

# Storyboard

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Giacomo Leopardi, one of the greatest Italian poets of all times.

His real identity and the value of his literary and philosophical work still have to be fully understood.

The aim of his research is the origin of sorrow in mankind throughout different times and countries. He investigated the limits of reason at the beginning of the XIX century, marked by the 2<sup>nd</sup> industrial revolution.

He spoke of the inability of modern human kind to communicate with nature. He strove for solidarity between men and women of every country, of every social class.

He was born in this little town in central Italy in 1798, in a noble family with economic troubles. Recanati was in a far Italian province, under the state of the Church.

Italy wasn't united yet as it is today. In the post Napoleonic age, the state of the Church was one of the head of the Restoration. All the little Italian states, ruled by their kings or dukes, wanted to go back to the past, to the age before the French revolution and before the Enlightenment, thinking that the absolute power of the king came from God.

Giacomo's father was a close minded and reactionary man. Nevertheless, he loved to collect books. His library encompasses an extraordinary collection of texts, with an unlimited range of genres. It was extraordinarily huge for that time.

Giacomo spent the majority of his childhood in his library. He avidly read about Literature, ancient and modern Philosophy, Maths and Science. His collection was extraordinarily up-to-date.

He was a genius. All the noble children used to be taught in their home by preceptors. However, his father decided to stop the private teaching of his son from the age of fourteen. "Giacomo had nothing more to learn!" After that, he kept studying alone day and night for seven years.

He learnt Latin, language of the Roman age, ancient Greek, language of the roots of Western culture, Hebrew language, that of the Torah, and basic Sanskrit.

Also to mention are modern languages: French, English, Spanish, German, and Maths and Astronomy.

He soon began to write his own books on Science, Philosophy, Poetry. At the age of fourteen he wrote the 'History of Astronomy' and the philosophical dialogues.

And also two tragedies, starting his poetical work.

He became deeply interested in Poetry at the age of seventeen. He translated ancient Greek and Latin poetry. Among many others, Homer's 'Odyssey', Virgil's 'Eneid' or Esiod's 'Titanomachia', masterpieces of the ancient Western poetry.

His first important poems belong to the same time of his existence.

Leopardi was delighted by beautiful ancient sculptures, and loved the imagination and creativity of Greeks and Romans.

Their tighter link with natural elements and their child-like minds made them more skilled in art and civil life.

But his deeper concern was sorrow, the unhappiness of human kind, the suffering of all creatures. His thinking was extraordinarily shrewd and acute.

In the summer of 1817 he worked on an ambitious project. He started to note down his thoughts concerning several subjects, from Literature to Philosophy, from Science to Politics, Languages... he even noted personal considerations on Japanese and Chinese languages after having read a book for a French scholar. He continued making notes till 1832, a few years before his death. The name of this work is 'Zibaldone', comprising 4526 pages, written with very few corrections and a very clear handwriting. It is a very notable piece of literature, since it was not meant for publication, but only as a private journal, like a laboratory for new works.

His health was not good. He was a very weak teenager suffering from several diseases and he was hunchbacked. He was oppressed by the closed mentality of his provincial town, by the limited cultural horizons, and by his reactionary family. His mother was very detached and she wasn't able to display love or feelings for her children.

But his mind was sparkling. His great physical energy showed itself in an enormous intellectual and imaginative activity. He enjoyed cultural reviews from Paris, London, Edinburgh, seeking debates in North Europe.

His family wanted him to become a priest. There was a lot of tension with his parents but finally he become an agnostic, a free spirit and began to develop a new kind of philosophical thought.

Leopardi thought Western society was becoming too rational. To be rational means to be pragmatic, egoistic, a calculating person. Nature otherwise, is not totally rational. Leopardi thought that the true philosopher must go beyond reason. That does not imply being irrational or superstitious. He invites us to realize that rationality is unable to understand all phenomena of life. A completely rational society would be based only on calculation, egoism, technical organization,

statistics, and that is the way our society is. He understood the increasing power of reason in the life and thinking of Western society.

Leopardi, like other contemporary philosophers such as Kierkegaard and Schopenhauer, thinks that reason is not the king of the human mind, it doesn't have absolute power. It is a strength, a power similar to many others in human minds like emotions, desires, feelings. Reason has its laws and rules, as emotions and affections have theirs.

Only a bad philosopher expects everything to be rational in life. Who is the philosopher then? He is a more complete figure, who realizes there are different strengths in the mind: emotions, feelings. There is an intelligence in all these forces that allows us to understand reality. Intelligence is a wider way of thinking.

He thinks sorrow and unhappiness come from the impossibility for men to match desires. Nature feeds these to the human mind, as a means to perpetuate life.

But when men and women live in touch with nature, they are able to feel positive illusions, in the same way ancient people and primitives could. They were physically stronger, more intuitive and creative. They were also more generous, defending justice.

As a poet, Leopardi believes Poetry should help modern people by stimulating their imagination. Happiness, impossible to reach in real life, can however be taught through life.

He kept on noting down the kind of images that are poetic, and which poetry should offer.

In general, these images are created when our senses, especially sight and hearing, are not able to fully perceive. Being partially hampered, Leopardi let his mind go on imagining what lays beyond.

A line of trees whose end is not possible to be seen.

Hills in the fog.

The light of the moon on the sea.

The bend of a river that disappears in green.

A light comes in starting from nowhere.

These are all poetic images that are able to excite our imagination. They raise up from deep memory, the strong, pure sensations we gathered in early childhood, when our brain was strongly sensitive.

After 1821, he finally succeeded in leaving his house for few months. He went to Rome but society and the cultural environment embodied in him a deep delusion: superficiality, arrogance, ambition. Italian intellectuals appeared upon his eyes as empty and poor in intelligence. This experience, with other unfortunate historical events, made him desperate about the possibility of a rebirth of ancient values and of a fully lived life.

A new period of his philosophical thinking began. He realized that the only concern of nature is the continuation of species, so that life on Earth could continue. Nature is absolutely indifferent towards creatures, as it requires a continuous life-death cycle. For five years, Leopardi didn't write any poem. He composed the philosophical dialogues of the 'Operette Morali'. In those years he lived in Florence, Milan and Bologna, working for a publisher and giving private lessons.

In 1828 he arrived in Pisa, Tuscany, where new friends and the mild climate of the city gave a new impulse to his poetry. Marvellous works appeared, in one of which he imagined a shepherd from central Asia speaking to the moon...

### **- Reading of the poetry 'Song of a Wandering Asian Shepherd' -**

In late 1828 he had to come back to Recanati. He then left his family for the last time In 1831. He moved to Florence where he had many friends. Some of them were working in a literary review, the 'Antologia Vieusseux', a liberal and progressive review. At that time an enthusiastic ideology was spreading throughout Italy. Many intellectuals were proclaiming that Science and technology would bring a new age of happiness and wealth for the human kind. In the meantime, many others, on the base of religious convictions, were reasserting that man is the king of creation, as the will of God.

Leopardi argued boldly with them all. According to him, thinking to have been predestined to happiness inevitably leads into hating the others, accusing them to be responsible for one's own unhappiness and sorrow. At that time he was living in Naples, far from his noble family, which had started allowing him a little salary. He wrote new poems, animated by a fierce ironic spirit. He was feeling that his century, the XIX, was characterized by overconfidence and arrogance. Even though advertised as a century of happiness, it was clearly failing by refusing the intellectual conquests of the Renaissance and of the Enlightenment.

His life was coming to an end... One of the last poems he wrote is entitled 'La Ginestra' or 'The Flower of the Desert'. It is considered his spiritual testament. In this long, wonderful poem he looks at the universe, human society, and history from the slopes of the Vesuvius, the volcano near Naples. This volcano destroyed the two big cities of Ercolano and Pompei in a sudden eruption, during the Roman age. The volcano and its surroundings testify the tremendous power of Nature and the insignificance of human kind. He looks at the depth of the sky and realizes how human

kind is little and how it's stupid to hate each other and to be arrogant in believing in being the owner of the world.

### **- Reading of the poetry 'Flowering Broom, or the Flower of the Desert' -**

In a life in which pain and unhappiness appear to be unavoidable and whose significance is impossible to be reached, the only right attitude is solidarity. This was the goal of human society since its origin in the prehistoric age.

Many people and many intellectuals thought and think that Leopardi is too pessimist, negative, nihilist, due to his bad physical condition. But can we define depressed, negative, nihilist, a man with this tremendous will in communicating with all the human kind? Sharing such beautiful images, claiming to respect and love each other?

So sensitive to the beauty of nature, to the sorrow of all humans and all creatures? Can we call a sick man a person who was able to write thousands of pages full of extraordinary reflections, so acute, so pure, without any kind of ambition or vanity?

No, we believe that this is not depression, this is not negative. We agree with him: negative is to build hate and war. If to look bravely at reality without self illusions is to build mutual comprehension and peace, it is absolutely positive. Now, at the beginning of the XXI century, this is still a voice claiming people from all over the world to embrace humility, peace and respect for each other and for all creatures. Conducting a research into the limits of reason without refusing it, he showed the complexity of the human mind, building a bridge between West and East.