

GESM 120 Seminar in Humanistic Inquiry
Trauma, Death, and Love in Italian Storytelling

Fall 2020



John William Waterhouse: "The Decameron" (Liverpool Museum)

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Course description:

This course explores Italian storytelling from the Middle Ages through the 20th century. We will focus on the themes of love, trauma, death, and the power of the creative word. It will begin with a discussion of how storytelling and the imagination heal a society undone by pestilence and death. Giovanni Boccaccio's masterpiece, the *Decameron*, is a collection of tales narrated by ten young storytellers during the Black Death pandemic of 1348.

Death, love, and poetic creation are crucially intertwined in the next author we will read. Dante's *The New Life* is a 13th-century masterpiece that narrates the story of young Dante's love for Beatrice, which led him to a new understanding of the meaning of love and a new way of making poetry.

Nineteenth-century poet and philosopher Giacomo Leopardi views love as a benign illusion—a façade of meaning in a materialistic universe governed by mechanistic and deterministic laws. Imagination, if unhindered by the knowledge of truth, is the largest source of human happiness.

For nineteenth-century realist author, Giovanni Verga, storytelling has the power to expose the injustice inherent in inalterable structures of reality. While his universe is governed by the Darwinian law of the survival of the fittest, he is most concerned on those tragically left behind.

We will then examine how trauma, death and love come creatively into play in lyric operas such as Giacomo Puccini's opera *Tosca*.

With twentieth-century novelist and playwright Luigi Pirandello, we will investigate how trauma, death and love are translated into theatrical performance. Pirandello's dramatic masterpiece, *Right You Are (If You Think So)*, inexorably shatters the idea of one truth or one reality, when multiple contrasting and competing points of view are aired surrounding death and love.

The seminar will conclude with a selection of short stories from the prominent 20th-century author Aldo Palazzeschi. His modern tales, *A Tournament of Misfits*, are filled with bizarre characters, peculiar situations, and deep compassion. They are in conversation with the medieval *Decameron*: they, too, are inextricably rooted in the awareness of trauma and death, and in the belief that storytelling can ease the pain of the infinite types of "plagues that, in every era, afflict humanity."