

## REPRESENTATION OF ITALIAN SOCIETY IN THE WORKS OF LUIGI PIRANDELLO: AN ANALYSIS OF THE SHORT STORY THE OIL JAR

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### *Abstract*

*The main discussion in this paper is to show how Luigi Pirandello (1867- 1936) in The oil jar (1909) describes the different characteristics of Southern Italian agrarian society of 20<sup>th</sup> century. The protagonist of the story is a rich Italian farmer from Sicily. It is important to see physical description of the characters in the story to form an idea of the personality of the farmers. This paper reveals different aspects of the agricultural Italian society where large number of farmers is not well organized and is exposed to be exploited by rich landlords of village. The artisans are not being appreciated for their work and are under paid. Through the use of comic elements, author reflects the characteristics of materialistic Italian society.*

**Keywords:** *Agricultural Italian society, Exploitation by rich, poor Italian artisans, materialistic southern Italian society.*



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### **Introduction**

Luigi Pirandello is a well known author in Italy and abroad. He was awarded the Noble Prize for Literature in 1934. He is a great short story writer. Even today Pirandello is very popular and is being translated in many of the foreign languages. He published this story in the newspaper *Il Corriere della Sera* in 1909 in Italy and later he included it in the part of his series *Short stories for a year (Novelle per un anno)*. *The oil jar* is so famous that it has been adapted for cinematic work as well.

*The oil jar* is a story of a rich landowner, Don Lollò. He is known in village for his quarrelsome nature. He is easily bad tempered and frequently consults a legal advisor for very small issues with farmers. This year, thanks to a large production of olives in his fields that he decides to purchase a big terracotta oil jar to keep olive oil in it. The jar is placed in courtyard of his home and after some days he finds it broken mysteriously. On farmer's advice he invites Zi Dima, a mender who is famous for having invented one special glue to repair the jar. Don Lollò does not trust his glue. He intervenes in repairing and orders him to mend the jar with glue and stitches of iron wire as well. Zi Dima is forced to follow his order and while stitching the jar, ends up trapped inside. Now Don Lollò goes to consult a lawyer,

who informs him that it is an unlawful imprisonment of a person. He advises him to release the mender but, however suggests him to take compensation of the value of the jar from the prisoner. Zi Dima refuses to pay any penalty even if Don Lollò breaks the jar. Don Lollò now decides to make him live inside the jar and goes to sleep. In the night farm workers gather to drink and dance around the jar. Don Lollò gets disturbed and wakes up by the noise of dancing and singing of the farmers. He is full of anger and smashes the jar against a tree, now Zi Dima is free and he wins.

### **Reference to Sicily**

Sicily is an autonomous region and an island in Southern Italy in the Mediterranean Sea. It is known for its beautiful sandy beaches and sea is the main area of economic activity. It is a land of farmers and fishermen. Many of the stories, dramas and novels of the author have a reference to this Italian island. Place of plot revolves very often about his native land, Sicily. *The oil jar* depicts life, problems and customs of Sicily, especially of farmers and of artisans. This story exhibits traditional songs, dances and life of a local Italian village.

This story is a reflection of cultural characteristics of author's birth place, Agrigento in Sicily. In Italy there is a discrepancy between the north and the south of Italy. North which is considered very much industrialized and developed, whereas economy of south is based on agriculture and largely it is rural. The Unification of Italy in 1861 is seen as a failure by southern Italy. It is a primitive state of life and living conditions of labourers that the author depicts in this story which however are economically different from the modern regions of northern Italy. Author uses agricultural vocabulary in the story and title *The oil jar* also indicates a reference to life in a rural and principally agrarian village. The protagonist of the story is a landowner and rest of the characters in the story is poor farmers and artisans. Farmers of village are being cursed by the greed of landowners who exploit them to amass wealth for themselves. Farmers, artisans live a secluded life and at the time of harvest, they have to undergo extreme physical labour. Some of them are even forced to do so against their wish by landowners. There is hardly any depiction in the story about farmers enjoying the life. Farmers dance and sing only once in the whole story when they are drunk after a tiring day and when their land owner is asleep. As far as justice in village is concerned, it is the landowner who visits the lawyer and decides for others. Sometimes innocent workers are blamed to be guilty and forced to pay penalty. Zi Dima wants to repair the jar only with the

use of glue but Don Lollò does not trust him, intervenes in his work and when Zi Dima is trapped inside the jar, he asks him to pay in order to exit the jar.

### **Stereotypes about Southern Italy**

Pirandello through this story plays with some of the stereotypes about southern Italy. It is apparent that author is trying to show the existence of a ruling class, Don Lollò, protagonist of the story belongs to this class. Labourers and farmers work for him. They have to face his ire. Farmers get less than what they deserve and are being threatened and exploited. Don Lollò symbolizes a position of power among the farmers and is a controlling authority. The workers find the broken jar, but they are very afraid to tell him anything about it. The story shows two different social worlds which are essential for survival but which will remain always very distant and will never find a common ground.

*Don Loll! Hey, Don Loll!, When he came up and saw the disaster, it looked like he was going to go crazy. First he rushed toward the three men; he grabbed one of them by the throat and pinned him against the wall, yelling, "God damn it, you'll pay for this!"*

*Then when grabbed by the other two, their despair overwhelming their earth-colored, sun-scorched, beastlike faces, he turned his furious rage against himself, threw his beat-up hat to the ground, punched himself repeatedly in the head and on the cheeks, stamped his feet and howled like someone crying over a dead relative.<sup>1</sup>*

The author showcases some of the stereotypes present in Southern Italy like the ominous presence of patriarchal society. From the protagonists, Don Lollò Giraffa, to the farmers, artisans, lawyers and workers all are male. There is no female character in the story. When people think of Sicily, they associate it also with the image of mafia and environment of organized crime but the authors depicts a different picture of Sicilian society which has its judicial system with courts and lawyers.

### **Representation of Italian society**

Pirandello is known for using comic elements to portray reality of Italian society. The protagonist of the story is comic, he always finds a reason for filing lawsuits against others. In his absence farmers make fun of him for his litigious nature.

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<sup>1</sup> Pirandello, Luigi, *The oil jar*, Trans. Maria Enrico, Canio Pavone Books, 2004, P.3.  
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*People said that his lawyer was so sick of seeing him ride up on his mule two or three times a week that, to get rid of him, he had given him a precious booklet, tiny, tiny: the legal code, so he could waste his own time looking for a legal basis for his lawsuits<sup>2</sup>.*

The attorney of village, a friend of the protagonist, goes in to uncontrollable laughter when he listens to the arguments of Don Lollò.

*Fortunately, he didn't have to cool his heels for long before seeing his lawyer, but he did have to wait for quite a while for the lawyer to stop laughing once he had laid out his case. He got upset at the laughter. "What's so funny, excuse me? You haven't been gypped! It's my jar!" But the lawyer couldn't stop laughing and wanted to hear the story again, how it had happened, so he could keep on laughing. Inside, right? He had sewn himself up inside? And, Don Loll, what did he expect? To keep . . . to keep him in there . . . ha ha ha . . .hi hi hi..... to keep him in there so he wouldn't lose the jar?<sup>3</sup>*

and on the other hand Zi Dima has a complex character. Pirandello has depicted Zi Dima as a silent and mysterious person. He is very proud of his glue and is sure of being able to repair the jar with it. All farmers have sympathy for Zi Dima. He belongs to the class of labourers and his opinion does not count in the society of big landowners. Although the harvest of olive is very good this year, but Don Lollò does not even think of offering any feast to his labourers, on the contrary Zi Dima spends all the money that Don Lollò throws inside the jar in buying wine and food for farmers. Zi dima is a figure of a savior, who ensures that workers drink and eat at land owner's expense. He forms an alliance with labourers and farmers. Labourers find a friend in him and when they realize that Don Lollò is asleep, they start dancing and drinking. Zi Dima also enjoys his stay inside the jar. He sings very loudly and smokes cigarettes. All the farmers are unified in terms of community and they stand together in the disobedience of their landlord. Zi Dima is one of those who is being abused, exploited and oppressed. Don Lollò orders him *I want stitches on the jar, glue and stitches. I am the one who commands here*. He is the oppressor in the story. Zi Dima is a skilled worker and is known in the farmer community for his invention. He represents the class of laborers and

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., P.2

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p.6

faces oppression by the landowner. He decides to go on protest against the exploitation of the landowner and leads the working class to voice against the oppression. He protests peacefully and is never aggressive like his landowner. He smokes, sings and drinks inside the jar. His victory is the victory of the entire farmer's community. It is evident that he teaches the meaning of liberation to other labourers and farmers.

*You want to live in my jar? Everyone here is a witness! He doesn't want to get out because he doesn't want to pay for it, but I am ready to break it! Therefore, since he wants to stay there, tomorrow I am going to sue him for squatting because he won't let me use my jar!*  
*Zi Dima blew out another puff of smoke, and then he calmly said, "No, sir. I don't want to stop you from doing anything. Do you think I want to be here? Let me out, but I won't pay anything! You've got to be kidding, mister!"<sup>4</sup>*

Zi Dima is trapped in the jar. Everyone is laughing at him by saying that how stupid he is to have sewn himself inside the Jar. The owner is only concerned about his jar and he does not want it to be broken. He wants the artisan to remain trapped inside for whole of his life. Material world is more important for him. It is a clear example of Pirandello's philosophy. The protagonist is very much attached to his property and his things, like the jar. Poor men are treated like slaves and it shows oppressive nature of Italian society. This is a unique Pirandellian style to use humor to portray the characteristics of the Italian society. Author presents the theme of madness through his story. In the story it is evident that such madness causes anguish and instability in the protagonist. Don Lollò behaves like a mad person. He is portrayed in the description as a wild animal and Zi Dima as an old arab olive tree. The confrontation and struggle between Don Lollò and Zi Dima, two protagonists of the story shows the typical tension between two cultures and two elements of the Italian society. Oppressor does not respect the humanity. He threatens and abuses labourers. Oppressed farmers are so innocent that they even do not realize to be exploited. In the same way Zi Dima initially does not realize of being trapped inside the jar, and only after finishing the work, realizes his inability to come out of the jar. Through these two characters, author depicts the class conflict in the Italian society. There is a fight between evil, anger, greed,

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p.8

arrogance, in the character of Don Lollò and good, joy, hope and serenity that Zi Dima and farmers represent.

Pirandello shows the Italian society where landlord is considered to be dominating. Justice is being administered by big farmers. Working class and artisans are not appreciated and are under paid. The protagonist of the story is inhuman and quarrelsome. He is always in anger. He shouts on farmers and gets annoyed for nothing. He considers himself to be superior to others. He does not trust neither his workers nor the genuineness of the glue that Zi Dima has developed. His alienation in the society shows the painful life he is going through. It shows the problem of men's solitude. Relationship of Don Lollò with the community of farmers is not cordial. He dominates in the poor society. He does not trust anyone and is ready to sue others. He creates a situation of chaos and scolds his workers. He tries to be the ruler of the society but in reality he is very uncertain and incapable. He cannot take certain decisions on his own. He refers to his lawyer even for small things. Zi Dima on the other hand is very committed and takes his own decision.

*"Zirafa pushed everyone aside and leaned over to look into the jar.*

*"Well! You all right in there?"*

*"Great. Very comfortable," he answered. "Better than at home."*

*"Nice to know. Meanwhile, I'm warning you that this jar cost me four onze, when new. How much do you think it would cost now?"*

*"With me inside it?" asked Uncle Dima.*

*The farm workers laughed."*<sup>5</sup>

It is interesting to note that only two of the protagonists have been referred by names in the story by Pirandello and rest of characters is called as farmers or workers. Our first protagonist is Zi Dima. Zi in Italian is "zio" which means uncle in English and the another protagonist is Don Lollò, don is someone who controls others. Figure of an uncle is someone who has to bring a change in the society. Uncle symbolizes equality in the society, someone who belongs to the class of the majority of the society and he is the leading figure. Pirandello shows that landowners and leaders of the labourers are known by names and rest does not matter in the society. Another important factor to note is that Don Lollò uses informal language when he speaks to Zi Dima to show his superiority and domination while Zi Dima uses the formal language that shows the respect and difference between two social classes.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p.7

On the other hand, Zi Dima depicts a clear picture of the Italian society where artisans have to undergo big struggle in their life for survival. Their opinion does not count in the society. Zi Dima is correct in saying that there is no need of using stitches to repair the jar but is forced by Don Lollò to do so. There is such a poverty in the society that in order to not pay the penalty of the jar, Zi Dima decides to stay inside it for the rest of his life. It is difficult to decide in the story of Pirandello who is at fault, because both the protagonists claim to be correct in their statements. Don Lollò wants to be compensated because in order to free Zi Dima, he will have to break the jar. Don Lollò has his own world and does not want anyone to enter it. On the other hand Zi Dima also believes to be right and refuses to pay by saying that he is not staying inside the jar for his own wish, but he is inside to complete the work which is desired by Don Lollò. So the Author leaves it up to the readers to interpret whom they want to put at fault.

In this paper I try to analyze the theme of honesty among the working class in the Italian society. The lawyer of the village gifts a book of legal code to his client Don Lollò so that he does not have to come to consult him every time for small matters. It shows his honesty as he does not want his client to spend all his money in legal advices. In the second instance farmers who are the first one to find the jar broken, are afraid of Don Lollò but inform him with honesty about it. The jar mender is also very honest, he tries to convince Don Lollò that there is no requirement of using stitches to repair the jar and only glue will work well. He is honest in his work. He obeys the command of Don Lollò and repairs the jar as per his wish. On the another hand, there is theme of dishonesty among the landowners. Don Lollò breaks the rule, he decides for everything and does not trust anyone. When he finds his jar broken, he blames his workers for it and starts beating them mercilessly. He also tries to take advantage of Zi Dima. No one among workers likes him or supports him. His dishonesty causes fear in him. He is afraid to lose his jar and it causes distress in him, which is very evident when he himself kicks the jar and it is broken.

It is the greed of the person that makes the man victim. In this story Don Lollò is obsessed with the jar and his money so he suffers and is victim of loneliness. At the end he is incapable of doing anything against Zi Dima. Zi dima is also obsessed with his glue. He is trapped inside the jar because he listens to Don Lollò and agrees to repair the jar as he wants. So in a sense he also suffers by staying inside the jar for some time.

In the conclusion of my paper I say as in most of the plays of Pirandello, this short story also has a happy ending. The jar is smashed in to an olive tree and Zi Dima is set free. He emerges as a stronger man in the end. Coming out of Zi Dima from the jar signifies the rebirth of the artist. It is a triumph of the agrarian society against land owners. It gives a message that unity of farmers can overturn the structure of hierarchy. Zi dima represents the leader of the oppressed society and revives the honor and pride of his colleagues. The liberty from the Jar is a symbol of the freedom from exploitation and from the oppressed society. It makes the farmer's society more relevant and more meaningful.

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