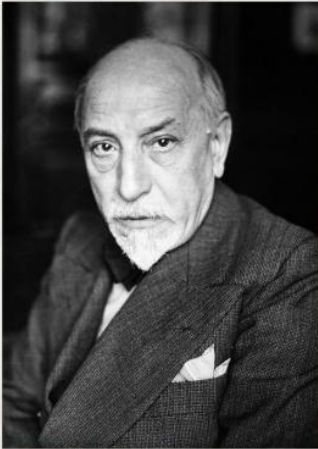


Analysis of *War* by Luigi Pirandello



Luigi Pirandello

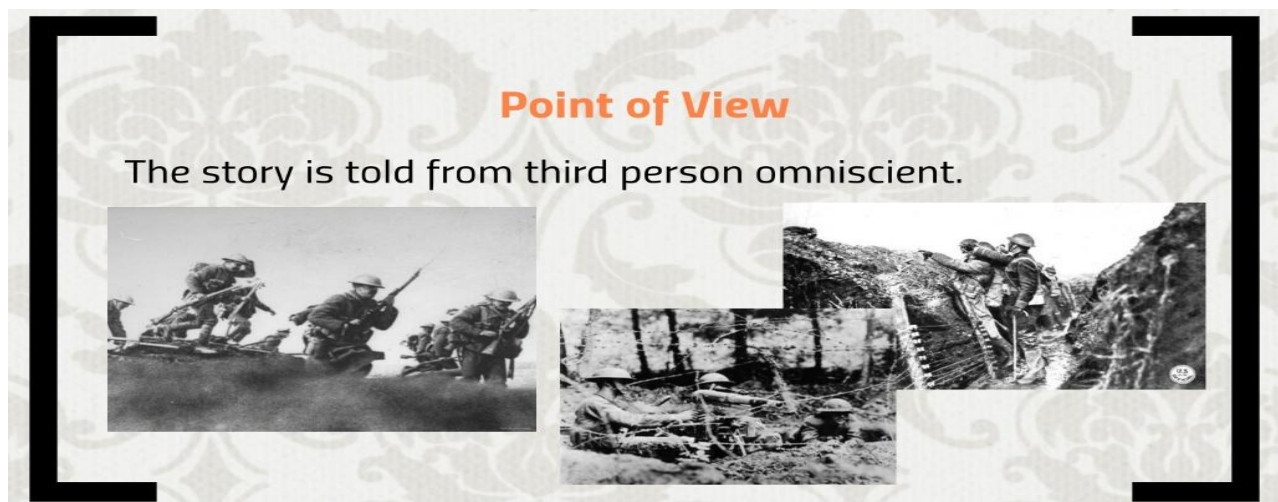
- Born in 1867 in Silcily
- Produces several volumes of verse and short stories
- His misfortunes and WWI contributed to his psychological themed writings
- He was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in literature in 1934
- Died 1936



Luigi Pirandello was an Italian dramatist, novelist, poet, and short story writer whose greatest contributions were his plays. He was awarded the 1934 Nobel Prize in Literature for his contribution to the genre of drama. He studied philology at Rome and at Bonn and wrote a dissertation on the dialect of his native town (1891). He wrote six novels and a great number of novellas. But Pirandello's greatest achievement is in his plays. He wrote a large number of dramas which were published, between 1918 and 1935, under the collective title of *Maschere*

nude[*Naked Masks*]. As Italy entered the First World War, Pirandello's son Stefano volunteered for service and was taken prisoner by the Austro-Hungarians. He dramatized this personal experience in the short story *War*.

Luigi Pirandello's *War* is a short story that manages to reflect human nature. By focusing the story on the emotional, as well as placing them in a vulnerable situation, Pirandello humanizes the characters and brings the reader to understand the harshness of the war. In the way that Pirandello illustrates human nature and reaction, we will be able to find ourselves through the characters in *War* and relate to the way they shut out the pain and suffering of their time.



Narrated in the third person by an unnamed narrator, *War* is set in a train carriage in Italy during WW1. While their nation is at war with the Central Powers, the passengers are at war with their own feelings. To stress the universality of the themes discussed in the short story, the characters are not given names. By finding ourselves in these characters, we can see how their feelings are reflected in our own and how we can identify so strongly with their interactions and reactions.

Reflecting his mastery of drama, many of Luigi Pirandello's stories focus on characters who reveal themselves primarily by dialogue. Pirandello even honors the three classical unities of time, place, and action. *War*, published in a 1919 collection and anthologized a number of times in college short story texts, is one of the best examples of this dramatic technique, for it focuses on a single situation limited in space and time in which a small number of characters reveal a hidden drama through speech. Critics point out the lack of physical action in the story and emphasize its debate-centered structure.

Summary of *War*

A husband and wife board a small train carriage at dawn in Italy, joining the five people who have already spent the night in it. The woman is large and in deep mourning. Some of the passengers help her in and make room for her.

The husband inquires if she's all right, but she doesn't answer. He explains to the others that their only son is being sent to war in three days and they're going to see him off.

A passenger says he has two sons and three nephews at the front, prompting the husband to stress that they're risking their *only* son. This sets off a passionate discussion about who is sacrificing the most.

The husband says a man who loses one son has another left to comfort him, but the passenger responds that such a man has an obligation to live for his other son, and thus can't end his misery at his own hand.

Another passenger, an old man, breaks in with a speech. He asserts that their children don't belong to them. They have interests of their own, including a love for their country, and they gladly fight for it. They don't want tears because if they die, they die happy. And dying young and happy is all anyone could want as it spares them of the boredom and disillusionment of life. Why, he doesn't even mourn the death of his own son.

He stops there, his lip trembling, his eyes watery.

The other passengers agree with him. The wife, inconsolable until now, finds strength in his words. She listens closely as the old man gives the details of how his son died heroically for King and Country, without regrets. All the other passengers congratulate the man for his stoicism and bravery.

The wife, as if waking from a dream, says to the man, "*Then... is your son really dead?*"

The old man looks at her, tries to answer, but can't. He seems to realize for the first time that his son is gone forever. He weeps uncontrollably.

Plot Outline

Exposition/Rising Action

Exposition: The man and women board the train to leave Rome and the woman appears to be in deep mourning.

Rising Action: Several passengers argue about who should be the saddest, or grieving the most.

- one traveler (passenger) has a son who was sent to the front on the 1st day and he has gone back twice.
- another passenger has two sons and three nephews on the front.
- the man and woman have their only son on the front.



Crisis/Climax

Crisis: the passengers trying to decide who should be grieving the most, or who should be the saddest.

Climax: the fat man stand up and says, or points out, that their sons were born to be happy and love their country; also, how the parents belong to their children. He even says "if one dies young and happy, without having the ugly sides of life... what more can we ask for him?"(866) The mans words change everyone's feelings to stop crying and just to be happy for their sons.

Falling Action/Resolution

Falling Action: The other passengers start to agree with the fat man, and the original woman tries to find a way to understand her sorrow/grief further.

Resolution: The original woman realizes she is being completely selfish about the whole situation.



Denouement



Denouement: The fat man begins to sob uncontrollably because he sees/realizes that his son is actually dead and is never coming back.

Theme

Theme: It is human nature to deny information or certain truths. (All the passenger believe they have it worse when they are all going through the exact same thing).



Theme: The Destructiveness of War

A significant theme that comes out of Pirandello's short story is that there is a pain intrinsic to war that cannot be placated. Pirandello's story is so powerful because it thematically breaks through many of the common associations with war. It strips away nationalism or love of country as a part of the justification of war. It takes away the notion of war being a part of a youthful adventure that young people must endure. It strikes at the heart that lies at all war. There is only death. The fact that the bundled up woman weeps for what she knows is going to be inevitable and that the fat man cannot escape the true horror of the war in that his son is "really dead" both help to emphasize the theme of the story. The end result of war is death and pain for those left behind. War becomes an experience where old people are left talking while young people are dying. The experience of war as a painful endeavor and one in which hurt is intrinsic to its being becomes one of the fundamental themes of the short story.

Theme: Patriotism

While the passengers have differing opinions over whose grief is greater, they all have strong patriotic feelings. No one even suggests that their sons shouldn't have to fight in the war. It's alright to feel sorrow, but it would be unthinkable to remove the cause.

The old man explains their sorrow by saying that a parent's love for their children is simply greater than their love for country, as evidenced by any parent's willingness to take their son's place at the front. On the other hand, a young person loves their country more than they love their parents.

He asserts that young people naturally put love of country above all else, and are happy to die in battle. He twice points out that he's speaking of decent boys. Likely, they've all heard of young men who tried to shirk their duty, and are disgusted by the thought—too indecent to tender as an alternative.

The old man also speaks of his son as a hero who died for King and Country. Everyone listens raptly and congratulates him.

Some critics, however, believe that the passengers reflect the lack of enthusiasm of the Italian people for the Great War, in which their country became involved because of a greedy backroom deal to acquire a few more chunks of territory that only few thought worth spilling blood to get. The lands would most likely have been theirs as the price of staying out. Italy's participation was conditioned by no great outpouring of national sentiment, nor because the national interest demanded it. However, a pretense has to be made. One character says, "Our children do not belong to us, they belong to the Country." His words, however, lack conviction. These people, despite their boastful facade, are not preoccupied with the great forces of history. They want to make it through life causing as little damage to their dignity as possible. They want to preserve the only thing that gives their life meaning and ensures their link with immortality: the lives of their offspring.

Theme: Intellectualizing Emotions

The old man avoids dealing with his grief by intellectualizing over the death of his son. Most likely because it is too painful for him to emotionally deal with the loss of his son. He claims that young people wouldn't want their parents to cry over them "*because if they die, they die inflamed and happy.*"

Moreover, he says that dying young prevents their children from seeing "*the ugly sides of life*" (like having to let your child go to their death?), so "*Everyone should stop crying; everyone should laugh, as I do...or at least thank God—as I do.*" The old man amends his statement that everyone should laugh. That's too much, even for him. Instead, they should thank God that their children die satisfied and happy.

The old man's speech is carefully constructed and delivered with some zest. He has obviously spent time rationalizing his son's death, trying to convince himself of its propriety. He has built an argument centered on duty, sacrifice, and love of King and Country—his son was a hero.

But all his rhetoric is just a wall put up to block his pain. His lip quivers and his eyes water; he already knows he's lying to himself. Ironically, he's losing his composure as the wife is finding hers. She gets swept up in his intellectual and noble argument. She comes out of her fog and asks if his son is really dead. The man goes through a moment of epiphany (an experience of a sudden insight or realization that changes his understanding). The shocking tactlessness of the question destroys his fragile equilibrium, revealing his extreme anguish.

Dominant Literary Device

Epiphany: A moment of sudden insight or revelation experienced by a character.



Conclusion

War was written in 1918 and is not widely available in short story collections. It's a moving glimpse at the effect of war on those left behind, the ordinary folks who make up the bulk of the population.

Although in its dependence on character and dialogue "War" seems like a one-act play, the climax of the story, the woman's simple question, is a typical example of a short story convention pioneered by Anton Chekhov. The question seems completely unprepared for, coming so soon after the woman's conscious acceptance of the fat man's rational and rhetorical speech. Her query about the reality of the situation undercuts everything that has been said before. It seems that the ultimate mystery of loss can be confronted only in unspeakable and unreasonable grief that no rhetoric can wash away.

Stay Safe!