

Elegy for a Dying Order: Narrative Form and Historical Consciousness in Lampedusa's *The Leopard*

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Abstract

This paper explores the aesthetic and structural brilliance of Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa's *The Leopard* (1958), with particular attention to its unique narrative form, historical context, and the philosophical resonance of its central character, Don Fabrizio. The novel's fragmented chronology, tableau-style chapters, and reflective tone subvert conventional plot-driven storytelling, offering instead a deeply textured portrait of a society in transition during Italy's Risorgimento. Drawing on Paul Ricoeur's theory of narrative temporality, this study interprets the novel as a work that transforms historical time into human time through the mediating function of narrative. Rather than presenting history as linear progress, Lampedusa configures it as a series of reflective, sensorially rich tableaux that foreground memory, resignation, and the dissolution of aristocratic identity. Through Ricoeur's concepts of emplotment and the narrative self, the paper argues that *The Leopard* is less a conventional historical novel and more a lyrical meditation on mortality, cultural memory, and the ethical significance of storytelling. The novel's enduring power lies in its capacity to evoke a vanishing world through narrative forms that mirror the fragmentation and refiguration of time itself.

Keywords: Narrative form, historical consciousness, emplotment, time, memory,

Introduction

Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa's *The Leopard* (*Il Gattopardo*), published posthumously in 1958, is frequently regarded as one of the most profound literary testaments to a vanishing

world. Set during the Italian Risorgimento—a period of profound political upheaval and national consolidation—the novel follows the slow decline of the Sicilian aristocracy through the eyes of Don Fabrizio, Prince of Salina. Rather than dramatizing historical revolution, the novel dwells on the internal processes of reflection, decay, and the metaphysical resignation of a class that understands its obsolescence.

Lampedusa's narrative, rich in atmospheric detail and subdued irony, resists conventional plotting in favor of an episodic structure that oscillates between historical moments, emotional intensities, and philosophical digressions. In this sense, the novel exemplifies what Paul Ricoeur calls "the mediation between temporality and narrativity"—a narrative strategy that integrates subjective time with historical consciousness (Ricoeur 52). Through a series of non-chronological yet thematically resonant tableaux, *The Leopard* reconfigures the historical novel as a site not of revolutionary rupture but of elegiac reflection, where memory becomes the dominant mode of engaging with history.

This paper argues that *The Leopard* should not be approached merely as a historical novel, but as a narrative that enacts what Ricoeur terms *emplotment*—the configuration of disparate events into meaningful patterns that allow both individual identity and collective memory to emerge (Ricoeur, 1984, p. 66). By focusing on Don Fabrizio's declining agency amid the rise of a new bourgeois order, and by emphasizing the novel's structural decisions over linear causality, Lampedusa constructs a poetics of disappearance. This study interprets *The Leopard* as an embodiment of narrative time, where the protagonist's awareness of decay is aestheticized into a form that both laments and preserves the cultural past.

Theoretical Framework

To analyze *The Leopard*'s narrative construction and historical vision, this study adopts Paul Ricoeur's theory of narrative temporality, particularly as articulated in his seminal three-volume work *Time and Narrative* (1983–1985). Ricoeur's central argument is that narrative mediates between phenomenological time (subjective, lived experience) and cosmological or historical time (objective chronology). This mediation occurs through emplotment (*mise en intrigue*), the process by which narrative selects, organizes, and configures events into a meaningful whole (Ricoeur, 1984, p. 66). It is this configurational act that transforms temporality into intelligible human experience.

In *The Leopard*, emplotment operates not through conventional causality or dramatic

development but through episodic tableaux—each chapter isolated in time yet thematically interconnected. The novel's temporal leaps between 1860 and 1910 resist linear progression, instead embodying what Ricoeur calls *narrative aporia*: the tension between temporal continuity and narrative fragmentation (Ricoeur 85). These interruptions are not narrative failures but deliberate ethical and aesthetic strategies that reflect the disjunction of historical consciousness.

Ricoeur further elaborates this narrative process through his threefold mimesis:

- Mimesis1 (prefiguration) involves the world of lived action and cultural symbols;
- Mimesis2 (configuration) is the act of emplotment itself—where discordant events are synthesized into a coherent story;
- Mimesis3 (refiguration) refers to the reader's reception and re-interpretation of the text's world into their own lived temporality (Ricoeur 54–87).

A crucial extension of this theory is Ricoeur's conception of memory as something narrative actively refigures. In *The Leopard*, memory does not function as a static recollection of events, but rather as a process of narrative reconstruction. The fragmented yet symbolically resonant structure of the novel allows the reader to experience history not as a sequence of causes and effects, but as a textured landscape of memory—sensory, reflective, and ethically charged. The Salina family's gradual decline is not documented in political terms but evoked through objects, gestures, architecture, and silence—narrative devices that preserve memory even as they signify its erosion.

Thus, through emplotment, memory is not simply recalled but reconfigured: shaped by what the narrative chooses to remember, omit, or revisit. Ricoeur argues that “narrative is the guardian of memory” because it gives form to the passage of time in a way that preserves ethical and cultural meaning (Ricoeur 117). In this sense, *The Leopard* is not merely about the past—it is a narrative performance of remembering, a poetics of historical memory articulated through aesthetic form.

By foregrounding Ricoeur's framework, this paper interprets *The Leopard* as a profound meditation on narrative identity, historical finitude, and the ethical dimensions of memory. Don Fabrizio's awareness of the dying aristocratic world becomes emblematic of what Ricoeur describes as the *narrative self*—a self-constituted not by mastery over time but by the capacity to interpret and accept one's place within it (Ricoeur 140).

Analysis

The Italian novelist Tomasi Di Lampedusa's only novel, *The Leopard*, was first published in Italian in 1957. In addition to this novel, Lampedusa also authored a short story that survives in complete form. Despite contacting several publishers during his lifetime, the author never lived to see his novel in print. Even on his deathbed, he received yet another rejection letter from a publisher. It was only after his death that a friend arranged for the novel's publication. Upon its release, *The Leopard*, achieved immense popularity, with 52 editions sold within the first four months alone.

Critical reception of the novel, however, has been marked by significant difference in opinions. Some critics labeled it a reactionary narrative aligned with the political right, accusing it of romanticizing feudal values. Others interpreted it as a denial of progress and an expression of despair. Conversely, some viewed it as a scathing, even "leftist," critique by Lampedusa of his own aristocratic class. Regardless of these contrasting interpretations, public acclaim for the novel remained undiminished. To this day, *The Leopard*, remains one of the most widely read novels in Italy, particularly in Sicily.

The events of the novel begin at a historical turning point—the decline of the Bourbon rule over Naples and Sicily. King Ferdinand has recently died, and for the first time since the fall of the Roman Empire, the Italian peninsula is on the verge of unification under a single state. The Risorgimento, or the Italian Reunification Movement, is gaining momentum with the aim of unifying all of Italy. In 1860, the renowned General Garibaldi landed at Marsala with a thousand volunteer soldiers, intending to liberate the region from Bourbon control. Within three weeks, he captured the capital, Palermo. He subsequently recruited more volunteers, crossed the valley, subdued the coastal regions, and advanced triumphantly to Naples. In that same autumn, the Bourbon army suffered a decisive defeat at Volturno, and Garibaldi captured King Francis II at Gaeta. The southern territories were then handed over to King Victor Emmanuel. A constitutional assembly was held, and all the states of the peninsula agreed to join the unified kingdom—except the Papal State of Rome. To bring it into the fold, Garibaldi launched a military campaign, but following his injury, the Risorgimento leadership shifted to a more strategic approach, ultimately incorporating Rome and declaring it the capital of unified Italy.

In constructing the novel, Lampedusa employed numerous historical characters and events, blending fiction with authentic detail. He elaborated on many of these characters in a letter addressed to his adopted son. This dimension of the novel has been examined in depth by César Antonio Molina in his essay, where, after unveiling the historical basis of the events, he remarks:

"Hence, nowadays, the best way of wandering through the places in the Italian writer's memory is through his literature, in which he takes us on a journey and helps us to enter into a dialogue with everything that made up his world, his time, his culture" (86)

The narrative structure of the novel does not follow a conventional, linear progression, typical of traditional storytelling. The sequence of events is non-linear, with temporal shifts that disrupt chronological continuity. The novel opens with an introductory chapter centered on Don Fabrizio, presenting a formal, almost stylized overview of his household and domestic affairs. Don Fabrizio is depicted as a physically imposing, exceptionally robust man who possesses thousands of acres of ancestral land, alongside a commanding presence, unwavering self-confidence, and sound judgment. Salina—a dominion has been granted to him by the king—and the Leopard is the emblem of his noble house. Deeply proud of his lineage, Don Fabrizio sees the preservation of his family name as the central aim of his existence. His wife, Maria Stella, is portrayed as devout and modest to an extreme; such is her modesty that despite having borne him seven children, Don Fabrizio confesses he has never seen her navel. Dissatisfied in his conjugal life, he frequently visits a nearby town to indulge in pleasures outside the marriage. The second most significant character in the novel is his nephew, Tancredi, whose mother is deceased and whose father squandered the family fortune. Tancredi is portrayed as witty and irreverent. Don Fabrizio's wife hopes he will marry their middle daughter, Concetta. The narrative also signals the imminent decline of the feudal era. General Garibaldi has already initiated an armed struggle against the monarchy, marking the advance of the Risorgimento. While these political upheavals unfold, Don Fabrizio remains largely unperturbed, having received assurances that his estate will not be confiscated. Ironically, his own nephew, Tancredi, is inspired by the revolutionary fervor and enlists as a captain in Garibaldi's volunteer army. In the second chapter, the family travels to Donnafugata for their annual holiday. There, Tancredi encounters Angelica, the beautiful and only heiress of Caregaro, a minor yet

ascending landowning family. Captivated by her charm and beauty, he soon falls in love and, through his uncle's mediation, formally seeks her hand in marriage. Although Don Fabrizio initially hoped his nephew would marry his own daughter, he ultimately arranges Tancredi's engagement to Angelica, recognizing the greater social and economic prospects this alliance offers. The entire household, including his daughter—who had quietly nurtured hopes of marrying her cousin—accepts the decision with outward grace and composure. From this point onward, the novel begins its gradual movement toward closure. Father Pirrone, the family's long-serving priest, returns to his native village, and through his reflections, the narrative offers a broader commentary on the socio-political transformations occurring across Sicily and Italy. In the following chapter—set after the revolution—a grand ball scene presents a vivid tableau of the family's social engagement and material prosperity in the changing order¹. The penultimate chapter is devoted to Don Fabrizio's death, while the final chapter, set twenty-seven years later, provides a poignant glimpse into the lives of his three daughters. The narrative contains no dramatic conflict in the conventional sense—no sharply defined beginning, climax, or resolution. Rather, its thematic core lies in portraying the traditional lifestyle based on the mutual dependency between landlords and peasants, and how this order comes under threat from political awakening, secular anti-papal sentiment, and the rising bourgeoisie.

Generally, the fundamental strength of any novel lies in its narrative. A compelling, artistically woven story and the reader's engagement with it are typically considered essential for a novel's success. However, in the case of *The Leopard*, its primary merit lies not in its plot but in its structure. The novel lacks a continuous storyline in the conventional sense, and the narrative method adopted to present what little plot there is proves entirely unique. Composed of eight distinct chapters, each presenting discrete episodes—four of which (if assessed solely on the level of plot) could arguably be removed without compromising the basic storyline—the novel nonetheless succeeds in constructing a vivid and coherent image of a collective historical condition. This success is partly attributable to the author's deeply personal connection with the characters—Don Fabrizio was his great-grandfather—and partly to his

It is worth noting that this chapter was originally incomplete in the first edition but was later restored in the Vintage edition of 2007.¹

refined literary sensibility. Because of this intimate connection, every scene the author paints is not only thematically complete in itself but also enriched with tonal nuances that vividly reflect the social atmosphere of the era. His literary sensibility lends the narrative a subtle complexity that enhances both its aesthetic richness and its thematic variety. As a result, the world created within the novel feels remarkably vibrant and lifelike. These eight chapters function as eight tableaux through which the author offers a multifaceted portrayal of life. Speaking to the novel's artistic brilliance, one critic has remarked quite eloquently:

"Di Lampedusa's Sicily, its bed-bugs and dust as well as its chandeliers and chapels, are - well, I was going to write 'evoked', but it's simply as 'there' as the location you are reading this in. The pace never dawdles and never hurries. The imagery is as clichéless as Creation" (Spiegelman).

The beauty of structure significantly enhances the charm and reception of *The Leopard*. Rarely in the realm of the novel has such a form been employed—where the narrative unfolds entirely through a series of carefully composed tableaux. These scenes, selected not for chronological continuity but seemingly according to the author's personal preference, nonetheless come together to form a remarkably cohesive and evocative portrait of a society in transition. Each chapter represents not a lengthy narrative arc but the events of a single, meticulously chosen day. The temporal range spans over half a century, with the specific dates as follows:

“May 1860, August 1860, October 1860, November 1860, February 1861, November 1862, July 1883, May 1910”

Moreover, this is not an account of an entire month, but a day-by-day chronicle. There is no particular order governing the selection of these images either. These are not panoramic depictions of historical periods, but intensely focused snapshots—momentary glimpses that together reconstruct the texture of late 19th-century Sicilian life. Sicily, though geographically and politically part of Italy, is rendered here with such vividness and intimacy that the reader experiences it as if it were a familiar rural village of their own. One particularly memorable scene occurs when Tancredi, accompanied by his future wife Angelica, explores the numerous rooms of Don Fabrizio's grand palazzo. The house is so vast that even after several clandestine visits, many rooms remain undiscovered. At one point, family members and friends begin to worry that these secret encounters might tarnish the family's noble reputation. Chapter six—the ball—is especially striking in terms of atmosphere and visual imagination. Don Fabrizio,

the guardian of feudal traditions, finds himself a relic in a world of new rhythms and values. The dances of the ball—graceful and youthful—stand in stark contrast to his aging body and weary mind. Exhausted, he retreats to the library, where he reflects on death. Though his actual death occurs twenty-one years later, this moment of reflection symbolizes the decline of the aristocratic order he embodies. For Don Fabrizio, death becomes a metaphor not just for personal mortality but for the inevitable dissolution of a social system. He knows he can neither resist nor reverse the march of new values; instead, he accepts defeat, recognizing that the natural course of history will remove him—and his world—from the stage. As one critic aptly notes in interpreting this scene: “Classes and generations mingle at the ball. We learn about a character's inner life through dialogue, and interior thoughts, but also through dress, food, décor, architecture and everything else that comes to us through the senses. Physical details reveal the soul” (Mitchell).

In the final two tableaux, the novel presents the literal death of Don Fabrizio and the concluding moments of decline for his family. The temporal gap of nineteen years between the sixth and seventh chapters underscores a narrative decision: following Don Fabrizio’s symbolic concession to historical change at the 1862 ball, his active role in life effectively ceases. Hence, there is no further need to chronicle his existence. His story is concluded not through gradual progression but by a quiet erasure—his presence annulled with a metaphorical stroke—followed by a final chapter that encapsulates nearly three decades of decay in a single, poignant scene. This last image succeeds not only in summarizing the key developments of the intervening years but also in presenting a dispassionate, vivid depiction of the final days of the Salina family.

Don Fabrizio stands as the novel’s central and most fully realized figure. He is powerful, proud, steeped in noble lineage, and still commands considerable wealth and estate. His broad shoulders and upright bearing reflect the gravitas of an aristocracy rooted in ancient feudal values. He sees social status and lineage as the foundation of human nobility. What distinguishes this character, however, is his remarkably nuanced attitude toward the political and social transformations sweeping across Italy. He neither laments nor resists the new order; most significantly, he does not opportunistically adapt himself to it. Instead, Don Fabrizio remains consistent in his values while graciously acknowledging and even facilitating the emergence of new forces. Two key moments in the novel exemplify this principled stance.

First, when he endorses Tancredi's marriage to Angelica over his own daughter Concetta, he does so with the foresight that Tancredi's future success will be better served by a woman molded by modern sensibilities rather than one entrenched in outdated traditions. Second, when Cavaliere Aimone Chevalley offers him a seat in the Senate, Don Fabrizio declines with characteristic dignity, stating that he is suited only to the old order and cannot administer a new system. He even recommends a social rival for the post, recognizing that the demands of the new age require a different kind of leadership. It is through such decisions that Don Fabrizio emerges not as a tragic relic, but as a figure of profound dignity. His steadfast adherence to his own code, coupled with his magnanimous acceptance of change, lends him a timeless nobility. Observing him, Father Pirrone recalls an old saying about true aristocracy—a lineage not merely of blood, but of character and conduct.

"Rage is gentlemanly; complaints are not. I could give you a recipe, in fact: if you meet a 'gentleman' who's querulous, look up his family tree; you'll soon find a dead branch" (Lampedusa 152).

The protagonist's demeanor is entirely realistic. His response to the question of becoming a senator also reveals the prevailing sentiment of the entire Sicilian populace, and within this clarity lies the reason for his refusal:

"The Sicilian never want to improve for the simple reason that they think themselves perfect," the prince tells a Piedmontese aristocrat who tries to persuade him to become a senator. "Their vanity is stronger than their misery; every invasion by outsiders... upsets their illusion of achieved perfection" (141).

The character is presented to us with such authenticity that one cannot help but feel affection for him. Particularly striking is his surrender and pragmatism at the time of his death, which is bound to deeply affect any sensitive individual. For instance, before his demise, upon seeing his reflection, he observes that his beard has grown. This demonstrates his realistic thought process:

"Call a barber, will you?" he said to Francesco Paolo. But at once he thought, "No. It's a rule of the game; hateful but formal. They'll shave me afterward." And he said out loud, "It doesn't matter; we'll think about that later." The idea of the utter abandon of his corpse, with a barber crouched over it, did not disturb him" (187).

Despite his former grandeur, this man, at the moment of death, is acutely aware that he possesses nothing on earth: no home, no property, no wealth. He believes that what truly belongs to him is merely this decrepit body, adrift like a survivor clinging to a plank from a sunken ship, awaiting its fate. He harbors no illusions of indispensability, nor does he imagine that the world's order would falter without him. Rather, he contemplates his own insignificance thus:

"And he himself would be merely a memory of a choleric old grandfather who had collapsed one July afternoon just in time to prevent the boy's going off to Livorno for sea bathing. He had said that the Salinas would always remain the Salinas. He had been wrong. The last Salina was himself. That fellow Garibaldi, that bearded Vulcan, had won after all (190)

The Leopard stands as a magnificent novel due to these very qualities. Through its masterful depiction of setting, character, and artistic brilliance, it will forever be remembered as a monumental work in the realm of fiction, and especially within the tradition of Italian novels, it will be enshrined as a true masterpiece.

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