Seductive Fruit

She is waiting there, with a gift of fruit that her Paulo sends to the landlady. And the mistress comes, almost running but a bit suspicious; she comes from the dark rooms; dressed in black: her pale face, caught between two shells of black braids and her bare, white hands emerge from the shadow like those of the figures in the paintings around her. And even when she appears in full, in the light of the room, her small, subtle person has something elusive, suspicious. Her big, gloomy eyes immediately stare at the fruit basket placed on the table; then, they wrap the waiting woman in a deep look, and a quick smile, which is of joy, but also of mockery, and which illuminates her sad and sensual mouth. And the mother’s first doubt, she still doesn’t know why, was born at that moment. She still did not know why, but she remembered the care with which the girl had welcomed her, making her sit next to her and asking her news of Paulo. She called him Paulo, like a brother; but she treated her not as an ordinary mother, but almost as a rival who had to be softened and put to sleep. She had her coffee served in a large silver tray, by a barefoot servant who had her face blindfolded like an Arab; she spoke to her of her two distant and strong brothers, pleased, without pardon, to appear between them as between two columns that supported the building, of her solitary life. Finally, she led her to see the garden from the
door of the room. Purple figs covered with silvery dust, and pears, and clusters of golden grapes appeared among the sparkling green of the trees and vines. Why, then, had Paulo sent his gift of fruit to those who already had so much?

(from the novel *La Madre*, 1920)

D. H. Lawrence, the famous English writer and author of *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, after a trip to Sardinia, defined the novel *La Madre* by Grazia Deledda as the most powerful erotic text he had read on the island and perhaps in contemporary Italian literature.

It tells the story of a young priest, Don Paulu, who is bewitched by one of his parishioners, and throughout the story told in the book is torn between following his instinct, which suggests that he should leave the clergy, and his moral and ethical duty, which keeps him tied to the Church. The mother represents the call to order and faith. Her death, at the end of the novel, comes at the same time as Paulu’s decision to remain a priest and not to follow Agnes. It was as if the mother had sacrificed herself to save her son’s soul. In a poor society, where meat and milk, as products of the sheep, were undoubtedly within everyone’s reach, unlike fruit, in the passage we have reported it is precisely grapes and figs that are attributed the discreet charm of wealth.

But their location in Agnese’s house (both the fruit basket given as a gift and the fruit found in the cozy dining room) determines, through a metaphorical trope, a sort of fascination, of seductive attraction perceived by the mother who, from that moment on, begins to have suspicions about
the nature of the relationship between her priest son and the young parishioner.