The Mystery of Amedeo

What do we know about Amedeo? – his name, his national origin, his suffering? What do the other residents of the Piazza Vittorio think about Amedeo? What does Amedeo bring to the others, to the Piazza Vittorio, to Italy?

Amedeo is “a real Italian”

Where to most residents think Amedeo comes from? Why are they so adamant?

- Why are you so insistent? I told you that Amedeo is a real Italian. [Benedetta 39]
- What are you saying? Signor Amedeo is a foreigner? I can’t believe he’s not Italian! [Benedetta 33]
- I’m sure of one thing; Signor Amedeo is not an immigrant. [Iqbal 51]
- Amedeo is a foreigner! Is it logical that the person who represents magnificent Italy is a foreigner? He’s the only one who answers all my questions about politics, the Mafia, movies, cooking and so on. [Johan 87]

Amedeo is “different from the other Italians”

What is Amedeo’s most distinctive feature, for many residents? How is this feature related to his national origin?

- Signor Amedeo is different from the other Italians...he’s not a racist who hates foreigners. [Iqbal 46]
- Signor Amedeo is the only tolerant person in this building. [Elisabetta 56]
- It’s not important whether Amedeo is Italian or not. [Parviz 15]
- Only now am I opening my eyes to this truth: I don’t know who Amedeo is. Who was he before he came to Rome? Why did he abandon his native country? Why did he choose Rome? What does his past hide? What secrets do the nightmares that haunt him conceal? A mystery that envelops his previous life—maybe that’s the secret of my passion for him. [Stefania 105]

Amedeo, “that magnificent man”

What is Amedeo’s effect on the others? Why?

Is he a hero, in the immigrant community?

- Amedeo is my only friend in Rome... I love...Amedeo. [Parviz 14]
- Amedeo acted as mediator between me and the police. [Parviz 25]
- Signor Amedeo promised to intervene to release me from this nightmare. [Iqbal 50]
- Amedeo is the only tenant who stops to talk to me. He always calls me Signora Benedetta and he avoids using the elevator because he respects my work [Benedetta 41]
- When I get married and have a child I’m going to call him Amedeo. .. Signor Amedeo is the only person who treats me kindly. [Maria Cristina 65]
- Amedeo sacrificed everything for me. He gave up his country, his language, his culture, his name, and his memory. He did everything possible to make me happy. He learned Italian for me, he loved Italian cooking for me, he called himself Amedeo for me, in other words he became an Italian to be close to me. [Stefania 102]
- [Amedeo] told him to leave Maria Cristina alone. [Fifth Wail 73]

Amedeo’s suffering

What frightens Amedeo?

I’ve often heard him utter incomprehensible words. Once he woke up frightened, repeating, “Bagia! Bagia!” he was sweating as if he had escaped from Hell. .. I asked him the meaning of the word Bagia. He didn’t answer but looked at me reproachfully, perhaps to remind me of the agreement we made before our marriage: the past is like a volcano, be careful not to rouse it! 107
Amedeo doesn’t like the past. Often he says to me that the past resembles quicksand: there’s no escape. [Stefania 105]
Memory is just like a stomach. Every so often it makes me vomit. I vomit memories of blood non-stop. [Ninth Wail 109]
The damn nightmare is pursuing me. Stefania told me this morning that I cried out in my sleep and that I kept repeating the name Bagia. I didn’t want to tell her the details. It’s pointless for her to join the game of nightmares. My memory is wounded and bloody: I have to heal the wounds of the past in solitude. [Ninth Wail 110]

Amedeo’s mystery

What is Amedeo’s mystery? His beauty? His poetry?
Amedeo is like a beautiful harbor from which we depart and to which we always return. [Stefania 105]
Amedeo is as mysterious as the Sahara. [Stefania 105]
I’m not saying that Amedeo is an enigma. Rather he’s like a poem by Omar Khayyam: you need a lifetime to understand its meaning, and only then will your heart open to the world and tears warm your cold cheeks. [Parviz 15]

Immigration and Identity—Mysteries, Misunderstandings, and Names

How do the people of Piazza Vittorio identify immigrants? How do they communicate with one another? What does Amedeo show them about immigrants, Italians, and themselves?

Differences

How do the people of the Piazza Vittorio identify one another by ethnicity? Are they always accurate?
That Filipino Maria Cristina always tells me that she isn’t from the Philippines, she says she’s from some other country whose name I can’t remember. [Benedetta 37]
He’s tried over and over again to convince me that he comes from a country that isn’t Albania. [Benedetta 36]
She insults me on purpose, calling me Hey Pakistani! I’ve told her many times, “I’m Bangladeshi, and I have nothing to do with Pakistan, in fact I have an unbounded hatred for the Pakistanis.” [Iqbal 46]
I can tell the difference between a Bangladeshi and an Indian, between an Albanian and a Pole, between a Tunisian and an Egyptian… as you see, it won’t be easy to convince me that my friend Amede’ isn’t Italian. [Sandro 92]
Have you seen the difference between us and them? Ahmed hasn’t grasped the substantial differences between our religion and Gianfranco’s. I can still remember the fear that struck me when I heard people call him Amedeo. I was afraid he had renounced Islam. I didn’t hesitate an instant, I asked him with distress and concern, “Ahmed, have you converted to Christianity?” And he answered serenely, “No.” [Abdallah 117]
I think Parviz is afraid he’ll forget Iranian cooking if he learns Italian. It’s the only explanation for his hatred of pizza in particular and pasta in general… Parviz thinks it’s impossible for them to live together in harmony. [First Wail 29]

The Difference Words make

How do the people of the Piazza Vittorio communicate with one another? Do they always understand each other’s words?

Guaglio — as you know, “guaglio” means “fuck” in Neapolitan. [Parviz 17]
That good-for-nothing is rude when I call him guaglio! I don’t know his name, and in Naples that’s what we say. [Benedetta 36]
Merci — He answers with a nasty word in his language... maybe mersa or mersis! Anyway the point is, this word means “shit in Albanian. [Benedetta 36]
I tried unsuccessfully to convince Benedetta...that merci is a French word meaning “thank you” that is used, with the same meaning, in Iran. [Second Wail 42]
Gentile —I am not gentile! [Benedetta 33]
Even the Dutch student Van Marten has not been safe from the negative cultural and social influences of the Romans. I’ve often heard him say, with arrogance and no shame, “I am not gentile!” ...I tried to correct this error...”Don’t repeat that phrase, because, in a word, it means that you are uncivilized and have no manners; that is,
that you are a barbarian.” He looked at me with an air of false innocence: “I know that the word ‘gentile’ means well brought up, kind, and polite, but I mean something else.” I couldn’t listen to the rest of his explanation...

[Antonio 79]

“Gentile” is ... actually ... the surname of the former player for Juventus and for the Italian national team that won the world championship in 1982 in Spain...Claudio Gentile was known for his aggressiveness and for man-to-man marking. For my father Gentile is the primary enemy of the sport, in fact the ultimate symbol of a catenaccio...That’s why I keep saying “I am not GENTILE”—it’s my way of saying I’m innocent. But is Gentile the true image of Italy? [Johan 84-85]

**Names, personalities, conflicts, and name changes**

Do names determine one’s character and identity? Is it damaging or disloyal to change one’s name?

When Sandro asked me my name I answered, “Ahmed.” But he pronounced it without the letter “h,” because “h” isn’t used much in Italian, and in the end he called me Amede’, which is an Italian name and can be shortened to Amed...The name Amedeo won’t hurt me. But is there a silent conflict between Amedeo and Ahmed? [Eighth Wail 99-100]

Why did he call himself Amedeo? That’s the question that leaves me so perplexed. His real name is Ahmed, which is a precious name, because it’s one of the names of the prophet Mohammed. 112

For example my name is Abdallah, and I know perfectly well that it’s a difficult name for Italians to pronounce, but in spite of that I’ve sworn not to change it as long as I live. [Abdallah 112]

I will not change my skin, or my religion, or my country, or my name, for any reason. I’m proud of myself. I’m not like those immigrants who change their name to please the Italians. [Abdallah 113]

Tonight I read an article in L’espresso by a psychologist who advises people to change their name every so often, because it creates an equilibrium among the various personalities that live in conflict within each of us. He said that changing our name helps us to a happier life, because it lightens the burden of memory. So I should be safe from schizophrenia. [Eighth Wail 99]

I am not a racist, but

How does the experience of difference, conflict, and confusion affect individual’s attitudes towards one another? What defines a racist?

I’m not a racist, but I can’t bear Neapolitans. [Sandro 93]

All you have to do is take a walk in the afternoon in the gardens in Piazza Vittorio to see that the overwhelming majority of the people are foreigners; some come from Morocco, some from Romania, China, India, Poland, Senegal, Albania. Living with them is impossible. They have religions, habits, and traditions that are different from ours...I am not a racist, but that’s the truth. [Benedetta 38]

Why don’t they arrest Iqbal and the Albanian and the rest of these criminal immigrants and throw them out? That Filipino woman, I really dislike her...she gets everything free and she acts like she owns the house... Is this right? [Benedetta 37]

Labeling any immigrant a criminal, without distinction, is a déjà vue. Italian immigrants in the United States were accused of being in the Mafia and suffered tremendously. Certainly, the Italians don’t seem to have learned anything from the lessons of history. [Third Wail 54]

I said to him: “This is not a public toilet.” He gave me a look of such hatred and said, “If you say that gain I’ll piss in our mouth! You’re in my house, you have no right to speak! Get it, you piece of shit?... Italy for Italians! Italy for Italians!” [Parvia 23]

The Neapolitan concierge is a racist, too, because she won’t let me use the elevator when I deliver groceries to my customers who live in her building. [Iqbal 46]

I can’t bear Benedetta, she’s a gossip, a big mouth, and above all she’s hated me since I was a child... I don’t like Professor Antonio Marini, because he’s like a traffic cop...I don’t like my neighbor Elisabetta Fabiani: that stupid woman had no qualms about giving the name of the mythical Valentino to her dog...once she accused me of being a racist. All you have to do is defend your rights and they stick the label of racist on you! [Stefania 104]
Iqbal asked me if I knew the difference between a tolerant person and a racist. A racist is in conflict with others because he doesn’t believe they’re on his level, while a tolerant person treats others with respect—he whispered, “Racists don’t smile!” I thought all day about racists who refuse to smile and I realized that Iqbal has made an important discovery. The racist’s problem is not with others but with himself... he doesn’t smile at his fellow-man because he doesn’t know how to smile at himself. [Third Wail 52]

Who are they? Who am I? Who are you?

How is identity manifested in the lives of the people of the Piazza Vittorio?

After a while Amedeo became a fan of Roma, and he doesn’t miss a game at the Olympic Stadium... When you get right down to it, every fan roots for his home team. [Sandro 94]

My hatred for pizza is beyond compare... [Parviz 14]

He’s the only one who answers all my questions about politics, the Mafia, movies, cooking and so on. [Johan 87]

How does identity become complicated or problematic: in solving the murder mystery? For the people in the Piazza Vittorio? For immigrants and nationalists?

It’s pointless to persist with this question: Is Amedeo Italian? Whatever the answer is, it won’t solve the problem. But then who is Italian? [Parviz 15]

And so what, if Signor Amedeo is a foreigner, as you say, then who’s a real Italian? I’m not even sure about myself. Maybe the day will come that Benedetta Esposito is Albanian, or Filipino or Pakistani. [Benedetta 34]

That dog is happier than I am... I envy little Valentino, I’ve often dreamed of being in his place. Am I a human being? Sometimes I doubt my humanity. [Marin Cristina 68-69]

Today I finished reading Amin Maalouf’s novel Leo Africanus. I reread this passage over and over until I knew it by heard: “I, Hassan, son of Muhammad the weigh-master, I Jean-Leon de’ Medici, circumcised at the hand of a barber and baptized at the hand of a Pope, I am now called the African, but I am not from Africa, nor from Europe nor from Arabia... I’m the son of the road. My country is the caravan. My life is the most unexpected of voyages.” It’s marvelous to be able to free ourselves from the chains of identity which lead us to ruin. Who am I? Who are you? Who are they? These are pointless and stupid questions. [Ninth Wail 110]

The Murder in the Elevator

How do the people of the Piazza Vittorio feel about the elevator? How did they get so attached to it? How is the elevator tied to Italy, immigration, conflict, civilizations, struggle, death, suffering, memory, life?

The people of the Piazza Vittorio and the elevator

How do each of the characters feel about the elevator?

I adore the elevator... I meditate in it. You press the button without any effort, you go up or descend, it could even break down while you’re inside. It’s exactly like life, full of breakdowns. Now you’re up, now you’re down...in Paradise...in Hell. [Parviz 16]

I hate the elevator because it reminds me of a tomb. [Second Wail 42]

My memory is like a broken elevator. Or rather, the past is like a sleeping volcano. Let’s try not to wake it, so we can avoid eruptions. [Stefania 104]

It’s exactly like life, full of breakdowns. Now you’re up, now you’re down...in Paradise...in Hell. [Parviz 16]

The morbid relationship that Benedetta has established with the elevator raises a lot of questions. [Second Wail 42]

Signor Amedeo is the only one in this building who out of respect for me doesn’t use the elevator, because he understood the problems it causes for me every time it breaks. [Benedetta 35]

Then they said my weight was responsible for breaking the elevator, they say it’s more than the capacity of the poor elevator... is it right that they forbid me to use the elevator while they let Signora Fabiani’s dog pee there? [Maria Cristina 68]

Stefania is right when she calls Antonio Marini the traffic cop. Luckily I don’t use the elevator, so I can keep clear of his obsession. This man has been stricken by a new malady, “elevator-mania,” very similar to paranoia. He never stops repeating that the elevator is civilization and that the fundamental difference between the civilized and the barbarians lies, first of all, in safeguarding the elevator. [Sixth Wail 82]
Barbarism and civilization in the elevator

Where do the conflicts among the people of the Piazza Vittorio take place?

She chose the elevator, because it’s at the center of the conflicts among the building’s residents. [Mauro 128]

Do you know that the residents of our building pee in the elevator? [Antonio 77]

I’ve tried quite a few times to organize tenants’ meetings to deal once and for all with some serious problems, especially the problem of the elevator. I repeated that the elevator is a matter of civilization, and that we must establish clear rules for using it… I proposed putting a sign on the door of the elevator: “Pease keep the elevator clean!” [Antonio 78]

Who is in charge of the elevator? Who should be?

I wonder if you need a residency permit just for the elevator. [Iqbar 47]

The elevator is the source of the problem. There is no agreement among the tenants about it: there are some who want air-conditioning in summer and heat in winter, there are some who propose putting a crucifix and photos of the Pope and Padre Pio in it, while some insist on the right to a secular elevator with no religious symbols. Then, there are some who reject all these proposals, maintaining that they are costly and unnecessary. In other words, this elevator is like a ship with more than one captain. [Johan 87]

That professor from Milan has done his best to keep us from using the elevator; he wanted to have it just for himself, and he advanced the oddest proposals, on the pretext that they would improve the quality of the service: bolt the elevator door shut, keep visitors and guests from using it, ban smoking and spitting, clean your shoes before entering, put in a mirror and a seat for two people, and so on. Once, after yet another meeting where I was really pissed off, I said to him, “You’re a pain in the ass, and I’ve got a mind to beat you up—this elevator belongs to everybody! it’s not part of your house, this is our building and we’re not a tribe of Zulus! Go back to Milan and do whatever the fuck you like!” [Sandro 96]

What is the elevator compared to?

All my nightmares take place in an elevator: a narrow tomb without windows. [Seventh Wail 91]

You barbarians, I’ll never be one of you! I will defend civilization in this building as long as I live. The elevator is the dividing line between barbarism and civilization. [Sandro 97]

The true meaning of the elevator

Why does the murder take place in the elevator?

I found him stone dead in the elevator. [Benedetta 36]

I’m sure that finding the body in the elevator has a precise meaning. Most of the fights between the tenants originate with the elevator. All the meetings focus on it: Mr. Elevator! [Johan 87]

The breakdown of the elevator is a catastrophe that forces us to use the stairs, and is thus an offense to modernity, to development, and to enlightenment! I’ve often tried to convince the other residents, but without success. I said, “The elevator is a means of transport produced by civilization. It saves time and effort, it’s as important as the train or the airplane.” [Antonio 78]

Why is the elevator a good subject for a film?

I discovered that the elevator would be a good subject for a film that combines neorealism and the cinema of Fassbinder… Clash of Civilizations Over an elevator in Piazza Vittorio. [Johan 88]

Suffering and Truth in the Piazza Vittorio

How many of the residents of the Piazza Vittorio are suffering? How many are entangled in the complexities of truth? What sections of the novel contain truths?

Suffering in the Piazza Vittorio

What brings suffering to the individuals in the Piazza Vittorio?

Parviz— I cry a lot and I drink even more. [Parviz 18]

“Oh my God, Parviz has sewed up his mouth!”…In front of me I saw Amedeo. It was the first time I’d seen him cry. [Parvia 22]
Oh, my God! Where does such sadness come from? What is silence? Is there any point in speaking? Are there other ways of telling the truth, without moving your lips? The authorities had told Parviz that his story of fleeing Iran was an invention, that it had nothing to do with politics, but instead with cooking! [First Wail 29]

Iqbal — I still remember how he helped me solve the problem that gave me an ulcer. [Iqbar 49]

Elisabetta — Elisabetta’s condition gets worse every day. I saw her tonight walking barefoot near Piazza Vittorio calling her vanished dog. [Fourth Wail 64]

Maria Cristina — I suffer terribly from loneliness and sometimes it makes me caress madness. [Maria Cristina 68]

Antonio — Now I’m about to retire. How I regret all the years I’ve spent here. [Antonio 75]

Stefania — I don’t know where Amedeo is now, I’m afraid something has happened to him. I still look for him everywhere. [Stefania 108]

Abdallah — I’ve sold fish for years, and I find no difference between the lives of fish and the lives of immigrants. I know a proverb that the Italians often repeat: “Guests are like fish, after three days they stink.” The immigrant is a guest, no more or less, and, like fish, you eat him when he’s fresh and throw him in the garbage when he loses his color. [Abdallah 116]

Amedeo — Ahmed’s troubles began when his fiancée, Bagia, died; she was the neighbors’ daughter Ahmed had loved her since he was a child, and wanted to marry her, … Terrorists…cut the throats of all the passengers except the girls. Bagia tried to flee, to avoid being raped, so they shot her in a burst of machine-gun fire. Ahmed couldn’t accept that tragedy. He shut himself fin the house for days, then he disappeared… [Abdallah 114]

I’ve often heard him utter incomprehensible words. Once he woke up frightened, repeating, “Bagia! Bagia!” he was sweating as if he had escaped from Hell. … I asked him the meaning of the word Bagia. He didn’t answer but looked at me reproachfully, perhaps to remind me of the agreement we made before our marriage: the past is like a volcano, be careful not to rouse it! [Stefania 107]

Who possesses truth? What is truth? Where is truth?

Where does Amedeo seek truth?

I ask as loud as I can, from this hole that has a stink to take your breath away: who possesses the truth? Rather, what is the truth? Is the truth spoken with words? Parviz spoke his truth with his mouth sewed up: he spoke with his silence. Today my hatred of the truth has increased, and so has my passion for wailing. I’ll wail for the rest of the night from this confined space. [First Wail 30]

Is truth worth seeking?

I thought of telling Benedetta everything I know about Iqbal, then I thought twice: to what end? It’s really pointless to know the truth. [Second Wail 44]

Is truth simple?

As you see, the story of Ahmed Salmi is simple, it’s not that complicated. The truth is different, it’s not what you thought up to now. There are no particular secrets, no twisted events in his life before he settled in Rome. [Abdallah 115]

What links truth to suffering?

Epigraph: The truth is at the bottom of a well: look into a well and you see the sun or the moon; but throw yourself down and there is neither sun nor moon, there is the truth.

— The Day of the Owl, Leonardo Sciascia. [Second Wail 45]

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**Cast of Characters**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Nationality</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parviz Mansoor Samadi</td>
<td>Iranian</td>
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<tr>
<td>Benedetta Esposito</td>
<td>Neapolitan</td>
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<tr>
<td>Iqbal Amir Allah</td>
<td>Bangladeshi</td>
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<td>Elisabetta Fabiani</td>
<td>Italian</td>
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<td>Maria Cristina Gonzalez</td>
<td>Peruvian</td>
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<td>Antonio Marini</td>
<td>Milanese</td>
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<td>Johan Van Marten</td>
<td>Dutch</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sandro Dandini</td>
<td>Italian</td>
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</table>
Lorenzo Manfredini—The Gladiator
Who killed poor Lorenzo Manfredini? … He was a friend of my son’s in childhood and adolescence, they were always together, like brothers. Lorenzo came to live with his grandmother when his parents divorced, after a legal battle over the division of their assets and custody of Lorenzo. The grandmother wasn’t capable of controlling her grandson, so Lorenzo left school early and has always hung around delinquents. [Elisabetta 60]
He was hated by all the residents of the building. He came home drunk, he peed in the elevator, he often quarreled with Sandro Dandini and with Antonio Marini. Further, he more than once raped the domestic worker Maria Cristina. [Mauro 127]
We made inquiries about the origin of this nickname. It seems that Lorenzo took bets, organizing clandestine dog fights that always ended with the death of one of the contestants… Lorenzo and his companions had invented a new game of death. [Mauro 128]

Ahmed Salmi— aka Amedeo
Algerian
Ahmed is from my neighborhood. I know him very well, just as I know his whole family. His younger brother was one of my dearest friends, my schoolmate and playmate. Ahmed was a person who was loved and respected in the neighborhood. … Ahmed’s troubles began when his fiancée, Bagia, died; she was the neighbors’ daughter Ahmed had loved her since he was a child, and wanted to marry her. … Terrorists…cut the throats of all the passengers except the girls. Bagia tried to flee, to avoid being raped, so they shot her in a burst of machine-gun fire. Ahmed couldn’t accept that tragedy. He shut himself in the house for days, then he disappeared. [Abdallah 114]

Academic Integrity note
Students have been asked to include citations in their papers on Clash of Civilizations Over an Elevator in Piazza Vittorio. All students have received a hard copy of The Essential Guide to Academic Integrity. This document is available to consult at http://www.cornell.edu/provost/docs/0812-academic-integrity.pdf.