

UCLA

Carte Italiane

Title

Grazia Deledda's *L'incendio nell'oliveta*: Rebellion or Disease?

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/766174dx>

Journal

Carte Italiane, 1(8)

ISSN

0737-9412

Author

Magistro, Elise

Publication Date

1987

DOI

10.5070/C918011257

Peer reviewed

L'incendio nell'oliveto:
Rebellion or Disease?

While Grazia Deledda is most often dismissed as a regional writer, a lesser Verga of sorts, a study of the author's mature works (1900–1936) reveals that Deledda was not as removed from the literary influences of her day as has often been suggested. On the contrary, individual alienation from society, rebellion against traditional norms, and the problems of evil and suffering as unavoidable, integral elements of a dynamic universal mechanism, constitute the core of the moral problematic in Deledda's narrative. In this respect the Nuorese writer's art, though never deviating from a uniquely Sardinian inspiration, is indeed modern and surprisingly similar to that of her contemporaries in its attempt to deal with issues of a conflicting ethical and moral nature.

In his book, *Literary Diseases*, Gian Paolo Biasin examines the motif of disease in nineteenth and twentieth century Italian literature, suggesting among other things that “an analysis of the theme of disease is a valid instrument for tracing the very precise emergence and development of social consciousness in Italian literature, along with the related problem of marginality.”¹ Though Deledda is not mentioned by Biasin in his study of Verga, Svevo, Pirandello, and Gadda, her interest in the literary motif of disease and social marginality predates, in some instances, that of her better known contemporaries.²

In *Colombi e sparvieri* (1912) for instance, Deledda confronted the psychosomatic manifestations of disease in the nervous paralysis of her protagonist, Jorgi Nieddu. Jorgi's paralysis is the result of a crisis of conscience, a reflection of his psychological immobility and his inability to fully break with a past which he claims to have rejected. *L'incendio nell'oliveto* (1917) demonstrates even more clearly Deledda's interest in adapting her narrative formula of sin-remorse-expiation and her fundamentally veristic themes (personal interest, material security, religion of the family, sanctity of tradition) to the modern metaphor of disease as an existential condition.

The plot of the novel revolves around the respected yet financially struggling Marini family. The main characters include the grandmother, Agostina; her daughter-in-law Nina; Agostina's grandchildren Annarosa and Agostino; and Agostina's only surviving son, Juanniccu. In arranging an economically crucial marriage for Annarosa, the family has set its sight on a well-to-do cousin of Annarosa's, Stefano Mura. Annarosa, however, is in love with a poor student, Gioele Sanna, who returns periodically to the village from Nuoro.

Agostina convinces her granddaughter to accept Stefano's proposal of marriage in the best interests of the family's financial future. Unbeknownst to all but Juanniccu, Nina has fallen in love with Stefano and subsequently resigns herself to the fact that he will marry instead her step-daughter. During the engagement dinner Juanniccu reveals the true sentiments of both Annarosa and Nina. Agostina and her grandson succeed in convincing all present that Juanniccu is simply half crazed and inebriated, understanding all the while that he must be silenced if the marriage proposal is to be salvaged.

Agostino takes his uncle to a remote farmhouse in the midst of the family owned olive groves where he beats and imprisons him until the marriage can take place. Upon learning of her brother's actions, Annarosa calls off the engagement but not soon enough to save her doomed uncle. Juanniccu sets fire to the farmhouse in which he is being held; the flames consume both him and the precious olive groves, the family's source of economic survival. Out of guilt over her uncle's death and in the face of imminent rejection by her ailing grandmother, Annarosa consents to marry Stefano in the final scene of the novel.

While the events in *L'incendio nell'oliveto* revolve around the economic necessity of a marriage between Annarosa and a wealthy individual whom she does not love, it is clear from the opening paragraphs that the central figures in the drama are two diametrically opposed and relatively sick individuals: the paralyzed octogenerian Agostina Marini, and her aging son, the alcoholic day-dreamer Juanniccu. All other significant characters in the novel can either be correlated or juxtaposed to Agostina and Juanniccu, suggesting that Deledda, in presenting two different interpretations of disease, is ambivalent, a "marginal" figure herself caught between the fundamental dialectics which permeate the novel: conformity or rebellion; faith or betrayal.³

In an extremely pertinent passage from an essay by Moravia which Biasin quotes can be found "in nuce" the problem of disease as presented by Deledda in *L'incendio nell'oliveto*.

Is disease, by creating diversity and modifying one's relation to the world, at the origin of an attitude of revolt? Or is the attitude of revolt, when it becomes impotent, the one that provokes disease? I believe in the former hypothesis. But with one correction. Disease and revolt are the same thing seen according to two different types of optics: for the 'righteous' man, revolt is disease; for the rebellious, disease is revolt.⁴

Agostina Marini is this type of righteous individual, an iron-handed matriarch and consummate realist for whom tradition, the Bible, and the family unit represent the only meaningful values worth striving for in life. In spite of her physical paralysis, a symbol of her psychological resistance to change, Agostina (a true "sparviero" in Deleddian terminology) has earned through her hawkish vigilance the respect, if not the love, of those under her protection.

Agostina's numerous sermons to family members inevitably have as their point of reference the Bible, this matriarch's justification for the power which she wields and for the obedience she demands. The suggestion that her authority and position are somehow divinely inspired instills a sense of fear and guilt in those who oppose her will. If in fact Agostina is a domestic idol of sorts,⁵ she is also representative of a tradition which has lost much of its original function and meaning. In the case of Agostina, purely economic factors rather than ethics motivate

her choices: blind obedience to her wishes has become the norm in a family (and by extension a society) which has grown more and more accustomed to subordinating individual desires to the economic well-being of the group.⁶

Juanniccu, Agostina's wayward son, is the antithesis of his mother and all that she represents. These two contrasting figures embody the major dialectics in the novel: Agostina is reason personified, the symbol of tradition. Juanniccu is an irrational dreamer and the consummate threat of rebellion.

If one considers Juanniccu's "revolt" within the context of the previously cited statement by Moravia, it is clear that rebellion is synonymous with degeneracy, a moral deficiency or disease which makes the protagonist "la parte marcia della famiglia," "il verme nel frutto della casa." Juanniccu's alcoholism (a disease) is perceived by his mother as contributing to his physical and moral decay, both the cause and the effect of his failure to integrate himself into the respectable social structures of his world.

Eccoti lì, con le mani in tasca e i piedi parati al fuoco, con le scarpe fangose come quelle dei pezzenti vagabondi. E dove sei stato? Sono tre giorni che non ti vedo. Del resto è meglio che non ti veda. Mi sembri l'immagine vivente dei miei peccati. E chi ti può vedere? Ti si sopporta perché si è cristiani; e basta. Tutti gli altri della mia famiglia hanno fatto buona riuscita: tu solo sei come l'ultimo pane andato a male, che nessuno vuole. Hai cinquant'anni e sei lì come un bambino che ne ha tre. (p. 18)

Juanniccu differs significantly from previous Deleddian protagonists in that he is neither overly traumatized by his dilemma (as is Elias in *Elias Portolu* in the face of his incestuous passion for his sister-in-law) nor particularly bitter (as is Marianna in *Marianna Sirca* who defies her family's wishes by loving an ex-servant turned bandit). While it may be argued that this is because his "sin" or infraction does not fall within the limits of a strictly enforced societal taboo per se—unsanctioned love or patricide⁷—it would seem rather that Juanniccu's indifference to his situation stems from his particular brand of rebellion. His indolence, his unwillingness to blindly conform, and his disregard for familial and societal norms of conduct is not perceived as revolt in itself

(something which is never admissible in the tightly knit structure of Deledda's insular society) but rather as disease, under which guise it becomes at least partially tolerated. Juanniccu's rebellious and often irrational behavior is necessarily viewed as a kind of mental imbalance in that it threatens social stability and in particular the crucial pending marriage between Annarosa and Stefano on which the family's survival hinges.

Hence the logical conclusion that Zio Juanniccu is in fact mad. In a very Pirandellian sense he is tolerated only insofar as he is considered deranged. As such his marginality is conveniently labeled as disease when in truth "disease" is nothing more than a pretext for revolt, and a tragic one at that. It is, as Moravia noted regarding the problem in general, "the attitude of revolt when it becomes impotent." In other words, the only viable protest for those who sense that real opposition to the power structures in this particular society is impossible. In both a poignant and pathetic moment, Juanniccu conveys this lucid insight to Nina who considers the realization of her own dreams as "un impeto di ribellione pazzo."

Invece non siamo mai liberi. E non lo siamo perché non vogliamo esserlo. Se tu volevi esserlo, potevi prenderti quell'uomo; e Annarosa si prendeva il suo ragazzo e così stavate contente tutt'e due, almeno per un po' di tempo. Ma è che qui, in questa casa, poi, si è tutti come ragazzi: si cerca tutti di disobbedire, ma non si può. No si può, non si può. (p. 119)

Clearly Deledda is not interested in madness as a pathological disorder but rather as a metaphor for the existential condition, for the sense of helplessness and solitude of the individual who retreats into feigned madness in order to escape; to avoid persecution from a society whose values he knows to be false and ethically unsound. There is always a disturbing truth in every "mad" statement Juanniccu makes. His introspection and intuition regarding other characters' underlying motivations suggests an undeniable correlation between his disease and truth. As Annarosa admits in an intense moment of remorse:

Non è cattivo, il povero zio Juanniccu, solo ha il difetto di dire la verità, come nessuno più osa dirla, e anche Cristo fu ucciso per aver detto la verità. (p. 211)

Deledda's religiosity aside for the moment, it is obvious that Juanniccu is intended as a symbol of conscience, a mirror in which all the characters recognize the truth which they have discarded and the lies which now govern their lives.⁸ Even the rigid Agostino, Juanniccu's nephew who beats him and who is ultimately responsible for his uncle's death, "pensava che gli ubriacconi e gli idioti a volte parlano ispirati da una volontà che non è la loro, ma la volontà stessa di Dio" (p. 140). Hardly coincidental is the fact that Juanniccu's presence is most disconcerting to those who have repressed what he expresses; to those who oppose his idea of a legitimate alternative reality based on love rather than on sheer authority, and on an understanding of the fragility of human nature.

Ecco, io dico, a mio parere, che bisognerebbe lasciar fare a ciascuno quello che vuole. Tanto è lo stesso; quello che si vuol fare si fa. La donna è fragile e anche l'uomo. Siamo tutti fragili. Non importa nulla . . . Si vive, si muore; si fanno tanti sforzi per riuscire a questo, per privarci di quello, e poi si muore. E se quei due ragazzi si vogliono amare e si vogliono sposare, perché volete voi impedirlo? (p. 47-48)

Deledda's view of human nature as fragile yet resilient (or as the title of a previous novel suggests, human nature as analogous to "reeds in the wind") is very much at the heart of *L'incendio nell'oliveto* and its treatment of rebellion vs. disease. In general, Deleddian characters feel constrained to adapt to a traditional code of behavior which conflicts with their most basic instincts. Faced with the choice of whether to conform or to be emarginated, they are paralyzed by guilt, fear, and subsequent indecision. Unable to survive in a very real sense outside the "clan" or community, yet without the necessary faith and strength of their own convictions, these individuals continue to be governed "fatalistically" by the laws of a society which are in essence devoid of meaning for them. While this type of moral crisis sounds decidedly more veristic than modern, Deledda's artistic lens focuses on the torment of the individual caught between a sense of duty and nostalgia towards the past and a paradoxical desire to break free from those very same repressive bonds.

Annarosa is the emblematic dove/victim, tormented and suspended between the antithetical poles of duty and desire. Juanniccu, however, harbors no illusions about the weakness of human nature or man's

reluctance to take responsibility for his actions. He does not rail against fate but rather accepts the conditions of exile in a less ironic, yet not totally dissimilar manner as Pirandello's Henry IV. By retreating into a world of feigned madness, imposed upon him initially yet never wholly rejected ("Sono pazzo perché sono pazzo"), Juanniccu is allowed his moral protest, at once a participant and an observer of the tragicomedy of his own and others' lives.

In the final analysis, however, Juanniccu's "disease" threatens the very fabric of the social structure and must be eliminated.⁹ Juanniccu's chief antagonists in the novel are precisely his mother whose ideology he rejects and his nephew who is the embodiment of those very ideals. It is ultimately Agostino's decision to lock his uncle in the family's distant farmhouse for it is Agostino who has labored diligently for the family's survival and who stands to lose all by his unrestrained actions. Juanniccu's expulsion from the community, his death by fire in the farmhouse, satisfies this society's very ancient need to purge itself (via a necessary scapegoat) of its "diseased" or undesirable elements.¹⁰

Much of the novel's modernity stems from Juanniccu's status as a quintessential observer of human nature. Unlike so many other Deleddian outcasts, however, he understands with startling clarity the terms of his more or less self-imposed exile. Consequently he asks for and expects nothing from the world whose values he has rejected. His world is not in fact the world of exteriors and objectivity in which he physically exists ("il viso morto di Juanniccu e gli occhi vaghi parevano affacciarsi da un mondo lontano, torbido, ma guardavano di qua, e osservavano le cose del mondo dei vivi") but rather a very subjective, interior world in which he alternates between extremely lucid vision and confused, anguished remorse. His alcoholism serves as a counterpoint for his introspection, and in a strange way provides the necessary vehicle for guilt which is typical of all Deledda's characters.

The need to self-castigate as well as to invite punishment and derision by others satisfies such individuals' self-destructive tendencies, individuals who see punishment as obligatory for having failed to abide by societal norms which they are incapable of rejecting in a forthright and constructive fashion.

Zio Juanniccu tornò più presto del solito, quella sera. Con tanto freddo, non aveva che la giacca leggera, tutta abbottonata, col risvolto unto tirato

sul collo rientrante fra le spalle. Senza togliersi le mani delle tasche dei pantaloni battè col piede alla porta chiusa, pensando che se voleva poteva fabbricarsi non una ma cento chiavi, da aprire tutte le porte del mondo; ma non voleva; preferiva picchiare col piede e aspettare che la serva aprisse e magari lo rimbrottasse per essere tornato tardi; così non scontentare quelli di casa che amavano fargli subire queste umiliazioni. Umiliazioni? Non lo erano poiché in fondo non lo toccavano. (p. 41)

There is no sense of disdain or humiliation conveyed in this passage since Juanniccu remains outside the sensibilities of this exterior world. During his mother's diatribes against him, Juanniccu "ascoltava senza protestare ma anche senza commuoversi" suggesting the perverse yet ever present idea in Deleddian narrative that punishment is necessitated by the infraction of silent laws even though there may be no logical justification for such punishment. Whereas early in her career Deledda tended to favor novels of "crime and punishment," concrete offenses which by their very heinous nature demanded retribution, in later works "sins" are far more subjective, defined primarily by ingrained attitudes and an obsessive, irrational obedience to archaic codes of social behavior.¹¹

This kind of psychological immobility which impedes an individual from breaking with the past is best exemplified in the novel by the tragic death of Juanniccu. In a final desperate act of protest he sets fire to the farmhouse in which he is being held captive. The olive grove, a symbol of the economic motivations which have dominated throughout the novel, is destroyed as is Juanniccu in an ultimate act of self-destruction. Much of the gloom which pervades the end of the novel results from the realization that Juanniccu has been defeated by a stronger yet not morally superior force. He is, in a very marxist sense, an authentic individual in a world degraded by economic needs: the "sick" man who is spiritually healthy in a "sane" world which is morally deficient.

Juanniccu's end strikes a hopeless chord which is resounded in the fates of other characters: Annarosa consents to a marriage with Stefano, a man she does not love; Nina resigns herself to a life of loneliness; and the servant Mikedda marries the servant Taneddu employing her typical rationale "i servi coi servi, i padroni con i padroni." The sole glimmer of hope in the novel is found in another marginal figure, Annarosa's love, Gioele.

Not coincidentally Gioele is young, he is a student, and he is a rebel; a more positive correlative of the doomed Juanniccu. Though he appears only once in the novel, Gioele animates the plot, undermining the efforts of Agostina and those who see his love for Annarosa as a practical impossibility. He is the nemesis in particular of Agostina who views his defects as far more than physical.

Se ha quel difetto non è colpa sua; è nato così e non lo hanno saputo curare a tempo, perché erano poveri . . . Povertà e cattiva stirpe son cose tristi, Annaro'! E tu hai parlato bene, poco fa; ognuno al suo posto, ognuno col suo decoro. (pp. 36-37).

For Agostina, Gioele's real handicap is poverty and poor social standing. Deleddian protagonists' preoccupation with material and class concerns stemmed from particular socio-economic conditions which required obedience to familial authority in order to insure survival.¹² Gioele rejects tradition predicated on these grounds and is thus classifiable with other enlightened Deleddian characters who have been exposed to both the positive and negative aspects of a much larger world beyond the confines of the village. Like Juanniccu, he possesses a knowledge which threatens, as is evidenced in this passage from one of his letters to Annarosa.

Ma tu mi darai ascolto; perché adesso non è più il povero Gioele che ti parla, ma il tuo istinto stesso della vita, il tuo diritto alla gioia.

Tu vuoi sacrificarti per la famiglia; ma chi è poi la tua famiglia? È la tua nonna, già *morta*, che vi tiene legati tutti intorno al suo *cadavere* di ferro come ad un pernio. È lei, la vera rappresentante della tua razza, *paralizzata* dalla *vecchiaia* e dalla sua stessa *immobilità*. (p. 57)

The images of death and disease which punctuate Gioele's pleas relate specifically to Agostina and by extension to Deledda's society as a whole. While Deledda by 1917 had obviously made the crucial break with her culture, it was painfully evident to her that others had not and would never, given the high cost of rebellion in terms of emotional pain and permanent emargination.¹³

That Deledda opts for a union between Annarosa and Stefano (rather than between Annarosa and Gioele) is not so much an indication of her own moral stance as it is her acquiescence to a "via di mezzo" for her characters. The fundamental difference between Gioele the rebel and Stefano, a moderate, may be taken as a final comment on the

novel: the former represents personal and collective salvation via change while the latter expresses hope for the future via assimilation. Though the ultimate solution is by no means a positive one in terms of the alternatives it offers for those who have subordinated their desires for the well-being of the group, Deledda sees it as the only plausible one in an inert society still dominated, except in rare instances, by traditional authority figures. Such unique individuals in *L'incendio nell'oliveto* are the marginal figures of Juanniccu and Gioele, both "diseased" characters who have been eliminated as obstacles by the novel's end.

While Deledda's handling of the theme of disease is perhaps less dramatic than that of Pirandello (and certainly lacking in the humor of Svevo) it is no less problematic in its approach. It is true that Deledda rarely varied the Sardinian settings and characters which inspired her writing. Yet there is a universality to Deledda's art recognized by those who awarded her the Nobel Prize for literature in 1926. *L'incendio nell'oliveto* treats the problem of disease as rebellion within the perimeters of a particular sociological context, yet the moral dilemmas presented within the text are addressed to an audience much more contemporary than Deledda's own isolated Barbaracina society. The result is a novel which not only transcends the boundaries of time and place in its message but one which also reaffirms Deledda's position in the ranks of modern Italian literature.

Elise Magistro
U. of California, Los Angeles

Notes

1. Gian Paolo Biasin, *Literary Diseases* (Austin, University of Texas Press, 1975) p. 34.
2. In particular that of Italo Svevo whose *La coscienza di Zeno* was not published till 1923, and that of Luigi Pirandello whose "Enrico IV" was published in 1922.
3. Biasin, p. 14. The author refers to Emile Durkheim's conception of the marginality of disease as a mirror of the writer's own marginality. In the case of Deledda, the theory is particularly applicable given the strong autobiographical undercurrent in all her works as well as a perception of self as rebel/outcast in her own society. See the author's quasi autobiographical work "Cosima" in *Opere Scelte*, a cura di Eurialo De Michelis, vol. II (Milano: Mondadori, 1964).

4. Biasin, p. 23.

5. Grazia Deledda, *L'incendio nell'oliveto*, edizione "Oscar" (Milano: Mondadori, 1977). All references to the work will be indicated parenthetically within the text unless otherwise noted. Underlining in all cases is my own. "Dopo tutto la nonna era la cosa più sacra, per lei la colonna più ferma della sua vita. Le parole della nonna erano tutte vere: erano la verità stessa. E quella sua immobilità, nel silenzio e nella solitudine della stanza quasi povera, quella sua pesantezza di bronzo, l'aureola del fuoco le davano un aspetto di idolo domestico." *Ibid.*, 35.

6. "È giovane ancora, lei," pensava la suocera. "Non ha bisogno di tinture, ha bisogno ancora di amore. Ma Stefano non lo puoi prendere, no, Nina mia, perché è destinato ad Annarosa; lo sapevi che era destinato a lei perché lo hai guardato? Adesso bisogna che ti rassegni, per il bene della famiglia. Per il bene della famiglia ti parlo, Nina mia: e tu mi ascolti e mi intendi . . ." *Ibid.*, 108.

7. For a thorough discussion on the subject of taboo in Deledda's works see Anna Dolfi's "Le restrizioni e 'le delire de toucher'" in *Grazia Deledda* (Milano: Mursia, 1979).

8. Deledda, *L'incendio*. "Poi la speranza d'ingannarsi la riprese. Vedeva la figura pallida e cascante dello zio ubriaco, quelle spalle incurvate dal peso di una vita che tende al basso . . . Aveva parlato da ubriaco; nulla era vero delle sue parole. Ma in fondo ella sentiva bene che tutto era vero; le parole di lui le erano cadute nell'anima come pietre nell'acqua; l'ombra del dubbio poteva coprirle, ma non le smoveva." 159.

9. "Domani questo idiota di nostro zio andrà ancora dal vecchio e continuerà a dirgli pazzie" pensava Agostino. "Bisognerà impedirglielo: bisogna educarlo come un ragazzo. Perché non l'ho fatto prima?" S'irrigidì, col pugno sulla tavola come quando faceva i suoi calcoli; ma un lieve tremito gli scuoteva il polso: poi sentì che la nonna lo guardava e la guardò. Si intesero. Si promettevano di essere forti, di essere sempre le colonne della famiglia." *Ibid.*, 141.

10. On scapegoats in general and their function in primitive societies see Sir James Frazer, *The Golden Bough* (New York: St. Martin, 1976) 3rd ed., Chapter LVII.

11. For a provocative discussion of the subject see Anna Dolfi, *Grazia Deledda* (Milano: Mursia 1979) pp. 141-169.

12. See in particular Maria Giacobbe, *Grazia Deledda. Introduzione alla Sardegna* (Milano: Bompiani, 1974) and Mario Massaiu, *La Sardegna di Grazia Deledda* (Milano: Celuc, 1972).

13. This attitude dominates throughout the entire body of Deledda's narrative and is confirmed in the author's vast epistolary prior to 1900, the year of her departure from Sardinia. See Francesco Di Pilla, *La vita e l'opera di Grazia Deledda* (Milano: Fabbri, 1966).