Italian Stories = Novelle Italiane Study Guide

Italian Stories = Novelle Italiane by Robert A. Hall, Jr.

BOOKRAGS

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Boccacio's Decameron - Eighth Day, Third Story

Boccacio's Decameron - Eighth Day, Third Story Summary

Boccacio was an Italian writer in the 14th century. Although he was a prolific writer who produced many works in his lifetime, he is known today really only for the Decameron. The Decameron consists of one hundred tales told over ten days by ten people who are staying in a house seeking refuge from a plague ravaging Italy. Most of his tales are risqué to an extent, and some are even obscene, but they generally tend to avoid being outright immoral, as such would not have been received well by his audience.

In this story, the third story told on the eighth day by a woman named Elissa, Calandrino is a painter living in Florence who has a reputation for being naïve and gullible. His two friends, Bruno and Buffalmaco, like to play pranks on him since he is so easy to fool. One day, another man, Maso, also aware of Calandrino's reputation, decides to have some fun with him. He finds Calandrino at church and has a staged conversation about magical rocks within earshot of Calandrino. Curious, Calandrino questions him about these rocks and wants to know where he can find them. Maso explains that there are many types of rock, but Calandrino is most intrigued by the helitropia stone which, Maso says, makes its possessor become invisible. Maso says that there are many such rocks in the area and that its distinguishing feature is its blackness.

Calandrino resolves to find this rock, imagining all the money he could steal with it. He goes to his friend Bruno and Buffalmaco requesting their help in finding the rock. Immediately identifying the ruse, the two play along. They put off the expedition for a few days, pointing out that it would be best to do in the morning, when the rocks could be most easily identified, and on a holiday, when no one else would be around. Calandrino agrees.

The three set out, as agreed, on Sunday. Calandrino picks up every black rock he can find and quickly has quite a burden. To keep up appearances, Bruno and Buffalmaco pick up a few rocks themselves. In time, the two decide to escalate the prank. They start talking in front of Calandrino as if they could not see him, and curse him for leaving them by themselves. They act like they are throwing rocks in the air through anger but actually hit Calandrino. Despite the blows he is receiving, Calandrino remains quiet, now convinced he possesses the helitropia stone. He starts back home and passes by a number of people who pay him no regard.

When he reaches home, his wife sees him and scolds him for returning home so late. Calandrino becomes furious, thinking that his wife has negated the magic of his stone, as women apparently are known to do. He brutally beats her. Bruno and Buffalmaco arrive to see his wife crying and Calandrino still furious. Calandrino explains what

happened—that is, what he thought happened. He confesses that he was standing nearby when they were cursing him and shows them the wounds from the stones they threw as proof. Angry again, he decides to beat his wife some more, but Bruno and Buffalmaco intercede, saying that it is his fault for not avoiding his wife, since everyone knows women ruin magical objects. Calandrino and his wife reconcile and the two friends leave his house.

Boccacio's Decameron - Eighth Day, Third Story Analysis

The most striking feature of this story for a modern reader is the attitude expressed towards women. Though Bruno and Buffalmaco stop Calandrino from beating his wife further, it seems to be only because they know Calandrino's reasons for beating her are mistaken. They do not seem to really have any principled contempt for wife-beating; they express no real outrage when they see she has been beaten severely upon their arrival. Boccacio himself seems to tacitly condone, or at least tolerate, wife-beating, since it occurs in the context of a light, humorous tale, wife-beating too takes on the aspect of levity.

The story also displays some of the social values which would be important to Boccacio and his audience. Particularly, it shows the value Italian upper-class society places on wit and awareness, virtues which Calandrino lacks dramatically. Bruno and Buffalmaco, then, represent the mainstream of society, which punishes the foolish. These virtues do not appear to be off-limits even to women, who are otherwise portrayed negatively in the story: Calandrino's wife is described as "clever."

It is significant that he is pranked by two friends and not one. The basic plot would be the same if it were just Bruno and not Buffalmaco; the two characters basically do the same things together and little distinguishes the one from the other. The fact that two people prank him (not including Maso, who also works with another) gives a more social aspect to the story. If it was just Bruno who tricked Calandrino, the audience might think him to simply be peculiar; the fact that two people trick him makes their attitudes seem more representative of Florentine society as a whole.

Niccolo Machiavelli's Belfagor: Story of the Devil Who Took a Wife

Niccolo Machiavelli's Belfagor: Story of the Devil Who Took a Wife Summary

Machiavelli was an Italian statesman and writer in the 15th and 16th centuries. His most famous work, The Prince, is a detailed account of the various ways a king maintains his power. Though the work earned Machiavelli a reputation for being an amoral, ruthless statesman, such a reputation is undeserved; Machiavelli was simply describing the way kings ruled as best he could. He was not endorsing it.

The rulers of Hell learn of a vision seen by a holy man. He saw that of all the many souls that went to Hell, most or all of them were damned on account of having a wife. The devils, thinking that this would make them look bad, decide to investigate this to see if there is truth to it. After weighing their various options, they decide to randomly pick one of their ranks to go to earth in the form of a man and take a wife. He will then report back with his findings. The task falls to Belfagor, an arch-devil. They give him a large sum of money and he comes to Florentine in the guise of a man named Roderick. His wealth attracts the attention of the wealthy Florentine families and he is soon married to a woman named Onesta. He falls in love and is willing to undertake any cost to make her happy. Realizing the power she has over him, she dominates him and makes him do her bidding. His money evaporates and he finds himself sunk into debt maintaining his and his wife's lifestyle. Desperate, he decides to flee town, but his creditors hear of it and start to chase him.

Roderick runs to the farm of a man named Gianmatteo. He promises to make Gianmatteo rich if he will help him and Gianmatteo agrees, hiding Belfagor in a pile of manure and refuse. After the angry mob moves on, Belfagor explains who he is and tells him his plan for making him rich. He says that he will possess the daughter of a wealthy man and will leave her at the command of Gianmatteo, who will ask for a large sum of money in return for his services. Their plan works as intended, but they are forced to repeat it because Gianmatteo does not ask for enough money the first time. Afterwards, Belfagor tells Gianmatteo never to seek him out again because, being a devil, he will naturally want to do him harm.

Not long after, rumors begin to spread that the king's daughter has become possessed. The desperate king seeks out Gianmatteo whose reputation for casting out devils is well-known. Gianmatteo tries to make excuses, but the king will not listen, eventually forcing Gianmatteo to come by law. When there, Gianmatteo orders the king to arrange a large procession of people who will sound loud horns. Belfagor taunts Gianmatteo for thinking that such a display would intimidate him, but Gianmatteo lies and says that Belfagor's wife is coming. Immediately, Belfagor leaves the daughter and returns to Hell, preferring the punishment of hellfire to being with his own wife.

Niccolo Machiavelli's Belfagor: Story of the Devil Who Took a Wife Analysis

This story reflects many of the misogynistic beliefs of Italian society during this time. In fact, it is difficult to imagine anything more dramatically misogynistic than the claim that women are responsible for the damnation of many, if not all, male souls, which claim seems to be affirmed by the story. In fact, women are so terrible that the devils prefer to suffer the torments of hellfire than be around them. Men are portrayed as hapless victims. Roderick tries to cater to Onesta's every need out of live, and she viciously takes advantage of him, driving him eventually to ruin. What is not clear in the story, however, is how exactly Onesta drives Roderick to spiritual ruin. Aside from his desperate attempt to escape from his creditors—which, in perspective, might not really be the worst of all sins—the story seems to focus on his financial ruin. This can possibly be interpreted as a reflection of the worldliness of religious belief at the time, or perhaps the worldliness of Machiavelli's religious belief.

Matteo Bandello's Madonna Zilia

Matteo Bandello's Madonna Zilia Summary

Matteo Bandello was a Dominican Friar and a prolific writer of stories. Despite vowing his life in service to the Church, Bandello spent most of his time in the courts of kings and nobles, and his stories reflect his interest in the worldly, rather than the spiritual, domain.

This story features a woman named Madonna Zilia, a young mother and widow who is still quite beautiful. She draws the attention of Monsignor Filiberto, an honorable and respected soldier. He falls in love with her, but she is not interested. She refuses to even follow the Italian custom of greeting men with a kiss. Distraught, Filiberto falls violently ill. Doctors are clueless and cannot find a cure. His friend, a man from Spoleto, decides to help Filiberto and promises to persuade Madonna Zilia to come see him. He dresses in the garb of a street vendor and gives her all of his wares. She is thankful and the Spoletine capitalizes on her good favor and convinces her to see Monsignor Filiberto.

Hesitantly, she agrees and upon hearing this news Filiberto is immediately put into better spirits. She comes and talks to him, but ultimately disappoints him; she wants only to raise her child and does not love him. He asks for just a single kiss—the kiss that she should have given him out of courtesy—and she agrees, adding the condition that he must vow to do whatever she asks. Overwhelmed by passion, he agrees and receives his kiss. She then reveals the oath he must take: He must not talk for three years. He is outraged by this request, which seems extremely excessive, but decides to keep the oath. He keeps the reason for his silence a secret to others and leads them to believe that it is a physical impairment.

In time, Filiberto moves to France to help the French king wage war against the English. After proving his valiance in battle, the French king favors him greatly. He seeks out all the doctors of the kingdom to cure his friend's muteness. Many doctors come and all fail. The king is frustrated by how many are coming, and assume that they all come simply for a monetary award. He changes his offer: If a man can cure Filiberto's muteness, he will receive ten thousand francs, but if he fails he will be beheaded. Naturally, the number of doctors diminishes greatly.

Rumors of the king's offer spread across Europe and finally reach the Italian town where Madonna Zilia lives. Moved by his fidelity to his oath—which, she assumes, is out of love—she travels to France to release him. He does not trust her intentions, however, and assumes she is only there to collect the reward. He succumbs to her sexual advances and they make love several times while she is there, but he continues to pretend to be mute. Finally, she resigns herself to failure and assumes that she will be executed. At the last moment, though, he speaks and explains what happened to the king. Madonna Zilia is pardoned from any punishment and, before he sends her away, he chastises her for playing with the heart of a man.

Matteo Bandello's Madonna Zilia Analysis

This story displays two different and opposite types of people. Monsignor Filiberto represents the man who is a slave to his passions. When he sees the beautiful Madonna Zilia, he is unable to control his desire to have her, and when she rejects him his sadness is so strong that it even threatens his life. Lest any emotion be left out of the story, Bandello displays Filiberto's anger at the end of the story, showing him treating the woman he once loved harshly, perhaps even cruelly.

Madonna Zilia, on the other hand, is Filiberto's opposite. If Filiberto is too given over to passion, Zilia is too resistant to it and lives in a way that is excessively chaste. This excess is seen clearly when she refuses to even kiss him as a greeting, an innocuous Italian custom. It is certainly curious, however, that the author, a Dominican friar vowed to celibacy, would seem to be critical of a woman who did not wish to remarry. However, as the editor of the collection notes, Bandello, though a member of the clergy, seem to be a rather worldly man.

Regional and national prejudices also seem to play rather strongly into the book. Filiberto's friend, who is never named, is from Spoleto and, like everyone else from that city apparently, he is shrewd, persuasive, and cunning. Through his trickery, he is able to convince Zilia to see Filiberto. (It is not, however, clear why he needs to resort to dressing up like a street vendor to ingratiate himself with Zilia. It would seem just openly giving her the goods would produce the same result.) Bandello also expresses a hatred of the English which surely must have been more French than Italian, as the latter would have had little or no contact with them.

Giovanni Verga's Rosso Malpelo

Giovanni Verga's Rosso Malpelo Summary

Giovanni Verga was a Sicilian author in the 19th century who was heavily influenced by the French naturalists, who tried to adopt the approach of science to literature. However, while Verga's literature is written from a purely objective perspective, it is obvious that his presentation is not without sympathy. His primary subjects of writing were the poor, working-class in Sicily, and he sought to expose their miseries to the rest of his country. Sicilians were known for resigning themselves to fate and believing that little could be done to help the misery of the poor and this same fatalism is present in "Rosso Malpelo."

Malpelo (which literally means "bad hair"—he was so nicknamed because he had red hair and people who knew him thought it was caused by his evil soul) is a poor child who works long hours in a mine. He had a notoriously mean, almost savage, personality and would never associate with the other workers at the mine. Though the other miners hated him, he was kept around mainly out of respect for his dead father. His father had died when he was removing a pillar of stone from a mine shaft and the entire corridor collapsed on him. The workers and their wives tried desperately to get the mine engineer and mine owner to help, but they reacted slowly and Malpelo's father was surely lost anyway. It was when Malpelo learned of his father's death that he became the vicious boy that he now is.

A new boy starts working at the mine, named Ranocchio, and Malpelo takes him under his care. He does not, however, treat him kindly. He beats the boy and constantly hurls insults at him. His attitude towards him is the same attitude the workers have towards mules, who willingly and submissively take the beating that is handed out to them. Despite all of this, the boys do have a certain affection for one another. Malpelo seems to be teaching Ranocchio a lesson, however misguided, that one cannot make in the world unless one is a fighter: As long as Ranocchio lets others beat him, they will keep beating him harder and harder. The only way to respond to a hostile world is with hostility. Though Ranocchio does not seem to care for the lessons which Malpelo seems to want to teach him, he comes to the aid of Malpelo when he is accused of some misdeed he does not do. Malpelo stoically accepts whatever punishment comes his way, however.

At home, Malpelo's family begins to dissolve after the death of the father. His sister is embarrassed to have such a bestial brother and sends him away with blows whenever her lover is around. Her mother, too, is ashamed of him, as stories of Malpelo have traveled far and wide in the town's gossip circles. He felt that it was natural for him to be underground, tucked away from the rest of the world. The rest of the miners leave him alone, for the most part, and he only leaves the mine when he has to. He envies the professions of others, those who can work under the bright daytime skies, but knows that it is not his lot.

One day, Malpelo shows Ranocchio the area of the mine which claimed his father's life. He recalls the stories his father had told him when he was too young to work in the mine. He would take Malpelo to vast fields and tell him that beneath it was an enormous network of mine tunnels. In fact, they were so large that workers would sometimes get lost in them and wander for years, crying uselessly for help. Some time later, workers are carting sand from the same room and discover one of Malpelo's father's shoes. Malpelo is horrified, imagining that he will one day discover the foot which the shoe belonged to. He refuses to work in that room any longer. In time, however, the rest of his father's body and clothing are discovered and the workers can tell that he survived the initial collapse and was buried alive in the sand.

Malpelo and Ranocchio start taking reflective trips together outside, mainly at night. Ranocchio likes visiting a ravine, at the bottom of which is a mule whose corpse was dumped there after it was worked to death. They watch animals tear its flesh off and Malpelo takes a macabre delight when, after his facial skin has been ripped off, the mule appears to be grinning, as if mocking those feasting on it. They sit under the stars sometimes, too, and look at the peaceful heavens. Ranocchio tells Malpelo that out beyond the stars is paradise, where the souls of good boys go. Malpelo does not believe him though and just mocks him.

Ranocchio one day comes down with an illness. The workers say that he is not fit to work in the mine, but he continues coming anyway, probably from necessity. Malpelo strikes him on the back one day—as he always did—and it causes Ranocchio to start coughing up blood. Malpelo, reasoning with himself or with God, perhaps, more than Ranocchio, insists that he could not have hit him hard enough to cause that. Nonetheless, Ranocchio's health declines significantly and eventually he stops coming to work. Malpelo goes to where he lives and finds him, on the brink of death, laying on a bed near his crying mother. Malpelo cannot understand Ranocchio's mother's emotions: After all, Ranocchio did not make very much money. Ranocchio, spiritually, is already gone, looking into the next world and dies soon after.

Malpelo himself does not have much longer. He had become accustomed to taking the dangerous tasks in the mine which other men—men who had families—were too afraid to do. Malpelo no longer had a family. His mother and sister had both married and moved away and he lived alone in their old house. One day the men are trying to determine where a certain mine shaft leads, but are too afraid to explore it, fearing they might get lost. Malpelo, however, has no fear, and disappears into the shaft. He is never seen again.

Giovanni Verga's Rosso Malpelo Analysis

As the editorial introduction suggests, Verga's writing in "Rosso Malpelo" is torn between the cold, scientific approach of the French naturalists and a sympathetic expose of the miserable living conditions of the poor. Stylistically, the story is unquestionably in line with naturalism. Nowhere does the narrator pass value judgments on what is happening and, for the most part, he even avoids going out of his way to

evoke the sympathy of the reader for Malpelo. He simply attempts to present the facts as they are and allow the reader to draw whatever conclusion he may.

That said, he is certainly well aware what reaction the reader is likely to have to the facts which are presented, and the objectivity with which they are presented even has the effect of making the emotional appeal more effective. By having no explicit angle, the story becomes more trustworthy; there is less room to suspect bias because Verga never directly tells the reader what he thinks about Malpelo's lot in life.

Verga's writing deviates from naturalism considerably by its frequent use of symbolism. Some symbols are impossible to miss: It is obvious, for example, that the dead mule is an image of the oppressed laborer. The mule is worked until it is no longer useful and is then tossed to the wolves in the ravine. Likewise, the capitalists running the mine have no real regard for the workers other than what they are able to produce. All the workers can do is accept the blows that come their way with a passive, bowed back and keep working for the few pennies they earn a week. The entire mine network itself is a symbol. Just as the miners—at least in legend—get lost in the mine shafts and wonder around for years, sounding out futile cries for help, so too does the worker get trapped, without hope or comfort, in the cellar of an exploitative economic system.

The story also shows signs that the author was familiar with advances being made in psychology at the time, a field which was quite popular with his French influences. Malpelo seems to be a classic case of a person whose will has been broken by a lifetime of misery. All he has known in life is suffering and he entertains no real hope to ever escape it. Idly, he admires those with the good fortune to push carts around under the blue sky, but he knows that even such a menial job can never be his. His desperation culminates when, finally left with nothing—no family and Ranocchio, perhaps his only friend ever, dead—he passes into the dark mine shaft, never to return again.

Antonio Fogazzaro's An Idea of Hermes Torranza

Antonio Fogazzaro's An Idea of Hermes Torranza Summary

Fogazzaro, a native of Vicenza, first established his literary career as a poet before transitioning into an author of short stories and novels. Stylistically and philosophically, Fogazzaro shares many similarities with the Romantics, particularly his interest in emotion. He was very interested in religion, specifically the relationship between the Catholic Church and the modern world. He advocated a progressive form of Christianity influenced by modernism, a philosophy which the Catholic Church would eventually condemn.

As the story opens, the narrator recalls the thoughts of a Professor Farsatti of Padua. Mount San Dona—the setting of this story—was, in his mind, quite contemptible, reeking of pretension and reminding one of French poetry. Since that time, San Dona has changed under the rule of Sior Beneto, the father of the household. Beneto is a strictly economic man and would happily chop down all of its impressive trees and foliage if his daughter, Bianca, did not protest. Bianca has just recently married Emilio Squarcina from Padua, but already their marriage has run into troubles. She cannot stand his parents and does not think that he does enough to protect her from them. To escape these problems, at least temporarily, Bianca has returned to her home at San Dona.

Meanwhile, Bianca has been nurturing a deep relationship with an aged poet named Hermes Torranza. Though he is several decades her senior, it is obvious to her that he has romantic feelings for her. For her part, her feelings are confused; she is unable to love one so much older than herself, but her feelings seem to have an affection deeper than what is appropriate for simple friendship. Torranza and Bianca habitually exchange letters while she is away from Padua—Torranza's residence, also—and he advises her on her marital problems and shares poetry and music with her. As she falls asleep one night, she is struck suddenly with a thought about him, the source of which she does not comprehend.

The next morning, she hears the sound of a carriage coming to the house. Bianca is excited, hoping that Torranza may be on it. Unfortunately, she is disappointed; the Dalla Carretta family and some friends have arrived to socialize. Over the course of polite conversation, the guests reveal that Torranza has died. Bianca is stunned by this revelation, but tries to hide her emotions, lest others glimpse the fondness she had for him. However, she cannot restrain herself when her family and the Carrettas begin to speak critically of him, denigrating his interest in studying spirits and the afterlife. She tries her best to defend him and at least end the conversation, but when her father insists on continuing it, she retires to her room angrily.

The Carretta's finally leave and soon after a letter is delivered for Bianca, marked as urgent. Bianca, thinking that it probably regards her marriage, is shocked to discover inside a photograph of Torranza and a letter from him. In the letter, Torranza apologizes for the nature of his advice regarding her marriage—evidently, he had encouraged her to leave Emilio—and urges her to reconcile with him. He then promises to give her a sign after his death and tells her to wait in her music room between 10 and 10:30 that night, making sure to keep the door open to the night air. Bianca immediately accepts his suggestions, and resolves both to resolve the difficulties in her marriage and to wait for his sign that night.

After she has finished the letter it is still only about six in the evening. She waits impatiently for ten to come, barely able to tolerate her parents. Finally, they go to sleep and she waits alone in her music room, following all the instructions he gave to her. The designated time finally arrives and she waits breathlessly for whatever might come. Finally, she hears knocks from outside and is amazed to see the figure of her husband enter the door. She is enthralled to see him and rushes over to embrace him. He explains that he had received a letter from Torranza similar to hers, instructing him to come to this door at this time. As she rests her head happily on his shoulder, she sees that the photograph of Torranzo that she had placed on the piano stand has been obscured by the pages of a music book which closed on top of it. She sees in this the sign promised by Torranza, and indication of his fading away from the foreground of her life.

Antonio Fogazzaro's An Idea of Hermes Torranza Analysis

As the editor of this collection notes, Fogazzaro shares the Romantic fascination with human emotion, and that fascination is prominent in this story. The emotional relationship between Torranza and Bianca is complex and confuses both of them. Torranza is a kind of paternal figure to Bianca, a sagacious advisor and teacher. At the same time, those fatherly feelings are mixed with sincere, if restrained, romantic ones. He probably realizes that his love for her can never be realized, but he is nonetheless unable to completely repress it and she picks up on it in the way he writes and talks to her. Though not mentioned explicitly, his letter to Bianca makes it obvious that he had formerly advised her to leave Emilio, advice which was surely colored by his own desires.

Bianca, too, is confused. While she tells herself that her love for him is like the love of a child for its parent, her actions, if nothing else, make it clear that she reciprocates, to an extent, his romantic emotions. She is kept up at night with thoughts of him and longs for the next time she will be able to see him. At the same time, however, Bianca seems to have decisively determined that her feelings for him, confused as they are, will remain hidden and she intentionally tries to cool his more intense outpourings to her.

When he realizes that he is dying, Torranza reverses his advise and urges Bianca to reconcile with Emilio. There are two possible explanations for this change of heart. First

of all, whatever remote hopes Torranza might have secretly entertained for union with Bianca are now completely gone. He no longer gains if she leaves Emilio and he is not so bitter or jealous to want her to be with no one at all. Second, Torranza is described as interested in spiritualism and it is possible that, reflecting on his death and the judgment which believes will follow it, his letter to Bianca is a kind of penance for interfering with her marriage. This reading is reinforced by the lyrics of the song he asks Bianca to play while she waits for his sign. They speak dubiously about his salvation, hoping that he is able to "burn in that love which I desired, / Which I was not willing to enjoy, impure, here" but fearing that he will behold "a Godless sky . . . amidst the funereal stars" (141).

On this last point it is interesting to note that the conversation with the Carretta family seems to reveal that Torranza's interest in spiritualism is occult or at least not totally orthodox. One of the people in the Carreta's party is a Canon, a man whose life is vowed to service of the Catholic Church. If Torranza's interest in spirits and the afterlife was nothing more than pious, orthodox Catholicism, it would not make sense that the Canon would be so critical of him and, yet, he is. As Fogazzaro himself had conflict with Church orthodoxy, it should not be surprising that the saintliness of Torranza—confirmed, perhaps, by his sign to Bianca at the end of the book—should coincide with doctrinal heterodoxy.

Renato Fucini's the Fountain of Pietrarsa

Renato Fucini's the Fountain of Pietrarsa Summary

The narrator is walking near the town of Pietrarsa when he runs into the municipal engineer. The two greet each other and the narrator teases the engineer about the fountain being built in Pietrarsa. Though all the plans for it have been laid out and the only work left to be done is physically installing it, the narrator bets the engineer that by the same time next year, not a single tile will have been laid. The engineer, believing the narrator to be a fool, happily accepts the bet.

When the narrator arrives in Pietrarsa, he discovers that the townspeople have gathered outside of the mayor's house, threatening him with spikes and whatever other objects they can find. They are angry that the fountain is going to be built so close to the rich people who live in the town and demand that it be built elsewhere. The mayor attempts to convince the people to allow the construction to continue, but, realizing they will not listen, he finally concedes. Months pass as the construction remains halted while the water from the river from which the fountain will draw continues to pour into the earth, lost forever. Council meetings are held and the result is always the same: If a plan is agreed upon, it is overturned almost immediately by this or that argument from some segment of the population. Meanwhile, Pietrarsa suffers from a drought. The engineer, embarrassed that the narrator appears to have been right, sheepishly avoids him whenever he sees him.

Renato Fucini's the Fountain of Pietrarsa Analysis

The meaning of this story is fairly obvious and the editor of the collection outlines it in the story's introduction. Fucini is making a thinly-veiled criticism of democracy. Pietrarsa—like Italy—continues to waste away its natural resources while the masses stall any and all progress that could be made. Significantly, the introduction mentions that Italian democracy would be replaced by military fascism only a few decades after this story's publication.

Gabriele d'Annunzio's the Idolaters

Gabriele d'Annunzio's the Idolaters Summary

D'Annunzio was a dominant force in Italian literature in the late-19th and early-20th century. His works are generally characterized by sensuality and emotion, though the story presented here is an exception. He was influenced by a philosophical ideal similar to Friedrich Nietzsche's "superman"—a man who was not restricted by morality but achieved whatever he wanted regardless of how it might affect others.

As the story begins, the town of Radusa is perplexed and horrified by a red light which has lingered in the sky for days; it is the aurora borealis, but the townspeople do not know it. They consult an aged, emaciated man named Giacobbe, who was, they believed, something of a holy man. He incites the crowd with visions of judgment day and approaching doom. The people look for help from the statue of San Pantaleone they keep in the church. The priest brings out its arm to attempt to ward off whatever evil has caused the sky to brighten, the people say a few prayers for help, and then the priest returns it to the church.

Immediately afterwards, the bells of a wagon are heard in the distance. The people know it is Pallura, who was supposed to bring wax for candles. The church had run out of candles and so all of their various religious activities were ground to a halt. Therefore, thinking that he has brought wax with him, the people race over to his wagon. Giacobbe is the first to look into the wagon and discovers, with horror, Pallura laying in the wagon, covered with the blood. Initially, the people believe him to be dead but eventually detect that he is breathing. The crowd murmurs among itself as to the cause of Pallura's maiming and Giacobbe suggests that the candles were stolen to be used in the church of San Ganselvo, located in nearby Mascalico. The people are infuriated at the thought, and their fury turns to action when Tallura, barely roused to consciousness, confirms Giacobbe's theory.

The men gather up arms and take the statue of San Pantaleone from the church. They load it into Pallura's wagon and ride to Mascalico. They begin to barbarically massacre everyone in the town, men and women alike. The men of Mascalico fight back with whatever weapons they can scrounge up. The church, presumably where they keep the wax, is barred up, and Giacobbe sneaks around the side to find another entrance. He manages to wiggle through and helps his comrades inside, who are already hacking at the front door. They bring the saint's statue inside the church with them and intend to install it on the altar, in place of the statue of San Ganselvo. The men of Mascalico have surrounded the altar, however, and the attack is finally thwarted. Those holding San Pantaleone are slain and the statue falls to the ground. Giacobbe is struck down next, falls on the statue, and dies.

Gabriele d'Annunzio's the Idolaters Analysis

Though intentionally written to be satirical and funny, this story pursues a rather serious point by presenting Christians as essentially pagan barbarians. The people of Radusan are, for one, highly superstitious. When they see the red skies, they assume it must be an omen of coming tribulation. They look to their similarly superstitious religious practices which apparently do not really refer to God, but to their silver statue of San Pantaleone. Their ceremonies are arbitrary but inflexible. Exorcisms, which they believe to be wholly necessary in this dark time, cannot be performed without candles. It is only natural, then, that when they discover the wax has been stolen by a neighboring town for its own religious needs, that the people are outraged. They immediately transform—if they were not so already—into a band of murderous barbarians and ravage the town of Mascalico. Like the pagans of ancient Greece or Babylon, they seek to humiliate the town by displacing its idol—of a different saint—with their statue of San Pantaleone.

Thus, clearly, d'Annunzio is an opponent of religion, which should come as no surprise given his fondness for Nietzschean philosophy, as referenced by the story's introduction. In fact, the parallels with Nietzsche run rather deeply in this story. It is interesting to note that the Catholic religion is represented here as being almost the inverse of what it claims to be. Thus, while the religion condemns murder, the people, in the name of religion, massacre hordes of innocents. The Catholic religion forbids the practice of idolatry, and yet the people clearly worship their statue; God is never even mentioned in their prayers. (It would probably be incorrect to see a parallel between the presentation of the Catholics in the story as "idolaters" and mainly Protestant criticisms of the Catholic religion. D'Annunzio is not criticizing Catholicism specifically, but religion generally.) Finally, though both towns belong to the Catholic—literally, "universal"—religion, their religions are more like the regional cults that prospered in antiquity. While d'Annunzio is surely intentionally and consciously exaggerating the similarities between the supposedly enlightened religion of Christians and the supposedly wicked religion of barbarians, he does so in order to make the point that the basic, selfish instincts of people always win out over the strictures of religion. Thus, no matter how much one religion differs from another in theory, the people will always, in practice, become barbaric.

Luigi Pirandello's the Tight Frock-Coat

Luigi Pirandello's the Tight Frock-Coat Summary

Pirandello is, after d'Annunzio, the most prominent Italian writer in the modern era. He wrote in many different formats, beginning with short stories and transitioning into novels and drama later in his life. He was the Nobel Prize winner for literature in 1934. His writing is highly philosophical and questions of self and identity pervade it: Can a person change his identity? What makes a person who he is? The story presented here, however, is not quite as a philosophically intense as other works, but deals rather with the conflict between desire and social pressure.

The story opens with Professor Gori trying on frock-coats to rent, upset that he has to wear one at all. Finally, he settles on one, but immediately after the store-clerk leaves his house, the fabric tears under the arm. His housemaid offers to mend it, but he refuses; he has no time, he is supposed to be at the wedding of one of his students, Cesara Reis, in less than an hour. He had been instrumental in arranging the marriage. The groom, a widower whose name he cannot recall, had asked him for someone to tutor his children and he recommended Ms. Reis. Though ultimately the arrangement did not work out—Reis could not spend so much time away from home—Ms. Reis attracted the groom's attention and he asked Gori to help him propose to her. She accepted.

He rushes out the door and is perplexed by the number of people milling outside the apartment building where the wedding party was to assemble. At first he thinks that he missed the wedding, but the people tell him that the wedding has been canceled because Cesara's mother died. He goes upstairs to the apartment and finds the wedding party stirring anxiously. He finds the brother of the groom and discovers the family name—Migri. He then talks to the mother of the groom. Evidently, she is happy that the marriage has been postponed and hopes that the parties involved will reconsider. The groom, he is told, is already preparing to leave town on business.

Gori asks to see Cesara and is taken into the room where her mother is laying in state. Cesara is kneeling beside the bed. He realizes that someone has to stand up for her and make sure that the wedding goes on as planned; otherwise, Cesara, now an orphan, will be alone and without any means of sustenance. He gathers the courage and tells her what she must do and, though she initially perplexed and dismayed at his insistence, she finally agrees. Gori then goes back out to the drawing room and announces that the marriage will go on as planned. He is met with cries of outrage and contempt, but he is unmoved. In his excitement, he rips off the sleeve, which had started to unravel and throws it into the air. He finds the groom and tells him that his bride has decided she wants to go on with the marriage. The groom agrees and they set out to have a simple wedding at City Hall; Gori serves as a witness. He must return, somewhat awkwardly, to the drawing room to retrieve his discarded sleeve.

Luigi Pirandello's the Tight Frock-Coat Analysis

The chief theme of the story is the conflict between natural desire and social pressures. This conflict is symbolized by Gori's frock-coat, which he finds stifling. It is so tight on his fat body that it threatens to burst at any moment and, in fact, when he is arranging the wedding for Cesara and her groom, he rips the sleeve off, a symbolic repudiation of those opinions which stand in the way of true happiness. Of course, while Gori's frock-coat is the symbol for this conflict, the uncertain relationship between Cesara and Migri is its literal counterpart in the story. The victory of desire over society is culminated when the couple decide to forgo the elaborate ceremony that had surely be planned and funded by Migri's wealthy family for a quick, unceremonial wedding at City Hall.

It is curious that Gori's motivation for wanting the marriage to go on is not grounded in romance or love. In this way, Pirandello seems to be a writer who has definitively moved past the Romantic obsession with passionate love and emotion. Gori is, instead, completely practical. Cesara lost her mother and if Migri does not marry her, she will have no money. Therefore, he sees to it that she gets married before Migri's plotting family can disrupt it.

Aldo Palazzeschi's Bistino and the Marquis

Aldo Palazzeschi's Bistino and the Marquis Summary

Palazzeschi, a Florence native, rose to prominence as a member of the Futurist literary movement. The Futurists wanted to discard all previous literature and literary forms and start anew. As such, their literature was often difficult for the average reader to understand and could even seem outright bizarre. After World War I, Futurism began to go out of style and literature returned to a more conventional form. Nonetheless, Palazzechi's later writings, while not Futurist themselves, certainly bear the mark of the movement.

The story begins with Bistino telling his wife, Nunzia, about a visit he had just made to the Marquis, his former master. Bistino loves the Marquis and recalls fondly the time they spent together. The Marquis could occasionally be harsh, even violent, with Bistino, but Bistino did not mind; in fact, the violence was a kind of affection in his mind, and he cherished it. Nunzia, on the other hand, did not like the man. He was, she thought, an immoral slob who lost his fortune by his own mistakes. She never cared to hear news about the Marquis or how he was doing; the only thing she was ever interested in was finding out what Bistino had given to him. The Marquis had been reduced to begging and Bistino was one of several donors to him. He now lives in a hotel frequented by prostitutes and is never able to pay his board; whatever money he receives he quickly squanders on a fine dinner or clothing.

Nunzia had been a servant for a Countess. The Countess was, by all accounts, a wonderful and upright woman. She had gone to great lengths to take care of her servants and had made sure that Nunzia would be taken care of after she died. After Bistino was forced to stop working for the Marquis, after not being paid for months, he took a job as the coachman for the Countess. That is where he and Nunzia met and, before long, the two were married. For his part, Bistino did not like the Countess; he certainly could not find any fault in her, but her virtue and rectitude simply bored him.

One day, Nunzia surprises Bistino by asking him if he would like to invite the Marquis over for dinner. Bistino is shocked and overjoyed. Nunzia prepares the apartment for an elegant dinner and the Marquis arrives. Bistono, however, is disappointed to see that the Marquis is not the man that he remembered. Instead of reminiscing on the good times the two had together—travels, women, drinking—the Marquis is sullen and remembering his past seems painful. Nonetheless, they invite the Marquis over for dinner again and again. One day, as if waking up, the Marquis burst out into laughter and amiably slaps him on the back. From that point on, the Marquis' visits increase and eventually he joins them for dinner every night. Finally, the next logical step is taken and the Marquis moves in.

Bistino is disappointed initially that the Marquis no longer treats him like a servant. He tries his best to make himself available for whatever the Marquis might need, listening by his door and offering help at every turn. Gradually—whether he comes around on his own or Bistino's advances finally cause him to yield—Marquis starts to treat Bistino like his servant, yelling his name out in the morning to prepare his clothing for the day and insulting him when he does not come quickly enough. Bistino is overjoyed to be a servant once again, but Nunzia thinks that the Marquis is in no position to act this way. Her arguments have no effect on Bistino, however, and she, too, is charmed by the Marquis, who treats her not like a servant, but with gentlemanly grace and charisma.

Nunzia, realizing her husband will not change, seizes on the situation. The three of them start going out to upscale cafes and restaurants and Nunzia uses the Marquis' title to raise her own social status. Though she cannot pretend that she herself is an aristocrat, she can pass off at least as wealthy woman who, perhaps, is the child or grandchild of a noble. The Marquis quickly realizes Nunzia's ambitions and gladly plays along.

Aldo Palazzeschi's Bistino and the Marquis Analysis

Bistino displays a kind of attachment to his master which most readers will, and probably should, find perverse. As the introduction describes him he is "incorrigibly feudal" (225) and seems to only be happy when he is treated like a servant. He does not want to be a particularly well-treated servant; rather, he waits impatiently for his former master to strike him with a shoe like he used to do. In Bistino's character, Palazzeschi seems to be making a psychological point about the kind of economic inequality inherent in an aristocratic system. Bistino is irreparably broken: He will always want to be treated like a wretched servant and nothing, including his wife's quite sensible pleas, will convince him otherwise.

As the introduction notes, when this story was written, Italy was going through a period of social and economic transition. The aristocracy still existed, but it no longer held the same prominence it once had. Nonetheless, it was still cherished by the nation, held aloft as a sign of Italy's glorious heritage. This is perhaps a somewhat exploitative relationship. The aristocrats no longer enjoy the economic power they once possessed—the Marquis, after all, lost all of his money—and they certainly enjoy none of their political power. Nonetheless, they bear the responsibility of dignifying an entire nation. It might, then, be reasonable to think that Palazzeschi is attempting to symbolize this new order in the relationship with the Marquis, who is thus exploited by Nunzia.

Corrado Alvaro's Broken Toys

Corrado Alvaro's Broken Toys Summary

Alvaro begins this story by discussing transportation between the northern and southern halves of the Italian peninsula. The rail line had been cut off during World War II and travel was difficult anyway before. After the liberation, a new express line was built, allowing an ease of travel previously unknown by Italians.

On one such train, traveling from Rome to the South, are gathered an assortment of people bickering over seats, yelling, tricking one another, and scheming. One man—a stocky man—observes the train and sees the people, mainly southern Italians, as reflections of people he had known and even himself in various stages of his past. He had once lived in the South, but had moved to the North when he was relatively young. He wonders what would have come of him had he stayed there. The Southern Italians on the train are simple people and traveling far from their hometowns—which he imagines are tiny, backwards places—is something that is unknown to them.

He focuses in on one woman in particular, who alternates between entertaining herself with toys, bought presumably for children waiting for her at home, and looking for her son, who has disappeared somewhere on the train. She asks him a series of questions about where he is going and how far off this or that city is. Her questions show a total ignorance either of Italian geography or the direction the train is traveling; perhaps she is simply confusing her original trip with her return trip. As the train travels through a dark tunnel, the man, for some reason, pushes a pedal which opens the car's door. The woman, standing at the door, utters a cry and the man thinks perhaps that she fell out. However, the train exits the tunnel and the woman still stands there, more confused than frightened.

Corrado Alvaro's Broken Toys Analysis

This story is a metaphor for Italian society following the Second World War. Alvaro is an outright regionalist: He believes the South, and the Southern Italians who live there, to be backwards and perhaps even hopeless. Like the woman, whose attentions shifts hazily between looking for her son and the toys, he believes the Southern Italians to all be simple and stupid. It is significant that the woman breaks both of the toys—products of the North—before they arrive in the South. This represents, perhaps, that the South, though dependent upon the North, fails to understand the great benefits they receive from it, because they arrive in "broken" form—that is, the reality of the benefits the North bestows on the South are twisted and distorted by political partisans.

As the story's introduction points out, the train's passage through the tunnel represents Italy's suffering through World War II. Many thought that, perhaps, the shake-up caused by World War II would spur the modernization of the South. However, when it was over,

the South remained as it was, like the Southern Italian woman standing bewildered at the door of the train.

Alberto Moravia's Competition

Alberto Moravia's Competition Summary

The story begins with the narrator recalling a conversation he had once had with his grandfather. His grandfather was a business owner and was teaching his grandson about the "law of competition." The law of competition means that someone else can set up shop near his business and sell the same goods at a lower price. If he doesn't lower prices, too, then he will go bankrupt. The narrator was appalled and rejected this law. He thought it was cruel and mean for someone to try to bankrupt him. His grandfather agreed but said there was nothing that could be done about it.

As an adult, the narrator sets up a business of his own, selling fruit and other goods in a cart. At first, business is very prosperous and he easily sells his entire inventory each day. However, one day, competition finally comes, in the form of a gray-haired mother and her beautiful daughter named Eunice. They set up a cart right by his and he almost immediately loses all of his customers. The narrator is dirty and scruff and potential customers almost universally prefer to give their business to the cart tended to by the beautiful Eunice. Eventually, he becomes so frustrated he threatens one customer with violence and says that the only reason he wants to buy from the women is because he thinks Eunice is pretty and his wife is ugly

In time, the narrator realizes that he has fallen in love with Eunice and he one day tells her as much. To his surprise, she says that she likes him. They start dating, but he is troubled because she never lets him kiss her. He asks her about it and she says that he has to be nice and build a relationship first. This intimidates him and he does not know what to do. Their relationship, as a result, turns more into a friendship than a romance.

One day, the narrator decides to go for a walk through the neighborhood in which Eunice lives. He happens to see her: She is walking on the street to meet another man on a bridge. The man takes her into his arms and kisses her. He sees the man's face and realizes it is a local man who owns a butcher shop. He is furious but decides not to do anything yet. The next day he decides to take out his anger on Eunice and her mother. He buys some olives and then, acting like they are rotten, spits them in Eunice's mother's face and demands his money back. The butcher is there and confronts him. The narrator pushes the butcher back and knocks down the cart. He pulls out his knife to stab him, but he is held down by two policemen. After spending some time in jail, the narrator discovers that Eunice has married the butcher.

Alberto Moravia's Competition Analysis

This story satirizes the social and economic theories which argue that the law of competition benefits society. While it may mean that the consumer can buy oranges or olives for a few pennies less, the cost to those who go bankrupt is far more significant.

In fact, when the narrator looses business, it is not even because Eunice and her mother are providing cheaper or better goods; it is only because Eunice's beauty attracts customers. This suggests, perhaps, the irrationality of the market. His financial ruin is paralleled by his personal ruin when he discovers that Eunice is in love with another man, the purpose of which is, perhaps, to make the negative effects of competition more accessible to the reader.

Characters

Bistinoappears in Bistino and the Marquis

Bistino is a retired servant in his sixties. He was born into his service as a peasant and gradually rose up through the ranks until he was the Marquis' constant companion and helper in nearly everything. He traveled extensively with the Marquis and would help him woo women; generally, when the Marquis would seduce a woman, Bistino would, almost automatically, make love to her servant. The Marquis often treated Bistino harshly and yelled all kinds of insults at him when he thought he was doing something slowly. Sometimes he would even throw objects, like shoes, at him. Bistino, however, did not mind his master's severity. In fact, he read into it a kind of affection and cherished those moments; it is not clear, however, whether the affection existed only in Bistino's mind.

Eventually, when the Marquis runs out of money, Bistino is forced to stop working for him. He takes a job as the Coachman for the Countess who employs his future wife, Nunzia. Nunzia is also a servant and it does not take long for the two of them to realize they like one another and marry. As described in the story, their marriage is a very successful one. Bistino, whose sexual experience is rather extensive thanks to the time spent with the Marquis, realizes Nunzia is not exceptionally beautiful, but they are a perfect match for one another in terms of personality.

As the story opens, there is one point they disagree upon, however: the Marquis. Though now retired, Bistino still has great affection for his old master. Pitying his misfortune, Bistino frequently meets him for lunch and pays for the meal, and sometimes even gives him a little extra money. Nunzia shocks Bistino one day asking to invite the Marquis over for dinner. Bistino instantly agrees but is disappointed to find that the Marquis does not seem to be his old, cranky self. Nonetheless, the dinner visits multiply and eventually the Marquis moves in. Bistino tries to establish their lost servant-master relationship and the Marquis initially resists, but finally yields and treats Bistino with the same severity he once had, much to Bistino's delight.

Malpeloappears in Rosso Malpelo

Rosso Malpelo is a poor boy who works long, difficult hours in a mine. He is notorious among his fellow miners and the townspeople in general for his unpleasant, even hostile temperament. He hardly talks to anyone and when he does, he usually only has insults. He frequently pulls mean-spirited pranks on people he works with for no reason other than malice. He is such a malicious child that some suspect that he has been possessed by a demon. They attribute his bright red hair to the devil, whence comes his name, "Malpelo" (in English, "evil hair"). In truth, however, Malpelo's mean disposition is certainly a result both of his father's tragic death and the distant, almost contemptuous attitude the remaining members of his family regard him with. His father, also a miner,

died while trying to clear a pillar in a mineshaft. The pillar supported the shaft's ceiling and he was buried alive. His father was the only member of the family who valued him at all, and as Malpelo's personality grew dark and bitter they drew away even more.

Despite his exterior coarseness, however, there is still a soft spot in his heart, however small. When another young boy, Ranocchio, comes to work in the mine, Malpelo adopts him, so to speak. He tries to teach the quiet and passive Ranocchio lessons about surviving in the world. His lessons are generally taught through extreme harshness and he frequently hits and yells at Ranocchio to make his points. One day, Ranocchio becomes very sick and, after Malpelo strikes him, he starts to cough up blood. In the most transparently tender moment in the story, Malpelo tries to reason that his blow could not possibly have caused Ranocchio to cough up blood; he cannot bear the thought that he might have seriously injured his only friend in the world. When Ranocchio stops coming to work, Malpelo visits his house. Ranocchio is still alive, but hardly conscious, his mind fixed firmly on the afterlife. Malpelo is perplexed to see Ranocchio's mother crying. His own family had always been so hateful towards him and had valued him only for his meager wages. Since Ranocchio could no longer work, and made very little anyway, he does not understand why his mother would be upset that he is dying.

Calandrinoappears in Decameron - Eighth Day, Third Story

Calandrino is a painter who has a reputation for being gullible. His friends take advantage of him and trick him into searching for a fictional stone that grants its possessor the power of invisibility. While on this expedition, they pretend that they cannot see him, making him believe he has the stone. However, when he returns home, his wife yells at him for coming home late and he believes that she has broken the spell on his stone. Angry, he beats her severely.

Belfagorappears in Belfagor; Story of the Devil Who Took a Wife

Belfagor is an arch-devil who is picked among the demons to see if there is any truth to a holy man's claim that wives are responsible for the damnation of most souls. He takes a human body and is given a large sum of wealth. In a short period of time, he meets, falls in love with, and marries a woman. Immediately, his life goes into a downward spiral and he soon finds himself heavily in debt. He tries to flee the city but his creditors pursue him. He hides on the farm of Gianmatteo and, in return, promises to make him wealthy by possessing the daughters of rich men and leaving at the peasant's command, making it appear that Gianmatteo had the power of exorcism. The plan works as intended and Belfagor warns Gianmatteo to stay away, since he will try to harm him in the future; he is, after all, a devil. Belfagor possesses another woman, a king's daughter, and the king seeks Gianmatteo, who has established a reputation for

himself as a man capable of casting out demons. He is finally able to cast Belfagor out of the woman by threatening to bring his wife there. Belfagor is terrified and chooses to return to hell rather than to be with his wife.

Monsignor Filibertoappears in Madonna Zilia

Monsignor Filiberto is a noble, well-respected soldier who falls in love with Madonna Zilia but is rejected by her. In exchange for a kiss, he vows to stay silent for three years. During this time, he fights valiantly against the English for the King of France and earns great favor in his court. The King, under the impression Filiberto's silence is caused by some physical ailment, offers a reward for anyone who can cure him, but warns that anyone who tries and fails will be beheaded. Madonna Zilia, moved upon hearing that he kept his vow, which she attributes to love, goes to see him. He is angry at her for the vow she made him take but has sex with her anyway. He continues to stay silent, however, to punish her by making her think that she will be killed. At the last moment, he speaks and saves her from execution. He lectures her on playing with the hearts of men and sends her back home.

Madonna Ziliaappears in Madonna Zilia

Madonna Zilia is a young widow and mother. She does not want to remarry so that she can devote her entire life to raising her child and thus she rejects Filiberto's romantic overtures to her. She finally yields to his request for a kiss but makes him vow to stay silent for three years in return. When she hears that he has kept his vow two years later she is moved by his apparent devotion and goes to see him. He is angry with her, in part because of the severity of the vow and in part because he believes she has come only to collect a reward. He nearly has the king execute her but intervenes at the last moment. Through this punishment she learns the lesson that she ought not to play with the hearts of men.

Ranocchioappears in Rosso Malpelo

Ranocchio is a poor boy who works in a mine with Malpelo. He falls ill one day and eventually dies.

Biancaappears in An Idea of Hermes Torranza

Bianca is a young woman who is married to Emilio. Their marriage is strained because she does not like his parents and thinks that he does not do enough to protect her from them. Thus, she returns home to live temporarily with her parents. She has a close friendship with an aged poet named Torranza. While they are nothing more than friends, their relationship is tinged with hints of romance. When Torranza dies, she receives a letter from him. He urges her to reconcile with Emilio and promises her that he will send

her a sign from the afterlife that night. As it turns out, the sign is Emilio, and she joyously embraces him and restores their marriage.

Torranzaappears in An Idea of Hermes Torranza

Torranza is an elderly poet who has a close friendship with Bianca. His romantic feelings for her lead him to advise her to leave her husband. He reverses his advice when he learns he is dying and begs her to reconcile with Emilio.

Emilioappears in An Idea of Hermes Torranza

Emilio is Bianca's husband. Their marriage is strained because Bianca does not think he does enough to defend her against his parents.

Giacobbeappears in The Idolaters

Giacobbe is an eccentric man whom the people of Radusa believe to be a kind of prophet. He leads the barbaric excursion to exact revenge on the people of Mascalico.

Professor Goriappears in The Tight Frock-Coat

Gori is a professor at an unnamed Italian university. Cesara Reis was one of his students and he helped arrange her marriage to Migri. When he sees that the wedding may not take place because of her mother's death, and discovers that the groom's parents are plotting against it, he takes action and ensures that it take place as planned.

Cesara Reisappears in The Tight Frock-Coat

Cesara Reis is a former student of Professor Gori whose marriage to Migri is thrown into doubt when the wedding is canceled on account of her mother's death. However, at Gori's urging, the marriage goes on as planned and the couple is wed.

Nunziaappears in Bistino and the Marquis

Nunzia is Bistino's wife. The two met when he became a servant of the Countess she had worked for for years. The two live comfortably, mainly because the Countess, who earned a great reputation for kindness and virtue, ensured that Nunzia would be taken care of after her death. Nunzia does not like the Marquis initially because of his reputation for immorality. However, she grows fond of him when he moves in and treats her with gentlemanly respect. She also finds him useful, exploiting his title as a way to rise up in the Italian social ranks.

The Marquisappears in Bistino and the Marquis

The Marquis is an aristocrat who lost all of his fortune and, in his poverty, is forced to move in with his former servant, Bistino. He has a reputation, well-deserved, for immorality and irresponsibility. He pays none of his bills and whatever money he is able to lay his hands on is immediately spent on some imprudent purchase.

Objects/Places

The Helitropia Stoneappears in Decameron - Eighth Day, Third Story

The helitropia stone is a fictional stone which Calandrino tries to discover. According to his friend's lies, it has the power to turn whoever possesses it invisible.

Mount San Donaappears in An Idea of Hermes Torranza

Mount San Dona is the home of Bianca's family.

Pietrarsaappears in The Fountain of Pietrarsa

Pietrarsa is a fictional town which is ruled democratically by its citizens.

The Fountain of Pietrarsaappears in The Fountain of Pietrarsa

Pietrarsa is unable to build its fountain—despite the fact that the town suffers from a drought—because the people cannot agree upon a location for it.

Radusaappears in The Idolaters

Radusa is the town the story takes place in and it is the site of the church of San Pantaleone.

The Statue of San Pantaleoneappears in The Idolaters

The silver statue of San Pantaleone is an idol to the people of Radusa. When they invade Mascalico they try to install it on their enemies' altar, much like the ancient pagans did in war.

Mascalicoappears in The Idolaters

Mascalico is the town the Radusans believe stole their candle wax.

The Frock-Coatappears in The Tight Frock-Coat

Professor Gori is forced to wear a frock-coat for the first time in his life for Cesara's wedding. The frock-coat represents the restrictive nature of social pressure.

The Express Trainappears in Broken Toys

After World War II, an express rail line connected the northern and southern parts of Italy.

The Law of Competitionappears in Competition

The Law of Competition states that consumers benefit from competition because weaker business, which are not able to sell their goods at prices as low as their competitors, go out of business. The narrator of the story learns this lesson in the most difficult way.

Themes

Women's Social Status in Early Italian Literature

The three earliest stories in this collection—the story from "The Decameron," "Belfagor; The Devil Who Took a Wife," and "Madonna Zilia"—all express an essentially misogynistic view of women. In Boccacio's story, it is common knowledge that women ruin magical objects, and thus when Calandrino is seen by his wife, he assumes that she has ruined his magical stone. The way the story is written, this was probably reflective of a belief somewhat common among the superstitious Italian audience for whom he was writing. Even more shocking to a modern reader is Calandrino's reaction: He furiously beats her. Nothing in Boccacio's story passes judgment on Calandrino's action and his silence approves—or, at least, tolerates—violence against women.

Misogyny is clearest in "Belfagor." The story begins with a holy man receiving a vision telling him that wives are responsible for the damnation of most, if not all, souls (of men). The devils are concerned by this theory and want to see if it is true, hence Belfagor goes to Earth in the form of a human and takes a wife. The holy man's vision appears to be true. Belfagor's wife ruins him financially and takes advantage of his deep love for her. He is finally cast back into hell when he believes that he will be forced to see her again.

"Madonna Zilia" is the tamest of the three stories in this respect but one can still glean from it some understanding of the Italian conception of women. Zilia is criticized—by the characters of the story directly and the author of the story indirectly—for being too much of a prude. Not only does she not accept Filiberto's romantic advances, she will not even obey the Italian custom of greeting him with a kiss. It would be reasonable to see in this a kind of expectation that women will yield to the advances of men, at least to some extent.

The Political Purpose of Modern Italian Literature

As Italian literature evolved, it progressively became a medium to advocate various political and social agendas. In some cases this was done indirectly by depicting situations which represent a problem and leave it to the reader to draw his own judgment about the matter. "Rosso Malpello" is an example of such a story. Nowhere in the story does Verga explicitly say that the reader ought to support workers' rights or that the economic system ought to be changed. Nonetheless, his depiction of the miserable urchin is certainly evocative and few could put down the story without feeling sympathy for those who are forced to live their lives in dark, dangerous mines. "The Tight Frock-Coat" addresses a different problem. Its subject is the conflict between natural desire and the pressures of society, depicted concretely by Cesara's uncertain marital situation.

Other stories are more overt in their agendas. "The Fountain of Pietrarsa" is really nothing more than a piece of political propaganda. If one were to take away from it all of its political substance, literally nothing would be left behind. The fountain represents economic development in Italy which would allow the country to take advantage of its rich resources. However, its construction is impeded by the constant bickering of the townspeople of Pietrarsa, paralleling the perceived inefficiency of the Italian democratic system. "The Idolaters" could also hardly be less direct with its message. By likening Catholicism to barbaric Paganism, d'Annunzio is making the point that the tenets of a religion are irrelevant, since people will always follow their base desires anyway; at most, religion will provide a justification for their violent impulses.

The Changing Subject of Italian Literature

As the three early stories in this collection indicate, Medieval and Renaissance literature in Italy focused almost exclusively on the upper class of Italian society. The characters in Boccacio's story are not exactly aristocrats, but they are painters, a profession which was well-regarded in Italian society and generally could only be practiced by a person who had the financial means to support himself. In "Belfagor," the eponymous character comes to Earth as a wealthy nobleman and his lifestyle is in keeping with his high social status. Gianmatteo, it is true, is a peasant when he is first introduced to the story, but with Belfagor's help, he becomes very wealthy. Madonna Zilia's social status is not clear, but she is probably fairly well off since she is able to support herself without a husband and draws the attention of Monsignor Filiberto who is some kind of minor nobility.

It is shocking to observe the dramatic change that occurs in Italian literature between "Madonna Zilia" and "Rosso Malpelo." Not only is the latter not about nobility, it depicts the life of the poorest, most miserable workers imaginable. This shift in subject is not without cause: It is a part of Verga's conscious advocacy for the poor. Alberto Moravia uses this same tactic to draw attention to the destructive effects of capitalism on the poor in "Competition." In this story he focuses on the misery the "law of competition" causes for the anonymous narrator. His presentation consciously invites the reader to generalize the toll, both financial and psychologically, that the free market can exact upon the most vulnerable members of Italian society.

Style

Point of View

Nearly all of the stories in this collection are written from the first-person perspective, reflecting perhaps the literary conventions prevalent in Italy. The third-person perspective is especially important in "Rosso Malpelo." Its author, Verga, was heavily influenced by the French naturalist school. According to this school, the subject of fiction ought to be presented as a cool object of scientific study. The author ought not to intersperse any prejudices, judgment, or evaluation. A first-person perspective is naturally laden with the values of the narrator and thus would be wholly unsuitable for such an "objective" style.

The only story written in the first-person perspective is "Competition," which is also the most recently written of all of the stories. The choice of perspective here is important. As the story's introduction indicates, Moravia's writing is characterized by putting the words of common, uneducated Romans into a unrealistically sophisticated and educated language. He believes that this writing style achieves a deeper analysis of the character's psychology than would an attempt to have them speak and think like they actually would. In other words, his work becomes less about representing the people who are the subject of his work and more about analyzing their behavior and motives.

Setting

All of the stories in this collection are set somewhere in Italy. In most cases, the settings are actual cities or regions. This is the case in "The Decameron" (Florence), "Belfagor" (Florence), "Madonna Zilia" (near Turin and, later, France), "An Idea of Hermes Torranza" (Padua and Mount San Dona), "The Broken Toys" (the train between Rome and Catania), and "Competition" (Rome). It is natural that the stories would be set in actual places since their readers would be almost exclusively Italians; translations were rare until somewhat recently, and so only Italian-speakers would really have access to them. This would have been especially true in the case of the three earliest stories.

It is noteworthy that the two most political stories in this collection are also the only two stories which take place in fictional cities. Pietrarsa, in "The Fountain of Pietrarsa," is a fictional village as are Radusa and Mascolica in "The Idolaters." The reason for this is fairly clear. By constructing fictional settings for their stories, the authors make their stories seem less concrete. If the story is not grounded in tangible reality, the reader is more likely to abstract and generalize the themes of the story. Thus, the inefficiencies of Pietrarsa's democracy cannot be read as if Fucini were making some point narrowly confined to Pietrarsa, because Pietrarsa does not exist. Instead, the reader sees in Pietrarsa every Italian town and, indeed, Italy as a whole. Likewise, Radusa and Mascolica are just any two Italian towns and, therefore, Italian religion—indeed, human religion—is universally flawed.

Language and Meaning

This collection allows the reader to witness the evolution of literary conventions and philosophies over the course of several centuries of Italian literature. In keeping with most European literature of the time, the first three stories, written between the 14th century and the 16th century, are all written with a plain, simple style. The role of the author is not self-conscious and it seems as if the writers of these stories want to disappear behind the narrative they are relating.

The next pieces of this collection display a literary style similar in many ways to styles prevalent in French and English literature. This is unsurprising; as the introductions mention, Italian writers were very much involved in literary movements which extended across national borders. Verga, for example, was heavily influenced by the French naturalist school. The dry, objective tone of naturalism is especially evident in "Rosso Malpelo." Fogazzaro, the author of "An Idea of Hermes Torranza," is clearly influenced by the Romantic authors, who were prominent especially in England. Romantic influence is unmistakable in the included story: the fascination with emotion, the exaltation of romantic love, and curiosity about the supernatural.

The final pieces of the collection—those pieces written in the twentieth century, specifically—show a departure from standard literary conventions. "The Fountain of Pietrarsa" and "The Idolaters" take place in vague, almost abstract settings; absent is any desire to place one's story in a concrete, identifiable place. Instead, these quasi-surreal settings allow the author to foreground the themes which underlie the stories and it is not surprising that these two works depend the most on the political and philosophical points they are attempting to make.

Structure

The collection of stories is composed of eleven short stories, none of a length much greater than twenty pages. Each story is preceded by about a page and a half of introduction which contains some basic biographical information of the author and explains his place in the world of Italian literature. Usually a paragraph or two are devoted to exposing the presented story's basic themes.

The stories are arranged in strict chronological order and the book can easily be divided into "early" and "modern" periods. To this first category belong the selection from Boccacio's "Decameron," "Belfagor; The Devil Who Took a Wife," and "Madonna Zilia." The stories were all written between the 14th and 16th centuries. In addition to their time of publication, these stories can be distinguished from the more modern works both by style and content. Stylistically, all three of these stories are very plain. The author is almost invisible and attempts to present the plot with as little flourish as possible. The subjects of the stories are always nobility or at least members of the upper-class, reflecting the values of both the writers and the times in which they lived.

The fourth story, "Rosso Malpelo," comes almost 400 years after the publication of the third story, "Madonna Zilia." The reason for this is that the short story, or "novella," fell out of artistic favor some time during the Renaissance and was only revived in the 19th century. The style of the writers in this more modern period should be much more familiar to the modern day reader. They do, however, occasionally deviate from the simple narrative paradigms of the Middle Ages employed in the early stories and as such probably require a more attentive reading. The subjects of these later stories vary, but it is characteristic of several of them to promote specific political, social, or economic agendas. This reflects that literature had become not only an art form but a platform to initiate societal change.

Quotes

"And going up into a little room and unloading there the quantity of stones which he had brought, he ran in fury towards his wife, and grasping her by the hair, he hurled her down at his feet, and there, as hard as he could strike with hands and feet, he gave her kicks and blows over all her body, without leaving a single hair on her heard or bone in her body that was not bruised; and it did her no good to beg for mercy with her hands crossed." (19)

". . . even those devils whom he had brought along as familiars, chose to return to Hell to be in hell-fire, rather than to live in the world under her rule." (35)

"In this assault Messer Filiberto carried himself as bravely as any man that was present, and he was seen by King Charles several times performing the deeds of a very brave and wise soldier, as a result of which, when the attack was renewed, Rouen was captured." (61)

"The caresses they gave him were with their feet, whenever he was in kicking range." (75)

". . . but on the other hand, everything is dangerous in mines, and if you start worrying about danger, you had better go and be a lawyer." (77)

"On the music-rack of the piano, the ballad "Last Poetical Thought"had closed over the little picture which Bianca, not long before, had put there to hold the pages; Hermes Torranza was no longer to be seen. His friend thought that this must be the promised visible sign, the farewell of the poet, who, having finished his work, was quietly withdrawing, was vanishing into the shadow, whether because of the mysterious conditions of his supernal existence, or, perhaps, also on account of an understandably melancholy sentiment." (147)

"Meanwhile the water from the spring which poured impetuously down into the depths of the declivity, roared so loudly as even to disturb the daughter or son Girolamo, who for two months, Heaven forgive her, had been practicing on the pianoforte the waltz from the Traviata for a concert in benefit of the sailors' hostels." (159)

"The silver saint, impassive and white, swayed in the thick of the melee, still held aloft on the shoulders of the four giants who were bleeding from head to foot but who refused to fall. And the supreme desire of the attacks was to place their idol on the altar of the enemy." (185)

"Usually Professor Gori was very patient with the old housemaid, who had been his servant for around twenty years. On that day, however, for the first time in his life, he had to put on a frock-coat, and was in a state of total rage." (193)

"And yet, instead of feeling pity, Professor Gori felt almost contempt for her. An imperious urge arose in him to pull her up from the floor, to shake her out of that bewilderment. She ought not to give in to destiny, which was so unfairly favoring the hypocrisy of all those upper-class people gathered in the other room!"(211)

"By now, there was no choice; from Siena there came a bare fifty lire per month, the harvests were going from bad to worse, and from Milan there came nothing because he didn't want to be bothered writing his well-known letters; for a plate of good soup and a decent lodging, he had to make the other man into the Marquis." (273)

"She would break it before she got home: who could tell what sort of town. She would be bringing broken toys to her grandchildren. They would get the impression of a world of things which were broken. . . . New things which were broken." (293)

Topics for Discussion

In "Belfagor," why do the rulers of hell think it would make them look bad if wives were responsible for most or all of the damned souls of men?

In "Belfagor," what is the significance of the fact that Machiavelli uses the name of a Roman god—Pluto—to refer to Satan?

Explain to what extent Verga follows the tenets of the naturalist literary school in "Rosso Malpelo."

Discuss the attitude towards women reflected in each of the three first stories in this collection.

Discuss similarities between pagan religions, as they are usually understood, and the presentation of the Catholic religion in "The Idolaters." What point is d'Annunzio trying to make?

Is "The Broken Toys" an allegory? If so, explain its elements.

What is the significance of the subplot with Eunice in "Competition?"