



Research Article

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The function of church in Deleddian novels

PhD (C.) Serxha Kolaj
University of Tirana, Albania

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2478/ejels-2025-0012>

Abstract

This paper focuses on the author Grazia Deledda, a significant figure not only in the literature of the 19th and 20th century but also an important factor in the promotion of tourism on the island of Sardinia, where many visitors seek to explore the locations described in her works. Grazia Deledda was the first Italian woman and the second in the world to ever win a Nobel Prize.

In the writer's works, particularly in the "deleddian world", religious structures are a distinctive feature as a symbol of the spiritual cult, as well as a background element. The study centers on the churches described by Deledda, highlighting their role and significance within her literary works. The article brings into focus the legends of these ancient churches, as well as the style and architecture of each and every one of them. Moreover, the religious aspect is a fundamental element in Grazia Deledda's works, where God's calling is depicted through the characters' ascetic lives. The author has been considered a biblical figure and she exhibits a strong connection to Catholicism, the presence of God and the blame-sin-redemption triangle. The analysis of these works highlights the fact that the religious structures mentioned in the novels represent symbols filled with implications and hidden truths, often dark, frightening, and loaded with sin.

Keywords: church, God, asceticism, guilt, regret, religion, tragic.

1. Introduction

This paper forms part of Italian literary studies, with a particular focus on the works of author Grazia Deledda. After providing an overview of some of her key works and the themes she explores, the paper specifically examines the churches depicted in her writing, highlighting their significance and role within her literary world. Additionally, it offers a brief history of some of Deledda's most notable works, with an emphasis on the function of church buildings, both in their emotional significance and their role within the social and cultural fabric of the local community. While Sardinia has long been the subject of scholarly studies exploring the landscapes

and places described by Deledda, relatively little attention has been given to the religious buildings she so vividly and meticulously portrays. This study seeks to develop a literary touristic tour, focusing on these religious structures, which, among other things, carry rich and important narratives that resonate deeply within her works.

2. The work and religion of Grazia Deledda

Deledda's work has been referred to by Italian critics as "the catholic novel". In Deleddian novels, the element of biblical religion is inevitable. The beginning of the novel is always characterized by a pessimistic tone, then, the author tries to convey the sense of sin, which prompts the need for a force superior to the mundane - the need for God. The main elements of her work are transcendence and superstition, the latter being especially linked to sin and regret. Deledda's characters do not possess a religious spirit as the Greeks do. On the contrary, they acknowledge God's will in life events and accept joys, sorrows and lastly the need for asceticism. Deledda's characters are real people that she has physically known and who tell stories that she heard of in her hometown, but the author twists them to her own liking to emphasize the religious aspect. It is essential to know that Deledda does not explore a personal "religious belief", but simply wants to punish evil. In 1896, she herself writes: *"If I tell stories of the people I have met in life, which is something worse than good, it is on the firm conviction that I am performing a moral act, always condemning evil"* (Casnati, 2017). For example, in the novel *"Reeds in the Wind"*, Efix is a character that demonstrates the purity of the heart and the humility that should prevail over pride, because we are put on this earth to suffer, this is a concept by Deledda, who, through her characters, portrays an unattainable righteousness, but only through another world beyond the mundane. Efix says: *"We are like reeds and fate is the wind", well: why this fate? - "and why the wind? Only God knows"* (Casnati, 2017).

It is evident that in Deleddian works, God remains loving, but when the moment of punishment arrives, God condemns the character to be deprived of love. The actions of her characters always have religious intentions, which implies that they are conscious of the concepts of good and evil.

3. "Reckoning with God: Guilt, Salvation and Tragedy in the Deleddian Universe"

"Ivy" delves into the story of Annesa, daughter of God, since her origins are not known. Standing next to a dead beggar, she is taken in by the Decherchi family. Annesa is Deledda's most complex feminine figure. She falls in love with her master, Paulo, and similar to an ivy supports him to the point where she even commits murder for his sake. Annesa knows that uncle Zua guards a treasure under his mattress, and one night when she receives a letter from Paulo, telling her that if she does not find the money to save the family from the economic crisis, he will commit suicide, Annesa

smothers the old man with a blanket. It is similar to Dante's hell scene — Annesa and Paulo resemble Paolo and Francesca, although Annesa's fate is even more tragic due to the act of murder. Annesa was not a religious woman and did not believe in God because Paulo was an atheist and had instilled in her the idea of God's nonexistence: *"And he had been her best and most influential teacher. He had taught her everything he knew — or thought he knew. He had shown her the constellations and explained the origin of mankind, the mystery of thunder and lightning. He had wooed her by introducing her to romance novels and, in the end, he had convinced her that God didn't exist"* (Deledda, 2022). It appears as if every bad thing happens to them because they rejected God and they are conscious of the evil within them, so they await punishment. The dialogue between priest Virdis and Annesa is the novel's key point, where he tries to persuade Annesa that there are no excuses in front of God. *"Only God can save you" — he continued, lowering his voice even more. You have erred time after time, because this is the fate of the one who is on the wrong path. Only the deceased can no longer rise. The living fall and rise again, and the sick can be healed. Annesa... a little earlier I told you that your soul is dead, but I was wrong. The soul does not die; it grows sick. Your soul, tainted by a plague — an evil that poisons the air around you. Let us try to heal it. Anna, answer my question: do you still believe in God? You're not answering? Let me repeat: now I am no longer your guide, nor your judge — I am your healer now"* (Deledda, 2022). Using guilt and sin as a foundation, Deledda wants her readers to be able to comprehend the existence of evil. Annesa is *"Eros and Thanatos — the drive for pleasure and the drive for destruction"* (Manca, 2010). Her characters face an internal struggle, where worries and anxiety stemming from "social constraints" emerge. In the face of pain, suffering and anxiety, one can very well surrender, but what the Deleddian characters choose are the risk of religion and the mystery of God. Only those who acknowledge the benevolence of God need not fear their fate. The only thing left to save Annesa is a life of asceticism and she turns to God with the only hope left in her. *"Oh Lord, my Lord! Help me! If I must return to the world, then help me! I no longer want to lie, to cheat or to do any harm. I do not want to marry Gantine and deceive him. I do not want to marry Paulu and sin with him. I am not worthy of anyone. I shall live alone, take care of the sick, work and only bear the weight of my own sins"* (Deledda, 2022). *"The Church of Solitude"*, the last book from Grazia Deledda tells the story of Maria Concezione, the novel's protagonist who suffers from breast cancer. In fact, Deledda herself was the one suffering from this illness, which proved to be fatal. Concezione falls into despair and decides to cut ties with every man, including Aroldo. He is dependent on alcohol and even attempts suicide. At this point, Concezione decides to tell Aroldo about her illness. The deleddian character is a sinner that needs to go through a calvary of pain, and such pain finds rest in the house of God, where people go to church to express the strongest desires of their beings. *"I should not have children... I should not" she thought, through the words of her prayer. "And it is fair... it is fair. Everything is fair by Your will, oh Lord!"* (Deledda, 2012). It's precisely here that Concezione (camouflaged under the name Concezione) has a *"my fault"* that makes her feel guilty in front of God, a mysterious sin that is revealed later on in the novel, apparently turning out to be a teenage love story where according to her,

the reason why the boy attempts suicide is due to her sake. However, at the end of the story she writes: *"This was Maria Concezione's secret and needless regret"* (Deledda, 2012), which proves that in reality she is not to blame, but is simply going through an internal spiritual crisis and feels the need to be punished. Sin emerges naturally due to trivial reasons, but the guilt of deleddian characters does not indicate hatred, but rather compassion. Deledda's character is not a hero nor a celestial character, but real and worldly, always on an anxious journey to save oneself and in the search of finding peace. Her characters such as: Elias Portolu, Annesa, Paulo and Efix possess a bare soul, always prepared to defy laws and the power of fate. In the deleddian art, the protagonists are the Sardinian priests, servers, bandits. This is because they are deprived souls and Deledda is interested in the spiritual, tragic, loneliness and pain that burdens their lives. The novels *"The Woman & the Priest"* and *"Elias Portolu"* delve into the story of two priests. Maria's only son, Paulo, becomes a priest in Aar and is adored by all the villagers. However, Paulo is a sinner just like any other deleddian character - a male led by instincts who has let himself be confused by his bodily desires because he is in love with Agnes. His mother notices his excessive care *"There, in fact, Paulu was moving again. Perhaps he was standing directly in front of the mirror, although this was forbidden for the priests"* (Deledda, 2011) and discovers the passion that bonds her son with Agnes. Paulo is going through a more intense emotional turmoil than she is, being head over heels with the girl and having to fight his bodily passions — the conflict with the girl he loves because he cannot make her his and give her what she wants, and the conflict with his mother, who watches his every step. Here comes the sin for Paulo — he too is a victim of guilt and had to be alone in spirit. After meeting Agnes that night, he stops in front of the door of the church and realizes the evil he has succumbed to, but at the same time, he does not want to give up on Agnes either: *"He stopped, breathing with difficulty in front of the church door. He felt himself completely frozen, as if he were naked in front of everyone in the small village and that all his pitiful believers would see him that way in their restless sleep: naked and bruised from sin"* (Deledda, 2011). As seen at this point, the church is an element of clarity for Paulo, as a call to remind him of the right path. In this novel, love is typically morally-religious. Deledda wants to highlight passion more than moral conscience, although sin never strays the character far from God. On the contrary, the presence of God is even stronger and he is called for when in need.

The last night that Paulo visits Agnes, she realises that he is not leaving her for fear of God but for fear of scandal, and that is why she chooses to reveal the secret in front of everyone in church. Although Agnes says nothing, the mother sits in a church bench, silent and motionless with a rosary in her hands, praying for her son till death. With this ending chosen for the mother, it is understood that she has paid for her son's sin with her death. In the novel *"Elias Portolu"* Deledda delves into the story of Elias that will later become a priest. The story begins when Elias returns home after imprisonment, the reason for it not being known. From the moment he lays eyes upon his brother's fiancé, he falls head over heels for her. This is where Elias' intense inner turmoil begins, in which he cannot even find the strength to fight back

or break free. This novel depicts the relationship between man and God. Elias is a christian who embarks on a complicated journey to find God — a journey that has a beginning but no end. Elias experiences a painful moment in San Francesco church, which indicates his inner turmoil: *“Elias knelt on the altar steps, his hat thrown over his right shoulder, and began to beat his chest and head, groaning softly”* (Deledda, 1920). The only thing that can save him is asceticism and unless Elias atones for his sins, he will be a lowly, evil man, while the path of asceticism makes him elevated because he has not submitted to sin but is rather fighting against it. Elias does not manage to win against bodily passion and impregnates his sister-in-law, who will soon give birth to his son. Later on, having turned into a priest, he starts suffering more than ever because he can no longer be a father to his child. *“Oh God, you can see I’m weak and unworthy. Have mercy on me, my Lord! Forgive me, grant rest to my soul, rip my heart from its cage! I am human — I cannot defeat myself. Why did You make me so weak, oh Lord?”* (Deledda, 1920). Although in the novel *“Elias Portolu”*, it seems as if God is punishing him in his most vulnerable spot: the death of his son, he has not handed his life to God because he has felt the calling, but to save himself from sin and the prejudice of others. With the death of his son, Elias understands that he has been cleansed of sin and gotten what he deserves. *“At last, at last he was alone with his child; no one could take it away from him anymore, no one could come between them. And despite his infinite sorrow, he felt a light veil of peace, almost joy, descend and envelop him — like the fog of that mysterious autumn night. His soul was finally alone, cleansed of pain, free from every human passion, in the presence of the Almighty and Most Merciful”* (Deledda, 1920). In the novel *“Reeds in the Wind”* the narrating focuses yet again on the fierce love that leads the characters to fall into sin and guilt. This novel tells the story of the four Pintor ladies and of Lia, who escapes from her violent father and is helped by Efix, who has fallen in love with her. In order to help Lia, Efix accidentally kills Mr.Zame. The story begins when Lia sends a letter to notify the arrival of her son, Giacinto. An important element are the sacred places, mentioned several times such as: churches, shrines, cathedrals, temples, and so on. Efix, whose name is also biblical, realizes that his end is near and sets out on a pilgrimage into shrines to atone for his sins — he goes to church, kneels and prays for his sin that will not let him to live. *« “Lord, I thank you, Lord. Take my soul now; I’m happy to have suffered, to have sinned, because I experienced your divine Pity, your pardon, your help, your infinite greatness. Take my soul, like a bird takes a grain of wheat. Lord, scatter me to the four winds. I will praise you because you have filled my heart....”* (Deledda, 1913). Deledda attempts to give meaning to existence itself, which is that of a life that belongs to God and for which, one should prepare in front of God.

4. “Deledda’s Spiritual Spaces: Churches and Shrines as an Influence in Her Creativity”

Nuoro and Sardegna are renowned for the importance that Deledda places on them in her works, but alongside them, special emphasis is also placed on other spaces such as churches and shrines. The author’s thoughts and memories are conveyed through



Figure 1: Church of the Madonna of Solitude in Nuoro, Sardinia.

the places with which she shares a deep emotional bond. These natural spaces shape her whole being and strongly affect her literary creativity. "The Church of Solitude" (Figure 1) is an actual church located in Nuoro, built in 1622. To this day, there is very little left of the original building, as it went through reconstruction in 1950-1957 by the project of the architect Giovanni Ciusa Romagna. However, an architectural style similar to the previous one has been preserved. On one side of the church there are some trees that create a natural and serene atmosphere. Close by lays an alleyway

that leads you to the top of Mount Ortobene, from where you can enjoy a breathtaking view of the surrounding nature. Within the church, on the right side, a sarcophagus made of black marble is kept, holding the remains of Grazia Deledda, who passed away on 16 August 1936. Firstly, her remains were buried in Verano of Rome, but it was later proposed that they be transferred to Nuoro, in "The Church of Solitude". About five meters from the church, there stands the monument "Andando via", designed by the artist Maria Lai. This monument is oriented towards both the earth and the sky and is regarded as a place of meditation. The bronze gate, crafted by Eugenio Tavolara, depicts Madonna of Solitude at the center, while the background showcases shepherds, flocks of sheep, animals, castles, men and women: "It was a small church, with a façade, facing directly towards this valley. In front and on one side it was surrounded by a flat surface, fortified by a low wall covered in plants, which enclosed a sort of garden with fruit trees. You could open a small wooden gate there and a narrow path led to the eastern side of the small church, which also served as a dwelling. Only two small windows with iron bars could be opened on the wall of the old building, where the road curved down to the square. The roof with black tiles, covered by moss and parasitic plants, belonged to both the small church and the dwelling" (Deledda, 2012). "The Church of Solitude" is a dual space. On one hand, it is a public space - the house of God and a place of worship and prayer. On the other hand, it is integrated with a private residence, which is also the house where Concezione lives. The residence-church is built by Concezione's grandfather, but it also holds a veil of mystery. According to the doctor's stories, the church was exploited by Concezione's predecessors, who were thieves, and it is said to contain a hidden passage. "According to what the people said, our grandfathers and great-grandfathers, may God forgive them, used the secret passage for their glorious endeavors. They entered the passage through a trap door beneath the altar in the church, exited the cave, and set off in search of their destiny like wandering knights. With the spoils they had won, they returned to the cave, where the slaughtered sheep were stored, much



Figure 2: Church of Santa Maria Maddalena in Lollova.

like in a cooler, and where other supplies were gathered as well" (Deledda, 1913). "The Church of Santa Maria Maddalena" (Figure 2) The setting of the novel "The Woman & the Priest" is in Lullova, which Deledda calls Aar. The church was built at the beginning of the 1600s in the gothic style and was later rebuilt in 1842. The church has a neoclassical style, with three naves and small windows that illuminate it from within. It also contains a rectory. This church is dedicated to Maria Maddalena, who is described as a sinner in the Bible.

Just as the biblical figure, this church too hides a tragic secret. It is said that a nun, cooperating with a local shepherd, engaged in human trafficking. For this reason, all the nuns were forcibly expelled. Walking away, one of them desperately calls out: "May you be like the water of the sea - never swelling, never drying away!" (Dedola, 2020). And it is true that the number of residents in Lullova has neither increased nor decreased. As it appears, the prophecy has been fulfilled. Although Deledda does not mention this actual scandal, she tells us about the scandal of Paulo and Agnesa, which is a true story.



Figure 3: The Shrine of Virgin of the Martyrs.
Source: Sardegna Ospitale

"The Church of San Pietro" (Figure 3) is a place of worship in the novel "Reeds in the Wind". It is located in Galtellì and was built in the eleventh - twelfth century, but it has undergone several reconstructions over the years. In a corner of the meadow, near the church, there is a stone monument dedicated to Grazia Deledda - it is an open book with written phrases from the writer. The church had remained abandoned for a long time until a fresco was discovered, hidden underneath the plaster for centuries. This fresco represents a fundamental episode in Roman mural painting in Sardegna and stands as a medieval

testament of great significance, as it is the only fresco of its kind on the island. The fresco depicts scenes from both the Old Testament and the New Testament, appearing on the left and right side, while on the counter façade. In the novel "Reeds in the



Figure 4: Photo 3: Church San Pietro,
Gltelli. Source: Nomade Culturale

the Basilica, surrounded by green and purple spiderwebs! There, the gray wall, the rusty gate, the old graveyard filled with white flowers marking the remains, standing amidst the wheat stalks!" (Deledda, 1913).

At the entrance of San Pietro church stands the monument built in honor of Grazia Deledda, who, through her literary works, has greatly influenced the development of tourism in Sardinia. Across from Don Predu's house, the mayor of the municipality of Galta, stands the Santa Croce church and a bit further is the Santissimo Crocifisso church, renowned for its bells. This church was originally called Santa Maria delle Torri, and later in 1500, it was expanded. It has a basilica plan with a central nave, while on its left, there are four shrines built in the gothic-Catalan style. Within it is kept the statue of Christ, brought by bishop Paolo from Rome in 1300. It is said that a miracle happened in 1550, where the statue of Christ started sweating blood. *The Small Church of Madonna di Valverde* is the place from where Efix in the novel *"Reeds in the Wind"* sets off, after having walked a considerable distance from Galta to Nuoro. This church was built by a devout believer, Nicola Sulis Manca, and has since become a pilgrimage destination for believers from all over Sicily. The Shrine of Virgin of the Martyrs, the Assembly of San Francesco and the Oratory of San Michele are religious structures located in Fonni, Sardinia, which are mentioned in Deledda's novel *"Ashes"*. After moving to Barbagia in 1610, the Franciscan priests built a church dedicated to the Holy Trinity. In 1702, at the initiative of the priest Pacifico Guiso, a new shrine started construction in the foundations of the pre-existing church, dedicated to Virgin of the Martyrs, located in Martyrs square, in Fonni. The shrine is named Virgin of the Martyrs (Figure 4) because it houses a statue of the Virgin Mary and is said to have been built using the dust of the bones of martyrs buried in the catacombs of *San Callisto in Rome*. The decoration of this church was done by the painter Pietro Antonio Are and his son, Gregorio. The building also includes the Oratory of San Michele, constructed in 1759 in the rococo style, following a Lombardy model. Its interior is richly decorated with paintings from the 17th-18th century.

Wind", the church is described as demolished in a dark frame under the presence of "Madonna", *Magdalena bends forward, leaning on her dark frame, beside the unknown.*" (Deledda, 1913). Near the San Pietro church, there is the incomplete Basilica, which has considerable dimensions. It is thought to have remained incomplete for economic reasons, as the walls are of the same height, which proves that they have not been destroyed by wars or natural disasters: "...there, see the thicket of



Figure 5: The Sanctuary of San Francesco, Lula
Score: Sardegna Ospitale

The San Francesco Church (Figure 5) is located in Lula and dates back to 1500. The shelters around the church are present to this day. From this spot, you can admire Monte Albo, an especially significant element to Deledda, which she uses as a setting in the novel *“Elias Portolu”*. The church is described as white with red roofs. Inside, there is a large statue of Saint Francis and two other smaller statues, brought from the *San Rozario* church in Nuoro: *“Si scorgeva la chiesa, coi suoi muri bianchi e i tetti rossi, adagiata a mezza china tra il verdeggiar delle brughiere.”* (Deledda, 1920). This

church has a garden surrounded by barracks and a perimeter wall. It is one of the few churches that Deledda describes as beautiful. It doesn't appear to be old or demolished but fresh and clean, with marble floors. *“... there is the beautiful church, surrounded by houses, the yard, the boundary wall, and the open gate. It resembles a castle — entirely white and red against the deep azure of the sky, set amid the wild greenery of the high meadows.”* (Deledda, 1920). Deledda also explores the legend behind the construction of this church. *“The San Francesco church rises above the mountains of Lulla. According to legend, it was built by a bandit, who, weary of his wandering life, promised to surrender to justice and build a church, if he were forgiven”* (Deledda, 1920).

5. Conclusion

Grazia Deledda is the first Italian woman to ever win the Nobel Prize for Literature. Her literary style was notably influenced by 19th century Russian literature, particularly in its psychological depth and exploration of universal topics such as guilt, redemption and facing one's destiny. Deledda emerges as a deeply spiritual writer, with religious belief prevalent in all her works. The presence of religious elements is not merely decorative but rather represents a crucial space where her characters confront themselves. At the peak of tragedy, amidst the serenity of the church and in the presence of God, sin, feelings of guilt and deeper pain unfold. It is precisely here where there are attempts for spiritual cleansing — through prayer and penitential life — in the hopes of liberation and forgiveness.

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