

# Lost Dolls, Lost Souls in Elena Ferrante's *La figlia oscura*

Nilay Kaya

Istanbul Bilgi Üniversitesi, Türkiye

**Abstract** This paper aims to analyse Elena Ferrante's use of the metaphor of playing with dolls in her novel, *La figlia oscura* (The Lost Daughter). With a view of shedding a light on this issue, the first part of the paper will review the prominent essays of Sigmund Freud, Ernst Jentsch, Walter Benjamin, Rainer Maria Rilke and Charles Baudelaire that question the nature of playing with dolls in terms of psychology with various focuses. These essays generally agree on the fact that playing with dolls is a strong threshold to come to terms with the self, as well as on the fact that this coming to terms with the self is by nature not guaranteed. The second part will examine Elena Ferrante's dealing with the problem of playing with dolls and her character's journey to death and a possible psychological resurrection.

**Keywords** Dolls as metaphors. Elena Ferrante. *La figlia oscura*. Inanimate objects in literature. Self-rotation.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 2 “Tell me how you play with dolls, I'll tell you who you are”. – 3 Playing Doctor with the Doll, Practicing Self-Surgery. – 4 Conclusion



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## 1 Introduction

Kafka's lost manuscripts reveal a letter from a doll that is written to an anonymous girl. Kafka comes across this girl in 1923 while walking with his girlfriend, Dora Diamant. The little girl is crying because she has lost her doll. Kafka talks to the girl. Even though he hesitates at first, he tells the girl that the doll is not lost and has gone on a trip. According to what he says, her doll even has written a letter to the girl. The girl calms down a little but insists on seeing the letter. When Kafka goes home, he writes the letter and takes it to the park the very next day and gives it to the girl. For the next few weeks, he keeps writing letters to the girl on behalf of the doll. Although the doll likes the girl very much, she has been bored of living with the same family for a long time. Letters are about the adventures that prevent the doll from coming back home although the doll wants to go home eventually. When Dora Diamant tells this story to Kafka's friend and biographer Max Brod, she emphasises that the author was as much sensitive to writing these letters as writing other stories while struggling with his own sufferings a year before his death. The present work will deal with the theme of playing with the dolls in Elena Ferrante's novel, *La figlia oscura* (The Lost Daughter) which is thoroughly an interrogation of the self, but firstly it will revise the prominent essays that are written on dolls, in order to examine the nature of Ferrante's using the metaphor of dolls.

## 2 "Tell me how you play with dolls, I'll tell you who you are"

The nature of the relationship between the child's relationship with toys and the impulse to play, the change in the child's relationships with objects in the outer world, the seriousness of the play, the flirting with the adult world, especially the relationship between the doll and the human spirit is raised intensively for the first time with Sigmund Freud's famous article titled "Uncanny" (2001, 217-56). In fact, Freud writes this article in response to Ernst Jentsch's work titled in "On the Psychology of the Uncanny" (1997, 7-16). In his study, Jentsch says that the key element of uncanniness corresponds to the confusion between the living and the non-living. Based on this, Freud discusses the emotional impact of an inanimate object through a series of arguments such as the child's castration complex, the defence mechanisms s/he has developed upon coping with a loss, the child's desires and sexual and aggressive fantasies with Hoffmann's doll Olympia in the story "The Sand Man" (Hoffmann 1991).

Since Jentsch and Freud, some authors have approached the dolls, which are particularly indispensable for girls, in terms of the issue



**Figure 1** Joseph Cornell (1903-1972), *Untitled (Bébé Marie)*. Early forties. Painted wooden box containing a doll.  
© The Museum of Modern Art, New York/Scala, Florence

of existence, on the basis of the psychoanalytic pre-acceptance that the relationship of the child with inanimate objects is the first act of abstraction, imagination and “the passage into a world of adult affections and demands and losses” (Gross 2012, xii). Why are dolls more interesting than swinging wooden horses or toy cars while entering the dream world and contemplating on existence? Why does the child prefer to get lost in a similar ‘other’? The doll, unlike the mother, does not answer the crying of the child, mirror her, endorse the good, punish the bad, and hold her out. It is usually physically smaller than the child herself/himself and against her/him when the child has to define her/his own identity. It almost stands on the edge of narcissism and puts an arrogant pressure on the child to create his own identity, it says ‘isolate yourself from the outside world’, but never answers any questions. When Walter Benjamin, in his essay “The Old Toys: The Toy Exhibition at the Märkisch Museum”, says, “When a doll is used in contempt, broken, repaired and broken again, even the most majestic becomes a proletarian comrade in the children’s play committee” (Gross 2012, 88), he develops a sense of companionship between the children and their dolls. However, it is also possible for these inanimate objects with a vivid appearance to create an

existential anxiety between the nature of things and human-beings.

Rainer Maria Rilke also puts forward a quite similar opinion in his essay titled "Dolls: On the Wax Dolls of Lote Pritzel" (2012, 51-63). He says that a doll he saw in a wax doll exhibition first helped him find his way in the place, thus, made him think about the existential rotation of the outer world surrounding him. According to him, the doll is no different from the universe that stays inert and carefree against the human's search for meaning. The external world evokes an absurd sense of reality with all its vitality, just like the silent doll standing in the face of all its deceptive vitality. Based on this argument, it is possible to say that the doll is not only a foolish tool that prepares a girl for motherhood by the patriarchal order/system, but also the mediator of an *anagnorisis* moment on the brink of the outside world. Although it seems extremely rational and comprehensible, indeed, it is a meeting with a very gray area of reality. Will this encounter be a joyful embrace, or will it turn into a fearful and disturbing experience? And this encounter is of high priority and a very critical moment in the construction of the subject.

According to another author, Charles Baudelaire, dolls are the *camera obscura* of the child's brain, those are the children themselves that are upside down. In his essay "The Philosophy of Toys" (Gross 2012, 11-22), while Baudelaire categorises the ways of playing with toys, he in fact points to different performance and self experiences in children's relationship with toys. First, all the children insistently talk to their toys, even if they do not get an answer. We should also note that Baudelaire labels the girls who imitated their mother as 'poor'. Some children take this course very seriously: they do not instrumentalize their toys in any ways, they collect them, they protect them, they arrange them in a row carefully, they create collections and museums from them, they refrain from showing the toys to their friends, and 'touching' them is a banned action. This is not the parents who put the babies in the glazed and locked windows, but the children themselves. Baudelaire takes his position against these "man-children". There are also some children that tend to damage their toys consistently. Let us think about the girls who bite the feet of plastic dolls, scratch their faces with pen, take their eyes out and tear their hair. Where does this *Angst* originate from? Baudelaire says that he does not know the reason behind the instinct that underlies this childish excuse, that this is a puzzling question, and that he cannot blame the children who did this. But, he is sure that this motive is the first metaphysical awakening in any case. It is obvious that what is experienced in this metaphysical lesson is the feeling that is close to melancholy and first dizziness. In any case, playing with dolls is a relationship model that is directed to the self and the other and points to the various secrets of human ego (Gržinic, Illic, Vidovic 2010, 45).

### 3 Playing Doctor with the Doll, Practicing Self-Surgery

Little Ayşe, little Ayşe  
 Tell me what you are up to  
 I'm looking after my baby, I'm feeding her  
 I'm kissing on her rosy cheeks, I'm telling her a  
 lullaby.  
 (Anonymous Turkish lullaby)

*Küçük Ayşe, küçük Ayşe  
 Napiyorsun bana söyle  
 Bebeğime bakıyorum, ona mama veriyorum  
 Gülyüzünü öpüyorum, ona ninni söylüyorum.*

Dolls that create dilemmas and tensions with their lifeless souls appear as powerful metaphors in the brilliant fiction of modern-day authors. One of them is the Italian writer Elena Ferrante who is famous for the 'Neapolitan Novels' around the world. Undoubtedly, Ferrante is being read fervently, but it is a controversial issue that she insists on hiding her identity as a writer. All of her works have been translated into various languages, including the so called "Neapolitan Novels" in the English speaking world: *L'amore molesto* (Troubling Love), *I giorni dell'abbandono* (The Days of Abandonment), *La figlia oscura* (The Lost Daughter), *La spiaggia di notte* (The Beach at Night), *La frantumaglia* (Frantumaglia: A Writer's Journey).<sup>1</sup> After the translation of Ferrante's works into different languages, various layers of her work has been studied as well as her 'fictitious identity of the author' based on critic texts like Michel Foucault's "What is an Author?" (1977) and Roland Barthes's "The Death of the Author" (1974), dealing with the notions of "killer text" or "the dead writer", which we can no longer be considered as original points for discussion. The fact that Ferrante conceals her identity gives rise to this cult of literary criticism as the first reflex is nothing but a trap on the way to interpret her literary text. In fact, Ferrante killed the author 'from the start' with a clever move and is looking for her naive readers who are not under the spell of the phenomenon of 'mysterious writer'.

One of the multi-layering elements of Ferrante's work regarding the form and the context is undoubtedly the doll. The first book of the "Neapolitan Novels", *L'amica geniale* (My Brilliant Friend) and the last book *Storia della bambina perduta* (The Story of the Lost Child), based on two women's childhood friendship of more than a half a century, are completed by the circle drawn by a doll. The relationship be-

<sup>1</sup> See Ferrante, Elena (1992). *L'amore molesto*. Roma: E/O; (2002) *I giorni dell'abbandono*. Roma: E/O; (2006) *La figlia oscura*. Roma: E/O; (2007) *La spiaggia di notte*. Roma: E/O; (2011) *L'amica geniale*. Roma: E/O; (2012) *Storia del nuovo cognome*. Roma: E/O; (2013) *Storia di chi fugge e di chi resta*. Roma: E/O; (2014) *Storia della bambina perduta*. Roma: E/O; (2017) *La frantumaglia*. Roma: E/O.

tween a daughter and her mother, a mother and her daughter, a girl and her female friend or her sister, a woman and another woman, but ultimately a woman's relationship with herself, and of course with the outer patriarchal world, is a matter of not only the "Neapolitan Novels", but also all of Ferrante's novels. And, dolls are in the centre of this relationship issue. Dolls are spirited miniatures that embody humanity, life and death, self and the surrounding, loneliness and communication, language and muteness, and anything that constitutes a matter of representation about human-beings. In particular, unusual mother-daughter relationships, girls discomfited by their mothers, mothers who abandoned or cannot abandon their daughters against their will, and who mother inanimate objects (dolls), girls and women who lost their voices and mute dolls are among the frequently used subjects, characters and motifs in Ferrante's novels (Milkova 2013, 91-109). *La spiaggia di notte* (The Beach at Night), which she wrote for children, is a first-person narration of a doll that fell into disfavour and was forgotten at the beach because of a sudden appearance of an adorable cat. The story of Celina - who is trying to get rid of the beach worker who cleans the garbage on the beach and trying to be protected from all kinds of threats in the outside world, loses her words and almost her name with the fear of being left behind, and does not want to be one of the dolls with plaques on which the same words are recorded - is Ferrante's one of the most striking examples of dealings with dolls. In the rest of this article, I will try to observe how the issue of dolls in her novel *La figlia oscura* (The Lost Daughter) expands Ferrante's fiction.

*La figlia oscura* focuses on Leda's lonely trip to a seaside town in the southern Italy. She is a teacher of English literature, a middle-aged widow and a lonely woman who devoted herself to her work and her two daughters. When Leda's daughters grow up, they move to Canada to live with their father. Leda goes on this holiday with mixed feelings of emancipation and longing for her daughters because they are now separated. While she is expecting a quiet sea holiday with her books, she goes through unexpected tensions in this holiday. She notices a family at the beach where she goes everyday. She starts to observe the young mother and the little daughter of this family with an increasing frequency. This observation turns into an uncomfortable experience after a while. The main object of the game that the mother and the daughter are playing on the beach is a doll. Leda's first encounter with the doll is described as follows:

In un'occasione le vidi giocare insieme con la bambola. Lo facevano divertendosi molto, la vestivano, la svestivano, fingevano di ungerla con crema solare, le facevano il bagno dentro un secchiello verde, l'asciugavano strofinandola per non farle prendere freddo, se la stringevano al seno come per allattarla o la rimpinzava-

no con pappe di sabbia, la tenevano al sole accanto a loro, sdraiata sul loro stesso telo. (Ferrante [2006] 2015, 17)

On one occasion I saw them playing with the doll. They did it with such pleasure, dressing her, undressing her, pretending to put sun-tan lotion on her; they bathed her in a green pail, they dried her, rubbing her so that she wouldn't catch cold, hugged her to their breast as if to nurse her, or fed her baby food of sand; they kept her in the sun with them, lying on their towel. (Ferrante 2007a, 19)<sup>2</sup>

I asked female friends around me how they played with their dolls during their childhood before I started writing this article considering Baudelaire's classification of the ways of playing with toys. No matter what the dolls are made of - paper, plastic, or porcelain - all the girls love to play with the dolls' clothes. Those who lived their childhood in the seventies were fond of dolls that were famous at that time and that had small sound recorded discs on their backs. If their parents allowed them to play with those precious dolls, the dolls were played until those records were broken. Well, what was playing on those records? Certainly, songs and speeches that gave the child some sort of instructions to mother the dolls. Of course, not every doll needed to have a disc on its back. Obviously, girls were often prone to mothering their dolls without the need for an instruction. A friend of mine told me that she threw away her dolls that she played with passion and started to mother her sister after her younger sister was born. It is understood that there are various ways of playing with dolls such as 'little artists' writing and exhibiting plays with dolls, playing for a variety of sadistic impulses, and playing to socialise with other children. However, it cannot be denied that the majority of girls like to be a mother to their babies, instinctively or through learning. This mothering play is what Leda first observes while the mother and the daughter are playing with the doll. Leda finds the mother and daughter artificial - imagine a scene where the mother speaks with a baby sound and the daughter pretends to be an adult - and thinks that the mother is showing off. According to Leda, this play is extremely annoying. Therefore, she expresses her negative feelings and impressions. As for the doll, it is ugly and dirty:

La piccola giocava con la bambola. Le parlava, ma non in quanto pupazza spelacchiata, il cranio mezzo biondo mezzo calvo. Chissà che figura le attribuiva. Nani, le diceva, Nanuccia, Nanicchia, Nennella. [...] Nani era una bambola brutta, vecchia, aveva in fac-

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<sup>2</sup> For English translations see Ferrante, Elena (2007). *The Lost Daughter*. (trans.) Ann Goldstein. New York: Europa Editions.

cia e sul corpo segni di penna biro. Tuttavia in quei momenti spri-  
gionava una forza viva. (Ferrante [2006] 2015, 36)

The little girl was playing with the doll. She spoke to it, but not  
as to a mangy-looking doll, with a half blond, half bald head. Who  
knows what character she imagined for her. Nani, she said, Nanuc-  
cia, Nanicchia, Nennella. [...] Nani was an ugly old doll, her face  
and body showed marks from ballpoint pen. Yet in those moments  
a living force was released. (Ferrante 2007a, 37-8)

Considering that they are enthroned specifically in the horror cin-  
ema, we have to accept that the dolls have frightening appearanc-  
es. The more they resemble living beings, the more they look scary.  
The doll plays a key role for children to get in touch with *things* and  
to get used to them, however, dolls lead to the damage on children's  
feeling of affection and even lead to the motive for damaging things  
through being alike to the children yet having totally different bod-  
ies from that of children's. In fact, the ultimate desire of children is  
to see the spirit of the toy, so they sometimes break the toy. When  
this action, which took place in the early stages of abstraction and  
imagination, fails to find the soul, it brings about the first disappoint-  
ment and melancholy with it. As a matter of fact, the girl whom Leda  
is watching throws her doll on the sand at some point.

On the other hand, another striking element in the quote above is  
the issue of naming. Playing with the doll also includes the basic need  
for naming things: the need to communicate with another person or  
to fill a gap that creates a sense of longing is included in this need  
(Gržinic, Ilic, Vidovic 2010, 48). Indeed, Leda implies that the person  
to whom the child is talking is not a doll and she wonders what val-  
ues the child attributes to the doll. One way or the other, this com-  
munication effort is not the type that ends very successfully. The fact  
that the child gives different names to the doll does not change the  
fact that she cannot get a response no matter how much she speaks  
to it. It is an experience that breaches between the self and the out-  
side world, so that it is inevitable that it often turns into revolt and  
anger. Thus, the faces of those babies are painted with a pen, their  
arms are cut off, and their hair is removed. After a while, the image  
of the doll becomes heart-wrenching as well as scary. When Leda  
saw the doll, which was thrown aside the afternoon when the beach  
fun was finished, she described the doll as: "Era rimasta solo la bam-  
bola, ma in una posizione penosa, le braccia spalancate, le gambe  
divaricate, sdraiata sulla schiena ma con la testa semisepolta nella  
sabbia. Si vedeva il naso, un occhio, mezzo cranio" (Ferrante [2006]



2015, 37-8).<sup>3</sup> Leda pulls the doll out of sand, which was thrown on the sand, shabby, with half of its face covered with sand as if it was about to drown itself.

From this point on, Leda's point of view that she directed to the outside world through the doll will now turn into her inner self. Will the negation that she tends to have while she is observing the outside world be revealed in the relationship she has with the doll? She takes the doll and brings it to her hotel room:

Estrassi la bambola, me la rigirai perplessa tra le mani. Niente vestiti, chissà Elena dove li aveva abbandonati. Pesava più del previsto, doveva avere acqua dentro. I pochi capelli biondi le venivano fuori dal cranio a piccoli ciuffi distanziati. Aveva guance troppo gonfie, occhi azzurri stupidi e labbra piccole con un foro scuro al centro. (Ferrante [2006] 2015, 44-5)

I fished out the doll, turned her in bewilderment between my hands. No clothes, who knows where Elena had left them. She was heavier than I expected, she must be full of water. Her sparse blonde hair stuck out of her head in widely scattered tufts. Her cheeks were too puffy, she had stupid blue eyes and small lips with a dark opening at the center. (Ferrante 2007a, 46)

The doll, which is now 'lost' for the mother and daughter, is owned by Leda in a way. Leda's second critical encounter with the doll takes place when they are alone. Her first impression appears with the implications that the girl mistreats the doll. The doll is in a naturally pitiful state due to being mistreated, and this let Leda have already a compassionate feeling. On the other hand, she uses the expression "stupid blue eyes" for the doll's eyes: an uncomfortable feeling of compassion and another negation. The reason for this negation is gradually appearing as she remembers her own childhood and the doll that she used to play with:

Ne avevo avuta una con bei capelli a boccoli, me ne occupavo molto, non l'avevo mai persa. Si chiamava Mina, mia madre diceva che il nome gliel'avevo dato io. Mina, mamma. Mammuccia, mi venne in mente, una parola per dire bambola che da tempo non si usa più. Giocare con la mammuccia. Mia madre si era sempre concessa pochissimo ai giochi che cercavo di fare col suo corpo. Si innervosiva, si arrabbiava. La indispettiva che la pettinassi, le mettes-

<sup>3</sup> "Only the doll remained, but in a painful position, arms spread, legs a part, lying on her back, her head half buried in the sand. Her nose could be seen, an eye, half her skull" (Ferrante 2007a, 39).

si nastrini, le lavassi la faccia e le orecchie, la vestissi, rivestissi. (Ferrante [2006] 2015, 45)

I had had one with beautiful curly hair, I had taken great care of her, had never lost her. Her name was Mina, my mother said that I had given her the name. Mina, mamma. *Mammuccia* came to my mind, a word for 'doll' that hasn't been used for a long time. Play with the *mammuccia*. My mother had rarely yielded to the games I tried to play with her body. She immediately got nervous, she didn't like being the doll. She laughed, pulled away, grew angry. It annoyed her when I combed her hair, put ribbons on it, washed her face and ears, undressed her, redressed her. (Ferrante 2007a, 46-7)

It seems that Leda names her doll like the little girl on the beach, but, unlike Elena, she protected her doll and never lost it. She also played the game of mothering. "Mammuccia," is an old expression used for dolls in the dialect of Naples. When Leda calls the doll like this, she feels the tension caused by the pairs of provincialism and urbanism as well as daughterhood and motherhood. Leda's hidden anger to Elena because of the mistreatment of the doll is now directed to her mother. According to Freud, the uncanniness of the doll conceals or exposes the dynamics of the death instinct. Playing with the doll is a narcissistic union with the universe: first merging with the mother, then with earth through death (Sims 1996, 676). Leda wants to be merged with her mother through the games she wants her to be included 'physically' but her mother does not appreciate the games in which she should perform the baby. Thus, Leda's desire is not realised. Another memory that occurs to her right after this is about her mum's farewell on her deathbed. Her mother's last words are, "L'ultima cosa che mi ha detto, qualche tempo prima di morire, è stata, in un dialetto sfranto: sento 'nu poch'e friddo, Leda, e me sto caccanno sotto" (Ferrante [2006] 2015, 88).<sup>4</sup> Her mother dies after turning into a doll. Then, Leda remembers that she gives her own doll to her daughter to play. Neither she plays with her mother nor a positive bond is created among her daughter, the doll *mammuccia* and herself. The daughter ruins her childhood legacy, which causes Leda to get angry and throw the doll out of the balcony. In Ferrante's famous series of Neapolitan novels too, the toys were thrown away due to various instincts: rejection, resistance, jealousy, confronting and aggression are some of these instincts.

Despite the feeling of aggression that stems from the relationships with her own mother, with her own daughter, but basically with her-

<sup>4</sup> "The last thing she said to me, some time before she died, was, in a fractured dialect, I feel a little cold, Leda, and I'm shitting my pants" (Ferrante 2007a, 89).

*self*, Leda keeps having an extremely strong sense of compassion. She puts the doll on her knees and asks herself honestly why she took the little girl's doll: "Perché l'avevo presa. Custodiva l'amore di Nina e Elena, il loro vincolo, la reciproca passione. Era il testimone lucente di una maternità serena" (Ferrante [2006] 2015, 61).<sup>5</sup> Although she feels guilty for taking the doll, she buys a new dress for the doll whose dress got soiled because of the black liquid drooling down the doll's mouth. The next day she deceives herself by saying that she will give the doll in its new dress back to the little girl. She constantly buys new clothes and shoes for the doll, saying herself that what she is doing is 'pointless'. She is deceiving herself because she thinks that she is not a good mother and wants to consolidate her own motherhood by giving the doll to the little girl. At this point, the question of whether Leda would give the doll back becomes the main tension of the novel, and it starts to increase its dose because Leda's inner conflicts have increasingly exacerbated. The moment when she feels the doll alive for the first time is a sign that the conflicts will turn into a fierce knot. When she cannot find the doll the next morning where she has left it, she feels uneasy "as if the doll throws itself off the terrace at night". The feeling that occurs when she finally finds it sitting on a table in the kitchen, when the uneasiness is remedied, is an illusion of reality: "Per una frazione di secondo mi sembrò che muovesse le labbra e mi cacciasse la punta rossa della lingua come per gioco" (Ferrante [2006] 2015, 111).<sup>6</sup> The moments when Leda feels the doll is alive start to increase. That "creepy, scummy, black liquid" that runs from the doll's mouth because of its belly that is full of water turns into the leitmotif of the novel. As Leda cleanses the doll with alcohol in a bloodcurdling way, the doll with full of water slowly becomes Leda's and its name changes into Mina.

In the meantime, missing doll posters are hanged in various spots in the summer resort for the lost doll. Little Elena whose aunt is pregnant, plays games as if she is pregnant in the absence of her doll. Moreover, she is back to pacifiers since she lost her doll. The situation of Elena, who desires to become a baby again despite playing 'motherhood', indicates the contradictory nature of the relationship with dolls. Leda, who observes Elena, remotely tries to explain this complicated situation by saying, "O no, un bambino non vuole mai soltanto quello che chiede, anzi una richiesta soddisfatta gli rende ancora più insopportabile la mancanza non confessata" (Ferrante [2006]

<sup>5</sup> "Why had I taken her. She guarded the love of Nina and Elena, their bond, their reciprocal passion. She was the shining testimony of perfect motherhood" (Ferrante 2007a, 62).

<sup>6</sup> "For a fraction of a second it seemed to me that she moved her lips and stuck out the red tip of her tongue, as if playing a game" (Ferrante 2007a, 111).

2015, 129).<sup>7</sup> She thinks that taking the girl's doll makes the existence of the girl extremely troublesome. Although she feels guilty as if she has kidnapped a child, not a doll, she herself feels depressed about losing the doll. We see the tremendously ambivalent moods of the characters we meet in all of Ferrante's novels in the words of Leda saying, "Ero confusa, mi pareva a tratti che Elena non potesse fare a meno, mentre io no" (Ferrante [2006] 2015, 111-2).<sup>8</sup>

The unknown scummy liquid in the belly of the doll goes beyond being a leitmotif as it flows into Leda's sink. Leda, who sees this dirty water flowing, thinks about the vomiting during her own pregnancy. "Sono rimasta in cinta, ho partorito una figlia e non so nemmeno come sono fatta dentro. L'unica cosa vera che desidero è scappare" (Ferrante [2006] 2015, 139),<sup>9</sup> she says. Later on, Leda's desire to be both with them and free and away from them since they abandoned her or she left her daughters is an absurdly irritating feeling. She cannot find out what's inside the doll till the end. This time, she plays the 'doctor' and takes the unknown out of the doll carefully and she ends the surgery. It is time to recall Freud's argument that dolls' uncanniness either uncovers or reveals the dynamics of the death drive. In the case of Leda, this surgical operation is a narcissistic unification with the universe that corresponds to her confrontation with her mother, her own motherhood, 'other' women's motherhood and her girlhood. In Leda's eyes, it is the resurrection and the voice in a universe where all women are limited to being mothers and are left voiceless, it is the emancipation of the emancipation of the 'eternally guilty mother'. That's exactly why it is meaningful for her to answer the complaint of her daughter on the phone, "Mamma, che fai, non telefoni più? Ci fai sapere, almeno, se sei viva o sei morta?" (Ferrante [2006] 2015, 141)<sup>10</sup> with "Sono morta, ma sto bene" (Ferrante [2006] 2015, 141)<sup>11</sup> at the end of the novel. When the record on its back is repaired, the doll regains its voices inside. The doll is emancipated after getting rid of that scum filling inside.

<sup>7</sup> "Or no, a child never wants only what it's asking for, in fact a satisfied demand makes even more unbearable the need that has not been confessed" (Ferrante 2007a, 128).

<sup>8</sup> "I was confused; at moments it seemed to me that Elena could do without her, while I could not" (Ferrante 2007a, 112).

<sup>9</sup> "I got pregnant, I gave birth to a daughter, and I don't even know how I'm made inside. The only true thing I want is to escape" (Ferrante 2007a, 138).

<sup>10</sup> "Mama, what are you doing, why haven't you called? Won't you at least let us know if you're alive or dead?" (Ferrante 2007a, 140).

<sup>11</sup> "I'm dead, but I'm fine" (Ferrante 2007a, 140)

## 4 Conclusion

It can be concluded that Elena Ferrante's using the metaphor of dolls in *La figlia oscura* is more ambivalent, not a mere problem of paring the dolls but also because these may be mediators in the process of finding the self in a blurred existence. These inanimate objects, with their vivid appearance, first create an existential anxiety: as Charles Baudelaire puts it a *camera obscura* reflecting the self upside down, challenging the human ego in various ways. And as Sigmund Freud firstly suggested in the strongest possible terms, the uncanniness of dolls exposes the death instinct in the narcissistic union with the universe: first challenging, then coming to terms and finally merging with the mother, reversing the roles of mother and daughter, but in a wider perspective a thorough calling for escaping from the present existence, eluding the self from the every possible social role of the external world. Essentially this path is visiting the underworld and coming back with even an imbibed *savoir-vivre*. In *La figlia oscura* visiting the underworld is concretized by Leda's 'surgery of the doll' and herself in the end.

Finally, Ferrante questions the collective pre-acceptance that dolls are the main objects that prepare girls for motherhood, and she discusses (the necessity of) being mother for women by metaphorizing this phenomenon in this example. But she does not stop here: the dolls of this skilful raconteur produce different voices in the struggle to find existential rotation in correlation with their unliveliness and uneasiness. Similar to Rainer Maria Rilke's finding his way through a doll in the wax doll exhibition, Ferrante's character finally experiences an *anagnorisis* moment and gains an insight of her own by metaphorically killing her mother and her own motherhood.

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