The House by the Medlar-Tree (I Malavoglia)

Giovanni Verga · *1881 · Mary A. Craig translation (1890)*

A family of fishermen in the Sicilian village of Trezza, the Malavoglias, live in a house beside a medlar-tree. They lose a boat and a son in a storm, and a debt follows. Over the years the family loses its house and its young. Verga writes in the plain, proverb-laden voice of the villagers, a hallmark of Italian realism.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

What happens to a family that tries to keep its old ways while the world around it starts to change?

Old 'Ntoni believes in work, patience, and the proverbs by which his ancestors lived. He holds the family together after the disaster, but he cannot stop the debt, the deaths, and the young people who leave. Verga does not blame the villagers or praise them for their hardship. He shows a closed world whose rules are real, and which cannot protect them when the economy and the state reach in.

KEY CHARACTERS

Padron 'Ntoni
The old head of the family, who speaks in proverbs and holds to the old rules.

Bastianazzo
His son, drowned with the boat and the lupins.

Maruzza
His widow, nicknamed la Longa, who dies of cholera.

'Ntoni
The oldest grandson, restless and unlucky.

Alessi
A younger grandson who buys back the house.

Mena
The elder granddaughter, who loves Alfio, the carter, and cannot marry him.

Zio Crocifisso
The village moneylender, who profits from the family's losses.

Grades 10–12

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01

The Family and the Boat

OPENING CHAPTERS

The Malavoglia family is introduced: old Padron 'Ntoni, his son Bastianazzo, his daughter-in-law Maruzza, and their children. The grandson 'Ntoni is called to military service.

- Verga introduces the village through its gossip.
- The family's nickname is a joke on their name, since it means ill-will.
- The Provvidenza, their boat, is their capital.

02

The Lupins and the Storm

EARLY CHAPTERS

The family buys lupins on credit from Uncle Crocifisso. The Provvidenza sinks in a storm and Bastianazzo drowns. The debt remains.

- The disaster is told in the villagers' chatter, not in drama.
- Debt becomes the engine of the plot.
- The family tries to rebuild with pride and little money.

03

Debt and the House

MIDDLE CHAPTERS

The family cannot repay and is forced to sell the house by the medlar-tree. Marriages are broken off, and the family starts to scatter.

- Mena's hopes of marriage fade with the family's money.
- The village's moneylenders and officials gain ground.
- Luca is lost in the navy's war.

04

'Ntoni Leaves and Returns

LATER CHAPTERS

The young 'Ntoni leaves for a city and returns disillusioned. He drifts into smuggling and idleness, and he is involved in a violent night with a customs guard.

- 'Ntoni's dream is a better life, but he has no practical means of getting it.
- The customs-guard episode brings the law into the family.
- Lia's fate is a sharp private loss.

05

Loss and Remnant

CLOSING CHAPTERS

Cholera takes Maruzza. Old 'Ntoni dies in a hospital. Alessi, the steady grandson, buys back the house and starts a family. 'Ntoni comes to the door and goes away again.

- The restoration of the house is a modest, sad victory.
- 'Ntoni's departure at dawn closes the book.
- The village goes on, not much changed by what happened.

Family and Honor · Debt · The Sea · Progress

What to watch for as you read

GRADES 10–12

1. Notice how the narration speaks in the village's own voice, with proverbs and rumor.
2. Follow the house through the book. When is it lost, and what does it mean to the family?
3. Verga is often called pessimistic. Decide whether the ending is bleak or only plain.
4. Compare 'Ntoni's dissatisfaction with his grandfather's patience.

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