmodern theory

## Introduction

Elena Ferrante's *Neapolitan Novels* have emerged as a significant and captivating addition to contemporary literature, effectively blending historical fiction with postmodern tendencies. Fragmented narrative structures, multiple perspectives, and a keen focus on the subjective nature of truth characterize these tendencies. As Linda Hutcheon asserts, "both history and fiction are discourses, that both constitute systems of signification by which we make sense of the past" (89). Ferrante's work exemplifies this by demonstrating how all stories are part of a larger system of signification that helps us make sense of the past in different ways.

In the *Neapolitan Novels*, the narrator, Elena Greco, adeptly employs the historical backdrop of the time to challenge conventional notions of history within postmodern art and literature. The novel's opening pages vividly depict the impact of Italy's political unrest on the atmosphere of the Naples neighborhood, thereby underscoring the enduring relevance of the past in shaping contemporary society. Through Greco's narrative voice, Ferrante skillfully establishes the contextual framework of the novels and introduces a fresh perspective on historical events, effectively inviting readers to reimagine and reconsider established historical narratives.

By seamlessly interweaving historical elements with postmodern narrative techniques, Ferrante encourages readers to engage critically with constructing history and interpreting past events. Through Greco's narrative lens, the *Neapolitan Novels* offer a compelling exploration of how history is shaped, conveyed, and interpreted, shedding light on the complex interplay between personal experiences, collective memory, and the broader sociopolitical landscape.

### **Elena Ferrante's Narrative Technique: (Self-)reflection**

Ferrante utilizes self-reflexivity in the *Neapolitan Novels* to challenge the reliability of the narrator and the story itself. The narrative creates a sense of uncertainty and ambiguity through Greco's frequent shifts in perspective and her tendency to question her own memories and motivations. Greco wonders: "Is it possible that I didn't want to keep anything of her, or, worse, that I didn't want to keep anything of her?" (Ferrante 20). This introspective moment reveals her struggle to understand whether she intentionally erased the memories of

a former friend or simply forgot them. This raises doubts about Greco's intentions and reliability as a narrator and serves as a tool for Ferrante to explore the complex relationship between writing and the representation of reality. Furthermore, Ferrante subverts traditional notions of authorial authority by utilizing self-reflexivity and unreliability in Greco's narration. This approach aligns with Roland Barthes' theoretical treatises on author's death and reader's birth (qtd. in Smith 48). Barthes argues that the author's identity should not overshadow the meaning of the text, and the readers should be active participants in interpreting the work.

The novel's self-begetting nature, in which Greco becomes both the protagonist and the author within the novel, challenges traditional notions of authorship and reinforces Barthes' idea of the death of the author. This blurring of reality and fiction forces the readers to question the role of the author in creating meaning within the text. Additionally, the novel's textual features draw attention to the narrator's unreliability in two ways. Firstly, a disparity exists between the actual outcome of the action and the narrator's earlier mindset, which is highlighted when Greco hesitates to establish a foundation for writing the novel, as encountered at the end. Secondly, Greco's constant internal contradictions, even regarding her decisions and other characters' viewpoints in the story, contribute to the narrator's unreliability.

Ferrante's use of self-reflexivity is evident throughout the narrative and extends beyond the act of writing, permeating the characters' lives and experiences. For example, Greco and Lila Cerullo's months-long reading of Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* during their childhood emphasizes their desire to become writers. Greco's self-reflexivity is also exemplified in her reflection on memory and constructing a narrative from fragmented recollections. According to Hutcheon, self-reflexivity creates a sense of fractured identity and a lack of coherence, which is reflected in Greco's fragmented sense of self. Hutcheon argues that writing can compensate for this lack of stability, as self-reflexive strategies create multiple narrative perspectives (139). Thus, Greco's writing becomes a way to piece together her fragmented memories and identity.

Blending the writer's exceptional attitude with the multifaceted nature of reality can be viewed as a manifestation of postmodernist fragmentation. Hutcheon observes that "postmodernist writers foreground the fragmentary, provisional nature of all human knowledge and the self" (145). Therefore, Ferrante's

use of self-reflexivity and the blurring of boundaries between the narrator and the character can be interpreted as a postmodernist approach to the novel. Additionally, the tension between Greco's uncensored self-expression and the need for stylistic suitability can be considered an example of the fragmented auctorial self. Hutcheon states that "self-reflexive strategies highlight the tension between the writer's authentic self-expression and the need to conform to generic conventions" (140). Greco's fixation with the act of writing and her desire to document the story in a specific way underlines the tension between self-expression and conformity, further reinforcing the concept of a fragmented auctorial self.

Greco employs the method of intrusive narration to deviate from common standards and draw attention to her composition, involving readers as genuine individuals with fictional characters and challenging how literary techniques alter the truth. Werner Huber and colleagues state, "Self-reflexive, metafictional writing means examining the fictional system, incorporating aspects of both theory and criticism" (9). Since the novel's self-reflexive method denies its reality as a practical account, readers are no longer focused on the outer world but rather on the inner universe of Greco's mind. They become trapped inside Greco's mind, sharing her pain and confusion. For instance, Greco struggles to detach herself from a painful drop of tension in her mind, which she cannot shake off (Ferrante 314). As a female author, Greco rejects the Neapolitan social system's self-expressive ability, increasing her self-reflection. In this way, she evaluates the vicious social system's concepts and her role in it, choosing a suitable place for a woman writer according to her desires.

Greco's self-reflection leads her to a heightened awareness of how reality and fiction are constructed. As Hutcheon argues, postmodern narratives challenge the boundaries between fiction and non-fiction, art, and life (10). Ferrante's use of language in its postmodern form allows her protagonist to explore the relationship between language as an arbitrary system and the world to which it alludes. Ferdinand de Saussure's concept of language-sign arbitrariness proposes that the relationship between a word and its meaning is arbitrary and conventional. Postmodernism, on the other hand, challenges the traditional understanding of the relationship between language and reality. The first-person narrator of Ferrante's novel creates a connection between Saussure's concept and postmodernism by exploring the constructed nature of reality and language. Greco's self-reflexivity enables her to understand better how language constructs reality and how reality is constructed through language. The concept of

arbitrary linguistic systems is central to postmodernism and is a theme that is explored throughout the novel. Ferrante challenges the reader to question their understanding of the relationship between language and reality through post-modern narrative techniques, such as metafiction and self-reflexivity.

Greco understands that language and thought constantly evolve and shift, making it impossible to find a stable and definitive meaning. As Nil Korkurt notes, the text is “a continuous process of signification, a field where it no longer makes sense to talk about boundaries, closure, and determinacy in meaning” (62). This approach to literature challenges the idea of boundaries and closure in meaning and aligns with the concept of the “text right.” The idea of the text right suggests that a literary work should be interpreted based on its internal logic rather than external factors such as the author’s intention or cultural context. This concept is closely related to poststructuralist thought, particularly the work of Jean-François Lyotard, Julia Kristeva, and Jacques Derrida. The *Neapolitan Novels* embody the idea of the text right by challenging the reader to engage in the process of active interpretation. Lyotard, Kristeva, and Derrida all emphasized the importance of reader’s role in the process of interpretation, arguing that meaning is not fixed or predetermined but instead emerges through a dynamic interaction between the text and the reader. In this sense, Ferrante’s writing is a prime example of poststructuralist thought, challenging the reader to engage in this dynamic process of interpretation.

### **Focalization**

The concept of focalization, which refers to the relationship between the narrative and the characters/events it portrays, is also relevant to the novels. According to Gérard Genette, there are different modes of focalization, including zero focalization, where the narrator has no privileged access to characters’ thoughts or emotions; internal focalization, where the narrator adopts a particular character’s perspective; and external focalization, where events are presented from a more distant, objective perspective (186). The *Neapolitan Novels* demonstrate the shifts in focalization, with Ferrante occasionally adopting Cerullo’s perspective, as in the scene where she burns Greco’s manuscript. The box of Cerullo’s notebooks at the beginning of *The Story of a New Name* (2012) is another example of this:

Elena's self-conscious metanarrative questioning explores the dire consequences of speaking. It prompts Elena's possibility as an unreliable narrator, whose ability to empathize with and position herself from the point of view of Lila is restricted by her voracious and contradicting jealousy, anger, obsession, love, and admiration toward her friend. (Bullaro and Love 15)

The use of notebooks also serves as an extradiegetic element, as it is a narrative device outside the story's world. Ferrante employs it to enable Greco to tell the story from Cerullo's perspective, which could not be achieved through intradiegetic narration alone.

Moreover, according to the concept of auto-referentiality defined by Viktor Žmegač and Dubravka Oraić Tolić, "[a]uto-referentiality appears as an essential feature of postmodernism, one which highlights the nature of the literary system itself and its relation to reality" (62), which is relevant, as the novels are not only self-referential in terms of the narrative structure but also in terms of the way the author uses language to comment on the act of writing itself. "The auto-referential structure implies that the text not only refers to itself but is also aware of itself, and in this way, it gives an insight into its own structure and the structure of the literary system in general," explain Žmegač and Oraić Tolić (62). This creates a sense of metafictional self-awareness, where the narrative voice is aware of its fictionality, the act of writing, and the reader's presence. According to Žmegač and Oraić Tolić, "The auto-referential text emphasizes the creative process and the self-reflexivity of writing, which in turn emphasizes the essential role of the reader in the creation of meaning" (62).

Additionally, Ferrante's use of language and narrative techniques further reinforces the auto-referentiality of the novels. For example, Greco frequently comments on her writing, describing the writing process as a way of creating and shaping her reality. She observes that "writing novels is like creating a parallel life, in which one can be something other than what one is in real life" (Ferrante 116). Furthermore, Ferrante uses different narrative structures to highlight the novel's self-referentiality. The repetition of specific phrases and motifs throughout the novels creates a sense of continuity and intertextuality, linking the novels to one another and emphasizing their interconnectedness. Thus, "[t]he auto-referential text can be seen as an attempt to overcome the limitations of the traditional realist novel, which aims to provide a representation of reality

that is as objective and accurate as possible,” conclude Žmegač and Oraić Tolić (62).

Greco’s journey from adolescence to maturity, a central focus of the *Neapolitan Novels*, aligns with the conventions of the bildungsroman genre. However, Ferrante subverts the established techniques, structures, and themes through her portrayal of the external world through Greco’s eyes. While the novels follow the broad structure of a bildungsroman, Ferrante departs from traditional conventions by focusing on the experiences of a working-class woman and delving into the themes of gender, class, and power dynamics that are often absent from traditional bildungsroman narratives. Richard Pearce states, “Postmodernist fiction manipulates the categories of narration and focalization in such a way that ‘the medium asserts itself as an independent source of interest and control’ (qtd. in Wesseling 3). Ferrante employs various narrative techniques to highlight the artificiality and subjectivity of Greco’s narration, revealing not only the external reality based on the reader’s perception but also the novel as an artistic creation.

The novels are also marked by a constant negotiation of power dynamics between the characters, particularly between the two protagonists, Greco and Cerullo. These aspects of the novels can be seen as a subversion of traditional binary oppositions and a critique of the fixed meanings and hierarchies they imply (Kegl 102). Derrida’s concept of the *différance*, which refers to the constant deferral and postponement of meaning in language, is also relevant to the *Neapolitan Novels*. The novels are characterized by rich and complex intertextuality, where specific phrases and motifs’ meanings are deferred and repeated through repeated usage and recontextualization. This creates a sense of instability and indeterminacy that reflects Derrida’s notion of the inherent instability of language and meaning (Sandoval 135).

Furthermore, Derrida’s critique of logocentrism, the belief in the primacy of speech over writing, can also be applied to the *Neapolitan Novels*. The novels are presented as a series of written memoirs, and Ferrante’s use of language and narrative structure is central to the meaning-making process. The novels can be seen as a challenge to the idea that speech is inherently more authentic and meaningful than writing and a celebration of the creative possibilities of written language (Johnson 63).

Ferrante employs deconstruction in the text by using binaries and hierarchical oppositions to expose cultural biases present in the novel. Certain words and concepts are privileged over the others, such as *rich* over *poor*, *male* over *female*, *enlightened* over *ignorant*, and *powerful* over *weak*. Through the lens of deconstruction theory, the text's arbitrary hierarchies are examined to find a series of contradictions that reveal the text's fragmentations. This fragmented structure challenges traditional narrative forms and allows for the creation of meaning through the interaction between readers and the text itself. Ferrante's work challenges the traditional gender hierarchy by presenting a complex and nuanced portrayal of female characters. Greco's struggle to find her voice and identity challenges traditional gender roles and expectations. She is not simply a passive recipient of the world around her but an active participant in shaping her destiny, presented in a way that defies traditional gender norms.

As noted earlier, the act of writing becomes the focus of Greco's excursion to self-acknowledgment. Through writing, Greco is able to process and make sense of her experiences and emotions and gain a greater understanding of herself and the world around her. Moreover, Ferrante's portrayal of Greco's journey is highly autobiographical, blurring the lines between fiction and reality. Greco's experiences mirror those of Ferrante, who also grew up in a working-class neighborhood in Naples and used writing to escape, as a form of self-discovery. By drawing on her own experiences and infusing them into the novel, Ferrante creates a highly personal and authentic portrayal of Greco's journey. The power of narration provides order to the chaos of her life, including the notions of true love and the role of maternity. Ferrante's narration techniques constantly thematize political and social issues of the time, challenging the author's concept as a unique source of definitive meaning. The self-reflexive component of the novel allocates the task of representation to Greco, who uses literary devices to allude to reality.

Likewise, Ferrante's deconstruction of the text also challenges traditional class relations, as noted earlier. By portraying the lives of working-class and middle-class characters in a realistic and nuanced way, she exposes the arbitrary nature of social class and questions the legitimacy of the power structures it creates. In doing so, Ferrante challenges the dominant cultural narratives that reinforce these hierarchies and create space for alternative voices and perspectives to be heard. Karen Bojar notes, "The *Neapolitan Novels* cover a time when tradi-



tional class relations were being challenged by post-war prosperity that brought more working-class people within reach of the middle class” (148).

### **Metatextual, Intertextual, and Metanarrative Aspects**

In her influential book *Poetics of Postmodernism*, Hutcheon argues that history and literature are both discourses and systems of signification that help us interpret and understand the past. Greco’s story can be seen as a part of this more extensive system of meaning-making, where the past is represented as a reliable historical fact. However, Ferrante’s postmodern discourse introduces a range of paradoxes that challenge the reliability of the narrative. Hutcheon explains that this does not necessarily indicate a deceitful attempt to avoid the truth but rather an acknowledgment of how human constructs shape our understanding of reality (89).

The 1960s and 1970s were a time of significant change in the art world, as traditional aesthetic canons and the purpose of art were being redefined. The rise of postmodernism marked a paradigm shift, with artists and writers beginning to challenge modernism’s dominant narratives and conventions. By exploring the details and nuances of the historical context, Ferrante’s novels illustrate history’s complex and multifaceted nature. As Hutcheon notes, using self-reflexive techniques in the novels creates a distinction between the historical-political context and the narrative itself, allowing for a deeper exploration of the relationship between history and fiction (89).

For the authors of this period, the shift towards postmodernism meant grappling with the purpose of art in an era of social and political upheaval. The traditional role of art as a reflection of reality was being challenged, and artists and writers were exploring new ways to engage with the world around them. Ferrante’s use of postmodern techniques reflects this broader shift, and her *Neapolitan Novels* offer a powerful example of how postmodernism can be used to explore universal themes and ideas while challenging traditional modes of representation and interpretation.

The novel’s opening establishes a pattern for how Italy’s political unrest affects the entire atmosphere of the neighborhood in Naples. Greco, now around sixty, displays a sense of nostalgia for her past friendship with Cerullo, but with a touch of irony. She reflects on the things she has discarded, particularly those

that remind her of Cerullo: "I've thrown away a lot of stuff, especially anything that had to do with her . . . Is it possible that I didn't want to keep anything of her, or worse, that I didn't want to keep anything that reminded me of her?" (Ferrante 20). Greco's ambivalence towards her friendship with Cerullo is emblematic of the more significant societal issues at play, where the past is fraught with complexities and contradictions. Her narration's use of irony and ambiguity highlights the tension between memory and forgetting and the difficulty of reconciling the past with the present.

Hutcheon's theories on postmodernism emphasize the importance of understanding a postmodern novel within its historical context. She argues that postmodernism is a contradictory, historical, and political-cultural activity (4). Ferrante's narrative technique in the *Neapolitan Novels* involves retelling history from the perspective of two young girls, which provides readers with a unique insight into the period. Inspired by the aforementioned Alcott's *Little Women*, Greco and Cerullo use their own experiences as a basis for their storytelling:

In that last year of elementary school, wealth became our obsession. (. . .)  
We thought that if we studied hard, we would be able to write books and that the books would make us rich. (. . .) 'Let's write one together,' Lila said once, and that filled me with joy. Maybe the idea took root when she discovered that the author of *Little Women* had made so much money that she had given some of it to her family. (Ferrante 106)

Ferrante skillfully employs Greco's and Cerullo's perspectives to vividly illustrate the economic struggles and harsh realities prevalent in the postwar Italy, particularly within their neighborhood plagued by corruption and brutality. Greco's narration captures the pervasive atmosphere of distrust and despair in her community, where wounds often fester and sometimes prove fatal: "We lived in a world in which children and adults were often wounded, blood flowed from the wounds, they festered, and sometimes people died" (Ferrante 32). Additionally, the tension and conflict that Greco's and Cerullo's experiences are rooted in the patriarchal society that dominates their world. Through their experiences, Ferrante highlights the impact of gender roles and societal expectations on women's lives, further demonstrating the political nature of the *Neapolitan Novels*. In this way, Ferrante's postmodern approach to storytelling enables her to present the past as an ongoing and fluid narrative that is continuously reinterpreted in the present.

Ferrante's *Neapolitan Novels* defy the idea of a rigid historical reality by blending historical events with contemporary fiction writing techniques. This allows for a more personal interpretation of history, as demonstrated by Greco's questioning of the labeling of Moro's killers as murderers. The novel's political and personal themes are seamlessly woven together, enhancing the personal drama without feeling intrusive. Greco's self-reflection throughout the novel exposes the political leanings of all the characters and highlights the impact of politics on personal lives. According to Hutcheon, "history and literature are intertwined through shared themes and intertextual references" (14). Ferrante employs metanarrative techniques that can be challenging for readers to navigate but ultimately immerse them in Greco's and Cerullo's daily lives in Naples. Through the linguistic and metalinguistic strategies, Ferrante exposes their personal and emotional fragmentation. Greco connects the dynamics of the neighborhood with literary expression, arguing that the transformation of the city's structure has influenced the formation of the novel.

According to Richard Lehan, literature gives imaginative reality to the city, while urban changes, in turn, transform the literary text, creating a symbiotic relationship between literary and urban texts (xv). In Ferrante's novel, Naples becomes a significant element, with the recurring theme of chaos reflecting the city's historical stage, including political and class-based concepts. Individualistic desires and the power of money lead the characters in the neighborhood toward cultural entropy and a desolate local wasteland. Hutcheon's concept of postmodern historiographic metafiction reveals its doctrine in two ways: first, through an ironic representation of history in the novel, with Greco describing various political tendencies from her subjective perspective. Second, through the accurate historical data, postmodern fiction acknowledges the paradox of the reality of the past and its textualized accessibility to us today (Stephan 31). The novel's atmosphere is imbued with hesitation and a sense of regression. Greco and her acquaintances are aware of living in a more antiquated place than the rest of Italy. Naples becomes synonymous with blood and crime, and the novel's literary aesthetics reflect this theme. From the story's beginning, Greco and Cerullo inhabit a microcosm where the politics of the female body must be understood within a social and historical context. The significance of the national context in this literary work lies in how a sense of displacement and disjointedness shaped responses to the postmodern city.

The *Neapolitan Novels* depict the social and personal transformations of Greco and Cerullo, who struggle to overcome the limitations of their upbringing. Greco successfully breaks free from the constraints of Naples and rises to the ranks of Italian elites, becoming a celebrated author. In contrast, Cerullo remains rooted in the neighborhood due to economic hardships that prevent her from pursuing her education. Greco's journey is characterized by a desire to assert herself as an independent and intellectual woman, despite patriarchal norms and a resistant community. She manages to cross the border of the neighborhood through her linguistic and intellectual development as a writer.

However, Greco's upward mobility is complicated by issues of class, gender, and identity, and she must make difficult sacrifices along the way. On the other hand, Cerullo demonstrates remarkable resilience and determination despite the constraints of poverty and social prejudice. She becomes a successful entrepreneur and innovator but also struggles to reconcile her love for her neighborhood with her aspirations for self-improvement. Both characters are defined by their relationship with Naples: Greco seeks to escape it, while Cerullo remains attached. This tension is exemplified when they overextend themselves to pursue their dreams, only to realize the difficulties of reconciling their desires with their roots. Despite their different trajectories, Greco's and Cerullo's stories intersect in their shared struggle to overcome societal constraints and achieve personal growth. Their journeys are marked by the complexities and contradictions of upward mobility and the difficulties of reconciling their past with their aspirations for the future. Through their experiences, Ferrante challenges traditional notions of fixed historical realities and the disconnect between the past and present in fiction. She seamlessly blends political and personal themes, showing how politics impact personal lives and how personal experiences are intertwined with larger historical narratives.

Ferrante's *Neapolitan Novels* expose the societal pressures placed on women to conform to traditional gender roles. Cerullo's character illustrates how women's intelligence and ambitions are often stifled by societal expectations that they should marry young and focus on homemaking. This portrayal reflects the pervasive issue of gender inequality, where women are denied equal opportunities to pursue their aspirations and are instead forced to conform to limiting gender norms. Greco and Cerullo struggle to establish new identities and authority that break away from the traditional gender and class patterns of their time. The overt sexuality and postwar zeitgeist challenge social constraints that mainly

affect women's roles. For instance, in *Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay* (2013), Greco's semi-autobiographical novel with lustful content causes embarrassment for her friends and family. Similarly, Cerullo's path diverges due to her parents' refusal to fund her education and her tragic marriage at sixteen, highlighting the generational conflict and social constraints that limit her prospects. Her father fails to recognize that his daughter deserves an education, reflecting the mindset of the time when the middle-class girls received education as a birthright. In contrast, the working-class girls had to rely on a combination of talent and sheer grit (Bojar 134).

### Uncovering Naples

Ferrante's *Neapolitan Novels* offer a compelling portrayal of life in Naples, shedding light on the intricate social and political issues that shape the city. At the novel's core lies the relationship between the two main characters, Greco and Cerullo, whose friendship is a microcosm of the social and political forces that influence their lives. Ferrante amplifies the struggles of ordinary people, especially women, who are frequently marginalized and silenced. Hutcheon offers a critical historical perspective, defining it as a process of exchange with the past through the performative use of language. This process involves both the historian and the reader, compelling them to respond to the offered account and its implications for the existing context of interpretation, thus leading to significant change (94). Greco provides a detailed account of the neighborhood's expansion during the economic miracle, describing how the Soloara's bar and Cracci's grocery store have undergone significant changes. Thus, the *Neapolitan Novels* bridge the dark past with the bright modernism of different historical stages in the lives of Greco and Cerullo, who interpret these phenomena uniquely. As Cerullo remarks, "there are no gestures, words, or sights that do not contain the sum of all the crimes that human beings have committed and commit" (Ferrante 142). Cerullo suggests that Stefano's invitation to the New Year's party represents a complete break from his father and the past:

According to Cerullo,

Stefano wanted to clear away everything. He wanted to try to get out of them before. He did not want to pretend it was nothing, as our parents did, but rather to set in motion a phrase like: "I know, my father was what he was, but now I'm here, we are us, and so, enough." He wanted to make

the whole neighborhood understand that he was not Don Achille and that the Pelusos were not the former carpenter who had killed him.

(Ferrante 158)

Don Achille, on the other hand, is a sinister character who lurks in the shadows of Cerullo's and Greco's neighborhood during their childhood. Ferrante employs his name as a code for the atrocities that plagued impoverished Italy. He is a notorious loan shark who possesses the power to devastate the entire community. Through these two young girls' eyes, Ferrante illustrates how Naples' dark history intersects with people's fates. Cerullo and Greco are consequently aware that they should fear Don Achille, but they are unsure why:

Like me, Lila had also been forbidden to offend not only Don Achille but also his family. We didn't know the origin of that fear-resentment-hatred-timidty that our parents felt towards the Carraccis and passed down to us, but it existed, like the neighborhood, its dingy-white buildings, the putrid smell of the stairwells, and the dust of the streets. (Ferrante 46)

In addition to Don Achille's menacing presence, the shadowy and eerie dungeon serves as a reminder of Naples' tumultuous past marked by social class divides, poverty, lack of progress, and criminality. Ferrante skillfully portrays these themes when Cerullo throws Greco's doll into Don Achille's cellar. They must enter this unfamiliar and unsettling place to retrieve it:

All around were unidentifiable objects, dark masses, sharp or square, or rounded. The dim light that penetrated the darkness occasionally illuminated something recognizable: the skeleton of a chair, the pole of a lamp, fruit boxes . . . I was frightened by what appeared to be a soft face . . . Those moments are etched into memory. (Ferrante 50)

Education is a significant and recurring theme in Ferrante's novels. Despite being intelligent and ambitious, Greco and Cerullo face limited educational opportunities due to their social and economic backgrounds. Ferrante illustrates how education can be a potent tool for social mobility, yet it also reinforces existing power structures. The novels expose how the education system in Naples perpetuates social and economic inequality by failing to provide equal opportunities. The books also tackle broader political issues, such as the rise of fascism in Italy and the impact of globalization on local communities. Ferrante chal-

lenges the dominant narratives of Italian history and culture, revealing hidden injustices and inequalities.

Poverty and violence are also central themes in Ferrante's novels. Poverty is pervasive, shaping characters' relationships, opportunities, and aspirations. Ferrante portrays poverty as a systemic issue that demands political solutions rather than a personal failure. Violence affects everyone in Naples, from the wealthiest to the poorest. It is portrayed as a symptom of deeper social and political issues, such as the lack of opportunities for young people or the normalization of patriarchal norms. Through her writing, Ferrante underscores the urgent need for social and political change to address the root causes of violence. The character of Don Achille also symbolizes political corruption and the abuse of power in Naples. Don Achille's wealth and influence allow him to act with impunity and perpetuate the community's poverty and violence cycle. This depiction reflects the broader problem of political corruption in Italy, where those in power frequently abuse their position for personal gain and perpetuate systemic inequality.

Ferrante's novels explore the impact of globalization on local communities too, particularly in *The Story of a New Name*, when Greco moves to Florence to pursue her education. Through Greco's character, Ferrante portrays the tensions between local and global identities and how globalization can erode traditional cultures and communities. This depiction speaks to cultural and economic homogenization, which can have far-reaching consequences for local communities worldwide.

### **Feminist Consciousness**

The novel portrays the prevalence of verbal and physical violence against women resulting from poverty and class-based society, as seen through Greco's personal experiences. It explores the privileged world of the Italian upper-middle class and the emerging feminist consciousness of the late 1960s. Greco's journey of self-discovery reflects the impact of social and political violence on women during second-wave Italian feminism. A pivotal moment in her development as a woman and a writer is her encounter with Carla Lonzi's *Let's Spit on Hegel*:

Every sentence struck me, every word, and above all the bold freedom of thought. (...) Spit on the culture of men, spit on Marx (...). And on historical materialism. And on Freud. And on psychoanalysis and penis envy. And on marriage, on family. (...) And on the class struggle. (...) And on the trap of equality. (...) Deculturate. (...) Restore women to themselves.

(Ferrante 470)

Ferrante's technique of retelling history through Greco's voice is a deliberate attempt to challenge the dominant male perspective. By allowing Greco to tell her own story as an independent female writer, Ferrante suggests that women can achieve equality by empowering themselves and their consciousness. This awareness becomes a crucial part of historical recognition when modern women accept their natural right to use their ideas and power in society. Through this approach, Ferrante disrupts traditional conventions that prioritize male perspectives in the retelling of history. As a result, Greco emerges as an acclaimed author who confidently presents her works to society, overcoming her past social vulnerabilities, and advocating for women's rights:

I had a natural ability to transform small private events into public reflection. (...) I talked about the world I came from, about the poverty and squalor, male and also female rages (...). I talked about how, since I was a girl, I had observed in my mother and other women the most humiliating aspects of family life, of motherhood, of subjection to males.

(Ferrante 86)

Cerullo's standpoint is equally significant in providing a fresh perspective on history, highlighting the political barriers faced by women and advocating for radical women's liberation. In one instance, Cerullo describes her experience working in a factory where she knew only workers, both men and women, who suffered in poverty: "[S]he said she knew only the workers, men and women, in the factory where she worked, people from whom there was absolutely nothing to learn except wretchedness. Can you imagine, she asked, what it means to spend eight hours a day standing up to your waist in the mortadella cooking water?" (Ferrante 874). Ferrante's incorporation of the stories of the Italian New Left and the emergence of women's activism in response to the left-wing ma-



chismo provides a nuanced portrayal of history. Her commitment to feminist theory is evident, as she has acknowledged her debt to feminist thought and characterized herself as a passionate reader of feminist literature. The *Neapolitan Novels* thus emphasize the constraints of gender and its intersection with class and ethnicity as a significant theme, reflecting the ongoing struggles of women for equality and liberation.

Ferrante's method of shifting Greco's narrative voice to different characters gradually unveils the violent postwar history of Italy, known as the Years of Lead. During their adolescence, Greco and Cerullo uncover the Solara siblings' crimes, exposing a hidden Neapolitan history and culture. According to Hutcheon, it is essential to consider the enunciative act's context and the situated discourse that acknowledges the social, historical, and ideological dimensions of understanding when tracing the postmodern poetics of self-reflexive art (97). Despite carrying the psychological structures of society's heritage, Greco contextualizes various viewpoints. She takes responsibility for her time, striving for a new and more positive reality: "In other words, everything was quivering, arching upward as if to change its characteristics, not to be known by accumulated hatreds, tensions, ugliness, but rather to show a new face" (Ferrante 109).

Cerullo's personal story also follows a similar historical feminist viewpoint of the working class, where she expands her local shoe business and becomes a member of the 1950s bourgeoisie. Cerullo's unique perspective offers a compelling retelling of history, drawing attention to the political obstacles faced by women and advocating for radical women's liberation. Ferrante's debt to feminist theory is apparent, as she characterizes herself as a passionate reader of feminist thought. The constraints of gender and its intersection with class and ethnicity emerge as the central theme of the *Neapolitan Novels* (Bojar 15).

Accordingly, the *Neapolitan Novels* are often examined in the context of Italy's political and social practices. According to the postmodernist theories of Terry Eagleton, the text's context is created not only by the act of perception but also through the inference of the act of production (Hutcheon 95). In this context, Greco's role as the author of the novels cannot be ignored. The novel's innovative narration techniques, such as metafiction and self-reflexivity, transform the reader into an active participant in the process of meaning-making, creating a sense of affinity between Greco and the readers. This affinity is further intensified by the influence of Ferrante's techniques, which challenge the traditional relationship between the author, the text, and the reader.

Ferrante draws on political discourses for inspiration, covering various historical issues that recur as collective pasts in postmodern forms. The novel deals with events such as the turn of the century, political unrest in the late 1960s, and conflicts between the extreme left and fascists. Hutcheon views postmodern novels as texts that prompt us to consider language and discourse as social and cognitive processes in highly complex sociocultural situations (97). The tension between the continuation of the past as history and Ferrante's creative techniques illustrates her desire to rewrite the changing world's history through the friendship of Cerullo and Greco, who constantly clashed with their neighborhood. According to Grace Bullaro, Ferrante's portrayal of poverty and the middle-class dream, political violence, and youth revolts of the 1960s and 1970s situate Italian dramas in the context of global seismic changes (15).

### Conclusion

The *Neapolitan Novels*, written by Ferrante, offer a unique perspective on life and its complexities. The novels, narrated by the protagonist Greco, equate life with the act of writing, creating a gap between what is typically viewed as realistic and fictional. The first-person point of view draws readers into the world of two Neapolitan girls, exploring their political, linguistic, and social complexities. The novels become self-generating entities, with their ambiguities, ironies, and complexities spanning four volumes. Greco's self-reflexive style emphasizes the text while downplaying the external world's realism. The novel becomes a complex issue that highlights the dynamics of the neighborhood and how it transforms the individual's interior life. Despite being a first-person narrator, Greco is not portrayed as self-centered; her thoughts and the fictional reality are always intertwined with other characters' personalities. This technique allows Greco to become an unreliable narrator, illustrating how political issues of the time create a postmodern mode of narration.

The *Neapolitan Novels* reveal Greco's metanarrative insight, which is sparked by her observations of the lives of other characters. This study examines how the novels incorporate Naples' dark past into its modern transformation through the lens of Hutcheon's postmodern theories. Ferrante situates Greco within the historical context of the time to provide an alternate perspective on events. Ferrante's historical metafiction demonstrates how literary language and historical discourse are intertwined, offering insights into psychological states, political tendencies, and social oppressions. What sets Ferrante's tetralogy apart is the

narratable self of the characters, constantly evolving within relational subjectivity. This evolution is influenced by Ferrante, the author, and the two female protagonists who share their lives and stories with each other, creating a tapestry of interconnected relationships.

The present study provides valuable insights into the *Neapolitan Novels* by Ferrante, shedding light on the complexities of postmodern literature, historical metafiction, and the dynamic relationships between characters in a work of fiction.

Through the lens of Hutcheon's postmodern theories, this study reveals the innovative techniques employed by Ferrante to challenge traditional notions of realism and create a metanarrative insight into historical events. Using the first-person point of view, unreliable narration, and overlapping of life and fiction demonstrates how literary language and historical discourse are intertwined and offer insights into psychological states, political tendencies, and social oppressions. One of the critical contributions of this study is its analysis of the evolving relationship between Greco and Cerullo, which provides a unique perspective on female friendship and empowerment, challenging the traditional narrative of women as passive objects. By exploring characters' relational subjectivity and interconnectivity, this study highlights the impact of external factors, such as political tensions, on individual lives.

Besides, this study underscores the significance of Ferrante's tetralogy in contemporary literature. It highlights its contributions to the ongoing discussions about the role of literature in understanding the complexities of the world around us. The insights gained from this study contribute to our understanding of how literature can provide an alternate perspective on historical events and question old conventions, potentially leading to fundamental changes in society. In conclusion, this study provides a comprehensive analysis of the *Neapolitan Novels*, revealing the innovative techniques employed by Ferrante to challenge traditional notions of realism and provide insights into the complexities of postwar Italy. By emphasizing the importance of relational subjectivity and the impact of external factors on individual lives, this study highlights the significance of Ferrante's work in contemporary literature and its potential to inspire fundamental changes in society.

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# POVIJESNA METAFIKCIJA: NAPULJSKI ROMANI ELENE FERRANTE KAO POSTMODERNO PREISPITIVANJE POVIJESTI

## Sažetak

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*Napuljski romani* (2011. – 2014.), koje je na engleski prevela Anne Goldstein, primjer su postmoderne književnosti koju odlikuje jedinstven stil pripovijedanja Elene Greco i na strukturnom i na ideološkom planu. Elena Ferrante koristi se višestrukim narativnim tehnikama, uključujući nepouzdanu pripovijest, samorefleksiju i paradokse, kako bi izazvala rigidnost postojećih književnih i povijesnih narativa i predstavila različite moguće načine ponovnoga pripovijedanja povijesti u tekstu. Ova studija oslanja se na postmoderne teorije povijesti i povijesne metafikcije Linde Hutcheon kako bi se istražila reprezentacija povijesti u *Napuljskim romanima*. Konkretno, analiziraju se metatekstualni, intertekstualni i metanarativni aspekti romana, istražujući načine na koje oni izazivaju tradicionalne povijesne narative i predstavljaju alternativne perspektive prošlosti. Pružajući uvid u reprezentaciju povijesti u postmodernoj književnosti, ova studija doprinosi širem diskursu o odnosu između povijesti i fikcije u suvremenoj književnosti.

**Ključne riječi:** *Napuljski romani*, Elena Ferrante, Linda Hutcheon, povijesna metafikcija, postmodernistička teorija