



ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

Literature

A TRIBUTE TO GIOVANNI VERGA: AN ITALIAN VERIST (THE CENTENNIAL COMMEMORATION)

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ABSTRACT

Giovanni Verga is one of the greatest Italian writers of the second half of the nineteenth century. He is best known for his depiction of life in Sicilian land, especially through his short stories, plays and novels. His literature gives insight to the poverty, customs, traditions, myth, superstitions and reality of the prosaic life in Sicilian land. He died in Catania in 1922 at the age of 82 due to cerebral thrombosis. The year 2022 is globally celebrated as death centenary of Giovanni Verga. By recalling his contribution to the development of Italian Literature, the present paper pays a sort of tribute to him.

INTRODUCTION

The year 2022 is marked as the death centenary of Giovanni Verga, who is known as one of the most eminent and leading literary figures of Italian Literature of the second half of the nineteenth century. He is a realist writer best known for his depiction of Sicilian life through short stories, plays and novels. Some of the critics have even referred to him as the greatest short – story writer between Boccaccio and the 20th century. His literary pieces are the true voice of Sicilian life, which give a deep literary, linguistic, cultural and social understanding of Southern Italy and make us to understand how Sicilian land differs from the rest of the country. Non – standard linguistic forms, regional expressions, idioms, proverbs, dialects etc. are the essential elements of his writing and these elements are the true representation of the Sicilian voice in his literature.

Early life

Giovanni Verga was born on September 2, 1840 into a prosperous family in Catania on the eastern coast of Sicily. He was the first son of Giovanni Catalano Verga and Caterina Di Mauro, who owned the most fertile, prosperous, large estates and lands in the areas of southern Italy. At the age of six, he was enrolled in a traditional private school of Antonio Abate, who was a patriot and strong supporter of the Italian Republic. The patriotic ideas, appreciation and admiration for Romantic literature were rooted in the mind of young Verga from quite an early age. His teacher encouraged him to fight and write for the independence of the country. Hence, his early literary works were fully manifested by the ideas of freedom, love and sacrifice for the country.

Starting with historical and patriotic novels, at the age of sixteen he wrote his first novel, *Amore e Patria* (Love and Homeland), but it was not published at that time. In 1860, after the arrival of Garibaldi in Sicily, Verga joined the National Guard at the age of twenty. Immediately afterwards, he published his first novel, entitled *I Carbonari della montagna* (Carbonari of the Mountain), which is based on the struggle for the unification of Italy. Moreover, he also wrote *Sulle lagune* (On the Lagoons) while he was still living in Sicily. It deals with elite upper – class aristocratic characters trapped in a passionate and usually impossible relationship, set against the Risorgimento, the 19th century movement that culminated in uniting the entire Italian peninsula into a single state in 1861 as the kingdom of Italy.

Shifting from South to North

His great courage and determination to become a writer inspired him to discontinue his study of law from the University of Catania and leave for Florence, which was the capital and major artistic and cultural centre of Italy. In 1866, he wrote *Una peccatrice* (A Sinner), which is a story of passionate love and death, set in a Sicilian village, Vizzini, in the late nineteenth century. In this novel, love turns out to be a

false illusion, which cannot withstand the social and economic pressure of post – unified Italy. Here, the theme of money appears for the first time in Verga's literary pieces, which played a major role in his later works. During his stay in Florence, the young, enthusiastic and ambitious Verga got the opportunity to meet some leading Italian intellectuals who always encouraged him to write. In the year 1871, his first successful book, *Storia di una capinera* (Story of a Blackcap), came out. It is an epistolary novel whose protagonist is Maria. She is a tragic female character who dies in a monastery cell where she had been secluded. In 1872, after getting attention as a writer, he decided to move to Milan, where he came in contact with members of the Italian Avant – grade movement which is popularly known as *Scapigliati* in Italy. It is an artistic movement which developed in Italy after the period of Risorgimento. Through this movement Verga understood profoundly the major European literary and artistic trends of that era. His writing started to shift rapidly from the tragically romantic figures of the Risorgimento to a more realistic and critical representation of the prosaic Italian life after the Unification. During his stay in Milan he wrote *Eva* and *Eros* in 1873 and 1875 respectively. In this phase of writing, Verga started to put emphasis on dark face of society which may be interpreted as the result of his first encounter with French Naturalism that had a great impact on Italian critics and readers, especially in Milan, where Verga was residing.

Returning to South Italy

In the new phase of writing, he was influenced by the works of Gustave Flaubert and Emile Zola. His literary bravery took him to the most reputed literary salons of Paris, Florence and Milan, which motivated him to establish a new literary movement in Italy known as *Verismo*. The literary term *Verismo* is derived from the Italian word *vero*, which means true or real. In English, it can be referred to as realism or critical realism. In Italy, *Verismo* is developed in the late 19th and early 20th centuries and the primary exponents were two Sicilian writers, Luigi Capuana and Giovanni Verga. The movement arose in Europe after the French Revolution and reached Capuana and Verga through the writings of Balzac, Flaubert and Zola. He is popularly known in world literature because of this phase of writing, as his literary pieces are a realistic representation of Sicilian peasant farmers and their daily struggles with poverty, hunger and injustice. In 1874, his first realist work, *Nedda*, was published. It is the first story that addressed the issues of peasant farmers living in Sicilian society. In one of his best novellas, *Rosso Malpelo*, he narrates the tragic life and death of a young Sicilian miner from an estranged perspective. The incipit of the story leaves the reader deeply puzzled about his new stylistic approach: *He was called Malpelo because he had red hair. And he had red hair because he was a bad, malicious boy, who promised to turn into a first – rate scoundrel. So all of the men at the red – sand quarry called him Malpelo. And even his mother, hearing him called that so often, had almost forgotten the name he was*

baptized by. Instead of offering us a “sentimental” portrayal of the brutally exploited boy, Verga suggests that Malpelo has accepted with a certain pride the way in which he is habitually treated. His realistic approach of writing culminated with the publication of his masterpiece *I Malavoglia* (The House by the Medlar Tree) in 1881. The novel deals with the family of a fisherman who works and lives in Aci Trezza, a small Sicilian village near Catania. It is the heart – wrenching story of the Malavoglia family. In the course of time, the family suffers a series of tragedies which change their lives forever. It's a story of futility and fatalism. It is one of his realist novels which focus on the dangers of social and economic transformation within Sicilian society. The family is compelled to take a gamble to better their situation by getting into debt, but unfortunately, they end up losing their ancestral house and later disintegrating by suffering a series of setbacks. The major theme of the novel is that hard work, human principle and morality do not ensure one's progress and survival in society. Social changes, materialism and political pressures play a major role in determining what happens in one's life.

His new mature style of writing is characterized by a truthful representation of the lower classes in remote and rural areas in which Verga's voice is purposefully absent from the story. Now in this new phase of his literary career, his writing is no longer dominated by idealism, patriotism, themes of love and Romanticism, but by the daily struggle for survival, the life of peasant farmers and fishermen, and a focus on poverty, myth, superstition, the pathetic condition of women and the marginalised class on the slopes of Mount Etna. As Anthony De Vito says in his article “The Struggle of Existence in the Work of Giovanni Verga”, the author managed to include elements of struggle in all his Sicilian works. De Vito writes: ... In his first realistic work “*Nedda*” (1874), Verga had already revolved about the struggle for living. “*Nedda*” was followed by *Vita dei campi* in 1880, *I Malavoglia* in 1881, the *Novelle rusticane* in 1883 and *Per le vie in 1883*. In these stories, the characters, whether peasants of Sicily or burghers of Milan, have to face the realities of life, though the all importance of struggle varies according to Verga's interest in presenting provincial customs and character, as in *Vita dei campi*, or the rise of bourgeoisie, as in *Mastro – don Gesualdo*, or the miseria and the hard life of the people, as in *I Malavoglia* and in the *Novelle rusticane* (179 – 80). In each of his stories Verga was able to represent the daily struggle of his character which allows the readers not only a glimpse into the real life of the characters but also into their struggles which might have been passed over by other authors.

During the life span of Verga, his most important works received very little critical attention because Italian readers were not prepared to identify his radical innovations pursued in his masterpieces. Francesco De Sanctis, the most eminent Italian critic of that period, had completely ignored Verga's literary productions. For a proper appraisal he had to wait until 1919, when Luigi Russo published his first monographic study in which he did a deep comprehensive analysis of Verga's work. Later, Luigi Pirandello, a Sicilian playwright and novelist, described him as *scrittore di cose* (writer of things) in his speech in Catania. Later, Gabriele D'Annunzio contemplated him as a *scrittore di parole* (writer of words). Giovanni Verga died in Catania in 1922 at the age of 82 due to cerebral thrombosis.

Books by Giovanni Verga

Novels

- *Amore e Patria* (Love and Homeland) (1856 – 1857)
- *I carbonari della montagna* (Carbonari of the Mountain) (1861 – 1862)
- *Sulle Lagune* (On the Lagoons) (1862 – 1863)
- *Una Peccatrice* (A Sinner) (1866)
- *Storia di una capinera* (Story of a Blackcap) (1871)
- *Eva* (Eva) (1873)
- *Eros* (Eros) (1875)

- *Tigre reale* (Royal Tiger) (1875)
- *I Malavoglia* (The House by the Medlar – Tree) (1881)
- *Il marito di Elena* (Elena's Husband) (1882)
- *Mastro – don – Gesualdo* (Mastro – don – Gesualdo) (1889)
- *Dal tuo al mio* (From Yours to Mine) (1905)

Collections of Short Story

- *Primavera e altri racconti* (Spring and other Stories) (1877)
- *Vita dei campi* (The Life in the Fields) (1880)
- *Novelle rusticane* (Little Novels of Sicily) (1883)

Plays

- *Cavalleria rusticana* (Rustic Chivalry)
- *In Portineria* (The Door-keeper's Lodge)
- *La Lupa* (The She – Wolf)
- *La Caccia al Lupo*
- *La Caccia alla Volpe*

Adaptations of Verga's works

Cavalleria rusticana (Rustic Chivalry) is his short story published in 1880. Pietro Mascagni adapted this story into a one-act tragedy and it caused a sensation back when it was first performed in Rome in 1890. It was performed over 14,000 times in Italy alone before the death of composer-cum-conductor Pietro Mascagni in 1945. According to Italian Ambassador Giacomo Sanfelice Di Monteforte, this particular opera is regarded one of the classics of realism: *At the time of its debut, it was a spectacular success. Based on a play by Giovanni Verga, the story explores love and jealousy and will certainly be an unforgettable experience for the audience...*

La Terra Trema (The Earth Trembles) is an Italian neorealist film directed by Luchino Visconti. This film is based on his most remarkable novel, *I Malavoglia*. It is considered as one of the essential films of the neorealist movement.

CONCLUSION

Nineteenth Century Italian realism (or *Verismo*) in general and Giovanni Verga's works in particular have received a great deal of critical attention. He, along with his fellow Sicilian Luigi Capuana, was one of the founding father of *Verismo* in Italian Literature. His major realist works include two volumes of short stories, *Vita dei campi* (The Life in the Fields) *Novelle rusticane* (Little Novels of Sicily), and two novels *I Malavoglia* (The House by the Medlar – Tree) and *Mastro – don – Gesualdo* (Mastro – don – Gesualdo). His narratives focus on the lives of the rural lower classes of Sicilianland.

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