

FORTUNES OF THE FIREFLY:

SCIASCIA'S

ART OF DETECTION

BY

GILLIAN ANIA

HULL UNIVERSITY ITALIAN TEXTS SERIES

Perché non ai dati di fatto, alla concomitanza di indizi, al convergere di testimonianze più o meno dirette, la ricerca della verità può affidarsi e arrivare a una soluzione “al di là di ogni dubbio”.

L. Sciascia, *A futura memoria*

L'única forma possibile di verità è quella dell'arte.

L. Sciascia, *La Sicilia come metafora*

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All translations of quotations from Sciascia's 'gialli' (unless otherwise indicated) are taken from the English translations as listed in the Bibliography. All translations from secondary sources are my own.

In references, the abbreviations I have adopted for Sciascia's works are as follows: *Il giorno della civetta*, GC; *The Day Of The Owl*, DO; *A ciascuno il suo*, CS; *To Each His Own*, EO; *Il contesto*, IC; *Equal Danger*, ED; *Todo modo*, TM; *One Way Or Another*, OA; *Il cavaliere e la morte*, CM; *The Knight and Death*, KD; *Una storia semplice*, SS; *A Straightforward Tale*, ST.

There is a Glossary of Terms at the back, which provides translations and/or explanations for most italicized items in the text.

GFA

Leeds, February 1996

Photograph by kind permission of Maria Sciascia

Cover illustration taken from an original water-colour by Doug Thompson

INTRODUCTION

Two of the principal features of Leonardo Sciascia's works are the treatment of historical events and the adoption of the techniques of the detective novel. It is the latter characteristic which is the object of this study, for which I shall examine in particular the five novels, *Il giorno della civetta*, 1961 (*The Day Of The Owl*), *A ciascuno il suo*, 1966 (*To Each His Own*), *Il contesto*, 1971 (*Equal Danger*), *Todo modo*, 1974 (*One Way Or Another*), and *Il cavaliere e la morte*, 1988 (*The Knight and Death*), and the short story, Sciascia's final 'giallo' (detective story), *Una storia semplice*, 1989 (*A Straightforward Tale*).

Before progressing to a consideration of these novels, I offer brief biographical details in the hope that some knowledge of the author's background will be helpful and of interest.

Leonardo Sciascia was born in Racalmuto, in the province of Agrigento, Sicily, on 8th January 1921, and lived through the entire period of the Fascist dictatorship.¹ His father was Pasquale Sciascia, his mother Genoveffa Martorelli and Leonardo was the oldest of three children. The area in which he grew up was a very poor agricultural area: one of the main occupations was in the local sulphur mines in which both his grandfather (whom he loved and respected) and his father (strict but largely absent) worked. Sciascia was brought up by his mother with the help of three aunts, one of whom was influential in encouraging Sciascia to read books from her small collection.² History was his passion at school, as were all the various instruments of writing: pen, paper, ink.³

When Sciascia was fourteen, his family moved to Caltanissetta, to enable their son to continue his education, since there were no middle schools in Racalmuto.⁴ Sciascia attended the college, the *Istituto Magistrale "IX Maggio"*, where Vitaliano Brancati was a teacher, much admired by Sciascia, although he was not taught by him. It was here that Sciascia developed an interest in French literature, which was to be an important influence on his later writing. The year 1936 brought the outbreak of the War in Spain. Sciascia later stated that this was the time when he consciously realized that he was an anti-fascist, as Mussolini sent troops to fight on Franco's side against the Republicans. In 1937 Sciascia met Giuseppe Granata, an English teacher at the college and later a Communist senator, who introduced Sciascia to American literature. The outbreak of the Second World War did not result in Sciascia being called into the forces because he was painfully thin and declared unfit and thus he had no direct experience of the War. In 1941 Sciascia gained his diploma as a primary-school teacher, but worked initially as a clerk at a grain collection office in Racalmuto, until 1948, and it was this which gave him direct experience of the peasant world.

Sciascia records that he spent the first twenty years of his life in a society which was doubly not free, doubly not rational, a sort of non-society, and that his writing was a reaction against this Sicilian way of life and against Fascism.⁵

In 1944 he married Maria Andronico and they were to have two daughters, Laura and Anna Maria. Sciascia enrolled at the Teacher Training Faculty of the University of Messina (though did not complete his degree because of a fundamental disagreement with one of the lecturers), and during this period he wrote assiduously, filling notebooks with poems, fables, and reviews of films. In 1949 he took the post of teacher at a primary school in Racalmuto, though he did not particularly enjoy teaching, thinking of it as a job rather than as a vocation.⁶

Sciascia published his first work, *Favole della dittatura*, in 1950. It was noticed and reviewed by Pier Paolo Pasolini, with whom Sciascia developed a friendship. In 1956 Sciascia was transferred to an administrative post in the educational offices in Caltanissetta. For the academic year 1957-1958, Sciascia was posted to Rome, to the *Ministero della Pubblica Istruzione* [Ministry of Public Education], leaving his family in Sicily. However, he did not settle to life in the capital and the following year he returned to Caltanissetta, where he again took up an administrative post in education.

In 1961 Sciascia published *Il giorno della civetta*, which is usually considered the most successful of his books, and which won the Crotona prize. Looking back, Sciascia later felt that, as a writer, 1961 was the year of his 'birth'. The novel gave rise to a play (performed in Catania, 1964), and to a film (directed by Damiano Damiani, 1968). Sciascia, however, hated his ensuing reputation as *mafioso*, claiming that all he had done was write a book on the subject.⁷ (The topic of the mafia, it must be remembered, was not as much discussed by the media then as it is today). Nevertheless, this coming together of the 'giallo', the mafia and the reader as a citizen was to be of considerable importance in Sciascia's development as a writer.⁸

A ciascuno il suo was published in 1966, gaining the Grugliasco prize. The following year, Sciascia moved from Caltanissetta to Palermo, where his two daughters were studying at University, but he did not feel at home and would return to Racalmuto each summer to write. In 1970 Sciascia retired from his work in educational administration in order to devote himself wholly to his writing. A year later, he published *Il contesto* which aroused much polemic, as did the film version of 1976, entitled *Cadaveri eccellenti*, directed by Francesco Rosi. In 1974 he published *Todo modo*, which was also made into a film, by Elio Petri, in 1976.⁹

In 1975 Sciascia was elected to the Palermo town council as an Independent candidate on the *Partito Comunista Italiano* (PCI) list. Sciascia has said that the electoral campaign gave him the opportunity to meet his readers: working class people interested in literature.¹⁰ However, he came to feel that his presence on the town council was of no value, since everything was decided in advance, outside the chamber. He was told that to discuss and analyse matters was simply a waste of time.

Sciascia resigned from local political office in 1977: he was impatient with the PCI believing it to be too compromised, and annoyed at his failure to achieve anything concrete. However, in 1979 he was elected both to the Italian Parliament and to the European Parliament for the left-wing *Partito Radicale Italiano* (PRI), and he chose to undertake duties for the Italian Parliament in Rome rather than serve in Brussels. In June 1983, Parliament was dissolved prematurely, and Sciascia's period as a *deputato* came to an end. He remained active, however, and was a member of the *Commissione d'inchiesta Moro* [Parliamentary Commission on the Moro Case], dedicating himself almost exclusively at this point to the enquiry into the kidnapping and death of the Christian Democrat party secretary, Aldo Moro.¹¹

By the late 1980s, Sciascia had become seriously ill, yet still continued his writing. He spent the summer of 1988 in Friuli where he wrote, unusually for him, in his own handwriting, *Il cavaliere e la morte*. The text was then revised and typed, and published at the end of the year. By April 1989, Sciascia's health had deteriorated dramatically. He was transferred to Milan, where (apart from a brief visit to Palermo in the summer), he remained until the beginning of September. In May, he was due to receive an honorary degree from the University of Messina, but, disappointingly, was not well enough to undertake the journey. His final months were marked by intense suffering, but he still collected material for *A futura memoria: (se la memoria ha un futuro)*, (published posthumously in December) and finished writing *Una storia semplice*, partly in his flat in Milan, while undergoing medical treatment, going twice weekly to a clinic for dialysis, and partly in the clinic itself. *Una storia semplice* appeared in the bookshops on the day of Sciascia's death: he died, at home, on 20 November 1989, and lies buried in the cemetery in Racalmuto.

Sciascia was a prolific writer of narrative fiction, critical essays, anthologies and articles on a wide range of topics, especially pertaining to Sicilian society, literature and politics. (See Bibliography, p.**Error! Bookmark not defined.**). From the publication of *Il contesto* onwards, 1971, Sciascia frequently aroused polemic, both when he intervened on certain issues, and when he remained silent. He believed firmly in reason, liberty and justice: in reason as an instrument of liberty and justice. Sciascia always felt close to France, to its thinkers and writers, especially those of the Enlightenment, and although he did not travel a great deal, he visited the country regularly from the second half of the 1970s. He furthermore suggested that Poe's choice of Dupin as investigator and Paris as location for his detective stories may have been intended specifically as a tribute to France as the country of reason, the country which could thus supply the necessary abilities to solve mysteries and crimes.¹²

Sciascia was a public figure, taking a prominent part in debates of both national and local importance, yet also a tenaciously private man, not given to discussing his own literary production with his friends. He was reserved and serious by nature, yet also very amenable and approachable, willing to give his advice to those who sought it, and enthusiastic about local cultural initiatives. In fact, despite being a small provincial town, principally because of Sciascia's encouragement and commitment, Racalmuto has hosted a number of important exhibitions and conferences.¹³ An avid fan of the cinema, he regularly frequented the local *Circolo Leoni* where he would engage in conversation with those around him on topics of mutual interest, particularly relating to cinema. As a writer, Sciascia is dry and essential, simple and rational, realistic but also evocative and metaphorical. He never considered his writing as work: for him work meant doing what one did not necessarily enjoy, while writing signified repose and pleasure.¹⁴ He nevertheless adopted a systematic approach, collecting his material during the winter months and writing in Racalmuto over the summer. Towards the end of his life, Sciascia still had the desire to write, commenting in an interview that the number of books he still wanted to write would far surpass the number of those he had already written.¹⁵ He did grow more sad and pessimistic from his observations of reality, seeing the continuation of society's ills, despite undeniable economic improvements. However his pessimism was never divorced from hope, while he could still write. After the publication of *Il cavaliere e la morte*, Sciascia said in an interview that to write a book was in itself an act of hope.¹⁶

The detective genre held a particular attraction for Sciascia and in 1974 he declared confidently: “Chi si imbatte in un mio libro non può né saltare un rigo, né lasciarlo a metà: deve leggerlo tutto e sino in fondo.” [“Those who come across one of my books can neither skip a line nor leave it half way through: they feel compelled to read it right to the end”].¹⁷ His skilful use and adaptation of the techniques of the detective novel have contributed immeasurably to his appeal, and it would thus be worthwhile if we were to examine briefly some of these techniques.

The classic detective novel, with its juxtaposition of fantastic and realist elements, is based on a clear idealistic division between good and evil. It has a shrewd detective as protagonist who strives tirelessly against a devious criminal, and, with prime importance being attached to plot, takes the reader through a recognizable beginning, middle and end.¹⁸ Typically, a seemingly perfect and usually violent crime is committed, which the detective, often in opposition to the local dim-witted police, will investigate through a series of sophisticated, rational enquiries, eliminating the various false leads which arise or are placed in his way. In the closing pages, the detective solves the case, frequently in an unexpected and ingenious manner; the criminal is arrested and the reader is left with a feeling of satisfaction that justice has been done.¹⁹

Sciascia, after drafting *Il giorno della civetta*, expressed his view of the detective novel in the following terms:

In un certo senso, il romanzo poliziesco presuppone una metafisica: l'esistenza di Dio, della Grazia, di un mondo 'al di là del fisico'. L'incorruttibilità e l'infallibilità dell'investigatore, il suo ascetismo (generalmente non ha famiglia, non ha ambizioni, non si cura dei beni materiali), il fatto che non rappresenta la legge ufficiale ma la legge in assoluto, la sua capacità di leggere il delitto nel cuore umano oltre che nelle cose, cioè negli indizi, lo investono di metafisica luce.

[In a sense, the detective novel posits a metaphysical dimension: the existence of God, of Grace, of a world 'beyond the physical'. The incorruptibility and infallibility of the investigator, his asceticism (in general, he does not have a family, lacks ambition, and does not care about material possessions), the fact that he does not represent official law, but rather absolute law, his ability to intuit crime in the human heart as well as in things, that is in clues - all these qualities - invest him with a metaphysical light].²⁰

To a world in which evil has manifested itself, the investigator thus appears as a bearer of illuminating Grace and divine Truth.

It is generally considered that the first detective story in English was *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*, by Edgar Allan Poe, published in 1841, and, on the frontispiece of *A ciascuno il suo*, Sciascia quotes intriguingly from this work: “Ma non crediate che io stia per svelare un mistero o per scrivere un romanzo.” [“But do not think that I am about to unveil a mystery or write a novel”].²¹ This respectable form of literature has since evolved through Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (the most famous and probably the most imitated), Wilkie Collins, G. K. Chesterton, Agatha Christie (the most successful 20th-century writer), Dorothy L. Sayers, and other exponents, generally English and American authors, into the more popular style known today. Indeed Sciascia recognized that the genre had developed and in some instances had assumed a

definite commercial tone, abounding in episodes of gratuitous violence and eroticism, such as is found in Mickey Spillane. He commented: “Il romanzo poliziesco si rinnova dunque in un senso peggiore; e non solo nella sostanza, ma anche nella tecnica.” [“The detective novel is undergoing a second-rate renewal; and not just in content, but also in technique”]. Nevertheless, Sciascia maintained that the classic form, from Poe through Conan Doyle, Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler, to Agatha Christie, Peter Cheyney and Ellery Queen (pseudonyms of Frederic Dannay and Manfred B. Lee), preserved its dose of pleasurable escapism.²² Furthermore, as Sciascia himself points out in his ‘Breve storia del romanzo poliziesco’, the typical reader of detective novels desires purely to be entertained without the need to exercise his intellect as he leaves the case in the capable hands of the investigator.²³ In the opinion of Anthony Lejeune, himself a writer of detective novels, the great detectives

teach us in a parable that there is a reason for everything, that puzzles were made to be solved, that what seems like chaos may be only the observed effects of unknown causes; in short, that the world, instead of being as meaningless as a modern novel, may be like a good detective story, in which the truth and a happy ending are kept for the final chapter.²⁴

From such definitions we see that detective fiction is primarily a type of fantasy which entertains and intrigues the reader through the elaboration of a puzzle and the manipulation of suspense, rather than illuminates him or increases his awareness in some way. This being so, even a cursory familiarity with the ‘gialli’ of Sciascia, will cause us to recognize that it is inappropriate to classify them purely as detective novels. In my study, I aim to determine how closely these works follow the detective novel tradition, examining firstly elements of similarity and apparent similarity, then proceeding to treat the main differences, and finally commenting on additional features to be found specifically in the ‘gialli’ of Sciascia.

Notes

- ¹ Fascism emerged in 1919, came to power in 1922 (the dictatorship being established between 1925-27) and was to remain until Mussolini was deposed in 1943. In power, Fascism was authoritarian and repressive. Basic rights, such as freedom of speech and political opposition were suppressed; strict censorship of the press was enforced; elected local government officials were replaced with centrally appointed figures; the death penalty was re-introduced for crimes against the State; a secret police force was instituted.
- ² See L. Sciascia, *Fuoco all'anima*, conversazioni con Domenico Porzio (Milan: Mondadori, 1992), pp.22-23.
- ³ On the first page of one of his exercise books, the young boy wrote neatly, “Autore: Leonardo Sciascia”, an auspicious indication of his future career! See Claude Ambroise, Introduction and Notes to Leonardo Sciascia, *Opere 1984-1989* (Milan: Bompiani, 1991), p.XXIV.

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- ⁴ Racalmuto is now a small town of 7-8,000 inhabitants, although in the period between the wars it had 13,000, and at the beginning of the century, 18,000. *Fuoco all'anima*, p.28.
- ⁵ Ambroise, Introduction to L. Sciascia, *Opere 1984-1989*, p.XXV-XXVI.
- ⁶ Sciascia describes, in the semi-autobiographical work, *Le parrocchie di Regalpetra* (Milan: Adelphi, 1991, p.111) how he would enter the schoolroom in the same state of mind as the worker entering the dark tunnels of the sulphur mine. This negative feeling can be partly explained by his profound sense of dismay that whatever he could teach the children, coming as they did from such poor and oppressive backgrounds, was of less value to them than addressing their very basic material needs.
- ⁷ L. Sciascia, 'Lezione sulla mafia', report of a debate between Sciascia and a group of Palermo arts students in *L'Ora*, 3 May 1973: see Nicola Fano, *Come leggere 'Il giorno della civetta' di Leonardo Sciascia* (Milan: Mursia, 1993), p.30.
- ⁸ Ambroise, Introduction to L. Sciascia, *Opere 1984-1989*, p.XXXI.
- ⁹ The film versions of *Il contesto* and of *Todo modo* both gave rise to polemic, since in the former, Sciascia had foreseen themes relevant to the mid-1970s: the corruption of ministers, a series of coups, the 'strategy of tension' (terrorist attacks intended to create fear and thus justify heavy state control), the PCI's rush towards the 'historic compromise' (the proposed collaboration in Italy between Catholic and Communist parties) and the renunciation of revolution. Before the latter film was released, the director reported being subjected to a certain degree of pressure from various Christian Democrat exponents not to show the film in Italy, since it was the period leading up to the elections. Sciascia never intervened in the polemics, merely commenting each time that if the film offended, as occurred with his books, it was a sign that reality had been well portrayed. He further stated that he liked the films of *Todo modo* and *Cadaveri eccellenti* while qualifying his statement adding that books and films were two separate entities, they were autonomous works. See Ottavio Rossani, *Leonardo Sciascia* (Rimini: Luisè, 1990), pp.108-110. See also the ironical remark in *Todo modo* (p.94), about the likelihood of a film entitled *Esercizi spirituali* being made out of the bizarre set-up at the hermitage, and what are perhaps Sciascia's thoughts on films drawn from books, in *Il cavaliere e la morte* (p.69).
- ¹⁰ Ambroise, Introduction to L. Sciascia, *Opere 1984-1989*, p.XXXVI.
- ¹¹ On 16 March 1978, Aldo Moro was kidnapped by the extreme left-wing terrorist group, the *Brigate rosse* [Red Brigades]. Sciascia felt, however, that the government was so corrupt that the citizen needed to defend himself against the state, though he denied that he was on the side of the *Brigate rosse*. He has stated that he detested Moro's politics, but that from the moment he was kidnapped Moro became his closest fellow human being. See L. Sciascia and D. Lajolo, *Conversazione in una stanza chiusa* (Milan: Sperling and Kupfer, 1981), p.31. Later that year Sciascia published his *L'affaire Moro*, almost simultaneously in France and in Italy. He accused the *Democrazia cristiana* (DC) of disowning Moro, from an absurd sense of 'state', which until then the party had never demonstrated. But now, though Moro had

been taken prisoner, the Italian state wanted to demonstrate its strength, after more than a century of corruption and collusion with the Sicilian mafia, the Neapolitan camorra and Sardinian banditry. See Rossani, p.85.

- ¹² See L. Sciascia, 'Breve storia del romanzo poliziesco', *Cruciverba* (Turin: Einaudi, 1983), p.220.
- ¹³ Sciascia also had a keen interest in art and indeed possessed a large collection of portraits of writers and of old prints.
- ¹⁴ Sciascia loved books and spent almost all he earned on them, but he did not like libraries: if research was indispensable, he consulted archives. See Rossani, pp.11, 28, 31.
- ¹⁵ L. Sciascia, *La Sicilia come metafora*, intervista di Marcelle Padovani (Milan: Mondadori, 1979), p.75.
- ¹⁶ See Rossani, p.143.
- ¹⁷ *Panorama*, anno X, no. 299, p.16, quoted by Filippo Cilluffo, *Due scrittori siciliani* (Caltanissetta-Rome: Salvatore Sciascia, 1974), p.112. The words introducing Agatha Christie's *Lord Edgeward Dies* (1933) support this belief in the fascination of the genre: "It is almost impossible to lay down the book until one learns the true solution of the mystery."
- ¹⁸ For a detailed analysis of the structure of the detective story, see Timothy Steele, 'The Structure of the Detective Story: Classical or Modern', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 27, 4 (winter 1981-1982), 555-70.
- ¹⁹ See Giovanna Jackson, *Leonardo Sciascia: 1956-1976: A Thematic and Structural Study* (Ravenna: Longo, 1981), pp.9-10.
- ²⁰ Claude Ambroise, 'Sciascia e il giallo', in Antonio Motta, *Leonardo Sciascia: La verità, l'aspra verità* (Manduria-Bari-Rome: Piero Lacaïta, 1985), p.233.
- ²¹ In his 'Appunti sul "giallo"', *Nuova Corrente*, no. 1. June 1954, p.23, Sciascia acknowledges the presence of 'spunti polizieschi' [detective traits] far earlier, as in Aesop's fable of the sly fox following and correctly interpreting a trail of prints leading to the lion's den (see also his quotation from Montaigne on the frontispiece to *Il contesto*: "Bisogna fare come gli animali che cancellano ogni traccia davanti alla loro tana" ["One must do as the animals do, who erase every footprint in front of their lair"]), although Sciascia accepts that seeking such examples is "un'indagine più brillante che utile" ["an investigation which incites admiration rather than serving a useful purpose"]. Others too have suggested earlier origins, such as the Bible, Aristotle, or Sophocles. For a history of early detective fiction, see Howard Haycraft, *Murder for Pleasure: The Life and Times of the Detective Story* (London: Peter Davies, 1942).
- ²² See his article, 'Letteratura del "giallo"', *Zibaldone*, *Letteratura*, 3 (1953), 65-66.

²³ 'Breve storia del romanzo poliziesco' in L. Sciascia, *Cruciverba*, p.217. For a most informative interpretation of the detective genre, see Peter Hühn, 'The Detective as Reader: Narrativity and Reading Concepts in Detective Fiction', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 33, 3 (autumn 1987), 451-66.

²⁴ S. H. Steinberg, ed., *Encyclopaedia of World Literature* (London: Cassell, 1973), p.163.