

THE PEOPLE'S DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF ALGERIA  
MINISTRY OF HIGHER EDUCATION AND SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH  
ABDERRAHMANE MIRA UNIVERSITY OF BEJAIA  
FACULTY OF LETTERS AND LANGUAGES  
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH



**Literary Merit of Bestselling Novels: A Case Study of  
Elena Ferrante's *My Brilliant Friend* (2012)**

A Dissertation Submitted to the Department of English in Partial Fulfilment of  
the Requirement for an **M.A. Degree in English Literature and Civilization**

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**Academic Year: 2019 / 2020**

## **Dedication**

To the memory of my beloved grandfather.

To my dear parents, and all my family.

## **Acknowledgments**

I would like to express my gratitude to my supervisor, Ms. Abida Benkhodja, for her patience, continuous guidance, and helpful remarks.

I would particularly like to thank Mrs. Sihem Saibi for her insightful comments and suggestions, as well as her generous support.

My gratitude also extends to all the teachers who have contributed to my education.

Most of all, my heartfelt appreciation goes to my family and close friends for their constant warm encouragement and support.

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## **Abstract**

The present paper addresses the issue of bestselling novels and the status and position they hold in the literary sphere. It calls attention to the disdainful and depreciating views towards bestsellers as it reveals the diverse perspectives prevailing in academia. Indeed, it highlights and emphasizes the literary quality of contemporary literary production. Accordingly, it undertakes the investigation and scrutiny of Elena Ferrante's international bestseller *My Brilliant Friend*'s literary merit. In the light of Harold Bloom's thorough approach addressing canonical status, the present study displays the various literary criteria and qualities that Ferrante's work implies. In general terms, this research work looks into what is considered genuine literature as it explores the concept of literary merit.

**Key Words:** literary merit, bestsellers, *My Brilliant Friend*, canonic criteria and standards.

# **General Introduction**

## General Introduction

With the emergence of the contemporary popular culture, books, among other artifacts, are turned into a commodity that is created to be consumed and to make a profit from. In such a situation where the emphasis is much on quantity and mass production, the critical question of quality and value is usually excluded. Even so, these works are largely consumed by the broad reading public. Hence, the bestseller, which is determined by its exceptionally high sales and popularity, is one sort of literary production that is widespread in the modern age. It is broadly circulated among readers as it enjoys both fame and fortune.

In academia, however, bestsellers are disdained and discussed only in devaluing terms. The fact that their success is measured by their sales rather than timeless literary quality makes them subject to criticism. In fact, a bestselling novel is often said to be the result of commercialized literature where publishers and writers focus more on the profit motive rather than literary merit. Thus, the popularity and commercial nature that defines it holds it back from getting attention in academic studies as well as gaining literary recognition.

This tendency to consider most bestsellers to be unimportant literature and of little value is the effect of the fixed prejudices in the literary scope. Usually, any work that pleases the taste of the general reading public is inevitably precluded from the canon of serious literature. Nevertheless, not every bestseller is inferior in a literary sense and substandard. On the contrary, there are some legitimate bestsellers which proved to be worthy and became part of what is called “Highbrow literature”.

Published in 2012, Elena Ferrante’s *My Brilliant Friend* is one of the remarkable bestselling novels of the early twenty-first century. Being the first book of a quartet called *the Neapolitan Novels*, the novel follows the complicated and intense lifelong female friendship of Elena Greco and Rafaella Cerullo. From its launch, Ferrante’s fiction has achieved huge

commercial success and has become a global phenomenon, as it was introduced for cinematic adaptation in 2018. Hence, it managed to catch the attention of many researchers as it has received critical acclaim.

## **Review of Literature**

The bestseller phenomenon had been tackled by several scholars from different perspectives. Thus, lots of information, as well as viewpoints about the subject matter have been provided. Many researchers perceive that bestsellers are of no worth and argue that their success is planned for. Indeed, Arman Veranyan, in his article entitled “Best-sellers as Indicators of Literature “Quality” published in 2016, stated that bestsellers are usually of no artistic merit; a truth that literary critics agree upon. He asserted that contemporary writers do their best to make a book famous and demanded with the help of editors and marketing specialists. According to him, writers follow some policies and criteria to make the book a bestseller. Likewise, Benoit Berthou, in an article titled “Le ”best-seller”: la fabrique du succès” (2008), explained and suggested that “best-sellers” are part of a certain form of book production. Berthou pointed out to three major characteristics that define the remarkable commercial career of these books: fast sale, be part of popular literature and follow a marketing plan for the launching.

The aspect of popularity makes of the bestseller a typical work of popular fiction, a fiction that is considered to represent a low form of literature. Ken Gelder, in his book *Popular Fiction: The logics and practices of a literary field* (2004), recalled the American novelist Henry James’ stance on popular fiction. As claimed by Gelder, Henry James viewed it as dominant over real literature. He went as far as to state that literature is vulgarised by popular writers (18). Besides, Jonathan Franzen in an essay entitled “Why Bother?” (2002)

further identified popular fiction as a cause of literature's decline. For him, conceding to the exigencies of the market place led to the decay of literary standards.

Accordingly, in *The Cambridge Companion to Popular Fiction* (2012), Fred Botting asserted that the appeal of bestsellers for consumable novelty rather than artistic innovation made of them a consumable commodity designed for contemporary tastes (165). Having the function of making money for both writers and publishers, bestsellers managed to dominate and transform modes of judgments. Such market practices, Botting affirmed, come to absorb literary value (169).

Features attributed to such commercially popular works, Ken Gelder discussed, formed preconceived views about them. Indeed, they are considered to be a product and a simple matter of commerce, no more. Or, as Gelder articulated it, this category of literary works is considered as "Capitalism's most perfect literary form" (35).

Actually, numerous critics suppose that bestsellers are the sort of literature produced on a capitalistic basis. It is commonplace to regard capitalism as a fuel to the creation of bad literature. In *The Anti-capitalist Mentality* (1956), however, Ludwig Von Mises suggested the contrary; it actually encouraged the innovator and offered a market for all kinds of literature (48-49). Yet, he admitted that most of the novels published today "are a mere trash" because of the tremendous production (52). Moreover, he criticized critics who blame capitalism for what they call "the decay of literature" (52). Therefore, he accused them of not being able to "sift the chaff from the wheat" (52).

From a similar perspective, Peter Uwe Hohendahl sought to identify the functions and responsibilities of literary criticism in a capitalistic environment in his book *The Institution of Criticism* (1982). In the chapter where he discussed the bestseller phenomenon, Hohendahl advocated the outlining of a more efficient popular literary criticism through which a

bestseller could be studied (223). As such, he asserted that the phenomenon could be examined by explaining both the economic and cultural-political context only (224).

Similar to the theme, the book under study has been explored, addressed, and examined by a number of researchers as well as reviewers, regardless of its recent publication. Indeed, in an article entitled “Local Flavour Vs. Global Readership: The Elena Ferrante Project and Translatability” (2017), Segnini examined the portrayal of Naples, and investigated how the geographical and cultural context is delivered and variously translated for various audiences. She noted that Ferrante’s books, *My Brilliant Friend* in particular, aroused mixed reactions in Italy; while some critics and feminists have praised her writings, other cultural journalists sharply criticized her and described her books as “feuilleton”, and questioned the use of a pseudonym as a marketing strategy (108).

Once more, Elisa Segnini conducted a comparative study about the reception of two translated works which achieved international success; Elena Ferrante’s *My Brilliant Friend* amongst them. Accordingly, in 2018, she published an article where she attempted to prove that translation gave an afterlife to the books, as it gave them access to circulate worldwide. Concerning Ferrante’s fiction, three major factors to its international acclaim were provided. Above all, she claimed that Ferrante consciously uses a style and form that appeal to the international readership (7). Segnini further asserted that, Ferrante’s English translator, Ann Goldstein’s signature contributed largely to *My Brilliant Friend* acquiring voice in English (11). Yet, most influentially, the reception in the Anglophone press played a central role in the novel’s commercial success (12). Actually, a large space was consecrated to her work in Anglophone media, such as *The Guardian*, *The New York Times*, and *The New Yorker* (11).

In *The New Yorker*, for instance, James Wood praised Ferrante’s earlier writings and depicted them as being exceptionally remarkable and limitless. Besides, the book critic considered *My Brilliant Friend* as a great, captivating bildungsroman that embodies powerful

scenes and vivid details. He described the complexity of the story in these words “a beautiful and delicate tale of confluence and reversal”.

Nevertheless, in an article published in Italy’s most influential newspapers, Paolo di Paolo considers the international hit of the work; to be discovered and celebrated in America, as a “miracle”. He, actually, believes that James Wood’s review has played a major role in the reception of the novel among English-speaking readers. Indeed, its success is attributed to the before-mentioned book review. Still, he admits that Ferrante’s success in the US is due to her solid narrative hand, plain language, her touristic rendering of Naples, and mostly her anonymous identity.

Otherwise, when discussing what kind of fiction Ferrante is writing, Daniel Schwarz declared that her novel takes its place in the tradition of the European novel (299). In a critical study, he assumed and strongly believed that *My Brilliant Friend* and *The Neapolitan Novels* in general are among the novels that change the way the reader sees the world (286). He considered the authors’ talent to present an entire subculture in depth as a remarkable accomplishment (324).

## **Significance of the Study**

Elena Ferrante’s novel has been addressed and scrutinized by several reviewers, researchers, and scholars. Previous works, for instance, revolve around the issue of the writer’s anonymous identity, the novel’s popularity and spread, characteristics of Ferrante’s narrative as well as the novel’s geographical and cultural context. As such, no research has been devoted to investigating the novel’s worth and value. Therefore, conducting a study about bestselling novels will shed light on the status and position they hold in academia. Besides, it will show the literary worth and value of Ferrante’s *My Brilliant Friend*.

## **Thesis Statement:**

This research paper will explore the literary merit and value of Elena Ferrante's commercially striking novel *My Brilliant Friend* and will demonstrate the worth and importance it is given and accorded in the literary sphere. As such, it will answer the following questions:

- What are the features that distinguish the different forms of literary production?
- How are the high literary standards that literature used to embody subverted by such tendencies?
- What are the literary merits and artistic qualities of Elena Ferrante's bestselling novel *My Brilliant Friend*?

## **Aim of the Study**

This research attempts to draw attention to the depreciating and the disregarding views towards books and novels which attain the bestseller status in academic circles. Thus, our study aims to demonstrate that not all bestsellers are of poor literary quality; there are some notable ones that deserve literary recognition. Accordingly, we seek to prove that *My Brilliant Friend* implies high literary standards.

## **Research Methods and Materials**

In order to achieve the aims of this research work, we will rely on the literary standards and norms set by scholars and critics in the late twentieth century, specifically, the canonical criteria suggested by the influential American critic Harold Bloom, which characterize the Western canon of literature and distinguish a good novel from a "bad" one. Indeed, we shall display the presence of all or most standards he identifies, in the selected novel of Elena Ferrante *My Brilliant Friend*. Thence, we will uncover its literary merit.

## Structure of the Research Paper

The paper is divided into three chapters. The first chapter is designed to further enlighten the readers about the contemporary literary situation. It provides an overview of the literary canon and its concerns. Besides, it sheds light on the characteristics of two contradictory forms of literary production: literary fiction and popular fiction. This chapter eventually attempts to explore the bestseller phenomenon and provide information about its production, distribution, along with the various factors that contribute to its circulation.

The second chapter provides two distinct sections. In the first section, we attempt to define literary merit and to introduce Aesthetic criticism. Then, we proceed to the discussion of canonical criteria and the literary standards established by numerous critics. We explain more the norms that determine a work's worth and literary merit. As such, this section serves as a theoretical background for the research work. In the second section, a biography of Elena Ferrante and a plot summary of her novel *My Brilliant Friend* are provided. Besides, it supplies an analysis of the main characters present in the novel.

The third chapter deals with the discussion of the corpus. It explores the literary properties and qualities that Elena Ferrante's bestselling novel *My Brilliant Friend* (2012) involves. It also displays the novel's worth and literary merit by drawing on the various literary standards and criteria addressed in the second chapter.

# **Chapter One**

**Presenting the Literary Canon, the  
Different Forms of Literary Production,  
and the Bestseller Phenomenon**

# Chapter I

## Presenting the Literary Canon, the Different Forms of Literary Production, and the Bestseller Phenomenon

### Introduction

The growing popularity of bestselling novels creates concern and inquietude in the literary field for it is thought to be threatening to the high standards literature used to embody. Such literary excellence is carried by the literary canon which is now undermined and compelled to major change.

The present chapter provides a definition of the literary canon, its formation process, and introduces the debate raised about it. It also sheds light on two contradictory forms of literary production: literary fiction which is considered as the high form of literature, together with popular fiction which is considered as the low form. Thus, the former section enables the reader to understand the different characteristics each field represents. This chapter explores the bestseller phenomenon as well and attempts to explain how it is produced, distributed along with showing the various factors that contribute to its circulation.

### 1. Canonizing Literature

#### 1.1. Defining the Literary Canon

The word canon originated from the ancient Greek term *kanon*, which usually means rule, standard, and model (Kolbas 12). The concept of canon, being adaptation and imitation was allocated to the Romans who took, recreated, and transformed Greek poetry. Virgil's *The Aeneid*, for instance, combines thematic and stylistic elements of both *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. Indeed, selected works were believed to be of great value and worth being imitated,

hence, their reproduction came to be a mark of canonical distinction (Kolbas 15). Therefore, the canon could be defined as an archetype, a model, and an artistic exemplar to follow.

However, it was only after the Middle Ages that a literary canon, set to literature, was established. Subtle shift in definition took place thus, the canon became a list of institutionalized works by authoritative writers which were perceived as equally valuable and timeless. As such, in *The Critics Debate: King Lear* (1988), Ann Thompson puts the meaning of the canon in the simplest words as follows: “The literary canon can be narrowly defined as that which is accepted as authentic ..., but it is usually defined more broadly as that which is assumed to be “good literature”, in fact the 'best' literature: that which is worth preserving and passing on from one generation to the next” (60).

## **1.2. Literary Canon Formation**

As explained in the previous section, the literary canon is defined as a high standard of literary excellence. This latter is generally determined by institutions of education that rely on several criteria. Yet, as Harold Bloom argues in his book entitled *The Western Canon: The Books and Schools of the Ages* (1994), a canon is determined by artistic supremacy and aesthetic elements only: innovative, artistic, and complex language and style constitute the grounds of literary evaluation (29). Innovation and originality are considered to be the main criteria for a work to be a canon, as Harold Bloom puts it “All strong literary originality becomes canonical” (25). However, literary canon formation varied from age to age and from reader to reader. As a matter of fact, several factors took part in shaping distinct canons throughout time.

For instance, the values ancient literature was thought to embody made of it an authority by which contemporary literature is legitimized. Indeed, imitating curriculum authors, valuable and timeless antique classics, was a means by which vernacular works acquired esteem. Actually, to survive in a climate dominated by the study of ancient literature,

vernacular literature became canonical only by association with and imitation of the ancient classics. Yet, after the boom of literary production due to the invention of the printing machine and the development of the publishing industry, imitation itself was not sufficient to make a work canonical; more than that was required.

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, major features reinforced a specific literary canon. With the growth of publishing and the gradual expansion of literacy, the development of professional criticism, along with the establishment of national identities multiple and distinct national canons began to be fixed. Truly, nationalism played a great role in modern canon formation, the increasing nationalism in Germany, for example, led to the foundation of a particular canon of German literature. In Britain, Shakespeare had become “the center of English literary culture” and his works “national treasures” (Kolbas 20).

Thus, the transformation of the literary canon is largely influenced by nationality as a form of social identity, to the extent that, in modernity, the canon fostered a sense of shared identity by appeal to national history and distinct cultural heritage. Therefore, the single, universal canon of antiquity and the Middle Ages had been fragmented. In the postmodern era, social, cultural, and institutional changes such as the social upheavals of the 1960s, the rise of academic interest in popular culture together with the growth of modern electronic media, represent the latest challenges to the canon; the once thought of as timeless and universal is now subverted to radical change.

### **1.3. Contemporary Canon Debate**

Since to be canonical means to be exemplary, then the concept of a canon inevitably involves qualitative judgment. Traditionally, high regard was accorded to the canon, for its great literary quality. Nevertheless, this regard was viewed as being unfair because the traditional canon had been dominated by white European males, and it excluded authors from

marginalized social groups. It is thus condemned as being elitist, patriarchal, racist, or ethnocentric. As a result of the pressures of multicultural and feminist writings, the canon was compelled to be revised, to expand, and to include a wider range of writings that are more culturally diverse and socially representative. This latest has come to be what is called the modern canon. The change provoked a variety of reactions: academicians, critics together with different institutions took contradicting positions, each attacking and defending its pronouncements.

### **1.3. 1. Conservative Critics**

Conservative critics try to vindicate the ongoing significance of the Western canon owing to its permanent greatness and the edification its study would provide to individuals and the society in general. They view liberal critics' arguments as a sign of the loss of academic standards and the decline of aesthetic judgment in front of political forces. In fact, William Bennett and Lynne Cheney, both chairmen of the U.S. National Endowment for the Humanities during the 1980s and 1990s, accused teachers and professional academics as the only responsible for the collapse; since formal education plays a major role in the formation of canons. They argue that the canon should be historically transcendent rather than being a political instrument in the service of class, race, and gender (Kolbas 26-29).

Others, critics, and journal editors charge the decadent influence of "theory" in the universities, which attacks democratic values and paralyzes standards of judgment. Likewise, Frank Kermode admits that changes in the institution of criticism occurred in his book *Forms of Attention* (1985). Still, he believes that these radical forms of criticism, suggested by Derrida and Foucault for example, are directly related to historical changes in what constitutes the canon (78-79). Therefore, Kermode recognizes the changing values of interpretations. Still, he suggests severe academic restrictions over social and historical explanations.

Accordingly, in his work *Pleasure and Change* (2001), Kermode isolates the experience of aesthetic pleasure from the social process and deems it as the central criterion of evaluation (31).

Harold Bloom is also among defenders of the Western canon. Being so, he mourns the fate of the canon in his book *The Western Canon* (1994). However, Bloom detaches himself from the debate; confessing that the canon is never really a fixed structure. Besides, although the canon is in continuous historical change, he strongly believes that it cannot be simply forced open since no canon of any literature is ever closed. Bloom states that: “[B]y its very nature, the Western Canon will never close, but it cannot be forced open by our current cheerleaders (35). He further attests that “All canons, including our currently fashionable counter-canons, are elitist, and as no secular canon is ever closed, what is now acclaimed as "opening up the canon" is a strictly redundant operation” (37). All in all, the canon, to Harold Bloom, is a self-reliant field of exclusive aesthetic experience that remains distant from all social concerns (18).

### **1.3. 2. Liberal Critics**

Liberal critics’, such as John Guillory’s and Frederic Jameson’s, aim to open the canon has come as a reaction to the nature of the existing canon, being elitist, racist, and ethnocentric; therefore, it must be challenged. It is believed that opening the canon will redress its imbalances and render it more democratic by making it more representative of genuine social diversity. Thus, literature by women, racial or ethnic minorities, non-Western writers, homosexuals, and the working class should no longer be ignored, but have to be considered as well.

Some liberal critics suggest a strategy of enlarging the canon by studying the hitherto neglected works of literature. Indeed, Charlotte Pierce-Baker, in the essay entitled “A Quilting

of Voices: Diversifying the Curriculum/Canon in the Traditional Humanities” (1990), advocates situating canonical works in their historical context, by studying them with other neglected works of literature at once (152-161). As a result, understudied authors and pieces of literature would be validated and valorized. Accordingly, many counterparts consider that pairing books together with historicizing them will enrich the canon and make it more credible. Such proposals aim to raise the consciousness of a literary work's social and historical context, along with promoting cultural pluralism, rather than simply discrediting the traditional canon.

John Guillory, for his part, asserts that schools have frequently restored the canon and the overall practice of literary study to harmonize it with the changing interests of the bourgeoisie ( Reinert 222). Thus, he argues against the forces that work to make literature feel exclusive, as he upholds a struggle to detach the study of literature from the creators of class prestige (224). In doing so, Guillory doesn't strive for the deconstruction of the canon but, simply, seeks to democratize access to cultural products (O'Dair 131).

Yet, others go as far as to open the canon, urging that new grounds of literary evaluation are necessary for a complete revision of the canon. Hence, thematic and generic classifications, social representation, the popularity of a work, as well as its political effectiveness are considered to be measures of literary merit and criteria for canonization. It is worth noting that opening the canon on the grounds of representation is thought to be politically empowering for certain communities.

Expansion of capitalism into broader and diverse markets is, also, strongly believed to be a central factor that enabled certain canons to be established. This growth demands an ever-increasing production of cultural commodities, including literary artifacts. Fredric Jameson, for instance, argues that capitalism thrives on pluralism and populism just as varied

commodities flourish in new and open markets in which the range of values that the canon represents has, supposedly, no place at all (Kolbas 23-24). Nevertheless, even though popularity alone does not provide sufficient ground for canonization, the canon debate seems to suggest that sheer force of numbers in sales, literary prizes, or entries in the course syllabus is equivalent to canon revision.

## **2. Popular Fiction**

Popular fiction is a form of literary production that usually holds a different status than literature in the literary scope. In fact, in popular fiction, the success of a novel is determined by its sales along with its popularity among readers rather than timeless literary quality (Shneider-Mayerson 22). Therefore, it is considered to be a low cultural product.

### **2.1. Literary Fiction vs. Popular Fiction**

Due to different cultural-social positions, distinctions between high and low cultural productions are made. Literary fiction in literature, for instance, represents the high and real literature whereas popular fiction takes an anti-Literature position. However, as Ken Gelder argues, popular fiction deploys a set of logics and practices that are different in comparison to those deployed by literature (12).

#### **2.1. 1. Characteristics of Literary Fiction**

Literary fiction is the sort of fiction that claims to have more literary merit in comparison with popular fiction. Such an elevated position is determined by critical acclaim since it is most of the time highly praised by the critics, as it is often awarded a prize such as the Nobel Prize in Literature, the Booker Prize, and the Pulitzer Prize (Saricks 177).

The books literary fiction embodies are acknowledged for their high literary standards. Indeed, its concern with the style and the complexity of writing (the use of elevated language, serious tone, and poetic descriptions) gives it a literary dimension (Saricks 178). Besides, literary fiction writers write by a sense of creativity, originality, and complexity, using the language or the discourse of art. Hence, it gives birth to masterpieces that are deep in character and of an intensive degree of artistic formality. Its writers are authors rather than just writers; they generate genuine novels of complex plot, dealing with the complexity of life (Amis 327). It is worth noting that literary authors are knowledgeable, instructed, and have received high education. Thus, it justifies their ability to create interesting, complex, and well-developed characters that drive the plot.

Literary fiction is directed to small audiences, to committed readers, and intellectuals of great literary taste. Unlike popular fiction readers, literary fiction readers are serious and devoted readers who invest more time and effort to solve and explain the enigma these thought-provoking novels usually carry (Saricks 185). These readers prefer novelty: they constantly look for new topics, creative language, and original styles. Such features are provided by literary fiction which, unlike popular fiction, does not have to follow conventional forms of storytelling; that is to say the genre forms (Paikin 00:01:26 – 00:01:34).

Literary fiction writers, however, do not write to satisfy the readers, to make a profit, or to grow in popularity. On the contrary, literary fiction is indifferent to the buying and reading public and it usually limits itself to expensive editions that cannot be afforded by everybody (Gelder 20). Its production is quite restricted for writers do not publish every year in this form. Consequently, the profit made out of it is very low. Literary fiction is not only limited in its financial gain but also in popularity. Hence, literary fiction is not very popular among the general reading public and, strangely enough, its writers dismiss and reject any opportunity that would make their work gain fame. Jonathan Franzen, for instance, refused his

book *The Corrections* (2001) to be selected as book of the month for Oprah Winfrey's book club, explaining that her support might harm "his reputation in high-art circles" ("Franzen 'regrets' Oprah row"). Even though influential figures' endorsement is a great means to boost sales and gain fame, literary fiction writers frequently reject it. Instead, receiving positive reviews and critical acclaim is more significant to them.

### **2.1.2. Characteristics of Popular Fiction**

Contrary to literary fiction, popular fiction is simply determined to please the readers. In fact, popular fiction is by nature careful and respectful of its readers, for the former are its market place. Thus, it values conventions over originality and writes in genre form. Crime fiction, for example, Science fiction, Romance, Thriller, and Fantasy are the more widely read genres. So, writers produce their works accordingly to achieve commercial success together with enhancing their popularity.

Success in popular fiction is planned for since the field is a sort of industrial practice (Gelder 15). Popular fiction writers aim to break publishing records by working hard and being productive to establish their reputation. Serialization, for example, is another strategy that guarantees a loyal readership and reinforces a novelist's reputation. This latter is of prime importance because it assures authorial influence which boosts the sales of his novels. For instance, the great success of J.K. Rowling's first novel published in 1993 of the Harry Potter series, led the reading public to read anything with the name of the author on it. Indeed, readers of popular fiction are considered to be passive consumers, for they are fast readers that read for pleasure rather than practical knowledge. Hence, reading habits, as Clive Bloom explains, became more a form of entertainment and less literary than scholars might desire (preface). That is why the high literary folk think of them as tasteless and sensual rather than tasteful and intellectual (Gelder 18).

Within the development and the growth of the publishing industry, the market expanded for fiction and book production increased. These factors led to fierce competition in the market place and book sales. As a result, publishers adopted promotional and marketing strategies to succeed commercially (Glover 29), as they developed a complex combination of format and pricing to be within the reach of a wider readership (Glover 17). For example, the weight and design of the book are quite important: a small, easy-to-carry book with an eye-catching cover would attract more readers. That being said, long-term success, financial gain, and an army of readers is the objective of popular fiction writers. Therefore, they turn to sales executives and business managers to give their work a chance to succeed.

Commercial hit and blockbusters are what matters most for popular fiction. John Sutherland, in his book entitled *Bestsellers: A Very Short Introduction* (2007), affirms that the bestseller is popular fiction's most vibrant manifestation (4). Yet, it is worth noting that not every popular book is a bestseller. All in all, the previously discussed features; from its function as entertainment, its self-identification as a form of industrial production, along with its commercial potential are the most common to be attributed to popular fiction.

### **3. Bestsellers**

With the emergence of contemporary popular culture, books were turned into a commodity that is created to be consumed, thence to make a profit from. Indeed, in a time where records of sales figures were widely circulated and interested in, they were defined more by the number of sales. Over the years, the bestseller phenomenon created great controversy among different scholars and critics: from what it represents, its promotion and circulation, to its production and distribution.

### 3.1. Definition

Although different definitions have been given to bestsellers, it is agreed that it is a novel that sells very well. Yet, the number of sales alone does not constitute a bestseller. It is distinguished for its strong initial sales (fast sales after its launch) and its ability to keep the sales high over a period of time; thus take place in a bestseller list. *Gone With The Wind* by Margaret Mitchell was at the top of the bestselling American list in the year of its publication (1936), as one million copies have been sold by the end of the year (Pierpont 87).

The mystery thriller by Dan Brown *The Da Vinci Code* (2003) is another novel that managed to reach and preserve the top spot for two years (2004-5) (Sutherland 26). In the same year, the fifth novel in the *Harry Potter* series, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, written by the British author J. K. Rowling, outsold Dan Brown's novel with five million copies sold in the first 24 hours of its publication ("July date for Harry Potter book"). However, most bestsellers fit only the period that gave them birth because they become obsolete once out of their time and place frame. Furthermore, a bestseller is forgotten once it no longer appears on the list. As Sutherland asserts they are of a "short lifespan" and "today's bestsellers become yesterday's fiction as soon as soon as one has read them" (1). It, actually, gains access into the bestseller list for a short time and then withdraws from it forever in most cases.

The short-lived success of the bestseller, usually, makes it subject to criticism; hence little attention is given to it in academia. Once again, John Sutherland strongly affirms that, unlike bestsellers, great literary works are not for an era but remain great the entire time (3). Moreover, it scarcely finds legitimacy and validity in academic studies. Its commercial nature, apparently, holds it back from getting critical esteem and literary recognition. Yet, a bestseller is not necessarily substandard or of poor literary quality but it may be a book with genuine merit that could become a classic. Likewise, Clive Bloom views that the term doesn't forcibly

refer to an ephemeral title badly written; dedicated to entertain the readers during summer (1), but it may carry pure artistic talent (3). In both cases, however, a bestselling novel is highly profitable; thus makes lots of money for its author as well as its publisher. Vickram Seth's *A Suitable Boy* (1993), for instance, became a hit in 1994 and recorded huge sales. The Indian novelist and poet gained a sum of £ 500,000 out of a £3 million gross (Clive Bloom 3). Thus, financial gain is one aspect that boosts not only writers' desire but also the publishers' to achieve the bestselling status. Indeed, publishers, marketing specialists, sales executives along with business managers form a working team which takes into account the different factors that influence books' sales before producing and distributing a book.

### **3.2. Production and Distribution**

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, mass readership emerged with the spread of literacy. Thereby, more fiction was read by more people, especially, women as predominant readers who had more time and were more engaged (Clive Bloom 12). In consequence, the book publishing industry developed and new sales techniques arose to answer the need of a book-hungry public. Meanwhile, the introduction of bestseller lists, which track and report sales records, in the United States of America put more pressure on making high sales. Thus, most writers aim at reaching the list; a deed that would ensure both popularity and revenue.

While some novels become directly and accidentally bestsellers (Clive Bloom 3), many others make it to the list by simply following, as Berthou states, some strategies and features. In fact, today's highly competitive world makes catching an audience extremely challenging (Yucesoy et al. 2). Therefore, writers write in a popular genre form that would appeal to and attract a mass audience. Indeed, authors tend to write mystery, thriller, science fiction, romance, and sensation novels which are the most popular among readers. Jacqueline

Susann's *The Valley of the Dolls* (1966), for example, is a romance novel that was at the top of the bestselling list during the entire year of its publication as it entered, for some years, in *The Guinness Book of Records* as the all-time bestselling work of fiction (Sutherland 70). In this regard, writers are guided by consumers' needs which offer more chances to bestsellerdom.

In addition to the genre system, advertising and promoting a book is the factor that changed the gameplay of books' sales. The massive book productions that the 20th and 21st centuries had witnessed led publishers to, necessarily, engage solid marketing strategies that would persuade readers to buy. Thus, professional book marketers and advertising experts recommend appearing in both traditional and digital media, occupying advertising boards, and working a potent sort of launching as the different strategies that prove to be effective in generating sales before the release of the book. In 2000, for instance, Christian Jacq's editor Bernard Fixot had invited 150 journalists from different countries to the launching event where the writer's historical novel *La Pierre de Lumière* came out simultaneously (Berthou). The media plan turned out to be very successful as more than one million copies have been sold (Berthou). Likewise, including references to already achieved success is another well-known marketing strategy (Hansen & Waade 113), which George R. Martin made use of regarding his second book of *A Game of Thrones* series; *A Clash of Kings* (1998). Indeed, the author is mentioned to be "A NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR" on the book's cover, thus the novel achieved the New York Times bestselling list even though the series' first novel was not one.

Covers design is one mechanism that drives the sales of books. In fact, an eye-catching and outstanding cover is more likely to sell. In a study, Jan Kamphius asserts that the attractive appearance of a book cover has a great influence on purchasing decisions (471-485). Accordingly, the indecent and obscene covers of the British pseudonymous author Hank

Jason enabled him to sell five million books by 1954 (Clive Bloom 111). Hence, writers tend to select thought provocative and attractive covers that would catch the readers' attention and boost their novels' sales.

As bestsellers are produced in hundreds of thousands, they are widely distributed and sold as well as purchased in supermarkets, airports, railways stations, newsagents, aside from both traditional bookstores and online bookshops (McCracken 22). Bookstores, where a book is usually placed in visible spots to attract more sales (Yucesoy et al. 19), are, especially superstores, sometimes paid by publishers to display a book in the window and push it to make its way "to the next big bestseller" (Donaldson 692). Internet bookshops, however, offer a broader exposure and visibility with a virtually limitless audience. As such, it allows a work to attract more readers with every sale made. Nowadays' top online bookshop Amazon.com, with its hourly updated bestseller lists (Sutherland 109), provides a limitless number of bestsellers, thus exposes them to a massive readership. Such aspects, among others, enhance further the circulation and the demand for these bestsellers.

### **3.3. Factors of Circulation**

Making high sale numbers allows one's novel to take a spot in a bestselling list. Yet, it soon after withdraws from it since to hold the position is quite difficult. However, the short-lived hit continues to provide both popularity and money. In fact, the bestseller rank of products, including books, affects directly current and future sales in a way that it increases demand (Carare 2). Indeed, Laura J. Miller asserts that bestseller lists, mainly the best-known and most broadly consulted ones such as *The New York Times Bestseller List* (6), are influential and "powerful marketing" tools that book professionals make use of to sell more and more books (2). Thus, the fact of having a bestseller status is an important determinant for one's work to circulate and make a reading public.

Accordingly, the widespread of an author's bestseller ensures reading and buying public. Hence, novels by popular, bestselling authors, or as Clive Bloom calls them "brand named authors" (97) easily find their way to the bestseller list. In such cases, the loyalty of the readers to the author or the genre, Sutherland suggests, may be the reason why (26), or simply because readers prefer the familiar over unknown (Yucesoy et al. 23). That is said, most novels by authors such as J. K. Rowling, Stephen King, Ian Fleming, Dan Brown..., enjoy bestsellerdom. Paulo Coelho, for example, is another author of many international bestsellers, such as *The Alchemist* (1988) and *The Spy* (2016), whose books have sold more than 225 million copies worldwide (Paulo Coelho).

It is worth noting that not every book reaches the bestseller list because of its initial sales. Actually, plenty of novels become bestsellers a long period of time after their publication date: only after either receiving a literary prize, being endorsed by a book club, or by influential and trustful TV show hosts. Indeed, Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maldives* (1999) became a bestseller after receiving the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 2000 (Surowiecki). Similarly, UK's *The Guardian's* official bestseller list for December 2006 indicated that 21 of the 100 titles were by authors that the British TV show hosts Richard Madeley and Judy Finngan selected (Bloom 18). Moreover, Oprah Winfrey's book club recommendation made both Pearl S. Buck's *The Good Earth* (1931) and John Steinbeck's *East of Eden* (1952) bestsellers decades after they had first figured in the lists (Sutherland 28).

On the whole, popular authors, TV shows, film adaptations, book clubs, the recommendation of both professional reviewers and celebrities, literary prizes along with the bestseller list itself play the role of authoritative and potent means which guarantee the widespread of bestsellers. These factors are, thence, ensuring lasting fame, greatest fortune together with a massive devoted reading public.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has identified the distinctions made between canonized literature as well as popular and commercial literature. Besides, it has explored the bestseller phenomenon and has scrutinized it. It has examined the different views regarding the popularity and profitability of bestsellers in the literary scope. Moreover, this chapter has incorporated several examples of bestsellers together with selling records in order to further inform the readers. In the next chapter, the canonic criteria and literary standards that define literary merit will be discussed. *My Brilliant Friend's* plot summary and its author's biography will be provided as well.

# **Chapter Two**

**Exploring the Evaluation of Literature, and  
Introducing Elena Ferrante's My Brilliant  
Friend: Biography, Plot Summary, and  
Brief Insight into Textual Elements**

## Chapter II

### **Exploring the Evaluation of Literature and Introducing Elena Ferrante's *My Brilliant Friend*: Biography, Plot Summary, and Brief Insight into Textual Elements**

#### **Introduction**

The literary canon is an umbrella term of exemplary works of serious and high literature. It encompasses works that are considered to have great literary quality. The high position it holds is because of the qualitative judgment it involves. In fact, works of “literary merit” are included in the Western Canon, a feature that distinguishes them from non-canonical works. However, such an assessment has been subject to criticism and, as time goes by, the norms and criteria that define a good novel change and a new set of standards emerges.

In this chapter, we will first define literary merit. Then, we will introduce aesthetic criticism which is primarily used to evaluate literature. We will further proceed to the discussion of canonic criteria and the established approaches that address canon formation by different critics. Indeed, in this section, we will explain more the literary standards that shall be used to say if a work is worthy and has literary merit. This chapter will, eventually, provide a brief biography of Elena Ferrante, a plot summary of her novel *My Brilliant Friend*, as it will supply an analysis of the main characters present in the novel.

#### **1. Defining Literary Merit as a Changing Concept**

In literature, major works are those considered to carry literary merit. However, the insufficient description professors and literary critics give of literary merit's nature leaves readers with a vague idea about what constitutes it (Graves 328). The term has scarcely been successfully defined since it is a changing value that shifts over time.

In a general sense, literary merit represents the artistic quality or value of worthy literary works. One definition that is attributed to literary merit is that it is the feature that all works of fiction considered to have aesthetic value have in common (“Literary merit”). However, since determining aesthetic value is dependent on personal taste, the concept of “literary merit” has been condemned as being inevitably subjective (“Literary merit”). Besides, it has been disregarded as a “relic of scholarly elite” (“Literary merit”). Thus, evaluating literature in reference to aesthetic standards was disregarded.

Knut Brynhildsvoll states that a good work needs to fulfill the academic and artistic requirements of a particular time; “good” should be appropriate to the norms of a genre, social context, or cultural tradition (228). Likewise, Nick Turner assumes that cultural, political, commercial, and intellectual currents contribute to canonization, thus attributing literary merit (Dancer 507). In this way, literary merit is defined and determined by the predominant trends and ideologies.

Accordingly, in the mid-twentieth century, the literary field and literary criticism confronted “the break-down of credible worth-systems”, whose assessments are worthless as they fail to provide valid grounds to evaluate the quality of the literary work (Brynhildsvoll 231). Thus, the crisis literary criticism encounters, however, opens up new ways for the development and establishment of evaluating standards and approaches. Indeed, from the late nineteenth century, various literary standards and evaluation criteria were set.

## **2. Assessing Literature: Approaches and Standards**

The status of literature and its inherent values are thought to be at risk as the standards and norms of literary evaluation are changing in accordance with dominant social, historical, political, and even economic requirements. Consequently, in an attempt to set literature free from any moral or ideological intentions, literary critics and scholars have put forward an

established set of criteria to assess and measure the literary merit of a literary work. As such, they advocate the reinstatement of aesthetics as a crucial standard for evaluation. Besides, they suggest a range of primary criteria that can be used to show the worth and merit of literary texts.

## **2.1. An Introduction to Aesthetic Criticism**

Many philosophers, scholars, critics, and theorists contributed extremely to the discipline of literary criticism and theory through the diverse expressions and initiations they have made. The various suppositions and perceptions developed and provided by the different literary approaches generated and established a wide set of standpoints and perspectives through which a literary text can be read, understood, and interpreted. Indeed, the diverse literary theories existing act like tools that seek to interpret, analyze, and evaluate a literary artifact through multiple lenses.

Modern literary theories have incited the intellectual sphere to consider literature within its social, moral, historical, and political context. Such inspirations challenge the notion of literature as autonomous and as having no purpose beyond itself. Its principal objective is, rather, to give pleasure; it is valued for its own sake no matter what other relevance it may have (Habib 357). This idea of literature as a self-sufficient and self-governing realm receives its very first verbalized manifestation by the German Philosopher Immanuel Kant in his *Critique of Judgment* published in 1790. Indeed, his work joined together earlier random attempts to express the notion that literature is determined and governed by its system of laws rather than by rules from other spheres such as morality and religion (357).

Aesthetics is concerned with the assessment of beauty, and beauty within literature emerges from the innovative execution of its form. Indeed, Aesthetic criticism relies on

aesthetic elements and qualities of textual images and representations to evaluate and judge a literary text.

### **2.1.1. Immanuel Kant's Aesthetic Judgment**

In the *Critique of Judgment*, which deals with our aesthetic judgment's nature and extent, Kant asserts that when we perceive beauty, we subjectively make a judgment. This beauty, however, is not a quality or a characteristic of the object or of the work of art or literature itself but reflects our faculty to understand as it expresses our way of looking at the object. Indeed, the object's form displays a harmony with both our understanding and imagination and thus gives rise to the feeling of pleasure or displeasure. Kant explains that our ability to judge the object by such a pleasure is "taste".

Accordingly, this sort of judgment is subjective in its essence. Besides, a Kantian judgment of taste has no interest in the object's purpose, or as Kant says "beautiful things have no meaning, and he defines beauty as the object of a disinterested judgment of taste" (Habib 369). However, since our judgment of an object's beauty reflects only one's own feeling of pleasure, how could others agree with that judgment? Kant claims that it must be isolated from any private feeling or ideas of morally good in order to obtain the consent of others; hence have a universal validity yet a subjective universality. In other words, Kant claims that the link between the object and the subject's feeling of pleasure is the same in everyone. Moreover, he states that taste is a common sense to most people.

Nevertheless, Kant identifies two types of beauty: free beauty whose assessment is a pure judgment of taste (doesn't require any concept of what the object is meant to be), together with accessory beauty which does presuppose a concept of what the object is meant to be (Habib 373). In this second kind of beauty, the judgment made is partially aesthetic and partially rational because it assesses an object's beauty in connection with one's estimation of

its goodness or perfection. As such, once art's and literature's status as beautiful works is recognized on an independent basis, they could serve all sorts of social, moral, and educational purposes (374).

Immanuel Kant, by his philosophy, seeks to establish the realm of aesthetic judgment as an autonomous field. His views provided the basis for a large part of Romantic thought and Romantic notions of the literary imagination. Besides, Kant's aesthetics' emphasis on form and artistic autonomy held the attraction for some advocates of aestheticism in the late-nineteenth century, as for instance Frank Kermode and Harold Bloom who seek to restore aesthetics and set it above other standards to assess literary works.

## **2.2. Literary Standards and Canonic Criteria**

The Western literary canon is a selection of exemplary and great works of literature. Indeed, it embodies valuable works; works qualified to have literary merit. However, as already discussed in the first chapter, the historical and institutional conditions of the 1960s gave rise to a whole debate over the literary canon. In consequence, the older type of literary study, as Frank Kermode in his critical work *Pleasure and Change: The Aesthetics of Canon* acknowledges, was demised (53). In an essay entitled "Requirements of an Aesthetic Concept of the Canon", Anders Olsson asserts that the succession of promptly changing canonizations and de canonizations of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, lead to the great decrease of the canon's stability and longevity compared with earlier when literary criticism was in order (80). Indeed, the continuous process of change it underwent threatened its status, as it challenged the endurance of its value formations. Accordingly, entirely new mobile and flexible ways of formation were necessary (Olsson 90). Thence, a set of coherent criteria was put forward instead of conforming to merely political or ideological interests.

Scholars, critics, and theorists, namely Frank Kermode and Harold Bloom, tried to provide theoretical and practical methods and approaches, specific to address the literary phenomenon. Thus, each of them offers different standpoints concerning what would make a piece of literature canon worthy.

In the essay titled “Plato’s Republic in the Core Curriculum: Multiculturalism and the Canon Debate”, Jon Avery asserts that multicultural texts are an excellent means to minimize “isms” (237), still they must possess the features that would make of them canonical. In effect, he identifies three central criteria for canonization. Avery believes that classics or a university’s literary canon “should be chosen on the basis of three criteria: historical influence, excellent writing style, and whether or not they promote critical thinking and morally sensitive citizenship” (242). He goes on by defining “morally sensitive citizenship” as “responsible citizens who possess an accurate historical self-understanding and the power to reason” (242). Unfortunately, Jon Avery does not provide further clarifications and explanations about the standards he endorses.

Similarly, Brian Quinn, in a very significant article, aims to present the diverse positions on canon development and imparts ways to include new works to the canon. In fact, he considers both influence and the ability of a work to generate new interpretation with each rereading as properties that librarians seeking out to detect potential canons need to trace (6). In this respect, Quinn affirms that “it may be possible though not without difficulty, for librarians to identify potential canon contenders. By monitoring the influences of current authors, and by selecting works that contain important themes and are capable of yielding multiple interpretations, librarians increase their chances of identifying future canonical works”(9). Be that as it may, it should be noted that the writer deems the application of Western aesthetic standards as criteria for evaluation and assessment, mostly to non-Western writings (9).

The most influential theories and approaches that address canon formation are those emphasizing aesthetic quality as a fundamental benchmark of the literary canon. For instance, in *Pleasure and Change: The Aesthetics of Canon* (2001), the British literary critic Frank Kermode advocates the preservation of the literary canon and lays out a set, different from any ideological process of formation, of three standards that make of literary works canonical: pleasure, change, and chance. Kermode acknowledges that the works included in the canon and how they are viewed change in a similar way that cultural periods and individuals change (5). Besides, he briefly points out that a work could become a canon by mere virtue of chance (33). The aesthetically-centered criterion, however, is of utmost importance to Kermode's perspective towards the literary canon. Indeed, he argues that canonical texts, great works of literature, afford a high experience of aesthetic pleasure (9). The combination of pain and pleasure, that a reading of quality works should provide, which the critic advocates is what distinguishes his notion of aesthetic pleasure (21). Accordingly, it elicits a high form of pleasure different in kind and degree from the pleasures other human experiences deliver.

Kermode's aestheticism was disfavored and even rejected by both Geoffrey Hartman and John Guillory, in their commentaries that ensued Kermode's lectures. On the one hand, Hartman is uncomfortable with the whole coalition of pleasure and canon, besides he concerns himself with the term of pleasure which, as he argues, "glides over the abyss" (58). On the other hand, John Guillory disapproves and directly rejects Kermode's claim that aesthetic pleasures "are higher pleasures", as he considers the judgment of canonicity unrelated and disconnected from the quality of pleasure (74).

Still, in a book published earlier in 1993 entitled *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation*, Guillory succeeds to acknowledge "the power of aesthetic experience and the importance of aesthetic judgment" (Reinert 223). Thus, he doesn't stand

for the renunciation of aesthetic judgment. He simply advocates the opening up of a universal access to the study of literature.

Harold Bloom's *The Western Canon* (1994) provides a more functional and practical approach through an established series of features that distinguish a canonical work. Bloom puts forth a set of four well-defined criteria of canonicity. First and foremost, he argues that a work's immortality is what makes it canonical. He asserts that ensuring continual readings is crucial for canonicity, as such Bloom states "[O]ne ancient test for the canonical remains fiercely valid: unless it demands rereading, the work does not qualify" (30). Another criterion he examines is the literary work's originality. He asserts that "ALL STRONG literary originality becomes canonical" (25), and further explains that an author's inventiveness makes the reader experience a strange and uncanny stupefaction rather than a fulfillment of expectations (3).

The following touchstone Bloom identifies is directly related to the previous one, it is that of literary influence. Indeed, any writer is influenced and inspired by major literary figures of the past. Thus, such inter artistic influence enables the author to engender and create an innovative and genuine masterpiece of his own. This process of influence guarantees the canonization of a work, as such Harold Bloom asserts that "There can be no strong, canonical writing without the process of literary influence" (8). Finally, yet importantly, the literary critic pushes forward the significance of aesthetic quality when evaluating literature while he sustains the autonomy of the aesthetic. Harold bloom gives a specific description of what he means with his idea of aesthetics as a standard of judgment, he says "One breaks into the canon only by aesthetic strength, which is constituted primarily of an amalgam: mastery of figurative language, originality, cognitive power, knowledge, exuberance of diction" (29).

Likewise, Ander Olsson intends to outline some criteria for a modern aesthetic concept of the canon (90). He starts with advocating the ability of a work to generate repetition and to engage with new readers as one condition for canonization. However, instead of discussing the inherent value of aesthetics, he rather goes on to argue that this repeatability may be formulated as an aesthetic criterion (85).

In addition to the heavy emphasis placed on aesthetic value and judgment and its significance for canonical assessment, it can be pointed out to literary influence, originality, and the power to engender new readings as the most persistent and consistent canonic criteria that major literary critics and theorists have identified. These literary standards can be applied to any literary text as a means to indicate its worth and merits.

Accordingly, the designated criteria are applicable to Elena Ferrante's *My Brilliant Friend*. Relying on them, the work would be evaluated and its literary merit would be revealed. Still, an overall conception of both the author and the text shall be provided before attempting to display that these criteria and standards are present in the novel.

### **3. Biographical Glimpses and Brief Insight into Textual Elements**

#### **3.1. Overview**

*My Brilliant Friend* is the first book from Elena Ferrante's quartet *the Neapolitan Novels* with which she gained international popularity. In 2011, the novel was published in Italy under the title *L'amica geniale*. Later on, in 2012, it was translated into English by Ann Goldstein and published by Europa editions. From then on, the quartet knew astonishing success. The Italian author became a global phenomenon, and her "*Neapolitan*" series led to the spread of the so called "Ferrante fever" among the readers. In 2018, *My Brilliant Friend* was adapted for television, directed, thus, as an eight-episode drama series by Saverio Costanzo for HBO.

Set in a violent and poor post-Second World War Naples, the tetralogy tells the story of Elena Greco (Linù) friendship with Raffaella Cerullo (Lila) through a revisited Bildungsroman structure. The narrative traces not only the turbulent developments in Lila and Elena's friendship but also the cultural, social, and political changes in Italy from the 1950s to the present. By reason of length, the story is recounted in four volumes: *My Brilliant Friend* (2012), *The Story of a New Name* (2013), *Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay* (2014), and *The Story of the Lost Child* (2015).

### **3.2. Elena Ferrante's Biography**

Elena Ferrante is the pen name of an Italian novelist born in 1943 in Naples, Italy. Apart from her date and place of birth, little information is revealed because the pseudonymous author believes that "books, once they are written, have no need of their authors" (Ferrante 2). However, in *Frantumaglia: A Writer's Journey* (2016), which is a published collection of the author's letters and interviews, one learns that the writer grew up in Naples, and has lived outside Italy for a certain period. Moreover, it is mentioned that she has a degree in classical studies. Besides writing, she studies, translates, and teaches.

Ferrante's career as a novelist started in 1992 with the publication of her first novel *L'amore molesto* (English translation: *Troubling Love* 2006). In 2002, *I giorni dell'abbandono* (*The Days of Abandonment* 2005) was published, then followed by *La figlia oscura* (2006; English translation: *The Lost Daughter* 2008) and *La spiaggia di notte* (2007; English translation: *The Beach at Night* 2016). It is noteworthy that her novels are translated into English years after their publication in Italian, excepting *L'invenzione occasionale* (*Incidental Inventions*) which was published in both Italian and English in the same year 2019. This may be due to the great interest the writer attracted by the success of her four book series: *The Neapolitan Novels*. Indeed, the quartet received a huge commercial success from

the publication of its first volume in English in 2012 with more than five million copies sold; thus making its author internationally well-known. Her works are widely adapted for stage and screen. For instance, her very first novel was turned into a film entitled *Nasty Love* in 2006. Likewise, *The Neapolitan Novels* are currently being adapted into a television series for HBO. Elena Ferrante's writings revolve around themes of love and infidelity, the nature of relationships between men and women, female friendship, motherhood and womanhood, along with life's hardships.

### **3.3. Plot Summary of *My Brilliant Friend***

Being originally published in 2012, *My Brilliant Friend* tells the story of Elena Greco's (Linù) and Raffaëla Cerullo's (Lila) lifelong friendship. Narrated from the protagonist's perspective, the novel opens up with a brief prologue in which Elena receives a phone call from Rino, Lila's son, telling her that her friend since childhood is, mysteriously, missing: Lila has taken all her possessions and has disappeared. Angered by Lila's conduct, Elena, who is now an elderly woman in her mid sixties, resolves to write down all the details of their shared story starting from childhood. The girls lived in an impoverished neighborhood in 1950s Naples, Italy. The rough working-class neighborhood, in which violent feuds were common, was run by moneylenders and Camorristi.

In addition to the shared hatred for the neighborhood's "ogre", school is what builds up the relationship between Elena and Lila. At the age of six, they were the best students in Maestro Oliviero's class. Elena was focused and studious, whereas Lila was gifted and naturally brilliant. Elena was constantly impressed by Lila's courageous and fierce character together with her intelligence. Thus, she was desperate to keep up with Lila and pledged to do whatever Lila does in every single detail of her life no matter the cost or the risk. Elena was a

good student, still Lila was better. Over the years, Lenù and Lila formed a close bond as they fiercely competed in school.

The girls' observant nature leads them to deduce that studying hard and becoming rich is the only way out of the poor neighborhood. However, by the end of the fifth grade attending school was, unfortunately, no longer possible for Lila. In fact, when it was time to attend high school, both Lila and Lenù were encouraged by their teacher to take admission tests. While Elena began taking private lessons, for which her parents agreed to pay, to prepare herself for the exam, Lila's parents wouldn't and couldn't afford them. Lila's father was an unenlightened shoemaker, whereas Elena's was a rational porter in a Naples' hotel.

Without Lila to compete with, Elena followed up her studies and excelled in them. Sometimes she asked help from Lila, sometime she was carried out by her cleverness and talent in writing. In the meantime, Lila was prepared to go to work beside her brother Rino in their father's shoemaker shop. She invested all her time and energy into designing and hand-making a pair of shoes that she hopes to market and sell with the Cerullo name in order to make lots of money. Lila did not miss a chance to overpraise her occupation to Lenù, as she constantly insisted that her vocation is more worthy than studying. This conduct led Elena to be no more interested in studies and she began thinking about dropping school. However, she decided not to do so when she learns that Lila is secretly studying at home by borrowing as many books as she can from the local library to keep pace with her. Obviously, Lila envies Elena for being able to continue her studies the same way Elena envies Lila's acuteness and strong character.

As adolescents, both Lila and Lenù experienced physical change that brought different struggles such as low self-confidence and insecurities. In fact, Elena noticed Lila's stunning transition into a charming young woman who became more and more attractive to all men,

both in and beyond the neighborhood. Trying to keep pace with Lila's line of suitors, Elena occupied her time with several superficial relationships; she dated some neighborhood boys that made her feel loved and desired although her heart belonged to her childhood crush Nino Sarratore (the son of a former neighbor). Lila's beauty attracted the attention of the neighborhood's loan shark's son: Marcello Solara. Despite his high status and wealth, Lila rejected him retentively because of his animalistic brutality. Nevertheless, Marcello managed to convince her parents and got their approval to marry her.

During this time, Elena passed middle school with remarkable grades and started to learn Greek and Latin at high school. There, she discovered that Nino attends the same school as herself. Once again, Elena performed well academically and succeeded to earn the admiration of many of her teachers. Yet, Nino still ignored her. Despite of her educational accomplishment, Elena was worried she would not be able to own Raffaella's keenness and charisma. Lenù was a girl that strived to please and impress everybody; therefore she got upset when Lila disregarded her achievements.

After a successful school year, her elementary school teacher, Maestro Oliviero, suggested that she should go and stay at her cousin's house as a praise and an encouragement. Nella, the teacher's cousin, owns and runs a boarding house on Ischia Island. Accordingly, Elena headed to Ischia: there, she enjoyed autonomy and peace of mind. Elena blossomed and became strong, confident, and splendid. She made sure to write letters to Lila in which she lively described both the island and her staying. Lila wrote to her only once telling her that she was fed up with Marcello Solara's insistence and her family's pressure to accept him. The vacation took a surprising turn once the Sarratore family, Nino's family, appeared as Nella's guests. Elena was excited and agitated at the same time to meet her loved one. After many long walks, Nino kissed her. However, the magical moment lost its beauty as Nino's

father, Donato Sarratore, sexually abused her in her fifteenth birthday. Elena, terrified and disgusted, fled Ischia and went back to Naples the next morning.

Upon her return from the Island, Elena was perplexed to find out that Lila, successfully, entertained the interest of Stefano Carracci, one of the neighborhood's wealthiest young men, the grocer. Stefano got Lila's approval to his marriage proposal as he got the consent of her parents by purchasing the shoes Lila designed and agreeing to invest in expanding her father's shoe business. By her engagement to Stefano, Lila not only disposed of Marcello's harassment, but also gained status, power, and affluence. Lila became more beautiful than ever due to Stefano's wealth and fancy gifts; making, thus, the neighbors love and despise her with their envy. Elena fell in the same trap: sometimes she felt estranged and jealous but she also perceived that Lila needed her help with her wedding's preparations and, most of all, her support to repel the callousness Lila faced from Maria and Pinuccia (her future mother-in-law and sister-in-law). Meanwhile, to keep up with Lila's romantic life, Elena engaged herself in a pleasurable relationship with a neighborhood's young man Antonio Cappuccio. At the same time, she continued to outshine at high school. There, Nino asked her to write a controversial article that will be published in a journal. Excited, Lenù, hurried to Lila and inquired her help. Lila tried to be of use at the beginning, but soon after she stated that seeing her best friend stand out and reading her writings discomfited her.

As the wedding day approached, Lila appeared to be doubtful and even apprehensive. On the other hand, Elena was full of jealousy seeing her contemporaries getting married and was afraid of losing her dear friend. Besides, she felt disgusted about her own situation and started to wonder if studying wasn't a waste of time. On the day of the wedding, Elena helped Lila getting ready. The bride advised Lenù and encouraged her to continue studying, because, for Lila, Elena is her brilliant friend.

The novel comes to an end at the wedding reception. Elena was troubled about not finding a way out of the neighborhood and having a fate, consequently, no better than her mother's. Lila found out that her husband sold the shoes she worked hard on to make to the hated Marcello Solara. The former walked in to the event and sat down on her table even though she pleaded Stefano to prevent him from attending their wedding. Thereby, she realized that her feelings were second to her new husband's business interests.

### **3.4. Main Characters' Analysis**

My Brilliant Friend comprises so many characters. Hence, it is quite hard to give a detailed account of all of them. Still, it is the occurrences with the other characters that mold and shape the relationship between the main characters. Indeed, the most important characters are Elena Greco and Raffaella Cerullo. As such, both of them drive the plot.

#### **Elena Greco**

Elena, also called Linù or Linuccia by her loved ones, is the protagonist and the first-person narrator of the novel. She is the elder daughter of a porter and a housewife, who lives and grows in poverty in a chaotic neighborhood. In the novel, Elena portrays her relationship with Lila and gives an account of their evolution as different and similar characters at the same time.

Since her childhood, Elena is impressed by Lila's intelligence and strong character. Thus, she constantly compares herself to her and imitates her behaviors. Thence, Lila is considered to be responsible for a great part of Elena's doings. The narrator asserts "what I did by myself couldn't excite me, only what Lila touched became important" (Ferrante 100). Elena studied, learned, even went out and played only to keep pace with Lila. She dedicated herself "to studying and to many things that were difficult, alien to [her]," only to be able to "keep pace with that terrible, dazzling girl" (47). In defiance of this idealized role model,

Lena feels hindered and insecure, as she is conscious of her insufficiency and inadequacy. However, for Linù attending middle school and high school was an opportunity to escape the turmoil of the neighborhood and to surpass her friend. Indeed, she was always repulsed by the vulgar, chaotic, and harsh atmosphere of the neighborhood. Lila was the only thing that attracted her attention in that place. Still, the state of being constantly in her shadow and the feeling of inferiority and inadequacy her closeness to Lila engendered affects deeply her self-esteem. In adolescence, her insecurities grew higher as her body developed.

Elena's relation with Lila is ambivalent, yet, an exceptional one. She is constantly jealous of Lila but she is attached to her and admires her. She wants to stay away from her but craves to have news from her at the same time. Her envy is harmless and holds no malicious intentions since she is a devoted and faithful friend who "would have done anything for her" (107).

### **Raffaella Cerullo**

Lina or Lila, as Elena calls her, is the second protagonist in the novel. Being the daughter of a shoemaker and a householder, Lila could not go beyond elementary school despite of her natural cleverness. In Elena's eyes, she is dazzling, gifted with exceptional skills, determined, impulsive, confident, and courageous. As such, she is presented as being a reflection of Elena's disabilities. Lila is continuously pushed forward by her endeavors, and thereby, never stops to prompt Lenù. Raffaella is defined by her strong character and her strong will to pursue her aspiration and make progress in her life, yet, she rapidly and suddenly abandons her passions: she becomes enthusiastic about designing shoes once she is no longer interested in books. Eventually, she drops everything and decides to get married at the age of sixteen. As she fails to escape the neighborhood through education and work, she decides to take advantage of her charming beauty charisma to capture a suitor. The misfortunes Raffaella

comes across worsen further her life. Accordingly, Lila is trapped within the corrupt and male-dominated Neapolitan society.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, we have outlined literary merit and its changing nature in the first place, and then we have introduced Aesthetic criticism. Besides, we have discussed the established literary standards and criteria that shall be used to determine a work's literary worth and merit. To further enlighten the readers about the author and the novel's content, we have included Elena Ferrante's biography and the plot summary of the novel under study. Moreover, we have uncovered the work's major characters. In the following chapter, we will investigate and uncover *My Brilliant Friend's* literary merit and worth relying on the literary criteria considered in this chapter.

# Chapter Three

Examining *My Brilliant Friend's* Literary Merit

## Chapter III

### Examining *My Brilliant Friend's* Literary Merit

#### Introduction

In the preceding chapters, we have addressed the issue of what constitutes genuine literary works. We have identified the characteristics that differentiate what is considered as “high literature” from what is deemed to be “low literature”. Bestsellers, being part of popular literature, fall in the latter category. A bestseller is disdained in the literary field because it is, usually, associated with business, popular literature, or simply because it is believed to be of poor literary quality. Indeed, they are regarded as providers of cheap entertainment to the masses; thus unworthy of critical or analytical study and of no literary merit. Still, it is not always right to judge so; some bestsellers prove to comprise great literary quality.

In this chapter, we will explore the literary properties and qualities that Elena Ferrante’s remarkably successful and popular novel *My Brilliant Friend* (2012) implies. Drawing on the literary standards and criteria discussed earlier in the previous chapter, we will display the novel’s worth and literary merit.

#### 1. Aesthetic Quality of Ferrante’s *My Brilliant Friend*

The aesthetic trait is an essential criterion, among others, in evaluating literary texts. Worthy works of literature involve aesthetic characteristics and features in a way or another. Like any good work of literature, Ferrante’s bestseller *My Brilliant Friend* displays an aesthetic facet. Such an aspect enables it to gain literary recognition.

## **1.1. Violence and Its Portrayal as an Aesthetic Feature**

### **1.1.1. Introducing the Theme of Poverty and Violence**

Throughout the narrative, Ferrante examines both issues of poverty and violence as they were the dominant conditions of post 2<sup>nd</sup> world war Italy. Set in an impoverished neighborhood, the novel exposes the disdainful circumstances its inhabitants lived in. Besides, it demonstrates how poverty limits educational opportunities, as is the case of Lila, and how it creates a feeling of inferiority among its inhabitants particularly when they go beyond the neighborhood.

The drastic level of poverty that dominates the neighborhood usually creates great tension and frustration among its inhabitants; thus leads to the spread of violence. As such, the narrator states that "... people often reached the point of *disperazione* – a word that in dialect meant having lost all hope but also being broke – and hence of fights" (83). The Neapolitan neighborhood was a world where "adults were often wounded, blood flowed from the wounds, they festered, and sometimes people died" (32). From childhood to adolescence, the girls were subject to and witnessed different brutal acts: children were abused, women fought among themselves, neighbors were killed, and domestic violence was performed on women. The childhood they lived was full of violence episodes as well as profanities and obscenities which terrified and affected deeply the narrator; she affirms "With these words and those years I bring back the many fears that accompanied me all my life" (33). It is worth noting that Ferrante indicates that the characters use Neapolitan dialect whenever they insult or act violently. These linguistic indications further relate violence to the Neapolitan setting.

### **1.1.2. The Deep Portrayal of Violence in Naples**

As previously indicated, the city of Naples where the events take place is unpleasantly portrayed through the hideous depiction of the poor outskirts it involves. The atmosphere of

the neighborhood where the protagonists lived was too dark, harsh, and foremost violent. The extreme poverty and the terrible conditions that dominate the neighborhood affect its inhabitants and generate the highest forms of violence. The verbal and physical violence is so common that it is unexceptional. When Elena recalls her childhood she reveals that she “feel[s] no nostalgia for [their] childhood: it was full of violence” (Ferrante 37). The grey and spiritless working-class neighborhood was filled with brutal acts and organized crime. Ferrante provides several vigorous and powerful scenes in which she portrays the intense, yet customary, brutality prevailing in the Neapolitan neighborhood. For instance, Linù remembers a fight at Lila’s house; a fight that she describes as “...that tempest of cries, obscenities, [and] sounds of destruction” (82). Elena accounts the event and says:

I cried, “Li, Li, Li,” but she – I heard her – kept on insulting her father.

We were ten, soon we would be eleven. I was filling out, Lila was light and delicate. Suddenly the shouting stopped and a few seconds later my friend flew out the window, passed over my head and landed on the asphalt behind me.

I was stunned. Fernando looked out, still screaming horrible threats at his daughter. He had thrown her like a thing.

I looked at her terrified while she tried to get up and said, with almost amused grimace, “I haven’t hurt myself”. But she was bleeding; she had broken her arm. (82)

Elena’s stupefaction shifts to the reader as well. Such dramatic scenes represent an indecent and severe reality that particularly discomforts the reader. Even though these scenes create a feeling of dismay, still, it represents a distinctive character that leads to the appreciation of the text. Accordingly, the depth Ferrante’s depictions imply grants an aesthetic dimension to the novel.

## **1. 2. The Novel's Visual Metaphors**

Elena Ferrante incorporates visual images, mainly photographs, in her work as a means to reflect and convey a particular meaning. This depiction of visual representation turns out to be a literary device called “ekphrasis”. In its modern definition, ekphrasis is “the verbal representation of visual representation” through which the power of a silent image is evoked (Milkova 161).

The novel opens with the mystery of Lila's disappearance in a prologue entitled “Eliminating all the traces”. Indeed, Lila has disappeared suddenly and completely without leaving a trace; all her belongings, even her photographs, have vanished. Rino, Lila's son, realizes that “she cut herself out of all the photographs of the two of [them], even those from when [he] was little” (Ferrante 22). The image of Lila's face cut out of all the family photographs denotes not only her want to disappear herself, but also her urge to eliminate the entire chaotic life she lived in the Neapolitan society, thus, freeing herself from the oppressive and violent reality she was trapped in. This means that the cut out photographs imply nuanced and layered meaning. Accordingly, Ferrante's ekphrasis supplements the thematic and rhetoric feature of the narrative through graphical use. This technique gives the silent image an expressive power that enables the text to captivate and fascinate the readers.

The author's strong, poignant, and striking depictions of violence in the Neapolitan setting of *My Brilliant Friend* together with its use of the literary device ekphrasis reflect some of the aesthetic features the text involves.

## **2. Originality and Innovation in Ferrante's Novel**

Replication, imitation, and reproduction are not enough for literature to evolve and thrive. What is required, however, is artistic creativity and vigorous originality. A writer can be inspired or influenced; still, his work must be shaped according to his own character and

individuality. Indeed, he needs to demonstrate a sort of creative ability which renders his work particularly new. Displaying signs of originality permits a work to acquire esteem within the literary scope. Accordingly, *My Brilliant Friend* proves to be distinctively new: the theme of female friendship and the classical conceptions of surroundings and spaces that Ferrante integrates and develops in her novel demonstrate its original and innovative aspect.

## **2.1. *My Brilliant Friend's* Thematic Peculiarity: Novelty in Depicting Female Friendship**

Women's bonds and female friendships have long been a prevalent theme, especially in modern Italian literature. It became notable during the 1970s when women's bonds appeared as a stimulus for female liberation and emancipation. In literature, a friendship between women is favorably delineated; it is pictured as being supportive, constructive, and incentive for sentiments of sisterhood. In the novel, however, Ferrante puts forth a more intricate and nuanced depiction different from what had been already seen. She calls out attention to the complications embedded in friendships between women through her narration of the ambivalent and tense relationship between Lila and Elena; a relation characterized by envy, imitation, and competition. In fact, the occurrences retrospectively reported about the girls' childhood and adolescence reveal the competitive aspect of it and the effects it has on their characters and identity formation over the course of time. At times, it was a source of empowerment and strength, and at others a source of suffering, insecurities, and abhorrence. Thus, *My Brilliant Friend* exposes the most noxious facets of female-to-female friendships. Elena's amity with Lila was toxic and harmful in a manner that it impacted her self-confidence as well as her self-esteem. Still, it was a defining factor in her development as a child and adolescent.

Elena and Lila function as muse and backer for each other, still they keep criticizing and being rough on one another. The two friends struggle between being dependent and being autonomous. Their friendship is represented as a destructive attachment that subjugates the individual. Elena's severe self-scrutiny and comparison with Lila, for instance, creates a sense of inferiority, inadequacy, and resentment. Similarly, Lila's envy of Lenù's fortune and good chance affects her deeply and triggers fierce rivalry. Nevertheless, this relationship is portrayed as an indissoluble and overpowering bond. The two friends admire, care, and ceaselessly look for one another. Lila implicitly keeps an eye on her friend as she protects and defends her at all times. For her part, Elena is ready to do anything for Lila, she possesses an incomprehensible and, particularly, unyielding devotion for her. Thence, their relationship is complex and has inscrutable dimensions. Ferrante, with her depiction, draws us closer to a deeper understanding of the attractive and repugnant forces that constitute and shape the intense friendship.

As such, female friendship portrayal in the novel is particularly unfamiliar and unconventional. The narrative uncovers its importance in growing up, identity formation, and self-realization, as it reveals stresses the psychic aspect of female-to-female relationship. Accordingly, Elena Ferrante explores female to female relationships' adverse traits by descending into the muddiest depths of individual and personal feelings and experiences that bring knowledge about oneself and reveal what is indescribable by others. She boldly delineates Elena and Lila's friendship as being complicated, distorted, and imperfect; thus she breaks new ground and undermines previous forms of narrative friendships. Indeed, Ferrante's original and innovative way of portraying the intricacy of female bond exceeds and transcends earlier models of friendship that were explored in literature.

## 2.2. Traces of Literary Influence and Newness

In literature, each and every outstanding work is infected not only by the writer's private life but also by his readings within and beyond the academy. Authors with solid literary backgrounds generate and create resonant and rich texts which bear intertextual connections to literary classics. This literary influence turns out to be a sign of greatness once reworked and renovated, in other words, a writer's inspiration enables him to create a singular and original work and thus reveals his creative capacity. The ability to give new life to inspiration is a great virtue in a writer as it unveils his genius and eminence.

Elena Ferrante is among the writers whose mastery and extensive knowledge of literature is reflected in their works. Her broad and strong background in Italian literature and the Classics in particular explicitly resound in her books. Indeed, in *My Brilliant Friend*, Ferrante invokes Greek and Latin studies in several instances. Such references show Ferrante's interest and attachment to classical studies, an attachment that mirrors her imbuelement with the Classics. The Italian novelist's bestseller includes numerous classical names and paradigms (Geue 6). The very appellation of her protagonist and narrator Elena Greco, for instance, may be a recovery of Helen of Troy or Helen the Greek as captured in the epic of Virgil the *Aeneid* (6). Yet, most significant is the writer's attachment to Virgil's *The Aeneid* as regards his heroine Dido and her relationship with both surrounding spaces and men (Barchiesi 78). In the epic, Dido flees her brother's tyranny to found the city of Carthage on her own while Aeneas is a Trojan hero who is commanded to flee. Because of a violent storm, Aeneas and his fleet landed in Dido's city Carthage. There, Dido and Aeneas have had a love affair and eventually got married. After a period of time, however, Aeneas abruptly and covertly abandoned and deserted Dido and the city. The ruling queen of Carthage Dido, being devastated and heartbroken, committed suicide for the love of Aeneas.

Although the love sequence of Dido and Aeneas is the most appealing element to readers, Ferrante concentrates on Virgil's conception of space. Indeed, the betrayed love of Aeneas leads to the destruction of Dido and, thus, her founded city Carthage. In *My Brilliant Friend*, Ferrante provides her own vision of the surrounding space through her protagonist's observation in the text: after having read the *Aeneid*, Lila shows great interest in the figure of Dido and makes an impressive comment, she remarks that "When there is no love, not only the life of the people becomes sterile but the life of cities" (160). Accordingly, the writer identifies the grounded conception of cities of Virgil in reference to the fourth book the *Aeneid* (Barchiesi 18). In other words, the city of Carthage that Dido founded and ruled on her own was thriving and prosperous. Nevertheless, after the coming and harsh abandoning of Aeneas, she perished and the city she founded collapsed. As such, Dido's love for Aeneas led not only to her death but also to the ruination of her kingdom Carthage. Similarly, In *My Brilliant Friend*, Lila perceives that it is the absence of love that defines the violent, vicious, and furious nature of the city of Naples. The inhabitants of the Neapolitan neighborhood are deprived of love; there is neither affection nor passion between family members, the married couple, and brothers and sisters. Such privation is reflected in their violent behaviors in everyday life and, hence, in the city's character. Once more, Ferrante reaffirms her notion of a city without love through her narrator's, Elena Greco's, idea that "if love exiled from cities, their good nature becomes an evil one" (Ferrante 188). Here, Ferrante presumes that a city where love is unaccepted and inexistent becomes a wicked, melancholic, and turbulent space.

In view of this, Ferrante's *My Brilliant Friend* proves to bear intertextual connections to the epic of Virgil. The novelist selected Virgil's character, Dido, for her own discussion of space. Accordingly, she reinterprets the story of the deserted queen to create her own epic. Ferrante reworks the classical conception of the city to make her own notion of "a city

without love”. Thus, she constitutes an elaborated and rather captivating setting that is central to the saga.

### **3. *My Brilliant Friend*’s Power to Generate New Readings**

One of the traits that determine a novel’s good quality is its faculty to ensure continuous readings and re-readings. Great works of literature are typically worthwhile to read and study. Upon each new reading, these works enable readers to uncover multiple and distinct elements and features. Besides, engendering several and diverse interpretations reinforces the work’s significance as it indicates its literary worth.

From its release, the first book as well as the whole tetralogy, Ferrante’s *Neapolitan Novels*, managed to attract attention and succeeded in ensuring continual reading. In 2012, the first volume *My Brilliant Friend* was published and has reached the bestseller status. As a result, the novel is widely circulated and read worldwide. Over time, readers did not lose interest in it but, quite the opposite, the number of its readers grew higher. Accordingly, Ferrante’s novel did not only appeal to ordinary and customary readers who read and forget, but it captivated and captured the attention of literary critics, academicians, reviewers, and researchers as well. Thus, numerous discussions, reviews, and interpretations of the novel were presented. In the years that followed its publication, for instance, *My Brilliant Friend* was the topic of several magazines such as *The New York Times Book Review*, *Publishers Weekly*, *The Times Literary Supplement*, and *The Guardian*. Furthermore, many academic studies and research papers were conducted to consider and examine different aspects of the work, among which are Stiliana Milkova’s essay (2016) that explores the concept of “ekphrasis” in Ferrante’s text, Velleda C. Ceccoli’s article (2017) which scrutinizes the novelist’s protagonists, and many other papers and articles that represent the diverse readings of the novel. It is worth noting that *My Brilliant Friend* had been the subject matter in critical

books such as the English literature's professor Daniel R. Schwarz's book *Reading the Modern European Novel since 1900: A Critical Study of Fiction from Proust's Swann's Way to Ferrante's Neapolitan Tetralogy* (2018). In this book, Schwarz thoroughly analyses the Italian novelist's text. Moreover, he attests that he didn't only read the book but reread it several times (288). Likewise, Deidre Lynch, a professor of literature at Harvard University, asserts that she has reread Elena Ferrante's *Neapolitan Quartet* more than once "for her astonishing style, for what she is doing with the novel tradition,...and to disclose the things we don't see the first time" (Paikin 00:17:11 – 00:17:59).

As such, *My Brilliant Friend* reveals to be a vibrant work that continues to engender new readings to this day. Its length of duration indicates its constant esteem and, thus, its literary eminence.

#### **4. Some Notes on the Novel and Literary Merit**

As noted earlier, literary merit is not a persistent value but a protean one that changes throughout time. Despite the scholars' efforts to fix a certain set of norms to determine literary merit, it remained quite flexible as taste unceasingly changes. This change is what enables and allows literature to evolve.

Bloom's approach is rigorous, thorough, and accurate. Still, aesthetic and artistic language and writing style are not always relevant to an oeuvre's high literary quality. For instance, Albert Camus' *The Stranger* (1942) is a masterpiece in spite of its simple and minimalist style. Similarly, Elena Ferrante is not a stylist; she doesn't employ elegant and elaborated sentences but writes in a direct and simple style. Her novel *My Brilliant Friend* is rather distinguished by the truthful narration she supplies; from the complex portrayal of Elena's and Lila's psyches to the depiction of intricate cityscape of Naples, the Italian writer provides a high level of authenticity. Against this background, in an interview, Ferrante

remarks that “[a] page is well written when the labor and pleasure of truthful narration supplant any other concern, including a concern with formal elegance. I belong to the category of writers who throw out the final and keep the rough when this practice ensures a higher degree of authenticity” (Schwarz 300).

All things considered, it could be said that *My Brilliant Friend* is not only a commercially successful novel, but it is an admirable work that deserves literary recognition as well. Indeed, the bestselling novel displays originality, aesthetic quality, along with different literary properties. As such, it covers most, if not all, of the literary standards and criteria that determine and define literary merit.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter is meant to both inspect Ferrante’s novel’s literary merit and worth and disclose the literary qualities it involves. Hence, we have first considered and exposed its aesthetic qualities. Then, we have identified the signs of originality and creativity that Ferrante’s text implies. In fact, we have discussed in what way is the work particularly new. Moreover, we have tackled the work’s ability to ensure continual reading over time. Indeed, multiple and diverse readings as well as interpretations have been demonstrated.

# **General Conclusion**

## General Conclusion

The present research has looked into the literary quality, worth, and merit that bestselling novels involve. It has examined Elena Ferrante's popular and commercially successful novel *My Brilliant Friend's* literary merit. Our study has claimed that not all bestsellers are of poor literary quality, but some decent and worthy ones gained both attention and respect that eventually render them eligible for canonical status.

This research paper is divided into a general introduction, three chapters, and a general conclusion. The general introduction has featured the depreciating positions held against bestsellers as it has uncovered the most predominant perspectives in the literary scope. Besides, it has reviewed former works related to both the bestseller phenomenon and the novel under study. The first chapter entitled "Presenting the Literary Canon, the Different Forms of Literary Production, and the Bestseller Phenomenon" has provided an overview of the modern literary situation: it has introduced the literary canon and its concerns, drawn a distinction between literary fiction and popular fiction, as it has thoroughly explored the bestseller phenomenon. This chapter, as such, has highlighted the distinctions made between different forms of literary production. It has shown that any popular literary work that pleases the readers is deemed as unworthy and lowbrow literature. By contrast, it has been observed that literary canons and classics only represent high and genuine literature. Moreover, it has unveiled literary scholars and critics' concerns about the threat that present day literary production constitutes. Indeed, this chapter has identified why and how high standards of literature are undermined and subverted.

The second chapter titled "Exploring the Evaluation of Literature and Introducing Elena Ferrante's *My Brilliant Friend*: Biography, Plot Summary, and Brief Insight into Textual Elements" has further discussed the great literary quality that literary canons and good works

of literature imply. Such works are distinguished by their literary quality and literary merit they have. Accordingly, this section has defined literary merit and has explained that it is a changing value which is affected by both the dominant taste and ideologies. Besides, it has investigated different approaches to address literature's assessment as it has determined the main criteria and standards which define literary merit. Moreover, it has also supplied a brief biography, a plot summary, and an analysis of the main characters to give an overall idea about both the author and the text. As for the last chapter, "Examining *My Brilliant Friend's* Literary Merit", the text's multiple aspects that reveal its worth are discussed and explored. In effect, it has displayed the novel's originality, novelty, and aesthetic quality as it has proved its literary worth and merit.

Our research has called attention to the question of what constitutes literature through the scrutiny of today's most prevailing sort of literary production: the bestseller. At first instance, the literary canon, Western literature's most esteemed and renowned collection of works, and its traits have been revisited. Accordingly, the literary canon is characterized by the high standards of literary excellence that it embodies. However, these standards are subverted and undermined throughout time especially within the changed climate of the 1960s. Indeed, literature became a mere representative of different ideologies. Not only that but it became also a means to fulfill economic requirements. Consequently, any work appreciated for the ideological thoughts it promotes, such as Feminism and Marxism, is deemed unworthy. Likewise, popular works associated with business, bestselling novels as for instance, are considered to be of no literary merit. By taking into account Harold Bloom's engaged proposal for the Western canon in which he suggests a set of four criteria that define a literary canon and determine a work's literary value and merit, our study has investigated a recent bestseller's literary quality: Elena Ferrante's *My Brilliant Friend*. As such, the novel

has revealed to involve both aesthetic qualities, traces of literary influence and newness, as well as marks of originality and innovativeness.

Our findings indicate and prove that not every bestseller or any work that is highly sold, broadly consumed, or notably popular necessarily means that it is of little value or unworthy and ineligible for canonical status. On the contrary, some of these works are of great literary merit and may display excellent literary quality such is the case of Ferrante's bestseller. The latter, throughout our scrutiny, has fulfilled and met the canonic criteria that Bloom has identified in his approach; thus, it may make its way to the canon of serious literature and the Western canon. As such, Bloom's approach has proven to be rigorous and convenient for literature's assessment as it has been a pertinent tool that supported our examination of *My Brilliant Friend's* literary merit. In addition, throughout our investigation, we can affirm that literary standards and criteria that define literary merit are not fixed but constantly changing as time goes by, and it is this change that permits literature to make progress and evolve.

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## Résumé

Ce travail de recherche aborde la question des romans à succès et adresse le statut et la position qu'ils occupent dans la sphère littéraire. Il attire l'attention sur les points de vue dédaigneux et dépréciant envers les best-sellers comme il révèle les diverses perspectives qui prévalent dans le milieu universitaire. En effet, il met en évidence et souligne la qualité littéraire de la production littéraire contemporaine. Par conséquent, il entreprend une enquête et un examen minutieux de la valeur littéraire du best-seller international d'Elena Ferrante, *My Brilliant Friend*. À la lumière de l'approche approfondie d'Harold Bloom concernant le statut canonique, la présente étude présente les divers critères et qualités littéraires qu'implique l'œuvre de Ferrante. En termes généraux, ce travail de recherche examine ce qui est considéré comme une véritable littérature en explorant le concept du mérite littéraire.