

Nobel Prize in Literature 1926



Grazia Deledda

The Nobel Prize in Literature 1926 was awarded to Grazia Deledda *"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 Deledda was born in Nuoro, a small town in Sardinia. There she spent her childhood and her youth, and from the natural surroundings and the life of the people she drew the impressions which later became the inspiration and the soul of her literary work.

From the window of her house she could see the nearby mountains of Orthobene with their dark forests and jagged grey peaks. Farther off was a chain of limestone mountains which sometimes appeared violet, sometimes lemon-coloured, sometimes dark blue, depending on the variations of the light. And in the distance, the snowy peaks of Gennargentù emerged.

Nuoro was isolated from the rest of the world. The few visitors to the town usually arrived on horseback, with the women mounted behind the men. The monotony of daily life was interrupted only by traditional religious or popular holidays and by the songs and dances in the main street at carnival time.

In this environment, Grazia Deledda's view of life developed into something uniquely ingenuous and primitive. In Nuoro it was not considered shameful to be a bandit. «Do you think», says an old peasant woman in one of Deledda's novels, «that bandits are bad people? Well, you're wrong. They are only men who need to display their skill, that's all. In the old days men went to war. Now there aren't any more wars, but men still need to fight. And so they commit their holdups, their thefts, and their cattle stealing, not to do evil but only to display somehow their ability and their strength.» Thus the bandit rather enjoys the sympathy of the people. If he is caught and put in prison, the peasants have an expressive phrase which means that he has «run into trouble». And when he is freed no stigma is attached to him. In fact, when he returns to his home town, he is greeted with the words, «More such trouble a hundred years from now!»

The vendetta is still the custom in Sardinia, and a person is respected if he takes blood revenge on the killer of a kinsman. Indeed, it is considered a crime to betray the avenger. One author writes, «Even if the reward on his head were three times its size, not a single man in the whole district of Nuoro could be found to betray him. Only one law reigns there: respect for a man's strength and scorn of society's justice.»

In this town, so little influenced by the Italian mainland, Grazia Deledda grew up surrounded by a savagely beautiful natural setting and by people who possessed a certain primitive grandeur, in a house that had a sort of biblical simplicity about it. «We girls», Grazia Deledda writes, «were never allowed to go out except to go to Mass or to take an occasional walk in the countryside.» She had no chance to get an advanced education, and like the other middle-class children in the area, she went only to the local school. Later she took a few private lessons in French and Italian because her family spoke only the Sardinian dialect at home. Her education, then, was not extensive. However, she was thoroughly acquainted with and delighted in the folk songs of her town with its hymns to the saints, its ballads, and its lullabies. She was also familiar with the legends and traditions of Nuoro. Furthermore, she had an opportunity at home to read a few works of Italian literature and a few novels in translation, since by Sardinian standards her family was

relatively well-to-do. But this was all. Yet the young girl took a great liking to her studies, and at only thirteen she wrote a whimsical but tragic short story, «Sangue Sardo» (1888) [Sardinian Blood], which she succeeded in publishing in a Roman newspaper. The people at Nuoro did not at all like this display of audacity, since women were not supposed to concern themselves with anything but domestic duties. But Grazia Deledda did not conform; instead she devoted herself to writing novels: first, *Fior di Sardegna* [Flower of Sardinia], published in 1892; then *La via del male* (1896) [The Evil Way], *Il vecchio della montagna* (1900) [The Old Man of the Mountain], *Elias Portolú* (1903), and others with which she made a name for herself. She came to be recognized as one of the best young female writers in Italy.

She had, in fact, made a great discovery - she had discovered Sardinia. In the middle of the eighteenth century a new movement had arisen in European literature. Writers at that time were tired of the models constantly drawn from Greek and Roman literature. They wanted something new. Their movement quickly joined forces with another which had begun in the same epoch with Rousseau's adoration of man in his natural state, untouched by civilization. The new school formed from these two movements advanced and gained force, particularly in the great days of Romanticism. The school's most recent trophies have been won by the work of Grazia Deledda. It is true that in descriptions of local colour and peasant life she had predecessors even in her own country. The so-called «regionalist» school in Italian literature had had such notable representatives as Verga, in his descriptions of Sicily, and Fogazzaro, in his descriptions of the Lombardo-Veneto region. But the discovery of Sardinia decidedly belongs to Grazia Deledda. She knew intimately every corner of her native land. She stayed in Nuoro until she was twenty-five; only then did she find the courage to go to Cagliari, the capital of Sardinia. Here she met Madesani, the man whom she married in 1900. After her marriage she and her husband moved to Rome, where she divided her time between her work as a writer and her family duties. In the novels written after she moved to Rome, she continued to deal with Sardinian subjects as in the work entitled *L'Edera* (1908) [The Ivy]. But in the novels written after

L'Edera, the action frequently takes place in a less localized atmosphere, as, for example, in her most recent novel *La Fuga in Egitto* (1925) [The Flight into Egypt], which the Academy has examined and appreciated. However, her conception of man and nature is, as always, fundamentally Sardinian in character. Although she is now artistically more mature, she remains the same serious, eloquent, but unpretentious writer who wrote *La via del male* and *Elias Portolú*.

It is rather difficult for a foreigner to judge the artistic merit of her style. I shall therefore quote one of the most famous Italian critics on this matter. «Her style», he writes, «is that of the great masters of the narrative; it has the characteristic marks of all great novelists. No one in Italy today writes novels which have the vigour of style, the power of craftsmanship, the structure, or the social relevance which I found in some, even the latest, works of Grazia Deledda such as *La Madre* (1920) [*The Mother*] and *Il Segreto dell'uomo solitario* (1921) [*The Secret of the Solitary Man*].» One might note only that her composition does not have the strong consistency which might be desired; unexpected passages often give the impression of hasty transitions. But this defect is more than generously compensated for by her many virtues. As a painter of nature she has few equals in European literature. She does not uselessly waste her vivid colours; but even then, the nature which she describes has the simple, broad lines of ancient landscapes, as it has their chaste purity and majesty. It is a marvellously lively nature in perfect harmony with the psychological life of her characters. Like a truly great artist, she succeeds in incorporating her representation of people's sentiments and customs into her descriptions of nature. Indeed, one need only recall the classic description of the pilgrim's sojourn on Mount Lula in *Elias Portolú*. They depart on a May morning. Family after family ascends toward the ancient votive church, some on horseback, some in old wagons. They carry along enough provisions to last a week. The wealthier families lodge in the great shelter standing next to the church. These families are descended from the church's founders, and each has a spike in the wall and a hearth to indicate the area which belongs to it. No one else can set foot in this area. Each evening the families gather in their respective areas for as long as the feast

lasts. They cook their food over the fireplace and tell legends, play music, and sing during the long summer night. In the novel *La via del male*, Grazia Deledda describes equally vividly the strange Sardinian marriage and funeral customs. When a funeral is to take place, all of the doors are shut, all of the shutters are closed, every fire is put out, no one is permitted to prepare food, and hired mourners wail their improvised dirges. The descriptions of such primitive customs are so lifelike and so simple and natural that we are almost moved to call them Homeric. In Grazia Deledda's novels more than in most other novels, man and nature form a single unity. One might almost say that the men are plants which germinate in the Sardinian soil itself. The majority of them are simple peasants with primitive sensibilities and modes of thought, but with something in them of the grandeur of the Sardinian natural setting. Some of them almost attain the stature of the monumental figures of the Old Testament. And no matter how different they may seem from the men we know, they give us the impression of being incontestably real, of belonging to real life. They in no way resemble theatrical puppets. Grazia Deledda is a master of the art of fusing realism with idealism.

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