

Nel Sogno: analysis and encoding

About the author

Neera (alias Anna Maria Zuccari) is one of the most authoritative female voices of nineteenth-century literature in Italy¹. The encyclopedia of women proposes the inclusion of Neera in Italian school programs alongside classical authors of the late nineteenth century such as Giovanni Verga and Capuana with whom she shared the literary stage of the time².

In her vast narrative production, Neera outlines her representation of the feminine experience: she imagines female characters that do not follow the paradigm of the patriarchal society of 1800 and who try to escape from traditional preconstructed female roles³. Although this apparent link with the fervent feminist movement⁴, born in those years, in her theoretical writings she reveals a more conservative point of view as she states marriage and motherhood are the only possible life choices for women. Her works are characterised by a sort of moral need that leads the author to a deeper interest in developing the theme of spirituality (Neera's last novels are defined as "simbolistiche") than narrating about the excesses of feminism and sentimentality. Perhaps this lack of interest in this thematic is the reason why critics underline in Neera's bibliography some paradoxes between her theoretical works and fictional novels⁵.



Figure 1. Anna Maria Zuccari

Nel sogno is a work that belongs to the second part of her production, in which we can see a great innovation in the writing style, which evokes an imaginative and dreamlike atmosphere rather than just describing the pure reality. Those few lines taken from a letter Neera sent to Giuseppe Benetti speak for themselves:

Stanca dei soliti volgari romanzi a base d'amore, ho voluto scrivere un racconto dove l'amore è trattato in una maniera nuova e dove predominano altri sentimenti: la sete dell'ideale dell'asceta, il pudore di Maria, la curiosità in Mèria. [...] Lei dice che l'annoiano i ritorni al romanticismo [...] Ma, mio Dio, cosa vuol dire romanticismo? Io non l'ho mai capito bene. Mi hanno accusato un po' di tutto oramai: di sentimentalismo e di verismo e di romanticismo e di materialismo [...] Io vedo, sento, scrivo: non so altro.⁶

¹ Arslan Antonia, *Dame, galline e regine: la scrittura femminile italiana fra '800 e '900*, Guerini Studio, Milano, 1998, pp. 90-91.

² <http://www.encyclopedialedonne.it/biografie/anna-radius-zuccari-neera/>

³ Her so-called "Trilogia della donna giovane": *Teresa* (1886), *Lydia* (1887) and *L'indomani* (1889).

⁴ For further information: <https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/femminismo/>.

⁵ For further information: <http://www.encyclopedialedonne.it/biografie/anna-radius-zuccari-neera/>.

⁶ Quinsac, Annie-Paule, *Segantini: trent'anni di vita artistica europea nei carteggi inediti dell'artista e dei suoi mecenati*, Oggiono, Lecco, Cattaneo, 1985, p. 685.

About the novel

Nel sogno is the story of an ascetic who, after years of almost complete solitude, finds himself sharing his life with two twins. The novel follows circular structure: it begins with a prayer and ends with an invocation to God. The hermit priest is alone in his mountains at beginning, and he ends alone. God is a constant in his life and when he decides to take care of the orphans, he suddenly dreams of raising them far away from “evil”, in the pure nature and alone. But the purity of his desire brings him even some doubts:

«Non era egli troppo orgoglioso? o che, pensava di fondare una nuova società indipendente dalle leggi e dai costumi che reggono l'altra? S'immaginava di essere l'Adamo di una novella stirpe? Si teneva in tanto concetto da sprezzare tutti gli uomini, o pretendeva forse di togliere al mondo il dolore ed il peccato?»

Only near the end of the novel the reader deals with the answer of the hermit's doubts: the way he raised the twins prevented them to know and understand the raw reality of life, in particular the existence of “evil”. Not complying Mèria's thirst for knowledge and lying about the nature of the world to Maria will bring him to loneliness once again after Mèria's disappearance and Maria's death, and this time not for choice.

About the encoding

Nel Sogno, as many other novels by Neera, can be easily found on the web in their digitized format for free, thanks to initiatives like “the women's writing database” of the University of Chicago⁷ and the Di.Re project⁸ which actively contribute to the spread and internationalization of her works.

The encoding of *Nel sogno* starts from a TEI Header, that aims storing all the data creator and the data curator's information in one place. The source document's extent measures 16017 words and 37 pages.

The main part of the document is inside the section <text> and is the <body> of the full text, which contains the hierarchical division of the single chapters and paragraphs. In this case, it is not appropriate to speak about “chapters division”, rather about “division in parts” since Neera divides her *Nel sogno* into five different parts (*L'asceta*, *Maria*, *Mistero*, *Il male*, *Solo*) which are simply separated by empty spaces and stars (*). This is the reason why I preferred to use two containers, <div1> and <div2>, in order to respect the author's hierarchy.

Because of the symbolistic style of this work, we can notice a narrow use of proper nouns, surnames, names of places: even the name of the ascetic is not known. Hence, my work was limited to the encoding of the most frequent written names of person, as “Maria” and “Mèria”, and names of religious entities like “Dio”, “Signore”, “Madonna” always cited with a capital letter. Since this last category is a central aspect of this novel, I thought it was important to encode even names of religious books cited a few times by Neera. In this way, a possible computational linguistic task will benefit from the encoding since the names will stand out from the rest of a sea of words.⁹ One possible application could be the construction of an index of names, even for example linking the twins' name to the mother of Jesus in order to let the reader find further

⁷ University of Chicago women's writing database: https://artflsrv03.uchicago.edu/cgi-bin/efts/textdbs/IWW/hub.py?type=document&auth_code=A0034.

⁸ Some of Neera's digitised novels (from 185 to 192 in the list): <http://www.braidense.it/risorse/dire.php>.

⁹ Burnard Lou, *What is the Text Encoding Initiative? How to add intelligent markup to digital resources*. Marseille, 2014. OpenEdition Press. Web. <http://books.openedition.org/oep/426>.

information about the religious background of *Nel sogno*. This could be done with all the names of religious places and name of saints cited in the novel.

Another tag that is widely used is <q> with @type *spoken*, to refer to the dialogues inside the text.



Figure 2. Voyant tools: cirrus.

Figure 2 is taken from the online Voyant tools¹⁰ and describes what are the most frequent words of *Nel sogno* (no stop-words taken into consideration): “Maria” certainly wins, followed by “Dio”, “egli” and “Mària”.

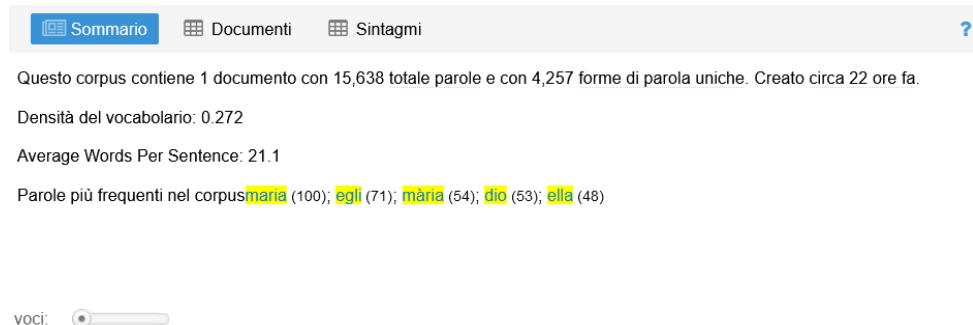


Figure 3. Summary section.

Through the observation of *Figure 3*, thanks to the numbers reported, we understand that actually “egli” is the second most frequent term in the corpus, followed by “Mària”.

¹⁰ To see the corpus click: <https://voyant-tools.org/?corpus=3ff1d8898c841259e1ab7aa027a11345>

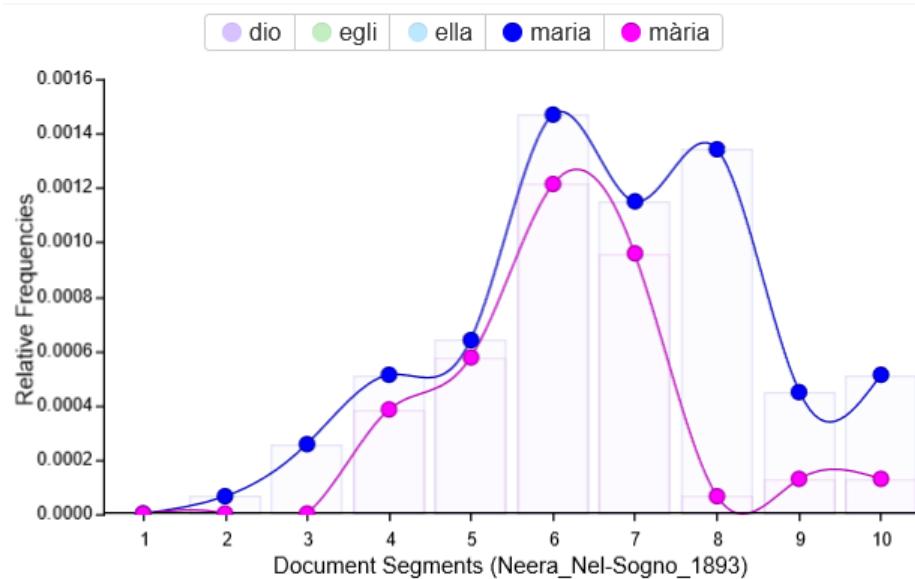


Figure 4. Trends section.

In *Figure 4*, the “relative frequencies over document segments” graph compares the frequency of terms “Maria” and “Mària”. We can notice how late the name Mèria shows in the book with respects of Maria: the reason why is to be found in the choice of the hermit character to call both the twins Maria until he understands they actually are not identical in everything, hence the almost unconscious choice to differentiate the accent of the name. Near segment 8, there is an important drop in the frequency of “Mària” since this part corresponds to the disappearance of the character. It is interesting to observe section 10 as while “Mària” decreases, “Maria” increases: in this part of the story the old solitary man buries his beloved Maria and apparently her name appears more than her sister’s, confirming he feels more affection to Maria, as it the reader finds out at the beginning of the book.

The analysis of the novel through Voyant tools, even if not particularly detailed, reveals how the online platform could be useful «to facilitate reading and interpretive practices for digital humanities students and scholars as well as for the general public.»¹¹ as the creators declared. More interesting applications could include a bigger corpus, for example a selection of all the greatest Neera’s works in order to provide a comparison of the topics she deals with and thus see how her writing style changed through years. Also, Neera could be compared with Verismo or Realismo authors of that time to find out links and similarities.

¹¹ <https://voyant-tools.org/docs/#!/guide/about>

Bibliography and Sitography

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