

# Listening to Ferrante's Women: A Psychoanalytic Engagement with the Neapolitan Novels

Presented by

Christine Maksimowicz, Ph.D  
Stacey Novack, Psy.D



Sofonisba Anguissola, 1555  
The Chess Game. Oil on canvas  
National Museum Poznań, Poland

March 6, 2021  
10:00am – 3:30pm EST  
Located on Zoom (Link to be sent after registration)  
4 CEUs for eligible participants

Sponsored by the Vermont Association for Psychoanalytic Studies  
Applied Psychoanalysis Committee

Elizabeth Goldstein, PhD, Chair  
Jean Pieniadz, PhD  
Mina Levinsky-Wohl, MD, LMHC  
Gerri Oppedisano, PhD

Thank you for your interest in this opportunity to engage with the work of Elena Ferrante! We are so excited to be able to bring together a lively group experience and hope to see you there! We are delighted to welcome Christine Maksimowicz, Ph.D. in English, and Stacey Novack, Clinical Psychologist and Psychoanalyst, for a special event focused on the work of writer Elena Ferrante, sponsored by the Vermont Association Psychoanalytic Studies Applied Psychoanalysis Committee.

If you have any questions, or would like additional details about the conference presentation, please contact Elizabeth Goldstein, Chair, Vermont Association for Psychoanalytic Studies Applied Psychoanalysis Committee, at [ESRGoldstein@gmail.com](mailto:ESRGoldstein@gmail.com).

Some of you might notice that the timeframe and number of CEUs for this event has been modified since it appeared in earlier “save the date” forms. Initial conference plans were made pre-pandemic, and based on experiences with an online learning environment over the past year, the schedule was modified to be more favorable in that medium.

## **Description**

Through talks that bring Elena Ferrante’s Neapolitan Novels into conversation with psychoanalytic and socioanalytic theory, the presenters, one a practicing psychoanalyst and one a literary scholar, will invite participants into a rich discussion of Ferrante's fiction. Participants will actively engage Ferrante's fiction, theoretical material and its clinical implications, together creating a personally rich, intellectually rigorous, multi-layered encounter with the world of Ferrante’s captivating novels and their finely drawn, psychologically complex characters.

## **Schedule**

10:00-10:15	Introductions and Opening Remarks, Jean Pieniadz
10:15-11:10	"An Analysis of Fragments: Elena Ferrante's <i>Frantumaglia</i> and the Problem of Authorship," Stacey Novack
11:00-11:15	Break
11:15-12:00	Discussion
12:00-1:00	Lunch
1:00-1:45	"Dropped Dolls and Dissolving Margins: Classed Injury and the Failure of Destruction in Ferrante's Neapolitan Novels," Christine Maksimowicz
1:45-2:00	Break
2:00-2:45	Discussion
2:45-3:30	Clinical Applications

## **An Analysis of Fragments: Elena Ferrante's *Frantumaglia* and Problems of Authorship**

Stacey Novack, Psy.D.

This portion of the day will focus on distilling Elena Ferrante's existential and broadly psychoanalytic vision of the struggle for identity and authorship amidst the ubiquitous press of otherness. Drawing from the Neapolitan quartet, interviews, and autobiographical writings, we will hazard to articulate Ferrante's unique perspective on the phenomenon of psychic influence. We will begin with a brief detour into how psychoanalysis (starting with Freud and Breuer's studies on Hysteria) has historically contended with these problems under the broad construct of "identification," tracing the concept into its usage in object relations theory. This review will allow us to consider the unique contribution of Ferrante's perspective, which has been rendered for us by the author implicitly, in literary form, and occasionally explicitly in her interviews and non-fictional writings. The two female protagonists in the Neapolitan Quartet, Lila and Lenu, will enable us to explore the dynamics of influence, identification, and authorship in two related and interpenetrating areas: 1) creative work, in which otherness must be digested and transmuted such that (the illusion of) novelty and a sense of personal authorship is generated, and 2) the establishment of (the illusion of) a relatively bounded, stable self that survives the inevitable psychic porousness endemic to human relatedness.

Throughout the discussion, we will consider the implications of Ferrante's vision for psychoanalytic clinical practice. We will consider a core contradiction inherent in the ritual of psychoanalytic case presentations—the injunction that we must both convey the core features of the life of the person and simultaneously conceal their identity. Ferrante herself serves a useful instance for exploring this challenge as an author who has worked assiduously to avoid biographical readings of her work, including by attempting to creatively conceal her true identity, and nonetheless, whose fiction is infused with an abundant feeling of truth and personal detail. We will consider what Ferrante's perspective may and may not illuminate for clinical psychoanalysis, and how her emphasis may draw our attention to details and possibilities we might otherwise, in our customary analytic modes of listening, have neglected.

### **Dropped Dolls and Dissolving Margins: Classed Injury and the Failure of Destruction in Elena Ferrante's Neapolitan Novels**

Christine Maksimowicz, Ph.D.

While ambiguities and enigmas abound in Winnicott's celebrated text "The Use of an Object," the standard reading equates the destruction to which Winnicott refers as the expression of the infant's primitive or appetitive aggression. Arguing that this dimension of destruction had been previously theorized by Winnicott in his earlier writings, Jeremy Elkins makes a compelling case for a new reading of the article that explores a different (yet related) kind of destruction, that of relinquishment. Drawing upon Elkins' interpretation and insights as well as my own research on working-class injury, I will explore both forms of destruction in Elena Ferrante's Neapolitan Novels so as to open up for discussion the role that social class may play in one's ability to engage in generative object usage, and relatedly, in the formation of subjectivity. Placing the Neapolitan Quartet within a larger literary subgenre that I've termed "the working-class escape narrative," I will offer a lens for understanding the failure of relational object usage that we observe between Elena and Lila as connected to a mother's inability to survive her daughter's idiomatic difference and aggression. I will also explore how Ferrante's work suggests the creation of art as a form of object usage that may enable the recovery of a creative subjectivity that was earlier repudiated.

In the first part of the talk, I will examine how Lila's ruthless assertion of selfhood that is neither able to be contained or survived by her working-class community illuminates a dimension of working-class aversion towards otherness that remains largely unrecognized by those who live outside of these communities. While sociologists have long noted the working class's hostility towards different others *outside* of the fold, the Neapolitan Novels take up an underexplored disavowal of difference that is frequently enacted *within* working-class families and communities. Bringing Elkins's rereading of Winnicott's "The Use of an Object" into conversation with specific forms of classed injury explored in the novels, I will provide a framework for understanding a logic of parenting widely practiced within working-class families that may diminish one's ability to engage in relational object usage.

In the second part of this exploration, I will examine the absence of relational play within the novels, and discuss its implications for theorizing working-class female subjectivity through a different lens than psychoanalysis presently offers. I will explore the possibility of imaginative writing opening for Elena the recovery of a creative, idiomatic subjectivity that was denied Lila. Considering how Elena's creation of the Neapolitan Novels allows her to destroy and "use" Lila in ways that enlarge the self, I will examine the centrality of play in the processes of destruction that Winnicott alludes to in "The Use of an Object," but never fully develops. Finally, I will consider the limitations of play that occurs not relationally but solely in the realm of the imagination. When art is the only sphere in which object usage is possible, what is the cost to the relational self?

## **Learning Objectives**

1. Describe the history of psychoanalytic theorizing of identification beginning with Freud and through contemporary object relations theory
2. Articulate an understanding of the themes of identification, internalization, and influence as they appear in Ferrante's Neapolitan novels
3. Use psychoanalytic and Ferrantean ideas of influence and identification to understand patients' difficulties with self formation and creativity
4. Articulate an expanded understanding of destruction, as explored in Elkins' rereading of Winnicott's enigmatic text, "The Use of an Object"
5. Employ the Neapolitan Novels to describe a form of relational breakdown that often occurs in working-class families
6. Identify ways in which imaginative forms of self-narration, as illustrated in the Neapolitan Novels, may be used recuperatively

## Presenters

Christine Maksimowicz, Ph.D. in English, is currently working on a book that moves between memoir, fiction, and theory to explore classed-based injury in her own past, as well as a larger cultural phenomenon that often occurs in working-class families but remains untheorized. Past publications include a class-centered exploration of trauma in the fiction of Alice Munro in the *Journal of Literature and Trauma Studies* and an examination of recognition failure and its relation to shame in *The Works of Elena Ferrante: Reconfiguring the Margins* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016). Christine serves as book review editor for *Psychoanalysis, Culture & Society*. She is also a member of the editorial board of the *International Journal of Applied Psychoanalytic Studies* and the American Psychoanalytic Association's Study Group on Teaching Psychoanalytic Writing. Christine has been an American Psychoanalytic Association Fellow and a fellow at the Massachusetts Institute for Psychoanalytic Studies. Past awards include the *CORST Essay Prize in Psychoanalysis & Culture* by the American Psychoanalytic Association and the Boston Psychoanalytic Society & Institute's *Julius Silberger Award*. Christine presently divides her time between facilitating writing groups for clinicians and creative writers, one-on-one work with writers, and training as an analytic candidate at the National Institute for the Psychotherapies (NIP).

Stacey Novack, Psy.D is a clinical psychologist and psychoanalyst in private practice in Northampton, MA. Stacey is a graduate, supervisor, and faculty member of the Massachusetts Institute for Psychoanalysis, where she teaches courses on object relations theory, the psychoanalysis of intense affective experience, and dreams. Stacey has written and published psychoanalytic essays on the subjects of grief, politics and culture, and creativity. Her most recent paper (in press) explores the work of the psychoanalyst Marion Milner and brings a relational psychoanalytic perspective to the problem of creative blocks.

## Suggested Readings

Participants are *not required to do any reading* prior to attending this event. There is no expectation that participants will have read Elena Ferrante's Neapolitan Quartet (*My Brilliant Friend, The Story of a New Name, Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay, and The Story of the Lost Child*). For those of you who may be interested, there is a well-done series on HBO that brings *My Brilliant Friend* to the screen. The suggested readings below can be accessed through a link you receive in the welcome email after registering for the conference.

Elkins, J. (2015). Motility, aggression, and the bodily I. *Psychoanal. Q.*, 84:943-973.

---. (2017). Revisiting destruction in "The Use of an Object." *Psychoanal. Q.*, 86:109-148.

Maksimowicz, C. (2016). Maternal Failure and its Bequest: Toxic Attachment in the Neapolitan Novels. In *The Works of Elena Ferrante: Reconfiguring the Margins*, Eds. Grace Russo Bullaro and Stephanie Love, Palgrave Macmillan Press: New York, pp. 207-236.

Winnicott, D.W. (1971). The Use of an Object and Relating Through Identifications. In *Playing and Reality*. London: Tavistock, pp. 86-94.

## **Registration Fees**

	Before February 18	After February 18
VAPS Member	\$90.00	\$100.00
Non-member	\$100.00	\$110.00
Student	Free	Free

Note: Registration closes on March 4<sup>th</sup>. Registration link can be found at [www.vapsvt.org](http://www.vapsvt.org).

## **Confidentiality**

This event is open to a variety of professionals. Clinical case material will be presented in a way that does not identify any particular individuals. However, it is still expected that case material presented is confidential.

## **Continuing Education**

It is anticipated that 4 CEUs will be available for eligible participants (Psychologists, Social Workers, and Allied Mental Health Professionals).

**We look forward to seeing you!**