



Analysis of the Crisis of “I” in the Pirandello’s Short Stories: Taking “The Handcart” as an Example

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Abstract

Literary modernism, or modernist literature, has its origins in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, mainly in Europe and North America, and is characterized by a self-conscious break with traditional ways of writing, in both poetry and prose fiction. Italian literature is always an important force in the field of European literature. Not only in the Renaissance but also in nowadays, there are a lot of famous Italian writers who had contributed a lot to the world’s literature such as Dante, Petrarch, Boccaccio, Italo Calvino, Alberto Moravia and Pirandello. The last one’s play is famous in the whole world, and received the Nobel prize. Pirandello is popular non only in Europa but also in China, nowadays, a lot of Chinese researchers focus on his plays, but his short stories are also important and have a great value to study. This paper will focus on one Pirandello’s short story: The handcart, to talk about the crisis of “I” in all the works of Pirandello.

Key words: Modernist literature; Italian literature; Pirandello; Short stories

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INTRODUCTION

Literary modernism, or modernist literature, has its origins in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, mainly in Europe and North America, and is characterized by a self-

conscious break with traditional ways of writing, in both poetry and prose fiction. Modernism literature contains different sub-genres: Imagism, Symbolism, Vorticism, Expressionism, Futurism, Surrealism, Acmeist poetry, Dada, etc.

Italian literature is an important force in the field of European literature. During medieval Renaissance culture movement there were a lot of famous Italians who had made a great contribution to the world’s literature, such as Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio. They had left immortal works to the world, and until to nowadays for their creative works still can impress the world. With the foundation of the unified Italy at the end of the 19th century, Italian writers became a strong force of the European literature power, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, Ungaretti were the pioneer in this period. After the Second World War, the contemporary writers Italo Calvino and Alberto Moravia became famous not only in Italy but also in the whole world. Among them, one of the greatest masters of modern literature in Italy is Pirandello. He was a dramatist, novelist, poet and short story writer. His classic drama “six characters in search of an author” is still popular in all of the world. He was awarded the Nobel Prize in literature just because of his impressive way of writing and the power to turn psychological analysis into his creative works. The novel “the late Mattia Pascal” is one of his best-known works and was in his first major treatment of the theme of the mask.

Pirandello is popular non only in Europa but also in China, nowadays, a lot of Chinese researchers focus on his plays: YANG Hanqi talked about “The life issues through Pirandello’s two classic plays: ‘Henry IV’ and ‘six characters in search of an author’” and discussed the value of life in the eyes of Pirandello. “His plays are also full of grotesque scene, alienation, behind this is implied for his unique thinking and real life. In his pen there is such a world: people in society split, alienation, and unusual loneliness. Sometimes they need a mask,

their helpless hide under the mask, no one can save themselves after the mask, the whole world is full of irrational.” But the major of the research have the focus on Pirandello’s plays, but we can’t ignore that Pirandello had a particular interest for the short stories, just like Zhai Heng said: “However, the Chinese research focus on Pirandello mostly in his dramatic works, studying the Pirandello’s short stories opens a new perspective for the study of Pirandello’s literary thinking for the Chinese readers.” Therefore, this text will talk about the crisis of “I” through one of his short stories with the hope to let more people to know his short stories and his opinion about life.

1. MODERNIST LITERATURE IN ITALY

The civilization of the Ancient Rome was glorious and resplendent, but before 1871, Italy was always a geographical term, with the further development of Italy national revival movement, the unified Italy as a Nation was born at the end of the nineteenth Century, with the rapid economic development, Italy became one power among the European powers. In the field of ideology and culture, France as the center of Europe, had a deep influence on all aspects of Italian society. In the first half of twentieth Century, under the influence of the movement of modern literature in the whole Europe, Italian literature also played a very important part in this movement. There were two major movements in Italy at the beginning of the twentieth century.

One was Futurism, which was an avant-garde movement founded in Milan in 1909 by the Italian poet Filippo Tommaso Marinetti. He launched the movement in his Futurist Manifesto, which he published for the first time on 5 February 1909 in “*La gazzetta dell’Emilia*”, an article then reproduced in the French daily newspaper “*Le Figaro*” on Saturday 20 February 1909. Marinetti expressed a passionate loathing of everything old, especially political and artistic tradition. “We want no part of it, the past” he wrote, “we are the young and strong Futurists!” The Futurists admired speed, technology, youth and violence, the car, the airplane and the industrial city, all that represented the technological triumph of humanity over nature, and they were passionate nationalists. They repudiated the cult of the past and all imitation, praised originality, “However daring, however violent,” bore proudly “the smear of madness” dismissed art critics as useless, rebelled against harmony and good taste, swept away all the themes and subjects of all previous art, and gloried in science.

Another was Hermeticism which was another movement in poetry, or hermetic poetry, was a form of obscure and difficult poetry, as of the Symbolist school, where in the language and imagery are subjective, and where the suggestive power of the sound of words is as

important as the meaning. Within the Novecento Italiano, Hermetic poetry became an Italian literary movement in the 1920s and 1930s, developing between the two world wars. Major features of this movement were reduction to essentials, abolishment of punctuation, and brief, synthetic compositions, at times resulting in short works of only two or three verses.

But both of these movements had little influence respect to the other French movements of modernism literature. So if one wants to talk about the symbol of the Italian literature of the twentieth century, in the first half of this century, the representers of Italian literature must be Pirandello and Italo Svevo. In the second half, Italo Calvino and Alberto Moravia talked to the world as the symbol of Italian literature. All of them had made an indispensable contribution to the world’s literature.

2. PIRANDELLO AND HIS SHORT STORIES

Pirandello was born into an upper-class family in a village with the curious name of u Càvusù (in Italian means Chaos), a poor suburb of Girgenti (Agrigento, a town in southern Sicily). His father, Stefano, participated in the famous Expedition of the Thousand, later following Garibaldi all the way to the battle of Aspromonte. However, from childhood, he could not communicate with adults, especially with his parents, this problem prompted Pirandello to learn the language, to imitate the adult behavior in order to narrow the gap between himself and the adults.

When young Pirandello was studying in Bonn in Germany, once fell in love with a German girl, and wrote a lot of poem for that girl, but this love finished without any result. At last, Pirandello married a wealthy daughter, whose father was an important business partner of Pirandello’s father. But this marriage was not happy at all for Pirandello because of the character sensitive of his wife, Pirandello felt the pressure, with the fails of his father’s business, Pirandello’s life was in complete trouble; on the other hand, his wife had a serious mental illness: the fragile wife was jealousy in all the other women around her husband, even her daughter. All the things made Pirandello’s life becoming worse and worse, for keeping the whole family, he had to earn the money by doing private teaching, writing articles for newspapers and magazines.

But Pirandello didn’t stop writing short stories in his whole life, writing plays, poems and novels for Pirandello can be only considerate as an entertainment, the short stories were considerate as his favor works. In 1922, Pirandello decided to turn his short stories compiled and published, and named the book with “stories in one year”. From 1922 to 1937, almost 300 short stories were published, all these stories seemingly unrelated at the

first sight, but after carefully reading, you will find every story happen around us, through each story Pirandello wanted to reveal that everyone in the world lives with a ridiculous mask in the life, and for everyone it is very difficult to get ride of this mask invisible. Just because "Masks have the function of separating the real life from the mask, and the function of restricting one's self. Man's life may wear different masks, and as society, life, and environment change constantly, people in society need to constantly use masks to make balance, in order to maintain relations to the life." And this is what Pirandello wanted to express.

3. "THE HANDCART" AND THE CRISIS OF "I"

3.1 Short Story "The Handcart"

"The handcart" is included in the 13^o volume of "Shorts Stories for a Year" published in 1928. This short story talks about a famous lawyer, on the way home from the train, seeing himself pulled out from the body in half awoken, sitting on the train and watching himself like a stranger. The train here has a special significance, symbolizing the passing time. The crisis of "I" on his way home gradually increased, until he returned to the door of his home and saw the door with all his social titles, he was aware of that he is not here, even had never lived. But he could not escape from the shackles of life, but only accept such a reality. In order to continue to live like this, he needs to find a way to vent. At the end of the story, he grabbed his pet dog's back legs and pushed it on the ground like a handcart.

3.2 Analysis of the Story

There are only three scenes in this short story: in the study room, on the train, in front of the door of his home. The beginning and end of the story happen all in the study room.

3.2.1 The Scene One: In the Study Room

The story begins with the protagonist's monologue: "When there is somebody with me, I dare not to look at her, but I can feel her sight on me, always on me. I want to tell her to not be worried and non be afraid, it means nothing for her but very important to me!" Here Pirandello used a very significant word "her" for holding a suspense at the beginning of the story, let the reader mistake that the one who watched the protagonist would be a woman, so maybe the reader will think about a story of a cheating man with his mass tress. And the story continued with the explanation of the protagonist that he is a success and famous man in his life: He is a lawyer, a professor, a husband and a father, his secret can't be discovered and then his life would be over, so he is very worried about "her" sight, and afraid that someone would find the reason of her sight on him.

At the end of the story, the protagonist described

I ran quickly to the dog sleeping on the rug, gently and gracefully lifting her hind legs, and pushing her forward like a handcart: but only about eight steps or ten, no more! That's all, I didn't do anything else. Then I ran to the door of the study and carefully open the door as if nothing had happened... It was the way it was, and for fifteen days the dog kept looking at me, and her eyes were full of horror. I wanted to make her understand, "never mind, don't worry! Don't look at me like that again!" Obviously, she is aware of that what I have done to her not for fun and practical joke, because such thing only children will do; she is very clear I was not joking, but I really want to let her know that I was just joking....

So here the reader finally know actually she is just a dog. So the dog continued to watch its host with the fear in the eyes. In this part, the dog watched always the protagonist, although it could not talk and say nothing, maybe the dog did not watch at all the host, but the protagonist who lived a life with a heavy pressure and stress felt the fear, so he could see the fear of the dog that maybe would come from the inside of himself, because he lived with a mask, and not only one mask: as husband, father, professor and lawyer, all the masks given by his family, his work and the society, he was forced to act as a mature, educated, confident and successful man. The protagonist complained that each mask is a man without life. So in this way, through all these shorts stories Pirandello wanted to tell people that only madness could bring true peace to the life. And this story also represented a typical "Pirandello's" life: Everyone lives wearing a mask, but this mask can't be picked off, because it is closely related with the success, the wealth and the reputation, the family and the work, this mask doesn't stop torturing us and bring us a deep loneliness.

Under the heavy pressure of life, the protagonist found a way to vent: pushing the dog as a handcart. If this is a child's behavior, we may find it funny to say: "what a naughty boy!" However, if this is what adults do, we might think that this person must be mentally abnormal. As a successful man like the protagonist, this action would destroy totally his life, it's a such madness, so the fear of the protagonist can be understood easily.

3.2.2 The Scene Two: On the Train

In this part, the protagonist told about fifteen days ago, he returned from a work and he was on the train to home, when he was reading some work papers, he felt very tired and he looked at the view from the window of the train, although the scenery was amazing, but himself didn't care about it at all, he felt that it was not him to watch the view but some other one, or he couldn't say that himself didn't see nothing, because the eyes did see: out the window of the train there was the charming scenery of Umbria, perhaps were just the eyes themselves immersed in the beautiful scenery. But the protagonist, himself did not care about what the eyes saw, he did not want to see the scenery, he did not even think: as if the body was taken in an instant, hanging in the boundless of an unknown

world. His spirit from his consciousness in pumping high, looked at himself: the man seated here, he did not know why there was a pleasure in his life, the man who sat there did not seem to be himself. There must be one who lives far away, where his spirit is complete, ready to go through all the pain and suffering of its own. So his eyes closed, even himself didn't notice, so the protagonist thought maybe he was dreaming of the life that never belonged to him. He said maybe because when he woke up, the train has arrived at the station, he felt like a different person, became a life of despair, like breath, unbearable....

Here for the first time, the concept of "I" was becoming a crisis. Everyone may have such a feeling, in a very tired or mental concentration, people will be distracted. The protagonist also encountered the same situation, exhaustion caused the brain's spiritual dream, in the "dream" where the protagonist seems to understand, but not completely and he could not explain the reason, he was confused and all these is just the beginning of his arousal.

3.2.3 The Scene Three: In Front of the Home Door

In this scene, the protagonist returned to home and stayed in front of the home door, in a flash, he, or his spirit was pulled out of his body, he saw himself and his life, the life of someone that he didn't know at all. With a strong fear, for a moment he was pretty sure that the man standing in front of the door, the man who lived in the house, was completely not him, and he had never been there. He knew clearly that in that family he never existed, he didn't exist in that man's life, not only that, he had never existed, not lived: it was a kind of life that he recognized, in accordance with the wishes of his life. His body, his dress, so he felt all those things were not to be himself, everything seemed to be outsiders impose on him: he act according to his will, they dressed according to their requirements, in accordance with their orders to live life, all these he had not been involved, his spirit never really was found! Never!... He took the key out of his bag, opened the door, and went back home to his usual life. This was his tragedy, perhaps a lot of other people's tragedy. And the protagonist talked about his thinking on the life:

The living man, when he is alive, does not see his own life: if anyone sees his own life, it proves that he is dead. Such a life is like an inanimate object, for every form means death. Few people can understand: Almost all people, life in the fighting and struggling, in order to get this or that a state or form; to achieve its goal, seemingly won life, actually also began the process of death. People don't realize it because they can't see it, because they can't escape from the form that they have built, they are living, and so means they are dead. Only those who are fully awakened can see the form that is given, the form imposed by others. If we see this form to prove that our life is no longer in it....

With this monologue, the protagonist's consciousness is fully awakened. He saw a body similar to his own, but he did not think it was his own, the real self has never existed in this world. Through the protagonist's

psychological monologue, Pirandello passed the message to the reader: the crisis of each person's "I". According to Freud's psychoanalytic theory, people are divided into "id", "ego" and "superego". "ego, which the German original meaning refers to 'self' is the conscious thinking, feeling, judgment or execution of memory, its function is to satisfy the impulse of 'id' and to protect the whole body from harm, it follows the 'reality principle' or self-service." In daily life, just because of the function of the "ego" which is to suppress some desires of the "id" the human being can become a social man. Such protagonists written by Pirandello have the crisis of the existence of "I". Pirandello once wrote an essay in 1900: "The human's spirit is a lot of debris, or some different elements, there is this or that relationship between them, these elements can be broken, can be restructured, forming a new personality, this it might not have been normal "I" consciousness, the new independent personality consciousness, he keeps spying the normal "I", so each person's body there are two different "I", the two "I" live with coordination, independent." It is not surprising that Pirandello would have such a thought, which is closely related to his real life experience. Since his wife's mental illness and madness, forced Pirandello to study Freud's psychoanalytic theory; literary works were often highly enriched in real life, Pirandello put all those disappointments, all repressed heroine perhaps in his incarnation of writing. Pirandello has made it clear that the only way to get rid of the crisis of "I" is to go crazy, which is also the theme of many works, such as the famous drama "Henry IV". Pirandello even wrote detailed steps for how to go crazy: To tell the truth, to say all those things naked and cruel, hurtful truth, do not care about the secular eyes, give up those mundane practices, ideas and norms of behavior. To keep doing so, will soon be out of tune with the community, in the eyes of others, become a madman. Abandon the secular and moral constraints, listen to your own heart, in accordance with the laws of their own live in their own world, remove the face mask, and do not need to consider the world view upon yourself, become a simple and true man.

CONCLUSION

"Handcart" was created in 1928, nearly a century ago, but the story for the people of the twenty-first Century is still very enlightening. The protagonist is a man: who has a happy family and success in the carrier, and such people can be found everywhere in today's society; this man undertakes a variety of social and family responsibilities: husband, father, professor, lawyer, just like each one of us in the modern society. In the family we may be husband, wife; son or daughter; father or mother, we may be social workers, students, leaders and civil servants and so on. We will listen to our real will to live or to work? Is every aspect of our being the true ourselves? The protagonist of the story chosen to push the dog to vent and relax, and

in twenty-first Century the human being should be more rational, and is there any other better choice to get ride of the pressure that we have? And a century ago, writing might be the best way to escape and release for Pirandello, and the people who live in the new century, what would be their best choice? Just like what said Pirandello, every “I” is composed by a lot of debris, so according to this philosophy, can we consider every protagonist of his play, his novel and his short story as a part of Pirandello himself? After reading carefully his works, the answer is certain. Pirandello lived a very hard life, and his life’s experience help him to create the different role in different works, but all of them take the shadow of Pirandello, and

through these seemly “crazy” men, Pirandello complained his pain from life and searched the way to escape, at last he found it: the answer is just the madness.

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