

# The geographical poetics of giovanni verga

Literature



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The primary thrust of Moe's argument is that Verga's experience of Milan, "the most civilized city in Italy,"<sup>1</sup> by Verga's own admission offered an interesting counterpoint from which to pose the "southern question," namely the menacing and problematically picturesque Sicily and the rest of the South. His experiences there made him intensely aware of the cultural, geographical and political distance that separated the two regions, and that this distance is manifested narratively in the work of Verga. Moe proceeds to explicate this notion of distance through a close textual analysis of a number of works. In *Eva*, a story about a "doomed love affair" between Enrico and the title character, he presents an interchange between the two of them. When Eva asks how far away is Sicily she wonders, "Farther than Naples." We can see Moe's idea of geographical poetics being played out in this example by how the characters conceive of distance, not in kilometers, or length of the trip but the distance past a preconceived geographical barrier, Naples. For Verga, his audience is primarily non-Southern and certainly non-Sicilian as he is heavily involved in the Milanese circle of writers and publishers, and thus he is aware of the sort of exoticized sentiment that many of his readership approach his subject matter. Thus, Verga has a double-responsibility of aesthetically representing Sicily and the South in such a way that is recognizable and foreign, picturesque and menacing, the South as a geospatial concept and idea and the reality of life in the South. Throughout the novels and short stories of Verga, the author himself seems to fluctuate between these two antipodes, addressing the picturesque while simultaneously problematizing its narrative validity.

Another geographically poetical symbol that undergoes this process is the symbol of "the sea" in his works. In such stories as "Across the Sea" the sea

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plays an integral semiotic role in representing the rural and picturesque Sicily. Though in other works such as *I Malavoglia*, the sea does not operate symbolically, and thus Moe suggests that Verga's goal is to show that the sea is not the *sine qua non* of understanding the region, though Verga cannot escape its hold on the imagination of his readers. In dealing with the sea as setting and symbol, Verga is cognizant of the geographical poetics working in his novels and short stories.