

# The concretization of character in narrative texts

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**ABSTRACT** This paper describes an experiment that studied the concretization of three female characters: Tarchetti's Fosca in *Passion*, Svevo's Angiolina in *As a man grows older* and Moravia's Carla in *The time of indifference*. The subjects were asked to read passages from the texts where the characters were described and then summarize the passages, list the parts of the body mentioned and answer some questions on the characters concerning their age, physical appearance, frame of mind, status and education. The questions also concerned information that was not explicitly stated in the texts read. In our examination of the answers, every time we find information that was not given in the texts, we have evidence of material coming from the readers' inferences and world knowledge. The test shows how characters can be concretized differently by different readers.

In narrative texts, when a new character is introduced, his/her body and personality are constructed on the basis of information found in the text and information activated in the readers' memory. In this paper I shall examine the introduction of three characters in three Italian novels: Fosca in Tarchetti's *Passion*,<sup>1</sup> Angiolina in Svevo's *As a man grows older*<sup>2</sup> and Carla in Moravia's *The time of indifference*.<sup>3</sup>

Tarchetti's Fosca is presented as an extraordinarily ugly woman:

Nor did her ugliness stem so much from some natural defect, a disharmony among her features (which in fact were somewhat symmetrical), as from an excessive thinness which I would almost call inconceivable to anyone who had not seen her - it was the ruin that physical pain and illness inflicted on her still youthful person. A slight effort of imagination would permit a glimpse of her skeleton. Her cheekbones and temples protruded fearfully, and her slender neck formed the most striking contrast with the bulk of her head, whose rich mass of hair, black, thick, longer than I had ever seen on a woman, further augmented the disproportion. All her life was concentrated in her eyes, which were jet black, large, veiled - eyes of a surprising beauty. One could not possibly believe that she had ever been beautiful, but it was evident that her ugliness was for the most part the effect of the illness, and that, when a girl, she was perhaps pleasant. She was tall and stood erect. She also displayed some of the pliancy, grace, flexibility that distinguishes women of sentiment and gentle birth; her manners were so naturally sweet, so spontaneously courteous that they seemed to be drawn more from nature than from education. She dressed with a great deal of

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<sup>1</sup> Igino Ugo TARCHETTI, *Fosca* (1869), in *Tutte le opere*, vol. 2, Bologna, Cappelli, 1967, pp. 235-427 (*Passion*, transl. by Lawrence Venuti, San Francisco, Mercury House, 1994).

<sup>2</sup> Italo SVEVO, *Senilità* (1898), in *Opere*, Milano, Dall'Oglio, 1962, pp. 425-593 (*As a man grows older*, transl. by Beryl de Zoete, London - New York, Putman, 1932).

<sup>3</sup> Alberto MORAVIA, *Gli indifferenti* (1929), Milano, Bompiani, 1974 (*The time of indifference*, transl. by Angus Davidson, London, Secker & Warburg, 1953).

elegance, and seen from a distance, she might even deceive. All of her horror was in her face. (pp. 41-42)<sup>4</sup>

The choice of which parts of the body are described and which are omitted depends on the narrator's priorities: when we read the description of a character, we receive information on the character's body and - at the same time - on the narrator's priorities. When a part of the body is not described, it can be concretized differently by different readers. We see that the introduction of Fosca is evaluative rather than descriptive. We remark the use of adjectives such as: «symmetrical», «excessive», «striking», «rich», «beautiful», «pleasant», «sweet». The meaning of such adjectives depends on the narrator's criteria: in order to understand them, we need to know his/her mentality. When we do not have sufficient information on the author's mentality, the adjectives remain indeterminate and allow the readers to concretize them in a way that fits their expectations or their desires.

In the course of the physical description of Fosca, we find statements that seem contradictory. The narrator remarks that the character's looks do not present «natural defects» nor «disharmony among her features» but, after a few lines, we read that «her slender neck formed the most striking contrast with the bulk of her head, whose rich mass of hair, black, thick, longer than I had ever seen on a woman, further augmented the disproportion». Fosca is «tall» and displays «some of the pliancy, grace, flexibility that distinguishes women of sentiment and gentle birth». Her manners are «naturally sweet» and «spontaneously courteous». Her clothes show «a great deal of elegance». Some parts of Fosca's body are really pretty: her eyes are «black, large, veiled - eyes of a surprising beauty». Her «ugliness» is mainly due to her illness, that devastated her face («all of her horror was in her face»). It is «the ruin that physical pain and illness inflicted on her still youthful person». We see an «excessive thinness», to such an extent that «a slight effort of imagination would permit a glimpse of her skeleton».

Fosca displays the face of death. Her «ugliness» is strengthened, by way of contrast, by the mention of signs of «beauty». The description of her physical appearance makes often use of hyperboles: «thinness which I would almost call inconceivable to anyone who had not seen her», «her cheekbones and temples protruded fearfully», «longer than I had ever seen on a woman». The contrast between her eyes and her face is remarkable: «all her life was concentrated in her eyes [...] all of her horror was in her face».

At this point, the readers have probably concretized the character's body. But, on the basis of the description we have read, we know very little for certain. The text contains several evaluations, to be interpreted according to the readers' criteria and expectations. We have read that Fosca is «tall», but we do not know exactly how many centimetres it takes to be tall. We remark that the average height of the Italians has

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<sup>4</sup> Original text: «Né tanto era brutta per difetti di natura, per disarmonia di fattezze, - ché anzi erano in parte regolari, - quanto per una magrezza eccessiva, direi quasi inconcepibile a chi non la vide; per la rovina che il dolore fisico e le malattie avevano prodotto nella sua persona ancora così giovine. Un lieve sforzo d'immaginazione poteva lasciarne travedere lo scheletro, gli zigomi e le ossa delle tempie avevano una sporgenza spaventosa, l'esiguità del suo collo formava un contrasto vivissimo colla grossezza della sua testa, di cui un ricco volume di capelli neri, folti, lunghissimi, quali non vidi mai in altra donna, aumentava ancora la sproporzione. Tutta la sua vita era ne' suoi occhi che erano nerissimi, grandi, velati - occhi d'una beltà sorprendente. Non era possibile credere che ella avesse mai potuto essere stata bella, ma era evidente che la sua bruttezza era per la massima parte effetto della malattia, e che, giovinetta, aveva potuto forse esser piaciuta. La sua persona era alta e giusta; v'era ancora qualche cosa di quella pieghevolezza, di quella grazia, di quella flessibilità che hanno le donne di sentimento e di nascita distinta; i suoi modi erano così naturalmente dolci, così spontaneamente cortesi che parevano attinti dalla natura più che dall'educazione: vestiva con la massima eleganza, e veduta un poco da lontano, poteva trarre ancora in inganno. Tutta la sua orribilità era nel suo viso» (p. 278).

increased between 1869, when Tarchetti's novel was published for the first time, and today: even the meaning of a word such as «tall» is variable. It would certainly be useful to have a historical dictionary of adjectives. We are also told that Fosca «dressed with a great deal of elegance», but we are not told exactly what she was wearing. Fosca's clothes cannot be determined in a standard way, because fashion, styles and tastes are very variable: they change with time and at any time they may be different in different people. In practice, in our case each reader chooses what clothes Fosca wears, following his/her views on elegance.

The narrator tells us that Fosca is young, tall but too thin. She has prominent cheek and temple bones. Her neck is very thin; her head is big. Her hair is «black, thick, longer than I had ever seen on a woman» and her eyes are «black, large». Her manners are sweet and courteous. She is very well-dressed. «Ugliness» is the main characteristic of her body.

The second character we shall examine is Angiolina in Italo Svevo's *As a man grows older*. Unlike Fosca, Angiolina is described as a very pretty woman:

Angiolina walked beside him. She was a tall, healthy blonde, with big blue eyes and a supple, graceful body, an expressive face and transparent skin glowing with health. As she walked, she held her head slightly on one side, as if it were weighed down by the mass of golden hair which was braided round it, and she kept looking down at the ground which she tapped at each step with her elegant parasol, as if she hoped there might issue from it some comment on the words that had just been spoken.<sup>5</sup>

In Svevo's novel, the reader finds information on the character's body: in particular her hair, eyes, height, figure, face and health. Angiolina is presented in the open air, while she walks. She is presented as a pretty and healthy woman.

In the beginning of Alberto Moravia's *The time of indifference* a female character is introduced, with indications that are similar to the beginning of a play («Carla came into the room»). The description centres around Carla's clothing, emphasizing aspects of sensuality:

Carla came into the room. She was wearing a brown woolen frock with a skirt so short that the movement she made in shutting the door was enough to pull it up several inches over the slack wrinkles her stockings formed about her legs; but she was unaware of this, and advanced cautiously, peering in front of her as she moved clumsily and uncertainly forward.<sup>6</sup>

Her skirt is «short» and a very small movement is enough to make it climb on her legs, but she does not notice it. Carla's bearing is awkward: she moves «clumsily and uncertainly forward».

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<sup>5</sup> Original text: «Angiolina, una bionda dagli occhi azzurri grandi, alta e forte, ma snella e flessuosa, il volto illuminato dalla vita, un color giallo di ambra soffuso di rosa da una bella salute camminava accanto a lui, la testa china da un lato come piegata dal peso del tanto oro che la fasciava, guardando il suolo ch'ella ad ogni passo toccava con l'elegante ombrellino come se avesse voluto farne scaturire un commento alle parole che udiva».

<sup>6</sup> Original text: «Entrò Carla; aveva indossato un vestitino di lanetta marrone con la gonna così corta, che bastò quel movimento di chiudere l'uscio per fargliela salire di un buon palmo sopra le pieghe lente che le facevano le calze intorno alle gambe; ma ella non se ne accorse e si avanzò con precauzione guardando misteriosamente davanti a sé, dinoccolata e malsicura».

In my experiment I study how the readers concretize the descriptions quoted above. The subjects were 120 university students<sup>7</sup>: half were men, half were women, half were students of applied sciences (*Facoltà di Ingegneria* and *Facoltà di Architettura*), half were students of humanities (*Facoltà di Lettere e Filosofia*, *Facoltà di Scienze della Formazione* and *Facoltà di Lingue e Letterature Straniere*). The average age was 21.8 years. One third of the subjects received Tarchetti's text, one third Svevo's and one third Moravia's, according to this distribution:

	Male	Female	Hum.	Appl. Sc.	Hum. Male	Hum. Female	Appl. Sc. Male	Appl. Sc. Female	Sum
<b>0-Tarchetti</b>	20	20	20	20	10	10	10	10	40
<b>1-Svevo</b>	20	20	20	20	10	10	10	10	40
<b>2-Moravia</b>	20	20	20	20	10	10	10	10	40
<b>Sum</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>120</b>

The test was administered in university classrooms during normal classes. Each subject was given a copy of one of the three texts. The students were told that it was the introduction of a character in a novel, but were not given any further information, such as title, name of the author or year of publication. They were told that the test was aimed at studying reading behaviour, but did not aim at evaluating their skills. They were asked to read at their normal speed.

When all the subjects had finished reading, they returned the copies of the texts they had read and received a questionnaire on the characters and a five-point appreciation question, asking whether they would like to continue reading the book. They were also asked if they had already read the passage on some other occasion; I did not make use of the answers coming from subjects who were already familiar with the text. The test was anonymous: the subjects only indicated their age and sex.

The subjects were asked to summarize the text read. Since the texts describe the characters, the summaries contain the description of a character. Then, in a distinct question, the subjects were asked to list the parts of the character's body mentioned. More specific questions followed, asking the character's age and information concerning the character's physical appearance (colour of the hair, height, stature, clothing), emotions, behaviour, economic situation and culture. Lastly, the subjects were asked in what season of the year the novel was set.

Since many pieces of information were not explicitly stated in the texts, the subjects were asked to answer making use of their inferences. If the subjects thought that the text read did not contain any information that could lead to an answer to a specific question, they were asked to omit it. In our examination of the answers, every time we find information that was not given in the texts, we have evidence of material coming from the readers' inferences and world knowledge.

*Table 1* presents how the subjects answered the five point appreciation question asking them if they would like to continue reading the text. We see a significant difference between male and female subjects: the women are more interested ( $p < 0,05$ , One-Way ANOVA). This is not due to their studies, because the differences between humanities and applied sciences subjects were not statistically significant (One-Way ANOVA). *Passion* generated the highest interest, but the difference may be at least partly due to the fact that Tarchetti's description is the longest: since the three texts have

<sup>7</sup> The data were collected in Turin on 22 November 1999; 14 February, 15 and 23 March, 11 and 29 May 2000; 21 March, 17 and 23 May 2001. I thank Giancarlo Baldi, Edoardo Barbisio, Claudia Bonardi, Mario Chiampi, Guido Ferraro, Giulio Lughì, Carlo Ragusa, Aldo Ruffinatto e Alessandro Vitale Brovarone for their cooperation.

different length and come from different parts of the novels, in our study we shall only compare the concretizations of the same text.

**TABLE 1 - INTEREST IN TEXTS**

	AVERAGE				Male		Female		Humanities		Appl. Sc.	
	Low interest (1 or 2)		High interest (4 or 5)		Low int.	High int.	Low int.	High int.	Low int.	High int.	Low int.	High int.
<b>0-Tarchetti</b>	5	(12,50%)	12	(30,00%)	5	3	0	9	3	8	2	4
<b>1-Svevo</b>	19	(47,50%)	8	(20,00%)	11	3	8	5	7	3	12	5
<b>2-Moravia</b>	13	(32,50%)	10	(25,00%)	10	5	3	5	7	4	6	6
<b>Sum</b>	37	(30,83%)	30	(25,00%)	26	11	11	19	17	15	20	15

**Note.** The remaining 53 (44,17%) chose the median position in the scale (3).

The three passages do not indicate the characters' ages explicitly. Fosca is presented generically as youthful («her still youthful person»), but not very young («one could not possibly believe that she had ever been beautiful, but it was evident that her ugliness was for the most part the effect of the illness, and that, when a girl, she was perhaps pleasant»). This is caught by a group of readers: according to 17 subjects out of 40, Fosca is less than 31. However the character is very ill and illness is often associated with old age: in a few cases this association overshadows the text's explicit information, so much that 6 readers think that Fosca is between 50 and 70. The concretizations of the character's age are thus very divergent: from 18 to 70, with an average of 36,5. Differences of this type produce very different expectations, that have strong consequences when, in order to reconstruct the world presented in the text, the readers have to choose relevant information in their world knowledge.

Also Angiolina's age is not explicitly stated. The text, however, contains several indications of health, strength and beauty, that are usually associated with youth: «a tall, healthy blonde, with big blue eyes and a supple, graceful body, an expressive face and transparent skin glowing with health». The readers think that she is between 19 and 40 (average: 24,5). The divergence is smaller than in the previous case, but it is still remarkable: an age of 19 or 20 leads to concretizations that are very different from 35 or 40.

Moravia's passage tells us very little about Carla. However her apparel («a brown woolen frock with a skirt so short») and her bearing («she moved clumsily and uncertainly forward») are normally associated with youth. According to our readers, her age is between 15 and 40 years (average: 25,5). Also these ages lead to different concretizations.

*Table 2* shows the age indicated by our subjects. The differences between male and female, humanities and applied sciences subjects were not statistically significant (One-Way ANOVA).

**TABLE 2 – CHARACTERS' AGE**

0-Tarchetti		1-Svevo		2-Moravia	
Age	Frequency	Age	Frequency	Age	Frequency
18	1	19	1	15	2
20	1	20	10	17	2
24	1	21	1	18	4
25	3	22	2	19	1
26	1	23	3	20	6
27	1	24	2	22	1
30	8	25	11	23	1
31	1	26	1	25	6
35	7	27	4	27	2
40	6	30	2	28	1
45	4	35	2	29	1
50	3	40	1	30	6
55	1			35	4
60	1			37	1
70	1			40	2

The test asked the subjects to describe the characters with an open question (a summary of the text read that, in our case, was the description of a character), a partially open question (a list of the parts of the character's body mentioned in the passage) and eight closed questions. A final question asked in what season of the year the novel was set. We shall now examine the closed questions, in order to verify the divergencies. Here are the nine closed questions:

The person described is:

- Q1:** 1 Fair-haired 2 Dark-haired 3 Red-haired 0 I do not know / Missing or unclear answer  
**Q2:** 1 Nervous 2 Calm 3 Quite calm 0 I do not know / Missing or unclear answer  
**Q3:** 1 Tall 2 Short 3 Average height 0 I do not know / Missing or unclear answer  
**Q4:** 1 Rich 2 Poor 3 Average economic situation 0 I do not know / Missing or unclear answer  
**Q5:** 1 Thin 2 Fat 3 Average size 0 I do not know / Missing or unclear answer  
**Q6:** 1 Badly dressed 2 Elegant 3 Dressed normally 0 I do not know / Missing or unclear answer  
**Q7:** 1 Boring 2 Brilliant 3 Average 0 I do not know / Missing or unclear answer  
**Q8:** 1 Educated 2 Uneducated 3 Average education 0 I do not know / Missing or unclear answer

In what season of the year is the description set?

- Q9:** 1 Spring 2 Summer 3 Autumn 4 Winter 0 I do not know / Missing or unclear answer<sup>8</sup>

*Tables 3 and 4* show the answers. As for the first question (**Q1**), Tarchetti's and Svevo's texts are univocal («black hair» and «blonde» respectively). This is caught by almost all the subjects (95% and 92,5%). There is no such information in Moravia's

<sup>8</sup> Original questions in Italian:

«La persona descritta è:

- D1:** 1 Bionda 2 Bruna 3 Rossa 0 Non so/Manca/Poco chiaro  
**D2:** 1 Nervosa 2 Calma 3 Abbastanza calma 0 Non so/Manca/Poco chiaro  
**D3:** 1 Alta 2 Bassa 3 Altezza media 0 Non so/Manca/Poco chiaro  
**D4:** 1 Ricca 2 Povera 3 Situazione economica media 0 Non so/Manca/Poco chiaro  
**D5:** 1 Magra 2 Grassa 3 Taglia media 0 Non so/Manca/Poco chiaro  
**D6:** 1 Vestita male 2 Elegante 3 Vestita normalmente 0 Non so/Manca/Poco chiaro  
**D7:** 1 Noiosa 2 Brillante 3 Media 0 Non so/Manca/Poco chiaro  
**D8:** 1 Colta 2 Poco colta 3 Di media cultura 0 Non so/Manca/Poco chiaro

In che stagione dell'anno è collocata la descrizione?

- D9:** 1 Primavera 2 Estate 3 Autunno 4 Inverno 0 Non so/Manca/Poco chiaro»

passage: in this case, most of the subjects (55%) do not answer. The information concerning the second question (Q2) is not explicit. However in the case of Fosca we remark that «her manners were so naturally sweet, so spontaneously courteous» and that she displays «grace». This may suggest calm and peace of mind, as 57,5% of the respondents choose; 27,5% of the subjects, in the absence of exact information, do not answer. Angiolina is described as «a tall, healthy blonde, with big blue eyes and a supple, graceful body, an expressive face and transparent skin glowing with health», while she is walking: even in lack of explicit information, she is considered as calm by 65% of the subjects; 25% consider her as quite calm. Carla moves «clumsily and uncertainly forward»: probably for this reason 62,5% of the respondents think that she is nervous.

**TABLE 3 – QUESTIONS Q1-Q8**

	<b>0-Tarchetti</b>				<b>1-Svevo</b>			
	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>0</b>
<b>Q1</b>	0 (0,0%)	38 (95,0%)	0 (0,0%)	2 (5,0%)	37 (92,5%)	1 (2,5%)	0 (0,0%)	2 (5,0%)
<b>Q2</b>	4 (10,0%)	23 (57,5%)	2 (5,0%)	11 (27,5%)	2 (5,0%)	26 (65,0%)	10 (25,0%)	2 (5,0%)
<b>Q3</b>	16 (40,0%)	0 (0,0%)	16 (40,0%)	8 (20,0%)	33 (82,5%)	0 (0,0%)	3 (7,5%)	4 (10,0%)
<b>Q4</b>	13 (32,5%)	6 (15,0%)	13 (32,5%)	8 (20,0%)	30 (75,0%)	0 (0,0%)	6 (15,0%)	4 (10,0%)
<b>Q5</b>	36 (90,0%)	1 (2,5%)	3 (7,5%)	0 (0,0%)	26 (65,0%)	0 (0,0%)	14 (35,0%)	0 (0,0%)
<b>Q6</b>	5 (12,5%)	23 (57,5%)	5 (12,5%)	7 (17,5%)	0 (0,0%)	33 (82,5%)	2 (5,0%)	5 (12,5%)
<b>Q7</b>	3 (7,5%)	4 (10,0%)	13 (32,5%)	20 (50,0%)	4 (10,0%)	14 (35,0%)	13 (32,5%)	9 (22,5%)
<b>Q8</b>	19 (47,5%)	2 (5,0%)	5 (12,5%)	14 (35,0%)	14 (35,0%)	0 (0,0%)	11 (27,5%)	15 (37,5%)

  

	<b>2-Moravia</b>			
	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>0</b>
<b>Q1</b>	6 (15,0%)	11 (27,5%)	1 (2,5%)	22 (55,0%)
<b>Q2</b>	25 (62,5%)	8 (20,0%)	5 (12,5%)	2 (5,0%)
<b>Q3</b>	7 (17,5%)	0 (0,0%)	17 (42,5%)	16 (40,0%)
<b>Q4</b>	2 (5,0%)	7 (17,5%)	15 (37,5%)	16 (40,0%)
<b>Q5</b>	21 (52,5%)	0 (0,0%)	7 (17,5%)	12 (30,0%)
<b>Q6</b>	12 (30,0%)	4 (10,0%)	20 (50,0%)	4 (10,0%)
<b>Q7</b>	3 (7,5%)	3 (7,5%)	12 (30,0%)	22 (55,0%)
<b>Q8</b>	2 (5,0%)	5 (12,5%)	8 (20,0%)	25 (62,5%)

The character's height (Q3) is indicated clearly with regard to both Fosca and Angiolina («tall»). In Angiolina's case, this is confirmed by 82,5% of the answers. In Fosca's case, only 40% of the respondents think that she is tall, while 40% think that her height is average and 20% do not answer: presumably her «ugliness» and her bad health may have overshadowed this piece of information. Carla's height is not indicated: for this reason, 42,5% of the subjects choose an average height and 40% do not know.

The fourth closed question (Q4) concerns the characters' economic situation. As for Fosca, Tarchetti mentions her «gentle birth» and writes that «she dressed with a great deal of elegance». However, also in this case her «ugliness» and bad health may have obscured this information: only 32,5% of the respondents consider her rich, while 32,5% choose an average economic situation, 20% do not answer and 15% say that she is poor. Here the divergence is broad. Angiolina is a «healthy blonde» who walks with an «elegant parasol»; she is considered rich by 75% of the subjects. It is interesting to remark that this expectation will be belied if we keep reading the novel. Moravia's quoted

passage does not tell us clearly what Carla's economic situation is: 40% of the respondents do not answer and 37,5% choose an average economic situation.

The characters' size is the object of the fifth question (**Q5**). This piece of information is univocal as for Fosca («excessive thinness which I would almost call inconceivable to anyone who had not seen her [...] a slight effort of imagination would permit a glimpse of her skeleton. Her cheekbones and temples protruded fearfully»). This is confirmed by 90% of the subjects. Angiolina is a «tall, healthy blonde, with [...] a supple, graceful body»: 65% of our readers consider her thin and 35% say that her size is average. This piece of information is less clear in Carla's case: 52,5% of the respondents think that she is thin, 17,5% choose an average size and 30% do not answer.

The sixth question (**Q6**) concerns the characters' clothes. Tarchetti's text is very clear: «she dressed with a great deal of elegance». This is caught by 57,5% of the subjects. However it is possible that this information is once again partially overshadowed by other information regarding her «ugliness» and disease: 12,5% of the respondents consider her badly dressed, 12,5% dressed normally and 17,5% do not answer. In the course of his act of reading, the reader activates, in his memory, material to be used in his concretization: in this way, he introduces new material. At the same time, his working memory is very selective: it often removes information that is considered irrelevant. If the reader is questioned later about removed information, he may be unable to recover it in full and may be forced to draw inferences that may lead to results that are different from the text's surface, or he may give a neutral answer like, in our test, answers 0 or 3.

Angiolina, a «healthy blonde» who walks with an «elegant parasol», is considered elegant by 82,5% of the respondents. We read that Carla «was wearing a brown woolen frock with a skirt so short that the movement she made in shutting the door was enough to pull it up several inches over the slack wrinkles her stockings formed about her legs»: 50% of the subjects think she is dressed normally, 30% badly dressed, 10% elegant and 10% do not know. In this case the concretizations of contemporary readers are likely to be very different from the concretizations produced at the time of the novel's first publication: customs regarding the length of skirts have changed a lot since 1929.

The seventh question (**Q7**) regards the characters' behaviour. The three passages are little informative. As for Fosca, her serious illness may make a brilliant behaviour unlikely: we see that 50% of the respondents do not give an opinion and 32,5% choose the neutral answer. As regards Angiolina, in default of precise information, 35% of the subjects consider her brilliant – probably under the influence of other positive attributes, like health and beauty – while 32,5% opt for the neutral answer and 22,5% do not answer. Carla moves «clumsily and uncertainly forward», which does not seem to be associated with brightness: 55% of the readers do not give an opinion and 30% choose the neutral answer.

The three passages do not give precise information about the characters' education (**Q8**). In the case of Fosca, 35% of the respondents do not answer, while 47,5% consider her well-educated. The passage speaks of «education»: «her manners were so naturally sweet, so spontaneously courteous that they seemed to be drawn more from nature than from education» and of «the pliancy, grace, flexibility that distinguishes women of sentiment and gentle birth». Angiolina is considered as well-educated by 35% of the subjects, while 27,5% think that her education is average and 37,5% do not give an opinion; nobody considers her uneducated. As for Carla, 62,5% of the respondents do not know and 20% choose the neutral answer.

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**TABLE 4 – PART OF THE YEAR (Q9)**

	1	2	3	4	0
<b>0-Tarchetti</b>	6 (15,0%)	0 (0,0%)	12 (30,0%)	6 (15,0%)	16 (40,0%)
<b>1-Svevo</b>	20 (50,0%)	10 (25,0%)	5 (12,5%)	0 (0,0%)	5 (12,5%)
<b>2-Moravia</b>	12 (30,0%)	3 (7,5%)	15 (37,5%)	6 (15,0%)	4 (10,0%)

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The ninth question (Q9) asks in what season of the year the novel is set. The three passages do not contain explicit information. As for Tarchetti's text, 40% of the subjects do not give an opinion and 30% choose autumn. Angiolina's description is set in spring according to 50% of the respondents and in summer according to 25%. Finally, 37,5% of our readers think that Moravia's passage is set in autumn and 30% in spring. The concretization of the season may be related to the perception of the character. It has important consequences on the type of material the reader activates in his memory in order to reconstruct the situation presented in the text, since different seasons entail many differences, like different clothing, hours of daylight and types of possible actions.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Very few differences between male and female, humanities and applied sciences subjects are statistically significant (One-Way ANOVA). Fosca is considered calm by women more than by men ( $p < 0,01$ ). Men set Carla's description in spring or in summer, women in autumn or in winter ( $p < 0,001$ ). All humanities subjects concretize Fosca as thin, while some applied science subjects answer differently ( $p < 0,05$ ). Fosca looks more elegant to the humanities subjects ( $p < 0,05$ ). The number of applied sciences subjects who do not give an opinion on Carla's brightness and education is higher ( $p < 0,05$ ). In all the other cases there are no significant differences between the groups. The examination of the open questions does not lead us to new conclusions. We see that Fosca's age has very divergent concretizations: according to a subject, she is «an old person» (and the age indicated is 60), while another thinks that she is «a young and bright girl» (25 years of age). We also do not see any relation between the answers to the nine questions and the interest in the texts.