



One hundred years after the death of the writer and novelist Giovanni Verga (1922) and his relationship with public health: a glimpse of the past in the era of the SARS-CoV-2 (COVID-19) pandemic

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Keywords

Giovanni Verga • History of public health • Hygiene and literature • Medical humanities • XIX Century • Epidemiology • Social status and class

Summary

Background. In 1922 the famous Italian novelist Giovanni Verga died in Catania (Italy). In Verga's works there are many suggestions to the world of medicine, in particular the diseases described in the poor society of southern Italy of that time. One of the most common diseases described by Verga was cholera.

Methods. The authors researched and reviewed Verga's works, detecting references to public health. These are topical issues in the current period of the COVID pandemic. In Verga's works the theme of hygiene, epidemiology, and infectious diseases occur. There are many hints related to medicine, especially as far as the typical diseases of poor society and the difficult social environments of the time are concerned. One of the most common dis-

eases described by Verga was cholera but also malaria and tuberculosis occur.

Results. It was estimated that 69,000 people died of cholera in Sicily, of whom 24,000 in Palermo. The public health situation in Italy was difficult. Verga denounces people's ignorance and the survival of past beliefs.

Conclusion. Verga describes a culturally and economically humble society, in a region characterized by large class gaps. It draws a difficult picture of the public health situation in the second half of the 19th Century and people's daily lives. The authors believe that today it is important that the centenary of Verga's death be an opportunity to read his works, also from a medical historical point of view.

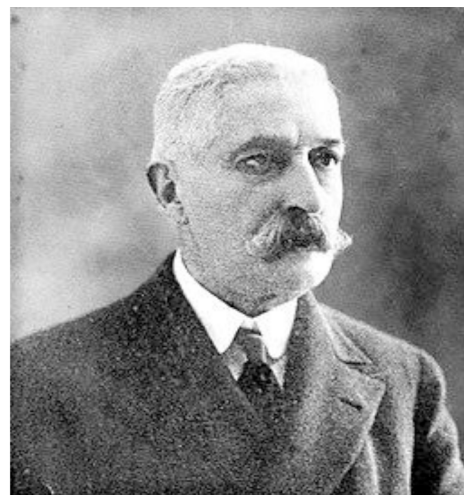
Introduction

Giovanni Verga was born in 1840 into a landowning family in the city of Catania, on the east coast of Sicily (Fig. 1). He began to write early and in 1865 he left the mainland; at first he moved to Florence (1869) and then reached Milan. A young provincial, he was excited by city delights: high society, love affairs, art, journalism, literature. Fashionable new life offered different matters for his early works as a novelist. In Milan he met several writers and intellectuals and the ideas of other writers much influenced his work. Despite of, he always kept present his native island and daily difficult life of fellow countrymen. Sicily began to be present itself into his work. Verga is known to be the most important figure of the Italian Verismo (Italian Realism), an artistic movement that developed in France in the mid-19th Century; the realist movement arose in Europe after the French Revolution and reached Italian authors particularly through the writings of Honoré de Balzac and Émile Zola and the Scapigliatura milanese ("Milanese bohemianism") group in Italy [1].

The primary interpreters of Italian Verismo (Italian Realism) were the Sicilian novelists Luigi Capuana and precisely Giovanni Verga. In particular, Italian Verismo never had the intent of social denunciation

that characterized the Naturalism in France, which was distinguished by its spirit of rebellion. Verismo's principal aim was the objective presentation of life, usually of the lower classes, using direct and simple language, with explicit descriptive and narrative detail,

Fig. 1. Portrait of Giovanni Verga (1840-1922) [Public Domain – Wikipedia Commons].



always presented in an impersonal way and realistic dialogue [1]. The new Italian writers, welcomed with great enthusiasm to the new ideas of French Realism and Naturalism exemplified by Gustave Flaubert, the Goncourts brothers, and Émile Zola. The Italian novelist Giovanni Verga died in Catania in 1922 and with this paper we remember this personality of Italian literature who started and marked a new and original style at the end of the 19th and the beginning of 20th Century.

PUBLIC HEALTH AND INFECTIOUS DISEASES IN VERGA'S WORKS

Starting with historical and patriotic novels, Verga went on to write novels in which psychological observation was combined with romantic elements, as in "Eva" (1873), "Tigre Reale" (1873); "Royal Tigress") and "Eros" (1875) turning into the most noticeable among the European novelists of the late 19th Century [2, 3].

The first translator of Verga's works was Mary Craig, who translated "I Malavoglia", with the title "The house by the medlar tree" [4], and "Mastro Don Gesualdo" with the title "Master don Gesualdo" [5].

In Verga's works there are many references to the world of medicine, in particular to diseases associated to the poor society of southern Italy at the end of the 19th Century. One of the most common diseases was cholera, an acute disease of the gastrointestinal tract caused by *Vibrio cholerae*. It was localized in Asia until 1817, when a first pandemic spread from India to several other regions of the world [6]. In 1854, a cholera outbreak in Soho, London, was investigated by the English physician John Snow (1813 to 1858). Dr Snow's revolutionary theory postulated that cholera's main route of transmission was through infected sewage finding its way into the water supply.

In particular in Verga famous literary work entitled "I Malavoglia" (Fig. 2), cholera is just as important in affecting the unfortunate family. The story tells about a family (called "Malavoglia"), who lives in a fishing village in Sicily. The whole family Malavoglia is the

main character of the book and is presented directly by the narrator at the beginning of the novel. The characters are the typical personification of the fishing family, upset by misfortunes [7]. Just as the Malavoglia family were recovering from their condition of impoverishment, while their anchovies were stacked up waiting for the right price for their sale, the epidemic broke out, the price of the anchovies fell, the character Maruzza (a housewife of the family) died, and the fate of the family took a bad turn. Verga described as Maruzza was infected: overcome by fatigue, after having been to the market, gives into the temptation to rest: "... She let herself be overcome by the temptation to rest for two minutes on those four smooth stones lined up in the shadow of the (caprificio) goat farm that is next to the chapel, before entering the town; and she did not notice, but she thought about it later, that a stranger, who also seemed tired, poor fellow, had been seated a few moments before, and had left drops of a certain filth that looked like oil on the stones. In short, she too fell for it; she took the cholera and went home she couldn't take it anymore, yellow like a vow to the Madonna, and with dark circles under her eyes" [7]. Verga describes also the steps taken to avoid the deliberately caused infection: "... But you had to beware of bad encounters, and not even accept a pinch of tobacco from someone you didn't know! Going down the street you had to walk in the middle, and away from the walls, where you ran the risk of grabbing a thousand junk; and be careful not to sit on the stones or along the walls" [7].

The cholera epidemic also becomes a focal point of another well-known literary work of Verga, entitled "Mastro don Gesualdo" as Gesualdo Motta (a parvenu) and his family take refuge in one of his country properties, which opens to all his relatives and also to the poor [8]. The story was published as a serial novel during 1888 and collected in "Nuova Antologia"; in 1889 it was published in the final draft, in a volume, after a meticulous revision of Verga, which was actually a real rewrite. The time frame covered by the novel is almost thirty years: the outbreak of the first anti-Bourbon uprisings (1820) [9] and the revolution of 1848 (at the dawn of the national process of unification). In his work, Verga illustrates the socio-economic mechanisms on which modern society is born and begins to develop, with all its problems and several contradictions, through a privileged observation point and a main character, Gesualdo.

The beginning of the tale is between 1820-1821. Verga's perseverance on the diffusion of cholera in Sicily and on the repeated poussée of the epidemic is driven by the need and desire to inform his fellow compatriots, and especially his fellow citizens who lived in the northern regions of the new Kingdom of Italy and focus on the difficult public health situation and the poor sanitation conditions of the Sicily region, the lack of sanitation facilities, sanitary standards, etc. (Fig. 3) Sicily was severely affected by the epidemic at the end of the 19th Century and it was estimated that 69,000 people died of cholera, of which only 24,000 in the city of Palermo [10]. Even the cities were in an extremely precarious hygienic

Fig. 2. Title page "I Malavoglia" by Giovanni Verga (Wikipedia commons – public domain) – (1907).



Fig. 3. Sicily – Isle (Italy) 1911 – (Public Domain).



state: there were no sewers and drinking water, but also homes, hospitals, schools and an efficient road network. In particular, the period of recession and economic stagnation had definitely worsened and two great changes and events had suddenly occurred. They were very evident and surprising: there were two cholera epidemics, which broke out in 1866 and 1867. Not only did they cause a large number of victims, but they also caused the isolation of the most important and vital centres, eliminating all trade because they were concentrated in commercial and economic centres [11]. The cholera epidemics were truly devastating events, two terrible epidemic diseases, that plunged the entire population and the local community into severe strife and deep crisis.

In 1893 there was also a severe drought and the local Sicilian newspaper “Il Giornale di Sicilia” described the situation in Carlentini (a little village close to Catania) as follows: “The state of the countryside is disheartening: the olives fall dried and drenched from the trees, lemon and orange trees are suffering, pasture is most rare, and the poor peasants are unemployed and bear more than anyone else the effect of such calamity. Misery is immense here, as all over the island” [12].

One of the most significant aspects of the presence of cholera in Verga’s work, however, is the recognition of the ignorance of people, who rely on popular rumours. A similar situation is repeated in the short story “Quelli del colera”, where some strangers “took out

their handkerchiefs, pretended to blow their noses, and dropped certain invisible powders, which whoever stepped on it to his misfortune was done!”.

This concept of “pestis manufacta” occurs also in “Mastro Don Gesualdo” (...) “The cholera was brought to Salonia by a traveler who was walking around with his saddlebag on his shoulder. These days, imagine! Some have seen him on the farm. Then all night, noises on the roof and behind the doors... And the grease spots that have been found here and there a day!... Like snail slime” [13].

Also the aristocrat don Ferdinando, Gesualdo’s brother in law, was persuaded that cholera enters through the cracks and, for this reason, he stuck strips of paper wherever there was a hole.

Verga refers to the popular riots, the climate of suspicion, the fires and the patrolling guards: people did not believe in the apothecary’s suggestions for hygiene, cleaning of stables and animal shelters, which, in reality, were the vehicle of the infection. The sewage in fact also contaminated the spaces where people lived and the infected water was the reservoir of the *Vibrio* [14].

Understanding cholera was a long and difficult process: the disease was generally attributed to miasmatic causes, but this concept was replaced, between about 1850 and 1910 by the scientifically founded germ theory of disease. For the understanding of the disease, the contributions of John Snow, Filippo Pacini, and Robert Koch were pivotal. John Snow (1813-1858) identified water as vehicle of

infection during the epidemic of 1854, Filippo Pacini (1812-1883) in the same year discovered in the intestinal mucosa of people died of cholera millions of elements, which he called Vibrions; Robert Koch (1843-1910) in 1883 isolated the Comma Bacillus in pure culture and explained its mode of transmission, solving an enigma that had lasted for centuries [14].

In the years in which Verga was writing, the debate was still very animated, but, above all, it was difficult to uproot ancient opinions, superstitions and popular beliefs in a retrograde and culturally very poor environment.

VERGA AND MALARIA

Another disease to which Verga attributed great attention was malaria, which must not be interpreted only as the disease caused by a parasite that commonly infects a certain type of mosquito, which feeds on humans, but as a general term for "fever".

1. An entire story of the "Novelle Rusticane", "Malaria", is dedicated to the disease, and to its effects on certain individuals.

One of the characters of the story is an innkeeper, who was nicknamed "Wives-Killer" (Ammazzamogli), because all four of his wives had died of malaria, causing him a serious economic loss, as a wife was indispensable for the management of the tavern.

The ideology of the story provides that men, animals and objects are all involved in the slow consumption caused by malaria, which appears almost like an inexorable disease of the time [15].

It is thus emphasized that in these places, there are fertile fields where the peasants work incessantly to bring home something to eat, but they often end the ears, as they weaken until they die.

Il Biviere (brackish lake) is mentioned here at the beginning of the work and is described as a pond without a boat, with flat banks, without a tree on the shore: all this to affirm that due to the spread of the disease no fisherman can carry out his own activity. Another passage underlines the spread of the disease: "Here the shepherd is yellow with fever, white with dust and with swollen eyelids. It is that malaria enters your bones with the bread you eat and if you open your mouth to speak".

In the story "La roba", malaria is evoked by sleep, which makes the eyelids heavy and makes one lose awareness of things.

However, there is another important feature in the poetics of Verga, which offers highly topical insights into today's medicine and is the very language of medicine.

In fact, e.g. in "Mastro Don Gesualdo", Verga proposes the scene of the consultation of some doctors at the bedside of Mastro Don Gesualdo, who has been suffering for stomach-ache [8]. Mastro Don Gesualdo waits for the response and anxiously invites doctors to comment on his state of health:

"Speak, my lords!" – then exclaimed the poor man pale as a dead man – "I'm the sick one, finally! I want to know how I am."

The doctors begin the explanation of the case, using

a terminology incomprehensible to the master: Pylori cancer, the pyrosis of the Greeks. Then they deepen the diagnosis, with technical words, difficult to understand, so much so that Mastro Don Gesualdo has a positive impression of his condition:

"This is all fine. But tell me if you can heal me, your lord. Without interest... paying you according to your merit..."

Despite the unfortunate diagnosis of a gastric carcinoma, Mastro Don Gesualdo shifts the attention to his economic possibilities, hoping to buy the expertise of the doctors with his wealth and, consequently, his recovery. One of the doctors ventures into the details of the surgery, so bloody that the women present at the scene run away crying and invoking the Virgin.

Mastro Don Gesualdo claims his autonomy, asks to be able to decide for himself, and he resigns himself to being operated on only if he has the certainty of recovery.

The doctors cannot give this certainty and they do not accept what they consider a "charlatan's bet" and Mastro Don Gesualdo refuses the intervention [8].

2. Also in a well-known novel titled "Rosso Malpelo" [16], the author Giovanni Verga describes a culturally and economically humble society, in a region characterized by a great difference in social status [17] (Fig. 4).

The enormous demand for sulfur, a precious element used mainly in the production of gunpowder, encouraged the opening of a huge number of mines in the central area of Sicily, in which many of the region's poor farmers went to work. They worked from 10 to 16 hours a day, pulling heavy loads of sulfur weighing 20-25 kilos (for the youngest boys) and up to 70-80 kilos for 16/18 year olds through the narrow tunnels of the mines. The fatigue to which the children were exposed often made them grow crippled or stunted and Verga represents this situation in a very detailed and realistic way.

VERGA AND TUBERCULOSIS

Another disease mentioned in Verga's works is tuberculosis. Tuberculosis is an ancient infectious disease caused by *Mycobacterium tuberculosis*, isolated by Robert Koch at the end of 19th Century, when it was one of the most common diseases [18].

Tuberculosis and humans have coexisted for more than 40,000 years and is still nowadays afflicting humans all over the world [19]. A century ago, in Italy and in most other western countries, four out of every thousand people died of TB every year, and most of these deaths occurred among young adults [20].

The hygienic-sanitary situation of Sicily in the second half of the 19th Century was really hard and in particular poor people had a hard time living. Within this social context took place the above-mentioned short story entitled "Rosso Malpelo".

This "Novella" was collected and published in 1880 along with other "Novelle" and published later in 1879-1880 in

Fig. 4. Photograph taken by Giovanni Verga – “La Sicilia rurale” (Wikipedia Commons – public domain).



“Vita dei campi” (literally Life of the fields/country life). It is the story of a poor boy called “Rosso Malpelo” (he was nicknamed this way for his red hair), a boy despised and considered bad because of a popular belief linked to people with red hair. Rosso Malpelo works in a red sand quarry and he leads a hard life. Verga describes the reality of poverty and exploitation suffered by the poor social class in Sicily at the end of the 19th Century, in the years of the formation of the kingdom of Italy (1861), a situation he knew well [21-23].

The author’s literary style is full of popular expressions and idioms. In this tale, a working boy (called Ranocchio, “Frog”), who worked as miner in the quarry was suffering from tuberculosis, as he “didn’t heal and continued to spit blood and he has the fever every day”. In “Mastro Don Gesualdo” the character called Donna Bianca was sick and spitting blood every morning; she died of consumption a few years later. Also in “Tigre reale” Verga described women suffering from tuberculosis.

Conclusions

The picture that emerges from Verga’s pages is therefore that of a culturally and economically humble society, in the Sicily of the 19th and early 20th Century large estates, where there was great inequality between rich and poor. The entire island featured levels of extreme misery and political and social unrest.

The unification of Italy had brought to light the problems

of the previous governments and the unification is seen as the umpteenth invasion of a foreign people.

From this point of view, Verga’s testimony offers an extremely difficult picture of the hygienic-sanitary situation in Sicily in the second half of the 19th Century, and the anniversary of Verga’s death is an opportunity to read his work also from a point of medical historical view.

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Each author declares that they have no commercial associations (e.g. consultancies, stock ownership, equity interest, patent/licensing arrangement etc.) that might pose a conflict of interest in connection with the submitted article.

Authors' contributions

DL designed the study, DL and MM conceived and drafted the manuscript; the authors revised the manuscript, performed a search of the literature. Both authors critically revised the manuscript. Both authors have read and approved the latest version of the paper for publication. Furthermore: DL: conceptualization, and MM and DL: methodology, software, validation, formal analysis, investigation, data curation, MM and DL: original draft preparation, MM: review and editing.

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