1911 – The License (La patente) – Short story

Scene inspired by *The License* (*La patente*, 1911), a short story by Luigi Pirandello. Rosario Chiàrchiaro, dressed as a jinx, confronts Judge D'Andrea to demand official recognition of his reputation. Visual reconstruction. Graphic design: PirandelloWeb.

Saggistica consigliata

Prodotto disponibile su Amazon

Giulio Ferroni: Storia della letteratura italiana (Vol. 1)

Un riferimento per approfondire la storia della letteratura italiana e il suo contesto culturale.

Link affiliato Amazon

Rosario Chiàrchiaro has been branded a jinx by an entire town. Driven out of his job and reduced to poverty, he brings a lawsuit against two young

men who publicly mocked his supposed power to bring bad luck. Judge D'Andrea, moved by compassion, hopes to spare him further humiliation. But when Chiàrchiaro appears before him, he reveals an astonishing plan: he wants the court to recognize his reputation officially so that he can earn a living from the very superstition that has ruined him. In this bitterly ironic short story, Pirandello exposes the cruelty of collective prejudice and the paradox of a man forced to become the person others believe him to be.

On this page

▶ **Full text**

▶ **Summary**

▶ **Analysis and meaning**

▶ **Pirandello in English**

Short story details

First publication

Corriere della Sera, 9 August 1911; later included in *La trappola*, Treves, 1915.

Collection

La rallegrata, *Novelle per un anno*, 1922.

Main characters

Rosario Chiàrchiaro, a man believed to bring bad luck; Judge D'Andrea, an anxious and conscientious magistrate; and the two young men accused of publicly insulting Chiàrchiaro.

Narrative structure

A story built around a legal paradox: the judge attempts to protect a victim of superstition, while the victim seeks official recognition of the very reputation that has destroyed his life.

English translation

Translated by Maria Enrico, in *Stories for a Year*, edited by Lisa Sarti and Michael Subialka, digital edition, 2022.

The License – 1911

To anyone who jokingly remarked on his odd way of living, the ever so thin Judge D'Andrea would repeatedly say "Oh, my dear child!" – and with what a tone of voice, not to mention the attitude conveyed in his eyes and gestures, while bent over as if carrying an unbearable weight on his shoulders!

He wasn't an old man; he must have been barely forty years old. But in order to arrive at even an approximate explanation of that human product known as Judge D'Andrea, it was necessary to imagine very strange, almost improbable things, a monstrous intertwining of ethnicities, a mysterious suffering over the centuries.

Segui PirandelloWeb su Facebook

Partecipa al Gruppo Facebook di PirandelloWeb
Commenta gli articoli, confrontati con altri lettori e scopri curiosità, approfondimenti e discussioni dedicate a Luigi Pirandello e alla sua opera.

Visita il Gruppo Facebook

It seemed as if, in addition to his poor, humble, and very common family history, he was well aware of the monstrous intertwining of ethnicities that made the kinky, thick hair of a black man sprout from the haggard, gaunt face of a white man on his head. Likewise it seemed he recognized the mysterious, infinite suffering over the centuries that had resulted in a mass of wrinkles on his protruding forehead and almost blinded his small bleak eyes and twisted his whole thin, sad little body.

He was lopsided with one shoulder higher than the other, and he walked sideways as dogs do. But no one, morally, was his equal. Everyone said so.

As for seeing, Judge D’Andrea might not have seen a lot of things, but he certainly had thought of very many, and he thought of them when doing so is saddest, meaning at night.

Judge D’Andrea could not sleep.

He would spend almost every night at the window, rubbing his hand over his tough, thick, black-man’s hair, his eyes on the stars – some clear and bright like pools of light, others flickering and piercing. He would configure the brightest stars into idealized geometrical shapes of triangles and quadrants and, squinting behind his glasses, he would capture the light of one of those stars in his eyelashes, and between his eye and the star there would be a luminous thread-like link upon which his soul would walk like a lost little frog.

This type of nighttime brooding is not good for one’s health. The arcane solemnity of the resulting thoughts almost always produces a serious case of constipation, especially in those of us who are imbued with an unshakable certainty, the certainty that nothing can be known and nothing believed in without knowing. In other words, a constipation of the soul.

And so in the morning it would seem both funny and atrocious at the same time to Judge D’Andrea that he should have to go to his chambers and administer – to the degree allotted to him – justice to small, poor, ferocious men.

And just as he did not sleep, he would not allow any paperwork to slumber on his work desk, even if it meant delaying lunch by two or three hours or renouncing his

usual stroll in the evening, before dinner, with colleagues down the avenue around the town walls.

This punctuality, which he considered an essential duty, increased his torture terribly. Not only did he have to administer justice, he had to do it on the spot.

In order to avoid being too hastily on time, he believed it would help if he thought over matters during the night. But instead, when at nighttime he ran his hands through his black-man's hair and gazed at the stars, he was beset by thoughts contrary to the ones he needed in his role as an investigating judge. **[1]**

> **[1]** An investigating judge in the Italian legal system is a judge who oversees pre-trial investigations and can refer them for prosecution. [Translator's note]

And so in the morning, rather than being helped, his nighttime thoughts attacked and blocked his punctuality and enormously increased his difficulty in adhering to his hated duties as investigating judge.

Yet, for the very first time, a case had been slumbering for about a week on Judge D'Andrea's desk. And because of this delay of many days, a growing irritation and a suffocating gloom preyed upon him.

He would be so overcome by this gloominess that his clenched eyes at some point closed. Holding a pen, sitting straight up, Judge D'Andrea would start napping, first by slumping and then scrunching up as if he were a worm incapable of weaving a cocoon.

As soon as he woke up, either due to some noise or a particularly strong nod of his head, his eyes would wander over to the corner of the desk, to the file, and he

would turn his head, tighten his lips, and through his whistling nostrils pull in air, air, and more air, and send it down, as far down as possible, to enlarge his guts, which were contracted with exasperation, and then push it back out through his wide open mouth, a bit nauseous; and then immediately he would bring a hand up to his hooked nose to adjust his glasses, which were slipping from the sweat.

The case in question was a truly unfair one. It was unfair because it involved merciless injustice against which a poor man was desperately trying to rebel without any chance of success. The case had a victim who could not blame anyone. He had attempted to blame two people, the first two he had come across, and – ladies and gentlemen – the law had to say he was wrong, wrong, wrong, with no mitigation, thus reinforcing, ferociously, the unfairness of which that poor man was a victim.

He would try to discuss the case when strolling with his colleagues. But as soon as he mentioned the name of Chiàrchiaro, the man who had brought the case, their expressions would change. They would stick a hand in a pocket to grasp a key, or secretly make the shape of horns with their index finger and little finger, or grab the silver little hunchbacks, nails or coral horns that hung from their pocket watch chains. **[2]**

> **[2]** These are all traditional gestures or talismans used to ward off bad luck or the evil eye, superstitions that were more pervasive in Pirandello’s day but remain part of the cultural lexicon today.

At times someone franker would burst out:

“Holy Mother of God, will you just shut up?”

But the skinny Judge D’Andrea could not shut up. The case had become an obsession. No matter what, he always ended up taking about it, to get some insight from his colleagues – he would say – just to discuss the case in abstract.

Because in truth it was the unusual and very specious case of a jinx who was suing for defamation the first two people he had glimpsed making ritual gestures to ward off the evil eye as he went by. **[3]**

> **[3]** In English a jinx is not only a spell or hex but also a person or object that carries the power to bring bad luck; in Italian the noun, ‘iettatore’ (‘jettatore’ in Pirandello’s spelling), refers specifically to a person with the power to jinx someone or something with the ‘iettatura’, bad luck or the evil eye. The two terms do not align perfectly in English and Italian because they derive from different etymological roots and so have slightly varying connotations, with the English ‘jinx’ coming from Latin ‘iynx’, itself derived from the Greek term for a type of bird used in witchcraft, while the Italian term derives from the verb ‘iettare’, or ‘gettare’, which means to cast the evil eye upon someone or something.

Defamation? How could it be defamation, poor guy, if his reputation as a jinx had been very well known in town for years? If numerous witnesses could come to court and swear that he had, on so many occasions, acknowledged his reputation by violently protesting against it? How in good conscience could he rule against those two young men for defamation simply for having made in his presence the same gestures that everyone else had been making for quite a while and openly, including and first among them those very judges themselves?

D’Andrea struggled. And he struggled even more when, out about town, he encountered the lawyers those two young men had hired: the slender and very

worn out Grigli who had the profile of a bird of prey, and the fat Manin Baracca who, triumphantly wearing on his belly an enormous horn talisman he had bought just for the occasion, and laughing with all the pale fleshiness of an eloquent blondhog, promised his fellow citizens that there would soon be a magnificent celebration in court for all.

Well, precisely to deny the town that “magnificent celebration” at the expense of a poor unfortunate, Judge D’Andrea finally decided to send an usher to Chiàrchiaro’s house to ask him to come to his chambers. He was even willing to pay the court costs if he could decisively convince him to desist by proving that, legally, those two young men could not be sentenced, and that their inevitable absolution would certainly cause him greater damage and even crueler victimization.

Alas, it is truly much easier to do evil than good. This is not only because evil can be done to everyone and good only to those who need it, but also, and in fact especially, because the need to do good often ends up making the hearts of the intended beneficiaries so bitter and thorny that doing good becomes very difficult.

This became very obvious to Judge D’Andrea when he raised his eyes to look at Chiàrchiaro, who had entered his chambers while he was focused on his writing. He erupted, tossed all his paperwork in the air, and jumped up yelling:

“Give me a break! What nonsense is this? You should be ashamed of yourself!”

Chiàrchiaro had contrived a really jinx-like appearance that was a marvel to behold. He had grown a tasteless bushy little beard on his sunken yellow cheeks. He had planted a pair of thick round glasses on his nose with a bone frame that made him look like a barn owl. And he had put on a shiny, loose-fitting, mouse-colored suit.

Chiàrchiaro did not openly react to the judge's outburst. He took a deep breath through his nostrils, clenched his yellow teeth, and whispered:

"So you don't believe it?"

"Give me a break!" repeated Judge D'Andrea. "Stop joking, dear Chiàrchiaro! Or have you gone crazy? Come on, come on, sit, sit down here."

The judge moved towards him and was about to place a hand on his shoulder when Chiàrchiaro bucked like a donkey, and then trembling he said:

"Mr.Judge, don't touch me! You must refrain! Or, as God is my witness, you will go blind!"

D'Andrea gazed at him coldly and then said:

"Make yourself comfortable… I summoned you here for your own good. There's a chair over there, sit down."

Chiàrchiaro sat down, and rolling his bamboo walking cane on his thighs like a rolling pin, he started shaking his head.

"For my own good? So you think you are helping me, dear Judge, by saying you do not believe in jinxes?"

D'Andrea too sat down and said:

"Do you want me to tell what I believe? All right then, I believe it! Now are you satisfied?"

“Not at all,” Chiàrchiaro denied flatly with the tone of someone who won’t stand for joking. “You have to really believe it, and you must also clearly prove it by prosecuting the case!”

“That will not be easy,” D’Andrea said, smiling sadly, “but let’s try to come to an understanding, dear Chiàrchiaro. I want to show you that the path you have taken is not the right one to reach a good result.”

“Path? Result? What path and what result?” asked Chiarchiaro with a frown.

“Neither the current course of action nor going to trial are solutions,” answered D’Andrea. “I’m sorry, but the two of them are like this.”

And Judge D’Andrea raised his hands up with his pointer fingers indicating that the two options seemed like opposites to him.

Chiàrchiaro bent down and stuck one of his own thick, hairy, and not very clean pointer fingers between the judge’s.

“Not true at all, Mr. Judge!” he said, wiggling his finger.

“What do you mean?” exclaimed D’Andrea. “You accuse those two young men of defamation because they believe you are a jinx, and then you show up dressed as a jinx and expect me to believe you are one.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And you don’t see the contradiction?”

Chiàrchiaro shook his head several times with his mouth open in a silent grin of

disdainful commiseration.

“Rather it seems to me, Mr. Judge,” he then said, “that you do not understand at all.” D’Andrea stared at him for some time in amazement.

“Well then speak up, speak up dear Chiàrchiaro. It could be that what you just uttered is the sacrosanct truth. But kindly explain why I do not understand anything.”

“Yes, sir. Here goes,” said Chiàrchiaro, drawing his chair closer. “Not only will I prove that you do not understand anything, but also that you are my mortal enemy. Yes you. You think you are helping me. My most bitter enemy! Do you not know that the two defendants have hired the lawyer Manin Baracca?”

“Yes. I know that.”

“Well, I myself, Rosario Chiàrchiaro went to this lawyer, Manin Baracca, a year ago to offer proof in the matter: that is to say, not only proof that I had known for more than a year that when I went by everyone was making the horn gesture, but also, documented proof and unrepeatable witness statements of the frightening facts upon which my reputation as a jinx is unshakably, unshakably based! Do you understand, Mr. Judge?”

“You? Went to Baracca?”

“Yes, sir. I did.”

The judge looked at him with growing amazement.

“I understand even less than before. But why? To ensure the young men’s absolution? Then why did you sue them?”

Chiarchiaro burst out in annoyance at Judge D’Andrea’s lack of comprehension. He stood up and started yelling and waving his arms:

“Because, Mr. Judge, I want official recognition of my power, how can you still not understand? I want my frightening power to be officially recognized, as it is my only asset!”

Huffing, he brought forth an arm and struck the floor forcefully with his bamboo cane, then remained still in that grotesquely imperious stance for a moment.

Judge D’Andrea bent down, held his head in his hands, and, overcome, repeated:

“My poor dear Chiàrchiaro, poor dear Chiàrchiaro, what type of asset is that? What can you do with it?”

“What can I do with it?” Chiàrchiaro replied quickly. “You, kind sir, in order to perform this profession of judge, regardless of how badly you might do it, now tell me, didn’t you have to get a degree?”

“Yes, a degree.”

“Well, I too want my license, Mr. Judge! A license as a jinx. And with a stamp on it. An officially legal stamp! As a court licensed jinx.” **[4]**

[4] In Italy all legal documents must bear an official revenue stamp as payment for validation. [Translator’s note]

“And then?”

“And then? I will proclaim it on my business card. Mr. Judge, I have been assassinated. I used to work. They got me fired from the pawnshop where I was a clerk with the excuse that, because I was there, no one any longer came to ask for loans or to pawn anything. They threw me out on the street. My wife has been paralyzed for three years, and I have two unmarried girls that no one will want because they are my daughters. We live off the help sent us from my son in Naples, and he too has family, four children, and can’t keep it up forever. Mr. Judge, I have no choice but to be a professional jinx! I dressed up in this way, with these glasses, in this suit; I let my beard grow. And now I am waiting for this license so I can start my business! And you ask me why? You ask it because, I repeat, you are my enemy!”

“I am?”

“Yes, sir. Because you do not believe in my power! But luckily others do, don’t you know? Everyone, everyone believes in it! And there are lots of gambling houses in town! All I will have to do is show up – no need to say anything. They will pay me to go away! I will start buzzing around all the factories. I will stop in front of all the stores. And everyone, everyone will pay me a fee – an ignorance tax, you say? I say a fee for wellbeing! Because, Mr. Judge, I have gathered up so much bile and so much hatred against all of this disgusting humanity that I truly believe that here in my eyes I have the power to make a whole city collapse!”

Judge D’Andrea, still holding his head in his hands, waited for the distress tightening his throat to subside so he could speak. But he could not say a word. And so, widening his small bleak eyes behind his glasses, he extended his hands and hugged Chiàrchiaro at length, strongly, strongly, at length.

Chiàrchiaro let him.

“So, you really care for me?” he asked. “Then prosecute the case, and in a way that I can get what I want as quickly as possible.”

“The license?”

Chiàrchiaro once again raised his arm, struck the pavement with his bamboo cane, and bringing his other hand to his breast repeated with tragic solemnity:

“The license.”

The License – Summary

Judge D’Andrea is a conscientious magistrate whose unusual appearance and troubled temperament reflect a life dominated by reflection, sleeplessness and moral uncertainty. Although still only about forty, he seems physically exhausted by his work and by his inability to reconcile legal procedure with his sense of justice.

One particular case causes him exceptional distress. Rosario Chiàrchiaro, a former clerk who has become notorious throughout the town as a jinx, has accused two young men of insulting him by making the traditional sign of the horns to ward off bad luck.

The judge recognizes the cruelty of Chiàrchiaro’s situation. The man has been rejected and ridiculed because of a superstition for which he bears no responsibility. Yet D’Andrea also fears that a trial will only reinforce his humiliation: the public already believes that Chiàrchiaro brings misfortune, and the accused young men are likely to be acquitted.

Hoping to help, D’Andrea summons Chiàrchiaro to his office and tries to persuade him to withdraw the complaint.

The visitor’s appearance immediately shocks the judge. Chiàrchiaro has deliberately cultivated the traditional image of a jinx: a bushy, bristling beard, large bone-rimmed spectacles, a shabby suit hanging loosely from his body, and a cane. Rather than rejecting the identity imposed upon him, he seems determined to embody it.

At first D’Andrea interprets this behaviour as a contradiction. Why would a man who complains of being called a jinx choose to present himself as one?

Chiàrchiaro then reveals the true purpose of his lawsuit. He has lost his employment and his family has been reduced to poverty. His wife is paralysed, his two unmarried daughters have little prospect of marriage, and the household survives through financial assistance from a son who has a family of his own.

Since society refuses to allow him an ordinary existence, Chiàrchiaro has decided to turn his supposed power into a means of survival. He does not want his reputation erased. He wants it officially recognized.

He therefore demands a legal certificate identifying him as a licensed jinx. Armed with such a document, he intends to visit gambling establishments and other places where people are particularly afraid of bad luck. Their owners will pay him simply to go away.

D’Andrea is deeply moved. What initially seemed an absurd legal demand reveals the desperate reasoning of a man whose social identity has been destroyed by collective prejudice. The supposed victim of superstition seeks to survive by

exploiting the superstition itself.

The License – Analysis and meaning

The License is one of Pirandello's clearest portrayals of the power exercised by society over individual identity. The central question is not whether Chiàrchiaro actually brings bad luck. The story makes the destructive consequences of believing that he does far more important than the superstition itself.

The town has imposed upon Chiàrchiaro an identity he did not choose. Once everyone begins to treat him as a jinx, the accusation acquires practical consequences. He loses his job, his dignity and his ability to support his family. A belief without evidence becomes a social reality with devastating effects.

This is the central Pirandellian paradox of the story: although Chiàrchiaro is not established as a genuine source of misfortune, the consequences of his reputation are entirely real. He has been forced into a role and can no longer escape it simply by denying its truth.

His deliberately grotesque appearance is therefore essential to the story. The bushy beard, oversized spectacles, ill-fitting clothes and cane do not merely provide comic details. They form a consciously adopted mask. Chiàrchiaro chooses to look exactly as others imagine a jinx should look, turning a humiliating stereotype into a possible profession.

The story also reveals the limitations of legal justice. Judge D'Andrea is compassionate, intelligent and sincerely concerned for the victim. Yet the law cannot simply eliminate a prejudice that has become embedded in the community. A favourable legal decision would not necessarily restore Chiàrchiaro's former life.

Chiàrchiaro's demand for official recognition transforms the logic of the trial. Instead of seeking protection against his persecutors, he wants the legal system to authorize the identity imposed upon him. The court, intended to establish justice, is asked to certify a social falsehood as if it were a professional qualification.

This reversal gives the title its bitter irony. A license normally confirms a genuine skill, qualification or right. Chiàrchiaro wants a license for a power that exists only in the imagination of others. Yet because those others believe in it, the certificate might acquire an economic value.

The contrast between D'Andrea and Chiàrchiaro is equally significant. The judge represents moral awareness, compassion and a rational understanding of injustice. Chiàrchiaro represents the desperate practical consequences of that injustice. While the judge hopes to free him from an imposed identity, Chiàrchiaro insists that the identity is now his only remaining resource.

Pirandello combines grotesque comedy with profound human suffering. Chiàrchiaro's appearance and his request may initially seem absurd, but the account of his ruined family reveals the cruelty beneath the comic surface.

Ultimately, *The License* is a story about the violence of public opinion, the conflict between personal truth and social appearance, and the tragic necessity of wearing a mask created by others. Chiàrchiaro cannot persuade society to stop believing in his supposed power. His final act of resistance is to demand payment for the fear that society itself has invented.

Pirandello in English

Pirandello in English

▶ **Pirandello in English**

▶ **Italian original – La patente**

If you would like to contribute material or translations, please send them, specifying if and how you wish to be credited, to

collabora@pirandelloweb.com

▶ **Discover ShakespeareItalia**

Visite uniche: 2.261

Argomenti correlati: @English-short-stories