

2-10-2009

## Giovanni Verga

Tullio Pagano  
*Dickinson College*

Follow this and additional works at: [http://scholar.dickinson.edu/faculty\\_publications](http://scholar.dickinson.edu/faculty_publications)



Part of the [Italian Language and Literature Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Pagano, Tullio. "Giovanni Verga." In *The Literary Encyclopedia*, edited by Jo Ann Cavallo. Vol. 1.6.1.00, Italian Writing and Culture, 453-present, edited by Carla Bregman and Jo Ann Cavallo. The Literary Dictionary Company Limited, 1998-. (First published 10 February 2009).

This article is brought to you for free and open access by Dickinson Scholar. It has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator. For more information, please contact [scholar@dickinson.edu](mailto:scholar@dickinson.edu).



## Giovanni Verga (1840-1922)

Tullio Pagano (Dickinson College )

Novelist.

Active 1860-1922 in Italy

Giovanni Verga was the most important Italian novelist of the second half of the nineteenth century and one of the masters of modern European literature. However, despite his contribution to the development of the novel, he is still relatively unknown to the English-speaking world. Italian critics generally associate Verga with *verismo*, a movement similar to French Naturalism, even though the Sicilian author always refused to be identified with any particular literary trend. In a letter to his friend and critic Felice Cameroni, written in 1878, Verga explains his poetics in a simple but convincing way: “I have always attempted to be true to life, without being either a realist or an idealist or a Romantic or anything else, and if I erred and did not succeed, too bad for me, but such was always my intention” (*Giovanni Verga*, 47).

Verga was born in Catania, a town on the eastern shore of Sicily, in 1840. His family owned large estates around the city, one of the most fertile and prosperous areas in southern Italy. Although Verga traveled widely throughout the peninsula and lived for long periods in Florence and Milan, he eventually returned to his native island, which inspired some of his best works. During his adolescence Verga was actively involved with the movement of *Risorgimento*, which culminated in 1860 with the unification of Italy. His most influential teacher, Antonino Abate, encouraged him to pursue writing and taught him the importance of fighting for Italian independence. When he was only sixteen he wrote his first book, *Amore e patria* (Love and Country) – which he never wanted to publish – dealing with the American Revolution. At the age of twenty, when Garibaldi landed in Sicily and led his troops to the conquest of southern Italy, Verga joined the National Guard. Immediately thereafter he published his first novel, entitled *I Carbonari della montagna* (The Mountain Carbonari), based on the struggle for Italian unification. His early works, including *Sulle lagune* (On the Lagoon), written while he was still living in Sicily, may be characterized as romantic. They portray upper-class and aristocratic characters, often trapped in passionate and usually impossible relationships, set against the background of the *Risorgimento*. Determined to become a writer, Verga abandoned his law studies at the University of Catania in 1869 and left for Florence, which was at that time Italy’s capital and one of its major cultural centers.

In 1866 he wrote *Una peccatrice* (A Sinner), another story of passionate love and death. In this novel, however, love turns out to be a false illusion, which cannot withstand the social and economic pressures of post-unification Italy. Pietro Brusio admits to his lover that their romantic relationship can no longer continue since they are not rich. The theme of money appears for the first time in Verga’s work, and it will be destined to play a major role in his later, more mature fiction. In Florence the young and ambitious author became friends

with some of the leading Italian intellectuals, who encouraged him to continue writing. Verga's first successful book was *Storia di una capinera* (Story of a Blackcap), an epistolary novel whose main protagonist is Maria, another tragic female figure. The girl is forced by her family to become a nun and forsake her secret love for Nino, who is engaged to her step-sister. Torn between a profound love and respect for her father and her insuppressible passion for Nino, Maria chooses to be silent and accepts the future that her family has chosen for her. Eventually she goes insane, and finally dies in the cell of the monastery where she had been secluded. The work was first published by Lampugnani in 1871, with an introduction by Caterina Percoto, a very important literary figure at that time, and two years later by Fratelli Treves, Italy's most prestigious publishing house.

In 1872, after gaining a certain reputation as a writer, Verga decided to move to Milan, where he came into contact with members of the Italian avant-garde movement, the so-called *Scapigliati*. Although he never fully identified with their poetics, through them the Sicilian author became more closely acquainted with the major European literary and artistic trends of the time. Verga's fiction was rapidly shifting away from the tragically romantic figures of the Risorgimento to a more realistic and often critical representation of the prosaic life of post-unification Italy. The male protagonists of the first novels he wrote in Milan, such as *Eros* (1875) and *Eva* (1873), are a far cry from the heroes of his earlier works. *Eva*'s famous preface reads as a strong denunciation of the current status of art and literature in contemporary society, which appears to be too focused on economic issues and no longer concerned with the ideals that had characterized the Risorgimento. As the novelist writes in the introduction, the most important element is the sincerity and veracity of the story, not its moral message: "Here is a narrative; it does not matter whether it is a story or a dream; what matters is that it is true, as it happened, or it may have happened, without rhetoric and free of hypocrisy" (*Giovanni Verga*, 21). Verga's new emphasis on true facts, or "faits divers", may be interpreted as the result of his first encounter with French Naturalism, whose theories and fictions were having a great impact on Italian readers and critics, especially in Milan, where Verga was residing.

In his path toward a more critical realism – or *verismo* – Verga was influenced by the works of Gustave Flaubert and Emile Zola, whose names began to appear more and more frequently in his epistolary. The latter's colossal narrative enterprise, entitled *Les Rougon-Macquart*, was very well received by progressive Italian writers and critics, most of whom lived and worked in Milan. Verga's interest in Zola and other French Naturalist authors did not focus as much on the subject matter of their works as on their innovative use of free indirect style. This narrative technique challenged the traditional boundary between the narrator's voice and that of the characters, thus creating a multivoiced text where the author is no longer at the center. According to Flaubert, the modern novelist should strive to remain hidden, like God in his creation. This approach entailed the "eclipse", as Verga would have it, of the authorial figure from the text. The traditional realist narrator *à la* Manzoni, who frequently intervened to comment on the protagonists and the events, guiding the reader toward a "correct" interpretation, was being rejected, to be replaced by an "impersonal narrator", whose reliability was constantly put into question. The book that influenced Verga the most in this regard was the seventh of Zola's narrative cycle, *L'Assommoir*, published in 1877, where the French writer successfully managed to give a representation of the Parisian working classes from within, reproducing not only their language but also their world views.

Giovanni Verga appropriated Zola's model and further developed it in his subsequent novels and short stories. But whereas French Naturalist writers often focused on the dramas of working-class individuals and families living in modern industrialized cities, Verga and other *verists* concentrated on rather remote and rural areas, such as Sicily. In one of his best novellas, *Rosso Malpelo*, Verga narrates the tragic life and death of a young Sicilian miner from an "estranged" perspective, which coincides with the world view of the protagonist and his fellow workers. The absence of a "bourgeois", external narrator who "mediates" the events and comments on them caused a profound shock among contemporary readers. Even today, the *incipit* of the story leaves the reader deeply puzzled about the stylistic approach adopted by Verga: "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 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” (*The She Wolf and Other Stories*, 65; translations are slightly changed). 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:

Knowing that he was Malpelo, he was prepared to be as bad as he could be, and if an accident occurred, or if a workman mislaid his tools, or a donkey broke a leg, or part of the tunnel fell in, they always knew it was his doing. And in fact he took all the blows without complaining, just like the donkeys, which take them and arch their backs but go on doing things in their own way. (*The She Wolf and Other Stories*, 70).

Verga continued to experiment with his estranged, “popular” narrator in subsequent works, in particular *I Malavoglia*, which is generally considered his masterpiece. The novel depicts the tragic decline of a Sicilian family of fishermen in the years immediately following Italian unification. The patriarch of the family, Padron ‘Ntoni, is portrayed as a mythical figure, whose downfall symbolizes the end of a pre-capitalist society in which people lived within the narrow limits of their own village and did not question the traditional wisdom they had inherited from their ancestors. The novel was conceived by Verga as the first work of a narrative cycle, entitled *I Vinti* (The Vanquished), which was to comprise five volumes. As we read in the preface, the author wanted to show

how the first anxious desires of material well-being must probably originate and develop in the humblest social conditions, and the perturbations caused in a family, which had until then lived in relative happiness, by the vague yearning for the unknown and by the realization that they are not so well off or that they could indeed be better off. (*The House by the Medlar Tree*, 3).

In the same pages, Verga describes human progress as a “tidal wave” that unavoidably submerges those who try to ride it. From a distance, the “spectacle” of economic and social development may seem grandiose, but when it is observed closely its pettiness becomes more evident. Verga’s outlook resembles Walter Benjamin’s angel of history, evoked in his *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, whose wings are caught by the great storm of progress which “irresistibly propels him into the future” (*Illuminations*, 258). While Benjamin’s allegorical angel cannot help looking back at the debris that the storm keeps piling up at his feet, Verga’s narrator is “swept along by the flood” like everyone else. He looks around at those who “fall by the wayside” and the “doomed who raise their arms in despair and bend their heads under the brutal steps of those who are pressing on—the victors of today, who are also in a hurry and eager to arrive and who themselves will be overtaken tomorrow” (*The House by the Medlar Tree*, 5).

Verga was articulating this tragic vision of progress in 1881, while living in Milan, when northern Italy was experiencing its first economic boom caused by the industrial revolution. However, his pessimistic viewpoint and original narrative techniques made it difficult for him to achieve the public success he was hoping for. Nonetheless, he remained steady in the path he had chosen to take, and continued to experiment with stylistic innovations in his short stories. His first collection, entitled *Vita dei campi*, had been published in 1880, shortly before *I Malavoglia*, and a second volume, *Novelle rusticane*, came out in 1883. These stories contained themes and characters that Verga would later develop in the second novel of his narrative cycle, *Mastro-Don Gesualdo* (1889), whose eponymous protagonist embodies the next step toward the ultimately illusory objective of social advancement. This work is a tale of alienation and reification: Gesualdo Motta is an ambitious, hard-working man devoted solely to the accumulation of wealth. In order to succeed economically, however, he forsakes every human feeling and ultimately finds himself isolated and unable to communicate with his loved ones, including his beloved daughter, Isabella. Having married a Sicilian aristocrat, she desperately tries to distance herself from the rather coarse manners of her father, who belongs to a lower social class. Isabella was to become the main protagonist of the third novel of Verga’s cycle, tentatively entitled *La duchessa di Leyra* (The Duchess of Leyra), but the author managed to complete only one chapter. The other two works, *L’onorevole*

*Scipioni* (The Honorable Scipioni) and *L'uomo di lusso* (The Luxury Man), which would deal, respectively, with the world of politics and the arts, were never begun.

Critics have given many explanations as to why Giovanni Verga never completed his narrative cycle. The author was undoubtedly disappointed with the poor reception of the first two novels in the series. The contemporary reading public appeared to be more interested in other, more psychologically-oriented authors, such as Antonio Fogazzaro, whose first work, *Malombra*, was published in 1881, as was *I Malavoglia*. Gabriele D'Annunzio's first and much-acclaimed decadent novel *Il piacere* (The Child of Pleasure) came out the same year as *Mastro-Don Gesualdo*, in 1889. Diminished financial resources and family problems forced Verga to leave Milan in 1894 and resettle permanently in Sicily, where he isolated himself from literary circles and became more involved with the management of his properties. In 1896 he published a new collection of short stories, *Don Candeloro & Co*. The two most important narratives in the volume focus on Don Candeloro, a weary and disenchanted puppeteer who resembles the author himself. The metaphor of "talking puppets" allows Verga to make interesting reflections on the theme of the mask and the relationship between illusion and reality, which will be further developed by Luigi Pirandello.

Even though Verga was never particularly attracted by theater – which he considered inferior to fiction –, he also wrote several plays, based on his short stories and novels. His most acclaimed theatrical work was *Cavalleria rusticana*, adapted from the homonymous novella published in the volume *Vita dei campi*. A few years later Verga's text was turned into an opera by the Italian composer Pietro Mascagni. His *Cavalleria Rusticana*, first performed in 1890, was enormously successful both in Italy and abroad, but contributed, in its subsequent adaptations as theater and opera, to a deformed representation of the Sicilian author's work: opera and theater spectators loved to see tales of passion, betrayal and vengeance, which confirmed their stereotypical image of his native island. Another successful play by Verga was *La lupa* (The She-wolf), also taken from a story in *Vita dei campi*, which further reinforced the beliefs that the Northern bourgeois public had formed about Sicilian culture and the South in general, perceived as a land of wild passions and uncontrollable sexuality.

While Verga was still alive, his most important works received very little critical attention, since the Italian public was not prepared for the radical innovations that he pursued in his masterpieces. Francesco De Sanctis, Italy's most eminent critic during that period, who had written an influential essay on Zola's *L'Assommoir*, completely ignored Giovanni Verga's literary production. A proper assessment had to wait until 1919, when Luigi Russo's first monographic study was finally published, providing an in-depth, comprehensive analysis of Verga's work. A year later, the great Sicilian novelist and playwright Luigi Pirandello gave a speech in Catania to commemorate the author's 80<sup>th</sup> birthday in which he described Verga as a "scrittore di cose" (writer of things), and juxtaposed him to other, more fashionable authors such as Gabriele D'Annunzio, considered a "scrittore di parole" (writer of words). However, in a period of rampant nationalism, which saw the rise of Mussolini's dictatorship (1922-43), heroic subject matter and flamboyant style continued to dominate the literary scene. Verga's pessimistic outlook, combined with his *pietas* for those vanquished by the "tidal wave" of progress, could not but clash with the demagoguery of Fascism and its expansionist politics. Giovanni Verga died in his native town in 1922, at the age of 82.

With a few important exceptions, during Mussolini's absolute rule Verga's work was almost totally disregarded. With the fall of Fascism, writers and filmmakers associated with the movement of Neorealism began to look at Verga's fiction as a source of inspiration. Luchino Visconti's filmic adaptation of *I Malavoglia* marked the beginning of a new phase. Whereas in Verga's novel the rebellious protagonist Ntoni Malavoglia is forced into a humiliating exile from his native village, in Visconti's film he becomes a proletarian hero who remains defiantly attached to his land. Despite Verga's conservative ideology, his narrative was interpreted by progressive and Marxist critics as an important example of critical realism. In his seminal book *Scrittori e popolo* (1965), Alberto Asor Rosa argued that Verga's disenchanted representation of the working classes was

more effective and true to the subject than the rather shallow “populist” ideology often displayed by contemporary Italian writers. Giovanni Verga’s fiction began to be carefully examined and debated by the best literary critics, and the Sicilian author eventually achieved the recognition that he deserves, becoming known as a literary “case” study (*Il caso Verga*). Today, Verga’s texts are widely studied in Italian schools and universities and continue to be translated into many languages. The Fondazione Giovanni Verga, based in Catania, is in the process of publishing a critical edition of his entire literary corpus, and organizes international symposia devoted to Giovanni Verga and Naturalism.

### Works Cited

Giovanni Verga. *The House by the Medlar Tree*. Translated by Raymond Rosenthal. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1964.

\_\_\_\_\_. *The She Wolf and Other Stories*. Translated by Giovanni Cecchetti. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1973. Translations are slightly changed.

Walter Benjamin. *Illuminations*. Translated by Harry Zohn. New York: Schocken Books, 1969.

Alberto Asor Rosa, editor. *Il caso Verga*. Palermo: Palumbo, 1972

**Citation:** Pagano, Tullio. "Giovanni Verga". *The Literary Encyclopedia*. 10 February 2009. [http://www.litencyc.com/php/speople.php?rec=true&UID=4535, accessed 1 May 2015.]

This article is copyright to © [The Literary Encyclopedia](#).

All entries, data and software copyright © The Literary Dictionary Company Limited

ISSN 1747-678X