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Lococo - Hislit III
Final Paper
November 27, 2025

Women and Religion in Verismo Opera: The Tragedy of the Religious Woman Explored Through Santuzza, Nedda, and Tosca

There are a few things Italians are known quite well for. Their food, their hospitality, and the Renaissance are just a few. Another is Catholicism. For hundreds of years the seat of the Catholic Church rested in Rome and with the conversion of Emperor Constatine, Catholicism has become one of the most practiced religions in Italy. In art, religion has been a very popular subject and the theatre is no different. What becomes interesting is the way in which religion affects the characters on the stage. A particular genre of art in the very Italian world of opera is verismo. As one of the values of verismo is to portray culture as it is, there is no doubt that religion would be included in many works of the genre. Often, religion provides a valuable frame through which to view the behaviors of certain characters, although religion itself may not be the primary motivator. Three distinct verismo operas use this frame to varying degrees: Mascagni's *Cavalleria Rusticana*, Leoncavallo's *I Pagliacci*, and Puccini's *Tosca*. These three operas represent the beginning and height of verismo in opera. Verismo opera works of the late Nineteenth Century are set within or include religion as an important theme. Often, women are affected the most by such a setting. Three exemplary women of verismo are Santuzza (*Cavalleria Rusticana*), Nedda (*Pagliacci*), and Tosca (*Tosca*).

Before the particulars of these women's stories, verismo must first be explored. Verismo, although a contentious term, has made a notorious name for itself within the world of opera. Some argue the term is too broad, others too narrow. Many scholars often conflate verismo with Emile Zola's naturalism due to the harmony of the two styles; however, verismo developed more

parallel to naturalism. Interestingly, due to the discussion around the term, verismo developed as both an offshoot of realism/naturalism as well as a response to the two. While generally attributed to literature, verismo was first referenced in an 1867 art review by Guido Guidi through the term “veristi” (Giger 279).

Since the creation of the term, the subsequent discussion of verismo turned out vague and conflicting definitions. For some, verismo was realism in the strictest sense of the term to depict “this ugly, vulgar, mutilated, and exaggerated life” as it is (Giger 282). Others had more moderate definitions believing realism lacked the necessary artistic expression for which verismo improved and balanced. “All that exists is true, not only what exists in nature but also what exists in the mind. Verismo is a term not only barbarous but also false if taken to mean that only the real is true. The real and the ideal are both true” (qtd in Giger 281).

One major event, or series of events, that shape this genre is the Risorgimento, also known as the Unification of Italy. For nearly half a century, Italy had been a land of political unrest spanning from roughly 1815 to 1861. Tensions were very high between the people and The Church as youth socialist revolution was sprouting everywhere. The Pope condemned the “deadly error of communism and socialism” and yet there were many members of the church who argued that using Catholic social doctrine could be a way to right the problems of society (Saresella 586). The influence of the unified Italy opened up more space for artists to more freely express themselves from which verismo sprung, moving from outdated and overplayed moral stories and myths to a world of copyright and modern settings. For some artists that claimed the title of “veristi” (a practitioner of verismo), such a movement was political. “For us [veristi], the philosophy that inspires us is socialism” (qtd in Giger 283).

The emergence of the verismo niche in the 1870s and 80s just after Risorgimento, although still lacking a solid definition, offered genre characteristics uniting various verismo works. Three primary characteristics have been identified by later scholars, using specificity to differentiate from generic realism: “meticulous observation of culture, politics, and language; logical development of the story toward a tragic ending; and impersonality” (Giger 278). Two major authors emerged in literature as exemplars of verismo (although both disliked the term being attributed to their works): Luigi Capuana and Giovanni Verga. Verismo transferred directly to opera through an adaptation of Verga’s *Cavalleria Rusticana* by Pietro Mascagni.

The indisputable first verismo opera is *Cavalleria Rusticana* composed by Pietro Mascagni. The one-act opera was first performed in Rome 1890. Closely based on Verga's *Cavalleria Rusticana*, the story follows Santuzza, an unmarried woman of great faith who was dishonored and betrayed by her love, Turridu. The setting of the opera takes place on Easter Day for which Santuzza refuses to participate in saying “sono scommunicata” (“I am condemned”) and quoting catechesis in which only people who have not knowingly committed great sin can participate in the Mass (“Cavalleria Rusticana Libretto”). She witnessed Turridu having an affair with a married woman, Lola, wife of Alfio, in the early hours of the morning which began her breakdown. She confronts Lucia, Turridu’s mother, first before Turridu and finally Alfio whom she informs of Lola and Turridu’s affair. Alfio challenges Turridu to a duel off stage in which Turridu is killed, ending the Opera with the words “They have killed neighbor Turridu!” (“Cavalleria”).

A concise yet dramatic story that some critics have called “primitive” as compared to later works categorized as verismo, the driving force of the story is Santuzza and the dishonor she has branded herself with (qtd in Giger 271). The tie between Santuzza and religion is quite

strong from her faith to her very name. Santuzza means “Little Saint” in English and she is also often called by the nickname Santa which simply means “Holy.” At several points throughout the opera she asks to be prayed for and often calls on Mary (“Cavalleria”).

Her relationship to the faith is damaged at the very top of the opera when she reveals that she has slept with Turridu before marriage although he has promised to wed her. He is unfaithful and yet when Turridu is onstage, he expresses regret and shows that he is intent on at least maintaining that promise to Santuzza. It is when she confronts him and he refuses to tell the truth or apologize and in fact insults her for not being able to move on from her mistakes that fully pushes him away. At the end of their argument Turridu throws her to the ground and she curses him “A te la mala Pasqua, spergiuro!” [“A cursed Easter on you, deceiver!"] (“Cavalleria”).

The most interesting encounter Santuzza has is with Alfio. After her unbeneficial encounters with Lucia, who simply acquiesces Santuzza’s request to pray for her and Turridu, and Turridu, who insults her and runs away, Santuzza has had enough and as soon as she meets Alfio outside the church, she tells him that he is being cheated on. He believes her wholeheartedly and is filled with rage to which she curses herself for having spoken. “No, you are innocent… They are the wicked ones,” is Alfio’s heartfelt response (“Cavalleria”). This line is the most important in the opera. It tells the audience where blame truly lies in the situation and although Santuzza has been causing issues by speaking up, she has been telling nothing but the truth in her despair that she has sinned and turned away from God in a moment of passion.

Despite the dramatics of the situation, Santuzza makes it out fairly alright. Her love has been killed, but she is taken in by his mother Lucia and (unlike the other two women discussed) makes it out alive. In some ways, the opera is structured to make it seem as though her reverence of faith has shielded her where Turridu has mocked it. She is arguably the most pious of the

characters discussed in this essay and for that she has been rewarded. Although, her story is no less tragic. One could pose that the real tragedy is in her living with dishonor and faith which tortures her endlessly. But after the curtain falls, she is still breathing and has the chance to rekindle her faith and move on from her tragedy with others, namely Lucia and Alfio, to support her. She is not left abandoned.

Nedda is the very antithesis to Santuzza. She is a married woman and quite obviously, not terribly religious. Nedda is the female protagonist of *I Pagliacci* composed by Ruggero Leoncavallo. It is an opera in two acts first performed in Milan 1892. The story follows a troupe of pagliacci [clowns] who arrive in a town on the Feast of the Assumption of Mary to perform. They make a big entrance and invite the townspeople to their show later that evening ("Pagliacci Libretto"). Nedda is married to Canio, the protagonist and leader of the troupe, but has a secret lover, Silvio. There is another clown Tonio who is in love with Nedda as well. Canio is quite possessive of Nedda which Tonio takes advantage of when Nedda spurns his advances. Tonio reveals Nedda's affair to Canio who in a fit of jealous rage kills her in the middle of the performance.

As far as verismo goes, *I Pagliacci* is exemplar above all, because it is based on a real murder case over which Leoncavallo's father had presided as judge (Leoncavallo 654). Leoncavallo wrote the opera out of frustration after seeing Mascagni's *Cavalleria Rusticana*, "I lost all patience, and I shut myself up in sheer desperation, resolved to make a last struggle" (654). What resulted was what would become Leoncavallo's most famous work, with the aria "Vesti la Giubba" becoming famous even outside the world of opera. What is curious is the explicit religious setting but lack of religion among the characters. In fact, both Canio and Tonio are the few to invoke any religion at all outside of the ensemble. Tonio first curses Nedda in a

fashion similar to how Santuzza had cursed Turridu by invoking the power of the religious feast. “Per la Vergin pia di mezz’agosto / Nedda, lo giuro, me la pagherai!” [“By the Virgin of the Feast of the Assumption / Nedda, I swear, I will make you pay for this!”] (“Pagliacci”). Canio again invokes Mary at the moment he rushes Nedda and kills her, “Per la Madonna!” [By the Madonna!] (“Paglaicci”).

These two lines in particular frame Nedda’s death as a deserved tragic ending. By the rules of verismo and religion, it is. She was an adultress as well as a seemingly non-practicioner of faith (if not a non-believer). Nedda’s demise fulfills the logical development of tragedy although it was others who brought it on to her. Canio’s absolute faith in his marriage and possessiveness often comes out in the calling of God or Mary’s names which represents an authority to which Nedda does not respond with anything but with total self-preservation from the very beginning. For Nedda, religion was nothing but an oppressive tool others used.

Another iconic opera of the era portrays Floria Tosca. *Tosca* was composed by Giacomo Puccini in three acts and first performed in Rome 1900. Verismo was an established genre at this point and *Tosca* is considered a quintessential work. Based on a French play of the same title by Victorien Sardou, the story follows the protagonist Floria Tosca, a popular actress, as she becomes entangled in a political plot. Her lover Mario Cavaradossi aids an escaped convict but is caught by Chief of Police Baron Scarpia. Scarpia is a fan of Tosca and uses Cavaradossi’s imprisonment and torture to manipulate Tosca into sleeping with him in return for his freedom and documents to ensure Tosca and Cavaradossi’s safe passage out of Rome. He makes the documents but she kills him before he can force her to do more (“Tosca Libretto”).

At this point in the opera there is an iconic scene which Puccini dictates firmly in his stage directions. Tosca cleans herself of his blood, retrieves the safe passage documents, and

arranges candlesticks and a crucifix around Scarpia's body ("Tosca"). There is only instrumental underneath this pantomime which has become inextricable from the opera. Many posters of the opera portray this very scene. This pantomime, which is not dictated in the original play, originated when "Puccini saw a performance with Sarah Bernhardt…and she was inventing this on the stage" (Ross). This pantomime is so inextricable that when a production fails to include it, whether to make a statement, ignorance, or any reason at all, it is often all any critic and frequent opera goer can notice. Alex Ross, a critic for the New Yorker, commented on the "scandal" that occurred when the Metropolitan Opera made such a folly, calling it "The Case of The Missing Candlesticks" (Ross). This is the most notable example, but the rest of the libretto is filled with detailed stage directions easily outnumbering *Cavalleria Rusticana* and *I Pagliacci* combined. Puccini was quite strict in his stage directions which reveals a lot of character, not that many productions follow his words so loyally.

The rest of the opera is tragedy after tragedy. Tosca was assured by Scarpia that Cavaradossi's death would be fake and she talks over the plan to leave with her lover before his "execution." Little do they know that his execution would be real and moments later he is dead. Tosca is initially in denial but once she recognizes the truth, she does not hesitate to jump off the roof of Castel Sant'Angelo ("Tosca"). The opera ends with all three primary characters dead.

Although the plot does not share the integral setting of a religious holiday, there is plenty of religious ideology, symbolism, and space. For instance, the first setting of the opera takes place in the Basilica de Sant'Andrea de Valle where Cavaradossi is commissioned as a painter ("Tosca"). When Tosca meets Cavaradossi in the church he goes to kiss her which she refuses, "Innanzi la Madonna! / No, Mario mio!" ["In front of the Madonna! / No, my Mario!"] ("Tosca). This is the first instance of Tosca's piety right after she is introduced to the stage. Throughout the

opera, she continues to pray and show incredibly strong faith in the face of adversity. Unlike Nedda and Santuzza, however, everything is out of her control. Any time she exercises autonomy, it becomes fruitless as there is only one inevitable end. Her faith does nothing for her despite her fervent belief. Whereas Santuzza believed and was spared and Nedda lacked religion and was killed, Tosca is full of prayer and faith but she too died in the end.

Tosca, unlike *I Pagliacci* and *Cavalleria Rusticana*, was set in the past, exactly 100 years in June of 1800. This is made known through the political plot that is revealed about the war that is happening outside of Rome which is a real historical event. However, what some scholars believe is that this was Puccini's way of getting away with criticizing his contemporary Italian government and fascism as a whole after the Risorgimento. This appears most optimistically in post-Mussolini productions through the contrasting of Tosca's piety with Scarpia's "religious spectacle with state-sanctioned violence" (Schwartz 243). It is less so that Tosca's faith had an impact on her fate than Scarpia's "spectacle" held power in fallacy and manipulation over Tosca. It was Scarpia who doomed Tosca with his desire and control.

The three women, Santuzza, Nedda, and Tosca all portray varying levels of faith to extreme senses. For Santuzza and Tosca, their piety only bolsters the inevitability of their tragedy and the vanity of exercising autonomy. For Nedda, her lack of faith contrasted her with her environment and the anger of the men in her life who killed her in the name of the Madonna. Each of their stories portrays the futility of faith for which the Italian populace may have been feeling after enduring such unrest during the unification. Strangely, Santuzza has the most power of the three and most influence over her story on top of being the only one to make it out alive. That doesn't diminish her tragedy however, but puts into perspective how suffering can affect

people differently. Santuzza believed she had betrayed her faith, Nedda had no faith, and Tosca clung to her faith in despair.

Verismo sticks closely to its values and does not hold back. The three values defined earlier (cultural observation, logical development, and impersonality) shine through strongly in these operas. Impersonality, as stated by Frederico de Roberto, is achieved best in drama due to the apparent lack of direct narration (Giger 275). The logical development can occur with complex plots such as *Tosca* and simple ones such as in *Cavalleria Rusticana*, leading our characters to their tragic end with or without autonomy. The first value of cultural observation is found in the use of religion. Amongst other things that made verismo unique and a musically progressive genre, the use of religion reveals more than just the characters but the environment they are set in based on reality. Basilica de Sant'Andre della Valle is a real church, *Pagliacci* is based on a real trial, and all of them are set in a familiar echo of the cultural landscape that shapes the audience's world as much as it shapes the world on the stage.

Word Count: 2881

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