

GRAZIA DELEDDA
(1871-1936)

This month's essay looks at a famous Italian author who focused her writing on her homeland...Sardinia...and sought to depict a realistic picture of the life of the poor peasants of the remote towns in this southern island of Italy. She maintained a strict writing schedule throughout her life: she started her day with a late breakfast, several hours of reading, followed by a rest period after lunch. Then, she proceeded to write later in the day for 2-3 hours, making sure that she produced at least 4 handwritten pages each day. This pattern took place seven days a week, year after year. She was a quiet and reserved woman, who did not speak much. She enjoyed friendly, intimate talk and traditional feasts and celebrations, but not political debates, serious discussions, parties, or haute society. Yet, in her quiet way, she was gathering the material for her books, listening and observing intently. The prodigious output of this "research" and her writing regimen was over 30 novels and about 400 short stories, most of which were collected into nineteen books. She also wrote poetry, essays, theatrical works, stories for children, articles on folklore, and a translation of Balzac's Eugénie Grandet. Ultimately these works and their overall themes resulted in her winning the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1926. (The first Nobel Prize in Literature was awarded in 1901). She is the second Italian author to win that prestigious award (Giosuè Carducci, who was the subject of one of my earlier essays, was the first, in 1906). Deledda was the second woman to win the award (the first was Selma Lagerlöf from Sweden in 1909), and the only Italian woman to have ever received it. The citation accompanying her award serves to indicate the themes the world saw in her writings: "For her idealistically inspired writings, which with plastic clarity picture the life on her native island and with depth and sympathy deal with human problems in general."



GRAZIA MARIA COSIMA DAMIANA DELEDDA was born in Nuoro, Sardinia, on September 28, 1871. Sardinian villages were isolated from one another, and this was particularly true of the town of Nuoro, which stood on high ground at the foot of Monte Ortobene and the surrounding Barbagia area in the mountainous and once thickly wooded center of the island. Her father, Giovanni Antonio Deledda, was a middle class, fairly well-to-do landowner who farmed his own land.

Her childhood circumstances were fortunate and favorable for the development of her writing genius. Her family home in Nuoro, facing the majestic mountain and overlooking a vast

valley, was located along the pathway of many travelers, who often stayed for a time at the house. Her home, dominated by a large kitchen with a smoking fireplace in the middle, was a center of storytelling, including tales of various encounters with fate, crime, tragedy, and romance. A well-behaved and quiet girl among more troublesome brothers and sisters (she had six siblings), Grazia was often ignored by her busy mother, Francesca Cambosu Deledda, and was left to her own devices. The young girl kept close to her father and took pleasure in listening to and observing his many guests. These encounters allowed her to meet and understand the people who would become types of characters in her future writings. (Her father was himself a book lover and a poet, who once founded a printing office to publish a small newspaper and his own poems).

Sardinia has a language of its own, Sardo, with many dialects. Thus, Grazia's native language was not standard Italian but the Italian dialect *Logudorese Sardo*. She grew up with Sardinian legends, folklore, and native customs that preserved cultural traits and themes from antiquity. It was for these cultural ties even more than its ancient history that led her to call her dear Nuoro "a Bronze-Age village." Its geographic location also explains another peculiar fact: this girl living on the island of Sardinia never saw the sea during her childhood years.

Grazia was born about the time of the first anniversary of the unification of Italy, when learning the Italian language became required in all schools. Her only formal education was four years at an elementary school in Nuoro. Thus, going to school and learning to read and write in Italian meant learning a "foreign" language, the language of a distant Italy, which was a language much different from the spoken idiom of her native Sardinia. (Yet, despite her limited formal schooling in Italian, it was to be the language in which she produced all of her written works. She became, as it were, a master writer in a foreign language).

Like the lives of most peasants, Grazia's life had its hardships. In her childhood, bandits (homeless outlaws and vagabonds) flourished in the Barbagia region. The stories of their



adventures, crimes, and misfortunes filled the minds of the children both with excitement and courage, but also with terror. She was nine years old when she received a mouflon for Christmas, the shorthaired grayish-brown or russet wild sheep native to Sardinia and



Corsica. It was brought to her by her *compare* (godfather), Francesco Satta, from Olzai. She related later how she thought that this was the best Christmas gift she had ever received.

That winter was the hardest in living memory. Satta appeared with the mouflon in his arms. He had been robbed by bandits, who had taken his horse and his winter clothes, including his sheepskin coat. He was frostbitten, but he was alive; and he was elated because he had retrieved the wild mouflon, which had run away when he was attacked.

That winter, the snow was unusually deep. Many people in the neighborhood starved or froze to death in the terrible spell of cold, and Grazia internalized the human suffering of that winter, and said it never left her as she later wrote about the peasants' struggle against harsh weather conditions. Families flocked together by the fireplaces in their kitchen; death took its toll in the Deledda home, too. Grazia's little sister Giovanna, three years younger than herself, was found dead one day in her bed. Grazia always remembered her as the most beautiful of her sisters. There is no reason to doubt that Grazia's dear Christmas gift was consumed out of necessity.



Following her four-year formal education, she was tutored privately by an elementary school teacher at home. He gave her a number of themes to write about and she improved her writing ability using these exercises. Some of these pieces were very good, and her tutor encouraged her to publish them in a newspaper. However, she did not know where to send her essays, so she procrastinated in publishing them. Finally, when she was 13 years old, she came across a fashion magazine, *L'Ultima Moda (The Latest Fashion)* that looked like a possible publisher for one of her essays. She sent the editor one of her short stories, and to her delight, "*Sangue Sardo*" (*Sardinian Blood*) was immediately published. The story was about a girl like Grazia,

involved in a love triangle and its jealousies. Set by the sea, the story ends in murder when the protagonist Ela pushes her sister's lover off the cliffs.

This short story was followed by several others that were published in local magazines and newspapers. Being a published writer of love stories as a teenager, Grazia found more infamy than fame in her village. Suspicion and rumors followed her. Her mother was verbally attacked for being an irresponsible parent; village women burned a magazine and shouted their reproaches. To deflect the shock and anger engendered by her fiction, she began publishing under various pseudonyms, such as G. Razia and Grazia Madesani, when she was published in local publications.

In 1892, she sent one of her novels, *Fior di Sardegna* (*Flower of Sardinia*) to an editor in Rome. He published it and with the widespread popularity of this first published novel, her life as a successful Italian writer was born.

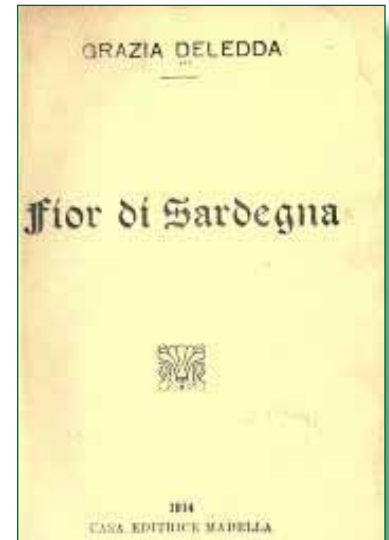
In 1899, she took her first trip outside of Nuoro, visiting the Sardinian capital of Cagliari. While she was there, she fell in love with Palmiro Madesani, a bureaucrat in the Ministry of War. She married him in 1900, and moved permanently to Rome. After her marriage and moving to Rome, Deledda led something of a dual life. A shy and retiring woman by nature—the opposite of her tempestuous siblings—in Rome she was both a homemaker dedicated

to raising a family and a successful writer. She and Madesani had two sons: Sardus (ca. 1901- ca. 1938) and Franz (ca. 1905- ca. 1981). [Deledda with her two sons, left.]



In 1903, she published her novel, *Elias Portolú*. Its publication brought her, for the first time, international fame and critical acclaim. It was first translated by the *Revue des Deux Mondes* (*Review of Two Worlds*) into French,

followed by translations into most European languages. The novel is about Elias Portolú who returns home to Nuoro after serving prison time in mainland Italy for a minor theft. Lonely and vulnerable after his prison exile, he falls in love with his brother's fiancée. But he finds himself trapped by social and religious strictures, his passion and guilt winding into a spiral of anguish and paralyzing indecision. For guidance he turns first to the village priest, who advises him to resist temptation. Not satisfied with this advice, he turns to the pagan “father of the woods,” who recognizes the weakness of human will and urges him to declare his love before it is too late. The novel is typical of her preoccupation with the notion of transgression, and with fatally flawed characters that are torn between hope and despair, right and wrong, sin and redemption in their lives in Sardinia.



NOBEL PRIZE IN LITERATURE

Although the Nobel Prize in Literature was awarded to Deledda for her complete body of work up to 1926, her international notoriety was based on several important novels. In addition to *Elias Portolú* (1903), her other most notable novels written prior to 1926 were:

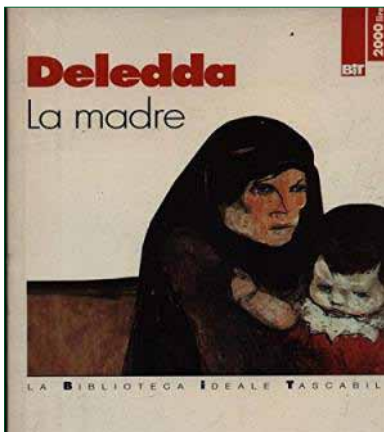
Dopo il Divorzio (*After the Divorce*, 1902), is set in Sardinia, where Constantino Ledda is convicted on charges of murdering his evil uncle. He is innocent, but he accepts the verdict because of his wife Giovanna. After Constantino is convicted, Giovanna has no economic means to support her family, so she divorces her husband and marries again with a wealthy but cruel landowner. Constantino is released after the real killer confesses, and he and Giovanna start a forbidden romance.



Cenere (*Ashes*, novel 1904; [1916 silent film](#) starring Eleonora Duse *[left]*, the famous Italian stage star in her only film appearance) is the story of Oli, a Sardinian unwed mother who is forced by poverty to abandon her only child. Raised by his natural father, Ananias eventually attains social acceptability in the legal profession yet cannot give up his obsessive search for his mother. When Oli realizes that public knowledge of her life in prostitution will jeopardize her son's impending marriage and professional success, she makes the ultimate maternal sacrifice to ensure his future. Deledda's novel explores the themes of filial duty, hypocritical societal expectations, the ravages of poverty, and maternal devotion. She interweaves into the novel leitmotifs of Sardinian

folklore, health issues, banditry, illegitimacy, prostitution, and the social mores of the late 19th century with all the attendant public opprobrium.

Canneal Vento (*Reeds in the Wind*, 1913), which tells the story of the three Pintor sisters, impoverished noblewomen who are looked after and whose small farm is tended by their devoted servant, Efix. For his own part, Efix has a sin to atone for: the murder of the Pintor sisters' father. Into this climate of stasis comes the sisters' ne'er-do-well nephew Giacinto, the son of a fourth sister who fled from her stifling family culture years before. Giacinto brings chaos, destruction, and change from the outer world, penetrating the calm of the insulated family and their acquaintances while Efix, as protector, watches, powerless to help. The novel shows clearly how Deledda combined strands of realism and naturalism, in doing so portraying not only the people of her time but their religious beliefs and practices as well as their mythic—if not pagan—superstitions.



La Madre (*The Mother*, 1920; published in English as *The Woman and the Priest*, 1922; also published in English as *The Mother* with an introduction by D. H. Lawrence, 1923) is considered by many critics her best novel. The mother, Maddalena, discovers—after following him cautiously—that her son Paulo, a young and venerated parish priest of the village of Aar, has entered the house of Agnese, a girl without relatives. The mother has always protected her son, even pushing him into the priesthood. Now, seeing him fall, she exclaims: “Why Lord, why?” She did not dare to finish the question,

but the question keeps gnawing away at her, “Why is he not allowed to love a woman? Everyone can love...only he could not love?” The mother suffers, fights against the sin of her son and, nevertheless, tends to justify it, perhaps blinded by the spirit of the previous parish priest, who was said to have gone mad possessed by vice and the devil. Helped by his mother, Paulo manages to overcome the temptation by renouncing Agnese’s pretensions. The young woman does not resign herself to letting him go so easily, but threatens to announce the scandal in the church. The next morning, when Paulo sees Agnese from the altar, he feels that his guilt is transformed into humble resignation: if the scandal must punish him, it will be the just atonement for his fault. But Agnese, arriving at the altar, kneels and is silent. Meanwhile, the mother, who cannot stand the tension and anguish of seeing her son defamed, dies in the back of the church.

In these and others of her more than 40 novels, Deledda often used Sardinia’s landscape as a metaphor for the difficulties in her characters’ lives. The ancient ways of Sardinia often conflict with modern mores and her characters are forced to work out solutions to their moral issues.

When she was informed that she had won the Nobel Prize, the unassuming woman said simply, “Già!” (“Already!”), and went directly to her office to continue her regular writing schedule. Arriving in Stockholm to receive the award, the scene was not as tranquil as it had been in her house in Rome. She was fascinated by Stockholm, as her letters home to her family indicated, but she was also amazed at being surrounded by dignitaries, royalty, ambassadors, and ministers of state. However, she did not let all the pomp and celebration go to her head; she remained unassuming as always. At the actual ceremony, she was introduced by the Swedish literary historian, Henrik Schück (who had nominated her for the award), who solemnly praised her in a long and incomprehensible speech (in Swedish, a language she did not understand). When she heard her name announced, she knew she was supposed to rise and approach the king to receive the prize. She then delivered one of the shortest acceptance speeches in the history of the Nobel ceremonies. Even in this great moment in her life, she remained reserved and unpretentious.

Returning to Italy after the ceremony, publicity and public attention were harder to face as the turmoil of Italy and Italian politics took over from the festivities of the ceremony and sightseeing. Mussolini, who had recently come to power, wanted to profit from Deledda's fame. She felt compelled to participate in an embarrassing ceremony where the mark of honor awarded to her was a portrait of Mussolini with a dedication that Il Duce proudly read aloud to the audience: "For Grazia Deledda with profound admiration from Benito Mussolini." Privately, she referred to these Fascist festivities as a farce, alien to her nature; but they appeared to her to be inescapable, the price of fame. She certainly held no affection or loyalty for Mussolini and his Fascist movement.

Grazia Deledda lived another ten years after receiving the Nobel Prize, years marked by a painful and slowly spreading breast cancer. But she continued to follow the same daily writing schedule that she had followed her entire life, and published a number of works. Some of these later works are: *La Casa del Poeta (The Poet's House, 1930)* and *Sole d'Estate (Summer Sun, 1933)*, both collections of short stories that reflect her optimistic vision of life even during the most painful years of her incurable illness. Life remains beautiful and serene, unaltered by personal suffering; mankind and nature are reconciled in order to overcome physical and spiritual hardship.

In many of her later works, she combined the imaginary and the autobiographical; this blend is readily apparent in her novel, *Il Paese del Vento (Land of the Wind, 1931)*. In another novel, *L'Argine (The Embankment, 1934)*, the renunciation of worldly things, including love, mirrors her own life with its acceptance of self-sacrifice as a higher manner of living, and through this is reconciled with God. Her final published novel, *La Chiesa della Solitudine (The Church of Solitude, 1936)*, is a semi-autobiographical depiction of a young Italian woman, Maria Concezion, coming to terms with her breast cancer. The common trait of all her later writings is a constant faith in mankind and in God.



Grazia Deledda died on August 15, 1936. For her burial, she was shrouded in the maroon velvet dress she had worn during the Nobel festivities in Stockholm ten years earlier. In a quiet spot at the foot of Monte Ortobene, close to her home in Nuoro, a memorial church was built, named after her book *La Chiesa della Solitudine (The Church of Solitude, 1936)*. There, under the shadow of the trees she passed on her many excursions uphill, is the lonely Tomba Deleddiana.



Even after her death, she seemed to continue to produce books. In a drawer there was found the carefully stored manuscript of the novel *Cosima*, written in ink on light-blue paper. The book was published posthumously in 1937. Its heroine was named after the author herself, whose middle name was Cosima, and the semi-autobiographical tale tells of Deledda's early life until her first trip by train, to the capital Cagliari in southern Sardinia on October 21, 1899.

ANALYSIS

The life, customs, and traditions of the Sardinian people were prominent in the writing of Grazia Deledda. She relied heavily on geographical description and details, and her work was most often concerned with transgressions. Many of her characters were social outcasts who struggle in silence and isolation. Deledda's whole work was based on strong facts of love, pain and death upon which rested the feeling of sin and of an inevitable fatality.

In her novels there was always a strong connection between places and people, feelings and environment. The environment depicted was mostly the harsh one of her native Sardinia, but it was relived not through realistic analysis but often through the imagination of Sardinian myths.

Deledda has not gained much recognition as a feminist writer due to her themes of women's pain and suffering rather than themes of women's autonomy. ❖

Adapted by James J. Boitano, PhD from: Encyclopedia Britannica website; Encyclopedia of World Biography website; Frenz, Horst, ed. "Grazia Deledda" in Nobel Lectures, Literature 1901-1967. Amsterdam: Elsevier Publishing Company, 1969; Hallengren, Anders. "Grazia Deledda: Voice of Sardinia." Nobel Prize website, 2002; Kern, Margaret. "Deledda, Grazia (1871-1936)." Italian Women Writers. Chicago: University of Chicago Library, 2002; Wikipedia.

BONUS: [Grazia Deledda in Stockholm \(45 sec\).](#)

<https://www.nobelprize.org/mediaplayer/index.php?id=1028>



Please welcome our newest members:

ROMANA BRACCO, SAN FRANCISCO, CA; SPONSORED BY RON DERENZI

**Romana was Il Cenacolo's Woman of the Year in 2011.
Her undergraduate studies were at St. Peter's College in New Jersey.
She held a managerial position with Alitalia Airlines for 25 years,
and married Cenacolista John Bracco in 1992.
She is known to continuously give back to the Italian American community,
and generously supports several charitable organizations in the City.**

MARIE DERENZI, S. SAN FRANCISCO, CA; SPONSORED RON DERENZI

Marie has a BA from San Jose State University with a Secondary Teaching Credential.

"My husband Ron has been a member of Il Cenacolo for 40 years. I have helped him on many functions, and feel I have been a member for years myself!!"

LEANNA C. GIANNINI, HILLSBOROUGH, CA; SPONSORED BY DAVID T. GIANNINI

**Leanna holds a JD from the University of Santa Clara; an AB in History, Italian & Humanities, and an MA in Education from Stanford University.
She is a teacher of Italian at St. Catherine of Siena School in Burlingame,
and an attorney at law.**

"I have a lifetime of devotion to Italian language and culture, a 40-year attendance and participation in San Francisco Opera and San Jose Opera, and I also have been attending Il Cenacolo events for over 40 years."

BILL R. MASTRANGELO, SAN FRANCISCO; SPONSORED BY RON DERENZI

**Bill holds a Degree of Science in Mechanical Engineering from Purdue University,
and is currently the Senior Director of Sales for Salesforce.**

*"I am interested in keeping the connection to the Italian culture. My family immigrated here and we lost some of that in the process of becoming citizens.
I am looking forward to joining Il Cenacolo."*

LISA MARIE MICHELIS, SAN FRANCISCO, CA; SPONSORED BY DAVID T. GIANNINI

Lisa is a San Franciscan native, and holds a BS in Business Administration. She currently is the Event Planner for the San Francisco Italian Athletic Club.

“I want to support organizations that represent my Italian heritage and support Italian causes.”

SUSAN D. PETERSON, SAN FRANCISCO, CA; SPONSORED BY CHUCK STAGLIANO

Susan holds a BA from UC Berkeley, and a graduate degree, CA Lifetime Teaching Credential, also from UC Berkeley.

“Since my first of many trips to Italy in 1966, I have been completely enamored of the country, its people, history, arts and culture. In the 80’s I began studying Italian at San Francisco Community College and regularly began attending the San Francisco Opera. I am a longtime member of Museo Italo Americano, as well as a longtime season-ticket holder and patron of the San Francisco Opera.”

ANNA MARIA PIERINI, SAN FRANCISCO, CA; SPONSORED BY DAVID T. GIANNINI

Anna Maria is the Executive Director of the Italian Community Services, and Il Cenacolo’s Woman of the Year 2017.

She holds a BA from Dominican College in San Rafael, and a Master of Human Resources and Organization Development from University of San Francisco.

“I respect the Il Cenacolo mission and was cordially invited to join by David T. Giannini.”

TERRI RYAN, SAN FRANCISCO, CA; SPONSORED BY BOB RYAN

Terri is a retired Project Manager for Wells Fargo Bank.

“I love Italy and Italian culture. I have come to Thursday lunches frequently as my husband’s guest and I find the group to be very congenial.”
